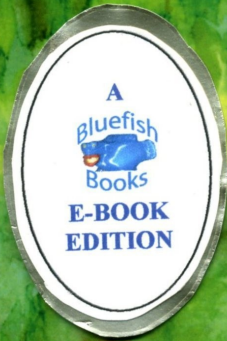


Book One of *Along the Way*

Along the Way



by Barbara White



ALONG THE WAY



Barbara G. White

**John W. Cowart,
Editor**



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About The Author



Award winning newspaper columnist Barbara White, of Jacksonville, Florida, lives in a retirement community where she continues part of her Christian service in spiritual and practical ways in prayer, driving people to medical appointments, and looking for other ways to be useful.

Her popular column profiles her own humble walk with Christ.

For over 15 years at the *Florida Times-Union*, Barbara wrote a personal account of her spiritual journey. Thousands of readers followed her column, *Along The Way*.

"I write about trying to live the Christian life and failing and trying again," she said.

"God loves us just as we are — and too much to let us stay that way".

This book is first in a series of Barbara White's *Along The Way* columns to be published by Bluefish Books. — jwc

**DEDICATED
To
My Family
&**

**To the Many Readers
Who over the years have traveled with me along
the way.**

**You have helped me to see the road signs —
and to avoid at least some of the potholes.**





Introduction

By Barbara White



I started writing articles for the Religion page of The *Florida Times-Union* newspaper in the spring of 1978. They were published weekly, with a few breaks, until I retired in 1994.

I had been employed by the *Jacksonville Journal* in 1969 to produce a weekly magazine section called *Action*. It was to be for teenagers and I recruited high school students to be the writers. I wrote everything they didn't.

In addition to that I was later asked to fill the part the *Journal's* weekly Religion page that wasn't filled by church ads. Nothing personal, I was told, just news stories.

The *Journal* was the afternoon paper put out by the Florida Publishing Company, which still runs the *Times-Union*. When the company ceased production of the *Journal*, we staff members were merged into the staff of the *Times-Union*.

There was already a religion writer there, so I tried to insert myself as a columnist. It worked.

The timing for the column was important to me because I had only recently gone from being a member of a church, with intellectual interests in things religious, to being a follower of One who called Himself the Way with interests in how you actually did that, what it looked like, felt like and worked out in daily life.

Barbara White



It wasn't exactly what you would expect to find in a secular newspaper. It wasn't exactly what I had expected to do. But it was what I did. It is, I suppose, a kind of diary of my journey along the process of becoming. It may speak to you on your own journey Along The Way.

Barbara White





ALONG THE WAY



Spiritual Hunger

I was 14 when I accepted the idea that God loved me enough to die for me

It was 30 years before I acknowledged Jesus as my Lord.

The day I gave my life to Jesus, He gave me the precious gift of reverence for and faith in the Scripture.

Until then I had never been sure what I could rely upon and what I couldn't. I understood that some Scripture was history, some poetry, some mysticism and some teaching — but I believed all of it had to be interpreted in the light of the best possible use of man's critical powers and resources.

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I believed some of it was right and some of it was wrong — and man had to decide which was which. I knew I wasn't smart enough to decide, so I kept reading books by men who were supposed to know. And I was "tossed to and fro and carried about by every, wind of doctrine." (Ephesians 4:14)

But a deep hunger stayed with me through those first three decades as a Christian.

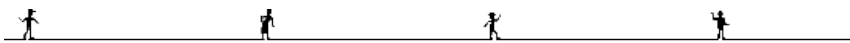
Eventually I realized that more was required of me than simply believing God existed and had somehow saved me. Living according to my best efforts alone was not producing good fruit.

Finally, I saw I had to make a decision about Jesus, and although I couldn't prove it, I decided to acknowledge Him as the risen Son of God, alive today and my Lord. I also asked His Spirit to fill me, strengthen me and teach me.

He began that very day. He led me to the second chapter of 1st Corinthians, and as I read Paul's words to the church in Corinth, I discovered I believed they were reliable, trustworthy and true. I believed they were God's word to the people in Corinth and also God's word to me.

I read the entire chapter, slowly, as if I had never seen the words before —and in truth, I never had. I had not had eyes to see spiritual things.

"My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power," Paul wrote., 'What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him,' God has revealed to us through the Spirit," the letter continues.



Scripture is history, poetry, mystical writing — all of it written by men, all of it breathed by God. It is perfectly true and completely trustworthy.

Since that first lesson, the Spirit has taught, me many things from the Bible about God, about life and about my life with my heavenly Father.

There is much I do not yet understand — but I believe the Bible, the part I know something about and the part I don't yet, is God's word written. I believe the Spirit is my teacher and Jesus the one he teaches me about.



A Letter From Prison

A friend of mine received a letter recently from her son who is in prison. He said he had given his life to the Lord.

What joy there must be in heaven, I thought. That's what Scripture says. The Shepherd has gone after one lost sheep and there is great rejoicing that He has found it.

It reminded me of the parable of the prodigal son.

Over the years I have identified with both sons in this story: the one who ran off to live it up in the world until he found the world not to his liking and the one who stayed home, but was resentful when the wastrel was given so much love.

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Now I joined my friend in feeling some of the joy of the father as he saw his wayward son turn again toward home.

Then a little voice whispered in my ear: Yes, but is it real? Will it last when he gets out of prison? Is it just a ploy to get sympathy, attention, love? Even if he means it, will he be able to stick with it?

My guess is that my friend has some of the same questions.

Jesus did not say if the father in the parable wondered if his son would stay at home just long enough to regain his health - and then take off again.

He did not speculate on whether the son would have turned again to his father if things had not gotten so bad. Or on what could happen once they were better. He just rejoiced.

The world is often cynical about prison conversions. It watched to see if Charles Colson was going to do something that would show he had not really changed, that he was not really a new person. I think some still watch after all these years.

When you think about, what better place is there for a conversion than in prison?

When Jesus said He came to set the captives free, He didn't mean just those behind physical bars and locked doors. Most of us are in prisons of our own making. The prisoner of the State knows he is in prison; the rest of us try to overlook the fact.

We are fortunate if Someone finally makes us see it. The prisoner who sees his prison knows the need for release. Those of us in invisible prisons persist in denial. If by chance we catch a glimpse of the "bars" or "locked doors," we do all we can to get



ourselves out by our own efforts. We turn to the many “how to” books available now.

When all these human efforts fail, we finally come to the point reached by my friend’s son, surrender to God. Is this self serving? Sure it is. And it serves us well if we mean it.

Is it easy? Yes and no. We have to give up our lives as they are, which sounds hard and is – until you have done it. Once on the other side of surrender, you find it wasn’t so hard at all, not compared to the joy that followed.

The prodigal son, the letter writer in prison and I share the knowledge that the world we live in does not hold the answers for us. This is the beginning, the first step in the journey that will take the rest of our lives.

I pray for a good journey for my friend’s son. And for you and yours, and me and mine.



Say It In Your Last Will And Testament

I was talking recently with some folks about wills and revocable living trusts and that sort of thing.

The discussion reminded me that I once wrote a column about making a last will and testament.

And as I recall, I received quite a bit of comment on it at the time.

It seemed I wasn't the only person who needed to update a will — or tell a family what was important.

Along The Way



This is probably as true today as it was a dozen years ago.

So, I believe I will share my thoughts on the subject again — some of the original ones, anyway, and some that are more recent.

Since I am not a lawyer or an expert on inheritance taxes, the will part of a last will and testament is not really what I want to talk about.

It's the testament part.

Have you ever wanted to make your family sit down and listen while you told them what you believe life is all about?

If you have ever actually tried to do this, I suspect you found in short order that everybody had something terribly urgent they needed to do.

Family members can come up with as many excuses for not attending your party as the folks did who were invited to the banquet in one of the parables Jesus told.

But there is one time when I believe most people can count on their family members listening to what they have to say — when their will is read.

And while those family members are listening to what you have to say about the disposition of your worldly goods, they will — if you have done your part — also hear what you have to say about what is important in life.

That's the testament part of a last will and testament, simply a statement of what you believe.

And since the reading of the testament will be followed by the part about your worldly goods, it's a



pretty good bet that those present will hear what you had to say.

I made my first will when I realized that if you become a parent, even if you think you have no worldly goods, you need a will to handle the guardianship of your minor children.

I made my second one when I became a single parent.

Neither contained a testament.

My children have been adults for some time now — although I occasionally wonder — and my desire to leave them more than stuff is even greater than before.

Stuff, as the Rubber Maid commercial and the economy have made clear, comes and goes.

I will give them what I have when the time comes. It may make a difference in their lives. And then again, it may not.

But opening to them my deeply held beliefs, well, that *could* make a difference in their lives for all eternity.

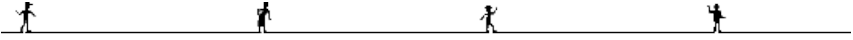
It was quite a challenge, trying to summarize my faith, putting down in a few words what I want to tell my family about my faith.

But I've worked on it for some time now; I think I can do it.

Even if I can't write everything, perhaps I can say enough to let them know how important this was to me. It just may make them look for more on their own.

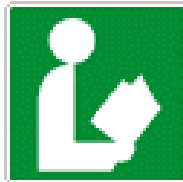
Anyway, this is what I want to say to those I love:

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Believing as I do that a loving God created the world and all that is in it, and that He put me here to have a relationship with Him; and believing that He became a man so that I could know Him, love, and serve Him, that He died and rose again that I might be forgiven for my sins and live with Him forever; and believing that He sent his Spirit to live within me, to teach strengthen and lead me, I have desired to live according to His will, loving and serving Him and my neighbor.

I long ago surrendered you to His loving care and direction, asking that His will for you would be accomplished. I leave you now with my blessing in His hands, with thanksgiving that He will continue His loving action in your lives and will bring you to a closer relationship with Him, which is the greatest treasure of all.



Some Reader Response

Every now and then, I find an interesting letter or two among the press releases and church bulletins in my mail.

A while back, a woman responded to a column about leaving a statement of your faith in your will so your heirs will hear it when the will is read — a time when I thought they would be paying attention.

"What makes you think your children will survive you?" she asked.



All of hers had not. But we do tend to think they will, even when we know there are no guarantees.

She shared briefly some of her private pain over the loss of a grown child and a grandchild.

And she wrote simply of her struggle to recover her relationship with God:

"She was a beautiful Christian and thousands of people prayed for her, but she died. For weeks I couldn't understand why God wouldn't spare her and let her live. Slowly I'm coming back into peaceful comradeship with my Heavenly Father and trying to cope with the heartache, regrets, guilt, etc."

No answers to her questions. Just a growing sense of his peace.

Near the end of the letter, she said her hope and prayer for me were that I would never have to endure such heartache.

Then, in closing, she said that it was nice to see such an article in the paper.

I haven't known the pain she had to bear. I have known others, but I will not attempt to compare them.

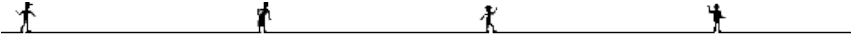
What stood out in her letter for me was the simplicity of her statement of reconciliation with God.

Our pains are too real to ignore, but so is the reality of his presence with us.

God does not often tell us "why." Instead, into the middle of our pain, he slowly makes his presence felt.

Another recent letter came from a man who was sorry to tell me I could not really be born again, that I could not, possibly understand biblical salvation and that it was questionable where I would spend eternity.

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He seemed genuinely sorry, saying how often he had enjoyed my column and found insights and wisdom in them.

But then I wrote about a person of a particular church, a young woman who had decided to become a Catholic nun.

And, he said, since Catholic priests teach that salvation is through one's own good — and I promoted such false teaching — that meant I could not know it really comes from the atoning death of Jesus Christ.

Mother Teresa's good works will not save her, he said. Good people will be shocked when they find out what their eternal destiny is, he said.

"We are not changed from bad people to good people by the blood of Christ, but from spiritually dead people to spiritually alive people, from death to life."

He did say he would pray for me. And I'm grateful. We all need prayer.

He might stop praying, however, if he knew how often I find spiritual truth in the speeches and writings of people in other denominations than my own and occasionally even in other faiths.

I don't know what that young nun believes about salvation.

I was impressed with her strong sense of God's presence in her life and her willingness to obey his call on her. I thought, and still think, that was worth sharing.

Jesus had several things to say about separating the saved from the unsaved. He separated sheep from goats according to who had served him in the needy. He also told some who did wonders in his name that he never knew them.

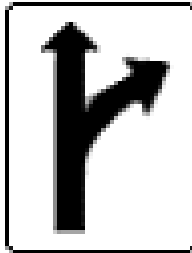
Barbara White



I believe that Jesus is the door of the sheepfold, the way into the kingdom. I believe his blood is the only thing that can wash away my sin.

But I believe that those who seek the truth seek him, whether they know it or not, and they will find him eventually because he seeks to reveal himself to us.

I leave to the Lord the determination of which ones among those who call him Lord have had their sins washed away and who haven't.



FAITH COMES ...

Don't ever say things can't possibly get any worse.

Of course they can.

About a year and a half ago my daughter was diagnosed with small cell lung cancer. After months of chemotherapy and radiation, scans showed it was all gone.

But another scan some months later showed it had returned - outside the lungs.

There was one small spot in a lymph node near her right collar bone.

More radiation and chemo.

And plans for even more chemo after a break of three weeks for the radiation area to heal.

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Last Sunday, a week before treatment was to resume, my pastor preached on the steps we can take to make us able to withstand fear. It was a good sermon, full of truth and challenge.

Afterward a friend asked me if I now felt ready to handle a disaster. I told her that, actually, I did - but not just because of the sermon.

Faith does come by hearing. But it ripens and strengthens as we take what we heard into our lives and act upon it.

It was years spent as part of a group of women, studying Scripture and praying together, becoming vulnerable with each other and holding each other accountable, in love, for our actions.

It was walking through other mine fields of life and finding the Lord always there with me.

All of this made the sermon not news, but a good refresher of what I already know. A refresher I was quickly to need to put into practice.

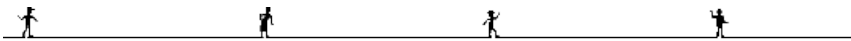
Sunday afternoon my son-in-law called and asked me to come by. He thought something was wrong.

He was right.

There was a gap - a pause between a comment or question and her response. A slight thing. Not a big thing, but more than disconcerting, a bit terrifying.

Doctor's visits, scans and MRIs later, she is in the hospital, being made ready for surgery in the morning.

The surgeon is very positive. We soak that up like dry sponges.



I spent yesterday thanking God for my daughter. First for the wonderful, joyful relationship we have now, a relationship I thought we would never have.

Then I thanked Him for the really bad times, when we were at odds, alienated from one another. Those times drove me closer to Him.

Now it is the evening and the morning of our next day.



Traveling Along The Way

Decisions, it seems, can be changed.

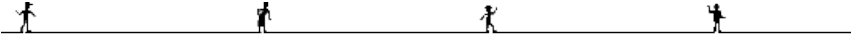
Since I'm still here, with a new name and all, I want to share something with you. When I thought it was too late, I wished I had told you what writing this column means to me and how it all started.

When I started writing religion articles, I was told to keep my opinions out of them. That suited me fine, because I had no opinions I would have ventured to back up.

All I had were half-formed theories and vague ideas I wouldn't have wanted published. After all, I thought, I'm not a theologian. As soon as I read all the right books and understand everything and have something new and significant to say, then I'll write my own thoughts.

But things changed. Everything changed. I changed.

Along The Way



Jesus said "I am the Way": I began to walk along that Way.

Now I find I do have some things to say, not about some new theology, but about the journey.

The foreword to a book I'm reading now, *Knowing God* by J.I. Packer, describes what, I have been, and will keep, trying to do.

Packer talks about the two kinds of interest in Christian things, the theoretical and the practical.

Picture, he says, persons sitting on a balcony watching travelers below walking along the road. The balcony sitters can overhear and even talk to the travelers, but they aren't going anywhere.

The travelers, on the other hand, face problems which are essentially practical, the which-way-to-go and how-to-make-it type of problem. Solutions to these problems call for more than theory, they call for decisions and actions.

Packer explains by example: "In relation to evil, the balconeer's problem is to find a theoretical explanation of how evil can consist with God's sovereignty and goodness, but the traveler's problem is how to master evil and bring good out of it."

And in the area of sin, the person on the balcony may ponder human perversity and ask if it is credible. The traveler finds sin within himself and asks what hope there is of deliverance.

I am a traveler.

It is from that vantage point that I share some of my problems and occasional solutions, making notes of stumbling blocks and paths around them.

Barbara White



My sister-in-law says I do this pretty well because I'm so common. She means I'm ordinary, I'm like everybody else, and I believe that's true.

That means you have problems, too.

Why don't you walk "along the way" with me and share your solutions with me and our other readers? I know you can; the letters you sent me this week show me.

Traveling is more fun — and easier — when you have companions. And when you help some one else, you are helped, too.



Peace

Some time ago, I woke up suddenly from a dream in which someone had broken into the house and was bending over me. Terror was with me as I awoke — in fact it was several long moments before I was sure it was a dream, not reality.

When I finally decided it was a dream, then I had to decide whether to get up and go all around the house making sure all the doors and windows were secured.

At that particular time I was not sleeping well and, once thoroughly awake, I found it almost impossible to go back to sleep. So if I got out of bed and walked, around the cold house checking aper-
tures, I was not going to go back to sleep.

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But could I sleep anyway, not being really sure the house was secure and the dream would not be turning into reality?

The horns of a dilemma. It seemed I wouldn't be able to sleep no matter what I did!

Then another option came to mind.

I sighed, said a simple prayer, a verse of Scripture actually, rolled over and went back to sleep.

The words I used are simple ones. Jesus used them once when He had a great need, too: "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit."

The next morning, after a refreshing sleep, I remembered the dream and the prayer.

"I'll have to remember that," I thought. "That worked like a charm."

It wasn't saying the words that produced the result, of course. Those words are not a charm, a magic incantation. It was giving my life away that made the difference.

If my life isn't mine, then I don't have to worry about it. I don't mean I don't have to take care of it; I am still the steward of His property, but the major responsibility is not mine, it's His!

Four major images used to describe our relationship to God are a father and his son, a husband and his wife, a king and his people and a shepherd and his sheep.

We are the son, the wife, the people and the sheep. He is the father, the husband, the king and the shepherd.

But only if we let Him be. The giving-into-the-hands has to be real.



We should know how important words are to our Lord. He is the very Word. We, too, must be our words, not just mouth them.

Then, when we truly give ourselves — body, mind and spirit — into His hands, we may not only sleep peacefully, we may do everything else in sure and certain trust in His goodness, His willingness and ability to be our Lord.

But remember, the responsibility is not simply to keep us safe — in worldly terms. Perhaps not that at all.

The responsibility is to keep us always His.



God Reveals Himself

The conversation was ambling easily along, when one of the group brought up a Bible passage she had difficulty understanding. It was an Old Testament passage and had to do with sacrifice — the sacrifice of a child to God in fulfillment of a vow.

The particular passage is not vital to the present point.

The point is, after she explained her confusion, she turned to me with an expectant look, eyebrows raised and attention focused.

I realized, with some shock and a little panic, that she was expecting me to explain the whole thing so she wouldn't be affronted by the idea and could rest easy with her understanding of God.

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Why me, O Lord!.' I thought. What do I know?

We talked for a while about the passage, sharing insights and finding some ground of understanding.

But since then I've been thinking about how I think about God. There is a world of "stuff" in my head that stands between me and Him. The arguments of theologians and philosophers, the writings of believers and non-believers, the thinking of scholars and simpletons alike.

For years these things have been trooping across the barren track of my mind, making imprints and scattering junk behind.

Little, if any of it, seems to have been built on the supposition that God actually *is* what He is, not just what we think He is.

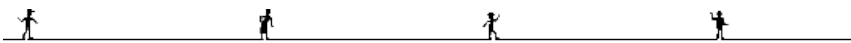
Cartoon character Popeye says, I yam what I yam, but only God can really say that truly.

His name is I Am.

So the point of discussing that Bible passage should have been trying to discover what God was revealing of Himself — what He really is — not trying to make it fit our preconceptions of what we think He is — or surely ought to be.

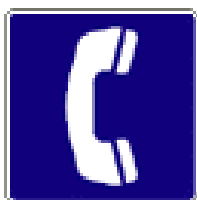
He is whatever He is. He will not change or become something else simply because we insist He should be this way or that way, or surely He fits this mold or that.

To know Him, we must be open to His revelation of Himself. That is absolutely the only way we are going to have any idea at all of what He is like. Only by being given it, never by discovery.



The Bible has more than history, poetry or even theology, the study about God, to offer. It has God Himself to offer. Reading and discussing the Bible from the understanding that God not only can, but has chosen to let me know Him through its words, opens a new world.

Jesus is the revelation. The Bible is the resource. The Spirit is the interpreter.



Help Is Available

Perhaps it's nearsightedness, astigmatism, bifocals, cowardice or a combination of them all, but I keep my eyes on my feet when walking over any kind of uncertain ground.

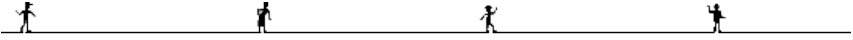
So it took quite a knock for the Lord to get me to look up and keep my eyes on Him instead.

The lesson came home to me during an overnight retreat a group from my church made last weekend.

It seems everyone on the planning committee thought someone else on the committee was to notify me of my responsibility for preparing the program for the adults. So nobody notified me.

When the person in charge of the teen program offered to compare notes on our guides to the study — two days before the retreat — I realized she meant I was supposed to be doing the same thing.

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My first reaction was indignation mixed with fear of failure; the second, simply not to go at all. Let them find someone else to stand up there in front of everybody — unprepared — and make a fool of themselves. I would just go stay with my family for the weekend, something I had been wanting to do anyway.

But when I prayed about it, the answer was that this church is my family, too.

The answer to my lack of preparation? "Trust me."

All the way through the Friday evening portion of the program (not my responsibility), I stared at the problem, trying to find *something* I could pull together and use. Nothing worked. Idea after idea dissolved before my eyes.

Finally at bedtime I (grouchily) told the Lord if He wanted me to stand up there in front of all those people and look stupid, well, that's what I would do.

And I quit looking at the problem and looked at Jesus.

Saturday was a beautiful day. The Lord used the obedience and trust I gave Him — unlovely, ungracious, but real — to let His Spirit teach and lead the program. Blessings abounded.

There are other troubling situations close to home. If I quit looking at them and keep my eyes on Jesus, I'm sure the same thing will happen.

I have spent agonizing hours looking at the very real dangers connected with these problems, trying to see a safe solution. But when I think I glimpse one, I realize I am weak in myself, cannot control anyone involved, and have no power to make it happen.



He can use even rusty tools to His glory. And the tools become brighter with use.

If I look to Him, in obedience and trust, and let His Spirit teach and lead, He promises that I will be able to do all things through Him who strengthens me and that it will all work together for good.



We're All Adopted

One day in a fit of adolescent anger, in rebellion against a stricture I was placing on his behavior, my son yelled that I had no right to tell him what to do because I wasn't even really his mother.

I surprised him. Without a moment's hesitation I put my hands on my hips, stared upward at him for eye contact (he's more than 6 feet tall) and said, "Oh, yes I am, and don't you forget it."

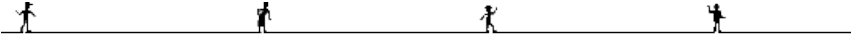
My son is adopted. He had picked what he thought might be a red herring of sufficient size to throw me off guard for a moment and let him drive home his version of how he should behave.

He may have been testing my feelings about him too, consciously or unconsciously.

But fortunately I had already thought that through. I know that adoption made him **really** my son.

And he understood my answer, for he was grinning as he stalked off into his room.

Along The Way



Adoption is a legal matter. In the eyes of the law, the adopted person has all the status of a natural heir, a child of the body. It is a relationship bestowed by the new parent and certified by the courts.

Perhaps my son was wondering in his own mind and heart whether he was truly a son and heir, or whether if he rejected me, I would reject him. But adoption produces more than a legal offspring. It makes the one adopted a true child of the house and an heir in the full sense of those words.

When we become children of God, we do so through adoption. I wonder sometimes if we really feel like God's adopted children. Sometimes we may feel as unsure of our status as my own son did about his that day.

Jesus is God's Son, the only one born His Son; all the rest of us are His children by adoption.

But our adoption was paid for with more than the time, effort, and even money we pay when we adopt children. Our adoption fee was shed by Jesus on the cross.

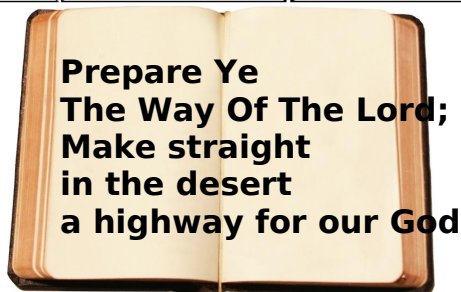
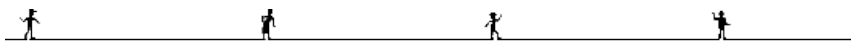
Would you pay that much to adopt a child?

Jesus compared human and heavenly fathers. Earthly fathers would give their children good things out of what they had to give, he said. How much more would the heavenly father give to his.

When I stand and yell at God that I'm not really His child, it's out of fear that I might not be His child, that I might, somehow, have fallen out of the family.

But I know my son is my son. And I know I am His child.

Barbara White



DEFEATED?

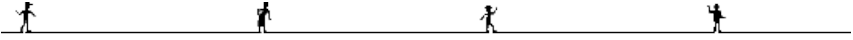
Is a Christian who feels defeat a defeated Christian?

The question came from a friend who found herself in that condition. She wondered if her feelings of depression and futility meant that she wasn't really a victorious child of God.

There is a teaching that says a real Christian knows he already has the victory and will never feel anything but wonderful. The problem with this idea, however, is that the victory may be ours — because it is His and He covers us when we claim Him — but that doesn't mean we are able to live that victory in every area of life immediately.

I couldn't find my copy of "How Come It's Taking Me So Long to Get Better?" by Lane Adams, but I recommended this little book to my friend and shared

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a very clear, real-life example the author had used to explain "victory" as we experience it.

Adams had been in the Marines during World War II and had "taken" a couple of islands from the Japanese. He said that once the beachhead was firmly established, the Marines considered the island "theirs," although there were still a lot of areas to be cleaned up.

Mopping-up operations to complete the victory took time. Supplies were gathered and preparations made before another segment of the island could be taken and the enemy routed.

Then time would be taken for gathering supplies again and for more preparations. This would continue until all of the enemy were flushed from hidden pockets of the island.

But the victory was theirs from the beginning. They knew, once firmly on the island, that it was theirs.

We are like those islands, I think. Once we acknowledge Jesus as both Savior and Lord, and ask His Spirit to live in us — and not just anywhere in us, but at the center of our lives — then the rest is mop ping-up operations.

These clean-up forays may take the rest of our lives — or even longer. As we marshal our resources (prayer, Bible reading, time spent with our Lord) and draw closer to God, a pocket of the enemy within us may surface and begin sabotage or sniper attacks. Feelings of depression or futility would be the fruits of the adversary's activities.

But we *are* His and the victory *is* His, so the victory is ours; we can be patient (His time, not ours)



and trust. And we will be more like Him as each little segment is claimed and cleaned.

The icing on the cake is the way He brings off the mop-up action. In this case, my friend found me in very much the same moods she was in.

While helping her, I found my own answer.



Different — But One

Pollyanna was noted for always trying to see something good in every situation.

I think I'm basically a Pollyanna-like person, but instead of looking for good in things, I look for God in everything.

Even sandwich meat can be the subject of theological musings.

I have never been able to develop a taste for headcheese — I can't gel past the way it looks.

But the way it looks provided food for thought — if not for lunch.

It started me thinking about the statement that we are all one in Christ. According to scripture, every other Christian is my brother or sister.

In Christ there is neither Greek nor Jew, male nor female, slave nor free. We are one in Him.

But that does not mean we are all the same.

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Baptists and Episcopalians are Christians. Greek Orthodox and Pentecostals are, too. Why do we so often deny that bond and see only the differences — as if they were more important than the bond that draws us together?

Christian unity is not simply brotherhood.

It is more like headcheese: bits and pieces of things like "chopped and boiled parts of the feet, head and sometimes the tongue and heart of an animal, usually a hog," as my dictionary describes it.

That's what we must look like to God, bits and pieces of chopped humanity, not the prime parts, but the odds and ends like feet. Of course, we are heart and head, too, and lots of tongue.

But what turns all those things into headcheese is a jelly. What holds all our bits and pieces together?

The gift Jesus gave us.

His Spirit in each of us molds us together just as jelly molds the pieces of meat into headcheese.

In Him we are not merely brothers but one body. We are His body — bits and pieces of all different sorts and conditions of humanity held together by Jesus.

The Baptist and the Episcopalian are not brothers. The Catholic and the Pentecostal are not merely denominations. They are pieces in the loaf that is the Church, the Body of Christ.

They may be flavored differently, one spicy, one bland, one tart and another sweet. But they are one.

My brother, you are part of me. My sister, you and I are joined by more than we know. The Spirit in me and in you makes us one.



Knowing Who You Are

Do you know who you really are?

Years ago I played a sort of get-acquainted game in which everyone had to identify himself by finishing the sentence "I am . . ." The choice of answer would be used to reveal what kind of person each one of us was.

The person who answered, "I am a mother," was identified as a person who knows herself only through her children. The one who said, "I am an editor and writer," was assumed to be primarily career-oriented, not people-oriented.

As I recall, there didn't seem to be *any* answer that couldn't be used against you.

Who am I?

To my grown children, I am still their mother. To my own mother, I am still a daughter. To some I am the author of this column. To a small group of high school students, I am the editor who handles their copy. To a larger number of area teens, I am a writer of stories about youth activities. To members of the symphony, I am one of their reviewers.

"I am . . ."

In his book *Knowing God*, J.I. Packer completes that statement. He writes:

"I am a child of God. God is my Father; heaven is my home; every day is one day nearer. My Savior is my brother; every Christian is my brother, too."

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I am a daughter, a mother, a writer.

But I am what Packer said, too. I am a child of God. God is *my* Father; heaven is *my* home; every day is one day nearer for me, too. My Savior is my brother and other Christians are my brothers and sisters, too.

It makes a difference in my life, knowing that's who I am.

How could I really know that — and feel despair? How could I really know that — and lose hope? I draw such assurance from knowing that's who I am.

But how could I really know that — and deliberately do anything that would make my Father ashamed of me? If I truly knew it, wouldn't I want to be a different me, one that fit that statement?

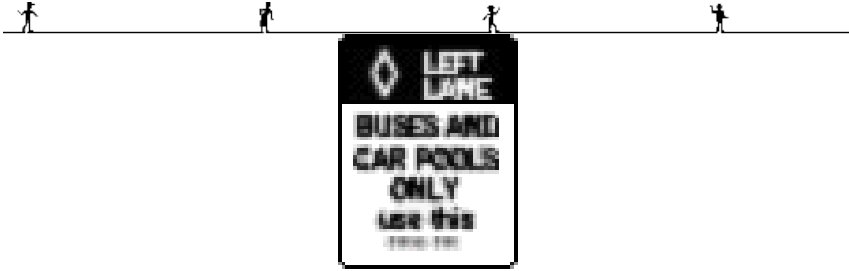
And if I wanted to honor my Father with my life, wouldn't I cooperate with all my will to see that His will is accomplished?

Packer recommends his reader say the whole statement to himself daily, on awakening in the morning, before going to sleep at night and as many times a day as he can remember to do it.

He recommends I say it until I know it's true.

This is not only the Christian's key to a happy life, Packer says, but truly the key to his Christian life, to his God-honoring life.

It is the key to who I am — and who I want to be.



A Time Not To Give

As deeply as I believe the Lord wants His people to tithe so they can come to reverence Him and so He can bless them, there are a couple of instances in which I wouldn't recommend it

One is general: people who do not believe in God. I think it would be impossible to give away 10 percent of your income to a God you didn't truly believe in.

A minister I know put it this way: non-believers shouldn't give anything; you can't tip God.

The other case involves a particular incident.

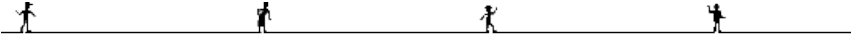
A friend of mine was dealing with the issue of tithing and talked it over with me. She believes it is what God expects of His people, and she wants to tithe. Her husband is not able to see it that way.

So she told him she would tithe from her salary (both work) and he could do what he wanted with his. Perhaps her example would be a witness to him.

I believe she thought I was going to be pleased and encourage her. I didn't.

Instead I suggested she should tell her husband how she feels about tithing — how much she wants to do it in obedience to the Lord — and then she should ask his permission to do so, but she should be willing to abide by his decision.

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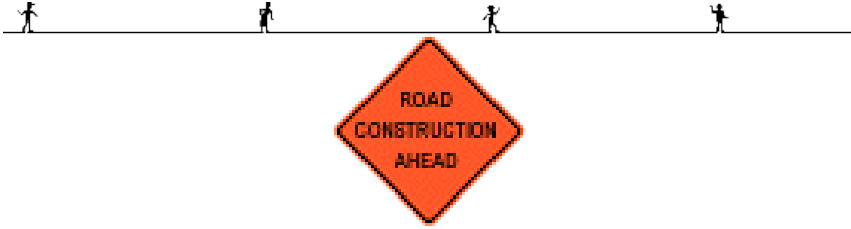
Her eyes got very big and she gave her head a strong shake. I thought perhaps I had angered her, but I reminded her that doing a good thing the wrong way was not good in the Lord's sight. And wives are supposed to be submissive (not door mats!) to their husbands.

Submission is a hard pill for some people to swallow — men and women — basically because they have not examined the way the whole thing is supposed to work. While the wife is to be submissive to her husband, he is supposed to be submissive to the Lord — and he will have to answer for the decisions he makes for them both.

Submission is hard for all of us because its roots lie in our desire to exercise our own wills — our desire to be our own gods — the original sin. That's why we are called to practice it. We need it so.

At home my friend found a book her mother had given her years before, but one that she had never read. Its title is *Submit? Who Me?* It took her less than a week to read it.

The result of all this has been that she shared with her husband her strong feelings on the subject of tithing — and then left the decision for a family pledge to the church up to him. I have no idea what he did. But I believe the Lord will bless her obedience far more than He would have blessed her tithe — against her husband's wishes. And that the witness of her obedience will be stronger than any other she could give her husband.



Forgiveness For The Flawed

The dimensions of God's forgiveness are so great it can take something really "unforgivable" to show how much they can encompass.

A dear friend of mine died last week— an unexpected and tragic death.

I was shocked and saddened at the news. But even more, I was overwhelmed for a time by guilt.

I had not found a way to communicate God's love and peace to her, to make it real enough to convince her she could trust Him, to let her know He could help her through her problems.

We had talked for hours sometimes. She had read and sought passionately to know and understand what she found beyond understanding — to believe something she could not feel.

My lack of success troubled me, even though I was not the only one trying to help her. But it was not simply failure here that hurt so.

The guilt I felt on learning of her death was of a smaller kind — one harder to take.

I had not visited her enough. I had not called her on the phone. I had not thought of her often enough — or at all on far too many days.

I had not done the little things I could have done.

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I had become too involved in the business of daily life, of my own family's needs and my own desires.:

I had not even prayed for her as often as I meant to.

The realization of my self-centeredness was an overwhelming sorrow, a burning shame, a heavy weight of remorse that pressed upon me.

When I looked at this deep, basic flaw I did not see how I could possibly forgive myself. I didn't just **-feel** guilty— I **was** guilty!

That was when the vastness of God's forgiving love became visible to me. His arms, which were once stretched out along the cross, can now spread wide enough to encompass such deep, basic human flaw. He not only forgives and loves the flawed creature, He is prepared to do something to make it better.

When I turn to Him in repentance and confess the sin, His Spirit is able to cleanse and heal — to correct and change. In his forgiveness

God did not say I was right; He said I am still loved — and still able to come into His presence.

There is much yet to change, much I don't even want to know about myself.

Yet, in His mercy He shows me my human nature so that I may turn it over to Him. The Creator can re-create in me a new person.





God Has A Cure

More than a year ago, a young friend of mine made a decision most of her peers would have approved — if she had asked them — and which I would not — if she had asked me.

I don't know if she talked it over with her friends, although a few knew.

We did not discuss it. In fact, I was not supposed to know anything about it, but one of those friends let enough slip for me to figure out the rest.

The only reason I bring this up (and in such a complicated way — it is not my secret to tell) is that this friend has now asked me if I knew and how I felt — and feel — about her actions.

How do I really feel about this friend now? When I see her, do I have to "put aside" thoughts of what she did? Does the fact that I cannot think her choice good mean I cannot think good of her?

Forgiveness. What is it really?

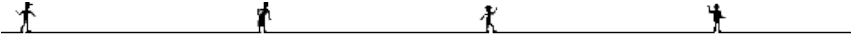
You know that old saying: I may forgive it (whatever), but I'll never forget it?

Well, that's not forgiveness. Forgiveness IS forgetting — really and truly forgetting, wiping it out as if it had never been.

When she asked, I realized I had already done this — I had forgotten.

Now she has reminded me. She didn't know I had forgotten, she didn't even know I knew. But now she wants no secrets. She wants a clean slate. She wants to be in a right relationship with me. She wants to be forgiven.

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So now I can tell her I have nothing to forgive. She hurt me only because I love her and want her to know no pain. She *has* hurt God, who wants her to be perfect, and knowing that will cause her pain.

But He has a cure, a healing, waiting for her.

She is His child. She may tell Him what she has done, as she has now told me, tell Him that she is truly sorry, and He will forget it, will wipe it out as if it had never been.

God does not do that because we are now so good He is willing to forget the past. We will do something else just as far from perfection again. He forgets because when He looks at those of us who are in Jesus, that's who He sees. The atoning act of Jesus on the cross, that sacrifice claimed through faith in it and with repentance of sin, has washed the sin away.

Sometimes, in our humanness, we believe the sinner (that other sinner) should suffer more than remorse — or that remorse should go on and on. We forget we, too, are sinners.. Forgetting others' sins is part of having ours forgotten.



Cat Fatigue

Monday morning, I arose at what my clock said was 5:30, but my body knew was really 4:30.

One of my usual early morning tasks is feeding the cat. He is very persistent in his requests and, as in



the case of the persistent widow and the judge (see Luke 18), he has his way.

That morning, however, I was beginning to wonder where he was when I finally spotted him, asleep, on top of a kitchen cabinet

I rattled his food box and asked if he wanted breakfast. He blinked, rose to his feet, stretched, turned around and lay down with his back to me-

His message was loud and clear: You may think it's time to get up, but I know better.

By Wednesday he was meowing as loudly as ever as soon as I appeared.

I, on the other hand, was still going to sleep by the old time and getting up by the new, a situation that leads to accumulative fatigue.

The cat had adjusted easily to a new way; I struggled, tied to the old.

I wonder how much of my old life I am still clinging to. How much of the old me is still hanging on, producing fatigue in my spiritual life?

That old life was supplanted by a new one when I surrendered to the Lord. I became a new creation. But all of the old did not immediately go away. What I am determined to cling to, the Lord lets me keep.

I fell exhausted into the bed that night, an exhaustion magnified by my poor adjustment to daylight-saving time, and began cataloging the areas of my life that are not in line with my new creation.

Fatigue has a way of making things look worse than they would otherwise, but it didn't take fatigue to make the catalog of things done that shouldn't have

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been done or not done that should have been look awful.

However, fatigue can make things harder to deal with.

A feeling of defeat at my many failures hovered over me, but I knew that guilt is not one of the burdens the Lord gives me to carry around.

Underneath the fatigue, the near depression, the recognition of how much room there is for improvement, underneath all that, was a sure and certain knowledge that I am loved and accepted, that I am God's child.

A sorry and repentant one — not ready for words of praise and needing an admonition or two — but a child and heir for all that, a full-fledged member of the family forever.

Sleep came as I felt myself adrift on stormy seas, but safe and at rest in the hands of the One who loves me.



Finding An Old Notebook

I recently came across a small notebook full of notes taken during a six-week Bible study course. One of the assigned activities was to read specific passages of scripture daily and write answers to some prearranged questions.

The results make very interesting reading now.



There is no date anywhere to be found, on the binder or inside, and I cannot remember exactly when and where I took the course. But the signs point to a time shortly before my surrender to the Lord.

This little book records my thoughts as I approached — and fled from — a moment of decision I knew would change my whole life.

Sure enough, it *has* involved my whole life. The decision, once made, became only the first step in a new life.

I have talked before about my moment of decision and about my new life. I have shared that it was a hard decision for me to make, that I was scared.

But an interesting thing has happened. As time has gone by, I have forgotten the depth of the agony involved in holding out against God when He *is* pressing against you.

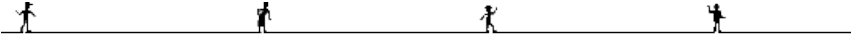
It was recorded in that little notebook — if not all, then enough to remind me of the struggle I had gone through.

How strange it seems now, looking back. How afraid I was I would disappear as a person, or I would find I had given my heart to something that wasn't real and I would be hanging over the abyss with nothing to cling to. It is hard now to remember exactly what I was so afraid of, but the fear was very real — and so was the agony.

Some of my fears turned out to be accurate perceptions of what was to come. I have disappeared in some ways and from some places. I am not the person I was then.

But the major fear, that I would be guessing wrong, that I would have leaped desperately into

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nothingness, has not proven true. The leap felt that way, although all I did was kneel down and mean it when I said, "I surrender my life to You, O God the Father, and ask that Your Son, Jesus, may reign in my heart, over my entire life, through the power of the Holy Spirit."

Though I cannot prove the existence of the God into whose hands I have given my life, I know He is there. But I had to believe it by faith alone before I could know it

In the process I traded agony for peace.

How I wish I could convince others, still in the agony, of the wonderful reality of that peace. But no one could convince me ahead of time. Each of us must come to it alone, with only the Spirit to help.



Surrender?

Every now and then one of these columns sparks a reader response. It took almost two weeks for one reader to get around to commenting about the column in which I spoke of the prayer of helplessness. But when he finally did write, he told me a story that reinforces the point I was trying to make.

I asked for and received permission to reprint it here.

The story concerns a fishing trip my reader took several years ago.



"There were about a dozen boats in our area of Lake George," he wrote, "widely spaced but each within sight of the other. After about an hour of quiet fishing there was a loud shout of 'Hey!' from one of the boats. My buddy and I glanced in the direction of the shout, as I am sure did the other boaters, but saw nothing out of the ordinary. After another 15 minutes there was another shouted, 'Hey!' but we paid no attention.

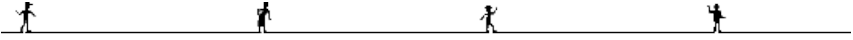
"After several more shouts of 'Hey!' the person finally shouted, 'Help!' Well, outboard motors cranked up all over the lake and boats headed in the direction of the shouts. We were the first to arrive and found the boat occupied by a young couple. The problem was a motor that would start, but when put into gear nothing would happen, indicating a sheared pin.

"We did not have another pin which would fit, but meanwhile other boaters had arrived and one of them had an extra pin which did fit. In no time at all, the repair was completed and we all returned to fishing — all but the young couple in the now repaired boat. They headed for shore.

"Incidentally, if none of us had had a pin that fit, one of us would have towed the disabled boat to shore. "My point is that as long as that young man shouted 'Hey!' nobody paid attention, but as soon as he admitted he was helpless and asked for assistance, that help came from all directions.

"Likewise, when events are not proceeding to our liking and we complain, nothing happens. But if we admit we are faced with a problem beyond our ability to solve and we ask for divine assistance, it will be forthcoming, provided, of course, that the end result fits God's plan for us."

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This "parable of the helpless fishermen" is a good example of how the Lord works in our lives.

The hard part is admitting we are truly helpless. When we are *truly* helpless, we don't lay down conditions for assistance, we just surrender and take what is given.

But when we make that surrender to the Lord, then He becomes our rescuer. With that kind of help, the result fits His plan for us and is always wonderful — maybe not what we expected, but wonderful — even if it sometimes takes a while to see it that way.



Each Decision Builds A House

Do you know the parable of the two houses, the one on a foundation of stone and the other on a foundation of sand? Jesus said that if we build on the good, solid foundation, the house will withstand storm, wind and flood, but if we build on a shifting foundation, the house will fall when subject to the elements.

Well, I guess I always thought when I got around to building, I would certainly build on a solid foundation — but that I wasn't really ready to build yet. I thought I could wait to build until I had accumulated enough supplies and know how to keep from running short of something needed or making mistakes.

I was wrong.



I thought the house was a structure of some kind, a repository for our future, perhaps. I thought I might live in the house, but if it turned out I hadn't done such a good job of building, I could just move away at the first sign of danger.

But now I believe I am the house itself. Each day of my life is a time of building. The winds, water and rains are the world beating around me.

We build the house that is our life in every decision we make. We add bricks to it where it stands, on the rock of faith or on the sands of the world.

I hadn't realized that every time I make a decision, consciously or not, I build the house that is me. And that is the kind of house the Lord was talking about.

We build willy-nilly, whether we mean to or not. We have no choice but to choose.

And we can't even see the plan. But the Lord can. He is not only the cornerstone, but also the master builder. Faith in Him is the foundation; our only work in building is the choice to stand on that faith, no matter what. Then He does the building.

Each time we will to will His will, He adds another window for His light to come through, another outlet for the energy of His Spirit to empower our lives.

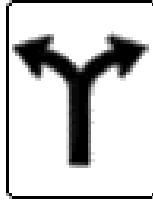
Each decision we make on the basis of faith in his continuing resurrection in our lives, moment by moment, gives Him material for the building. Every surrender to His will He uses as mortar and brick.

Shall I fear decisions? Shall I worry or fret about making the right one?

Each time I remember that a decision can be an opportunity for Easter to be made real in my life, I

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won't fear. Each time I remember to will His will, I will know only anticipation and expectancy about the results.



No Wrong Turns

It doesn't surprise me that the church is full of sinners. Jesus came not for the righteous — for there aren't any — but for the fallen, so who else could fill the church?

It does surprise me to find in the church those who think they are never sinners. They are called hypocrites, and Jesus had some pretty harsh things to say about them — like calling them whited sepulchers and vipers.

Every now and then I am more than surprised. I am shocked to find myself in their ranks.

The difference between the Christian sinner and the non-Christian sinner is like the difference between the publican and the Pharisee: the Christian acknowledges his fault, says he is sorry and asks for forgiveness and the strength to do better next time — because he knows all that will be given.

Jesus called the Pharisee a hypocrite because he *looked* as if he were really obeying God and staying close to Him, while in reality he was only making a show on the surface and was full of sin inside. And worst of all, he condemned another for not looking as good as he did.



None of us is perfect. That's not what I mean. My imperfections may come as a shock, but they don't make me a hypocrite.

What makes me a member of that whited sepulcher crowd is when the Lord has cast His light on an area of my life and I do not walk according to that light. If my Lord gives me some personal insight, I am a hypocrite if I ignore it, go my own way and still call myself His child.

I don't always want to walk in the light the Lord has shown me. There are times when I just plain want to walk the old familiar ways, times when I don't want to expend the energy to walk His way or face the reactions of others.

Then for a while I may look clean on the surface — as does the whitewashed outside of a tomb — but I will be full of death inside. And eventually it will show, because the fruits of the Spirit cannot grow in that atmosphere.

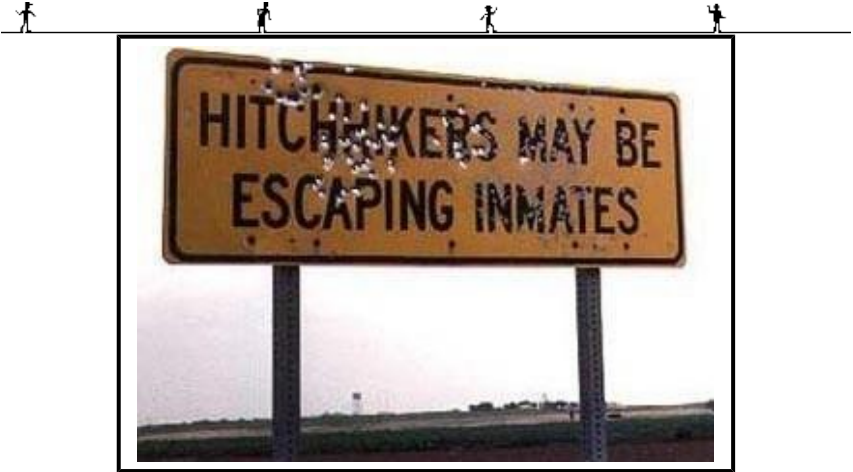
The only answer is to say with the publican, "O Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner," and to ask for the strength to change. When I surrender to the Lord, let go of my own will and yield to His, I am made a new creation.

This is not a one-time process in my life. There are many areas still in the dark..

It is an ongoing process, a daily one. Sometimes it is painful.

But always that painful surrender, that hard walk ends in joy. I receive the blessing the publican received and I am again at one with Him — and that is joy.

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Who Needs Him Most?

A friend snorted in disbelief when she read about the father who had "found Jesus" in jail after being arrested and charged with forcing his daughter into sexual relations with him.

"Yeah, sure," she said. "All he's trying to do is get off with a lighter sentence. Now that he's 'found Jesus,' we shouldn't be so hard on him. Ha!"

And yet, what is more natural than a person, faced finally with his own misdeeds, turning to the source of redemption?

A person in jail knows a judge is going to pass sentence on his actions and wants as good a lawyer as he can afford.

He may also realize what a sorry state he has made of his life, how far short he has fallen from the goodness and perfection his Creator expects of him.



He may think of eventually facing a judge in a heavenly court, not just an earthly one.

In such circumstances, is it strange that he may come to the conclusion he needs an advocate?

My friend is cynical about this man's jailhouse conversion because she sees it as an attempt to escape punishment. And this is true: he is trying to escape eternal punishment. He probably won't escape earthly punishment, but if he has to go to prison, he will not go alone now that he has accepted Jesus into his life.

And here is another truth about prison conversions:

I don't think it is primarily fear that draws people to Jesus. I think it is His love. The fact that He loves us — while we are yet sinners — is truly beyond comprehension.

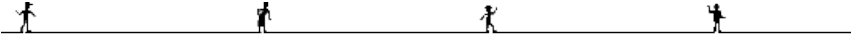
Some of us, not understanding it, refuse to acknowledge this as true. But others, knowing the extremity of our need, accept it gratefully.

I have not broken any major laws. I've logged a traffic violation or two for which I have paid fines and been absolved by the state.

But compared with the description of the character of man that God designed, drawn for us in the Sermon on the Mount, I was a pretty miserable sinner that day when I accepted Jesus. I was not in a jail made by men. I was in a prison made by a human nature that ruled my life.

So mine was a jailhouse conversion, too. I looked at myself, looked at the love of God, which is so great He gave His only Son to die for me, and I "found Jesus."

Along The Way



Which one of us needs Him most? Which of us has most to be thankful for? Well, if you're snatched from the flood, does it matter how deep the I water was? I can't believe he is more grateful than I.

That man's conversion may not grow into commitment, but I pray it will. For as a fellow Christian, he is now my brother.



Time For A Fill-up

Some mornings I have a very hard time saying my prayers. All I really want to do is rush up to God, pour out to Him my needs for the day and ask His help.

What I know I *ought* to do is enter His presence with praise.

I tell myself it is hypocritical to pause a moment in my headlong rush to lay my hurting head on my Father's lap just to mouth a phrase or two of praise I don't feel at the moment.

Now, it is all right for a child to rush up to her father and throw herself on him, weeping, when some major hurt has happened. But it is not a terribly appropriate habit for a maturing child to develop as a regular thing.

As I grow in my walk with the Lord, I begin to know His peace and to trust Him deeply in everything that touches my life..



If that is true, the rush to petition for myself, the immediate seeking of solace for my hurts, is a direct rejection of that peace and trust.

Words of praise that are simply mouthed, said like the "abracadabra" that opens the doors into the treasure room, *are* hypocritical. I am grateful that His Spirit within me makes me uncomfortable when I try to use them. Being childish is not what Jesus meant when He said we should be like little children.

When I rush to the door of my Father's throne room, it is not hypocrisy for me to lay down my concerns in a little heap at the door, to enter instead in awe and wonder of my Heavenly Father, to recite the works He has done in history and to call to mind how He has touched the lives of individuals and peoples throughout time.

I know that bundle of troubles will be waiting right where I left it when I am finished praising my God for his mighty works of creation and redemption. But although those problems will still be the same, I will not.

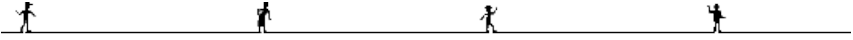
From my words of praise I will have learned again that I am never alone in any troubled time.

I will be filled with confidence in Him and will trust again in His plan and desire to be in my life, to use me to His will, to make me whole.

God did not send His Son to die on the cross, Oswald Chambers writes, because of pity for my problems.

He died because He wants to make me the righteous creation He intended me to be. He does not intend to make me a sweetly rounded grape. He wants poured-out grape juice from which to make wine.

Along The Way



Perhaps the very problem I intended to complain about to my Father is the one that will crush the protective grape skin and let the juice pour out, the one that will break down the dam in me that keeps His love from pouring through to others.



Dangerous Salt

I add as little salt to my food as possible. I don't put any on after cooking, in fact, and try to avoid all those extra-salty foods such as ham and salted nuts.

Yet Jesus says I am to be the salt of the earth — and not just me. That's one of the names the Lord chose to call His people.

I heard a talk on what it means to be the salt of God's earth recently and found there is more than one meaning to the phrase.

Salt adds flavor and zest, it says in Matthew 5. It is also used to purify, and preserve. In reading Mark 9 we understand that salt burns when it is rubbed in a wound, but used properly, it may lead to healing.

Jesus expects us to be that kind of salt. And I can manage that some of the time, anyway.

But all the time?

Another thing about salt is that, under the right kind of circumstances, it goes on being salt forever. And that is certainly one of the things Jesus expects us



to do. Luke 14 tells us that if we start out adding the spice to life or begin to bring healing to the world and then find we can't keep it up, we aren't any more use to Him than salt which has lost its saltiness.

It is better not to start than to start and quit, the passage in Luke says. Those are very hard words, but they come right next to the ones about being salt.

Salt also has some dangerous qualities. Too much salt is bad for the arteries and the blood pressure. The right amount preserves food; too much spoils it.

When an enemy wishes to destroy land, he may plow it with salt and nothing will grow there. The Lord buried Sodom under salt.

How can I have just the right amount of salt?

The same way the Sea of Galilee does.

The same water runs into the Sea of Galilee that runs into the Dead Sea, but the former is full of life, the latter, death.

The difference is simple. The water that runs into the Sea of Galilee also runs out. The Dead Sea only takes in and never puts out.

I want to be salty enough to save, not so salty nothing can live.

I thank God often for His goodness to me — for pouring His living water into me, for giving me His zest for life, for purifying me and healing me.

And ask that I may serve Him with gladness and with singleness of heart. That, means letting His zest and His healing serve his world through me — every day.



Projecting My Image

I bought a new car this week.

The manager of the dealership seemed to be pleased to have me as a customer — as a religion columnist and all. Having the dealership name on my car would be good for their image, he said.

Perhaps. I'm not so sure.

The little car is bright red and rather sporty looking. Being a religion columnist has clout, if any, only with a certain segment of the community, and that segment may have second thoughts about a religion columnist who drives a sporty little red car — even if it isn't a real sports car.

The whole business of images, however, is an interesting one. What kind of image do I project?

The one I would like to project is the image of Jesus in my life. I wonder how many people see Him when they look at me?

Images aren't simply outward appearances. A sporty little red car does say something, but there is more, something much harder to define, involved in shaping an image.

The ad men know that. The little touches added to a presentation of a product build the total picture they want to project.

What little touches in my life help me project the image of Jesus?



What little things that I do or leave off doing mark me as His?

As the saying goes, if being a Christian were a crime, would there be enough evidence against me to convict me?

Well. The Lord has cleaned up my vocabulary. But I never did swear a lot, because my mother wouldn't have liked it. And I don't keep the money if someone gives me too much change. But that is simple honesty.

Does anything mark me with His image?

Does the cross that was marked on my forehead at my baptism show in any way at all?

I give a tithe to my church. I read the Bible regularly. I pray.

But what does this do to shape an image? I can't go around carrying a placard that says all that stuff No one would ever know — except, of course, that I have just told you.

But I can't proclaim my own image.

It must be recognized by others.

Looking in a mirror will never reveal what image I project.

I guess the only way I will ever know is if someone else tells me.

Those around me can see who truly rules my life — which is the true image I project.

The more Jesus rules, the more they will see Love.

Along The Way



Following My Own Advice

A friend came to me with a problem, expecting sympathy.

I offered sympathy for her pain, but I also asked her to thank the Lord for working in her life and to use her will in trusting Him to bring her through the difficulty to a closer relationship with Him.

It's easy to give advice. It costs nothing to give and may not involve the giver beyond the moment.

In this case, however, the Lord had me give advice I need to hear. I, too, have a problem and want sympathy. I, too, am called to praise and to trust.

My friend's husband has lost his job. It is a common event in the world, but not for this family. It is hurtful, humiliating and frightening. One's stomach tightens up and release is often found in anger.

As she talked about how hard she is having to work to keep from being angry with her husband, I told her the Lord is giving her a chance to practice being a supportive wife.

As she talked about how scared she is, I reminded her that the Lord loved her enough to die for her and loves her enough still to want her to turn more of her life over to Him.

And as she talked, I heard my own fears and angers. My son has presented me with a problem that brings both reactions.



As I talked, I listened, for the message is for me, too. I have a chance to practice being the kind of parent the Lord has always wanted me to be. I have the chance to thank Him for loving me and my son enough to keep trying to bring us closer to Him.

How can we praise and trust when fear and anger overwhelm us? We can praise Him for what we know He has already done for us and we can will to trust Him, leaving the Lord to deal with our emotions.

None of us can become holy just because the Lord tells us to be. But each of us can become more like Jesus by reaching the end of our own abilities and letting Him take over.

My friend's marriage was suffering from her husband's old job. He was never at home. It is possible he will be better off with a new job. It is possible their marriage will be better off, too.

It is possible that all things will work together for their good if they love the Lord by praising, trusting and following Him.

My son's situation brings pain and distress. But it may bring him to a new beginning. It may also bring a new dimension to our relationship, so we are not just mother and child, but mother and grown son, both related to the Lord.

I promised my friend that every time I think of my son and our problem, I will lift her and her husband up to the Lord in prayer. She has promised to do the same for us.

Along The Way



Abstain From Doubting

I sigh a lot when I weigh myself. The dial never seems to stop soon enough and the only real solution, eating less every year for the rest of my life, seems so hard to do.

I think it's easier to give something up entirely than to cut down. I think it's easier to give up cigarettes or liquor entirely than to give up food partially.

That's easy for a non-smoker to say. It was also easy for a social drinker to say, when I undertook a fast from all alcoholic beverages to go with prayer for a specific situation.

Obviously, I can do without both of those substances totally.

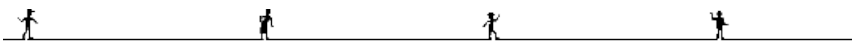
There are other areas of my life where cutting down is not the solution, either. One is the area of doubt.

I hadn't realized how often I hug doubts to myself — absolutely wallowing in them — until I read Hannah Whitall Smith's classic, *The Christian's Secret of a Happy Life*.

The doubter is just like the alcoholic, she says. Total abstinence is the only answer.

It was easy for me to give up cigarettes — I never started smoking. It was also easy to give up drinking because I am not addicted to it.

Barbara White



Doubting, well, that's another matter entirely. I may be a chronic doubter.

I don't *mean* to doubt what God can do, but I do, subtly, doubt that He will do it in my life.

I don't think of it as doubting God. I tell myself I only doubt myself. I say it's just that I'm afraid I won't do the right thing, that I won't understand His guidance when I ask for it. Or I say I'm not worthy.

Look at those doubts! Everyone of them is a denial of the power and love of the Lord! When you put it that way, I certainly don't mean them.

But I do allow them a place in my life. "I'm not worthy" is simply false humility. Jesus is worthy and He has accepted me in Him. "I won't understand" is a denial of His ability to teach and lead me.

One little doubt always leads to another with me, too. And the first thing I know I am staggering from them, unable to stand.

Once I became aware that doubts are an affront to the majesty of God, I swore off. I took a pledge of abstinence, wrote it on a piece, of paper and put it in my Bible.

That's all I have to do never to doubt again, the Lord will do the rest. If I feel one small doubt coming on, or see a tidal wave of them about to swamp me, I am to call on Him to handle them.

I don't doubt He can and will do it.



**An Highway Shall Be There
And A Way,**



**And it shall be called
The Way Of Holiness...
Wayfaring Men,
Though Fools,
Shall Not Err Therein.**

How To Treat The Unloving

Jesus saved some of his harshest remarks for those who said they were righteous but who didn't know how to love their neighbors.

A letter I received recently sounded the same note.

It was unsigned so I can't reprint it, but I will take a look at the issue it raised: the person who loudly proclaims his own righteousness while cheating strangers, browbeating co-workers and in other ways mocking the word of the Lord.

The non-Christian observing that kind of behavior simply uses it as an excuse to stay away from Jesus.

What does the Christian do when he sees his brother or sister acting that way?

Jesus said that not everyone who calls Him Lord will enter the kingdom of heaven. He said that being good to the least of His brothers is being good to Him — and that *not* being good to the others, was not being good to Him.



And He had some pretty rough things to say to the churchmen of the day who obeyed the letter of the law but ignored the spirit and made life miserable for the lesser folk who could not seem to match their diligence.

So what can a Christian do to keep his brother from being one of that number?

I found a solution in Scripture (the right place to find solutions), in a passage in Second Timothy about how to handle a breach between Christians.

If there is a breach between you and your Christian brother, first you go and try to heal the breach, to reestablish the relationship.

If that fails, you take some others and go try again.

If that fails, you bring it before the body of the church and if that fails, you treat the person like a tax collector or a heathen.

How *did* Jesus treat tax collectors and gentiles?

Did He shun them?

Was He mean to them or did He turn His back on them?

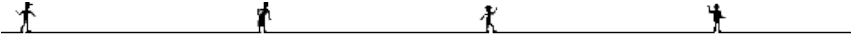
He loved them and sought them out to bring them the good news of salvation, that they can repent and be forgiven and be made new.

But He certainly didn't tell them what they were doing was right and they could continue in it.

Someone who has heard the Word and refuses to be healed by it cannot be treated as part of the body, because he no longer is part of the body.

It isn't easy to do, especially by Christians who know they aren't perfect, either.

Along The Way



But the reason for putting him outside the circle is not to punish him for punishment's sake.

It is one more attempt to jolt him into awareness and bring him back into full fellowship.

That is loving the way Jesus loves.



Forgiveness Requires Belief

I visited my daughter last weekend and while we were chatting over lunch she asked my opinion of a tough question she and some of her friends had been discussing.

If parents kill their child, through neglect or worse, should they be forgiven? To my daughter and her friends, it is the ultimate crime and she doesn't see how it can ever be forgiven.

It is certainly a very heinous thing. It is perfectly understandable that she should be revolted at the thought.

But unforgivable? No. We find it hard to forgive someone who has done such a thing, but since the death and resurrection of Jesus, God doesn't.

Nothing is unforgivable except the refusal to believe He will forgive.



The judicial system is forced to deal with our fallen nature, to keep us from destroying ourselves, but God has made provision for the restoration of our spiritual nature. He has provided the means of forgiveness.

Jesus died on the cross for all the sins of all people. He who never sinned became sin for us. His atonement for sin has been completed and He has gone to be with the Father. It is done.

I receive forgiveness through His act of redemption.

But it is not mine until He is. Redemption from sin is not mine until I am in Jesus and He is in me. Then the act of redemption once done becomes new in me.

Repentance is not the key to being forgiven, either. Repentance is the fruit of being forgiven, a product of grace, the result of being in relationship with the Lord.

Saying I believe Jesus is Lord and God raised Him from the dead is the key.

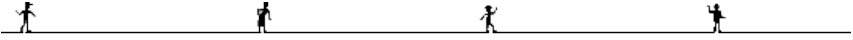
But not "saying" alone. Mouthing the words is not what I mean. Believing is. Saying with my lips and believing in my heart is the way Scripture puts it.

And when I believe in my heart, then I begin to see the condition of my heart. When Jesus enters my life, His light shines in all the dark corners and I can see everything as it really is.

Then I truly repent and I don't just say I'm sorry, I become sorry.

Redemption was accomplished long before I repented. And it even became mine before I repented.

Along The Way



It became mine the minute I surrendered my life to Jesus. Repentance is the result of His light in my life.

The mother who killed her child may receive forgiveness because forgiveness has been won for all

There will be great remorse in her heart, I'm sure, after Jesus comes to reign there and she sees what she has done in the light of His love. But there will also be great rejoicing, for forgiveness is real.



Belief At Work

There is a little poster around my house that says: "When I thinks, I thinks deep; when I works, I works hard; and when I sits down, I falls asleep."

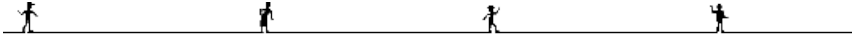
It's the middle slogan I want to talk about today.

When I work (to be a bit more grammatical), I do work hard. The problem is, I often work very hard at the wrong thing.

When a situation arises and I think something should be done about it, I sit right down (kept awake by the pressures of the problem) and begin designing solutions or modes of attack.

In the midst of one of these planning (and worrying) sessions recently, I came across the Scripture that tells me what my primary work task really is.

My work is to believe in Jesus and in Him who sent Him.



It is much harder work than it sounds like it should be.

Believing — really believing so that you live it — is not an easy thing. It may begin with a desperate situation. but it needs a sustained effort to survive.

Many of us came to belief in Jesus by way of a desperate situation. If the ship has gone down and the lifeboat is sinking and someone says Jesus knows how to make people walk on water, I may decide to believe in Him.

Without a sustained effort of belief, however, that will last only long enough for me to find my head above water where I can breathe again. Then I begin to think I am swimming so well, I can handle it from here.

All the other swimmers may be telling me that walking on water is impossible and I'm deluding myself, but in this case believing means if I go under the water, I'm still certain I'm going to be OK.

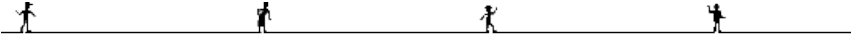
Believing in the face of what looks like facts to the contrary is not easy. Thomas said he couldn't and wouldn't believe that Jesus was raised from the dead until he saw Him and touched His wounds.

Jesus gave Thomas that experience — once. After that, Thomas had to live either on the memory of that one experience or by faith built by believing daily.

Being human, the memory of a past experience is not enough. It's like trying to stay in physical shape by remembering the exercises we did last week. Runners know they have to keep running.

It helps if I can occasionally see someone else doing the same thing and being blessed by the effort.

Along The Way



The Lord knows this is true. That's one reason He intends us to be part of a body instead of lone believers. He knows that as we see belief at work in another Christian's life, our ability to keep on believing is strengthened.



On Being Elevated

Sitting at the foot of the table is really a drag. It's much more fun at the head. At least that's the way I found it recently.

A short time ago, I was given the chance to act as the assistant city editor in charge of community news. For a couple of weeks I worked with the *Journal's* community correspondents, scheduling their stories and getting their copy ready for publication. I also prepared a daily budget of their stories and took it to the editors' meeting at noon.

Then they gave someone else a chance to work that desk.

Jesus told me how it would be. When you go to a feast, He said, you may try out that seat at the head table, but you'd better not think of it as your own, because someone else might come along and be ushered to your seat and you'd have to move to a lower seat.



Actually, He didn't say it that way, but what He did say translates out that when I apply it to my situation. I know it does from my reactions now that I'm back — writing the digest of yesterday's news, putting together obituary notices, or calling for more information from the weather service.

It's all necessary work — and what I had been doing before I was "elevated" to fill a vacancy on a temporary basis. Although it had not bothered me before, suddenly it felt like sitting at the foot of the table.

It has been a humbling experience. Not being put back in my old job, but realizing how much I had reacted to feeling important and how depressed I was at being "moved down."

The old ego had really let itself get all puffed up in self-importance, and the deflating process was a bit painful.

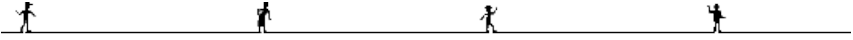
And admitting my false pride and real foolishness was almost worse.

Now, no honest work is better or worse than any other. The pay is better for some, our talents and personalities are better suited to some, and there is nothing wrong with wanting a better-paying and challenging job — if you can handle it — but who we are is not measured by what we do to earn a living.

There is a cure for my discomfort, a freedom from the painful awareness of my own self-centeredness, a release from the pangs of put-down pride.

The solution is surrender of self to Jesus. When I care more about lifting Him up, it won't matter to me whether I am lifted up or not.

Along The Way



I won't even notice.

When I am serving Him in every minute of my life, it won't matter how important the tasks are that fill my workday hours.

Obviously I'm not there yet. But I believe this experience has been part of the process.



A Seed To Grow?

A fellow who had come to see me months ago hoping I'd write a story about him called me back this week. He is an ex-convict who said he had come to know the Lord in prison and was going to serve Him in some kind of prison ministry.

He had been in the news a lot as a criminal, he said during his visit, and he showed me a box of clippings to prove it. Now he wanted to be in the news for the Lord.

I made copies of several of his clippings and spent an hour taping an interview, but told him I thought it would be better to wait awhile to write his story.

He called back, he said, to tell me things aren't so good right now. He had worked with three different prison ministries in the area and none had "worked out." He had quit going to church and no longer had a close relationship with his minister.

In fact, he said, recently he had thought about suicide.



It was just one more shallow prison conversion, some might say. But I think what happened to this man happens to a lot of new Christians who have never been near a prison.

After I hung up the phone, I thought of the parable of the sower. Some seed fell among thorns and they grew up and choked it out.

Has the enemy snatched the Word of God back out of this man's life? Have the cares and problems of the world choked it?

The Bible also warns us of the twofold danger of new Christians trying to do anything of importance right away: If they fail, they become discouraged; and if they succeed, they become puffed up and open to the enemy.

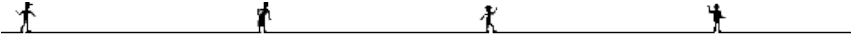
I don't think it was a coincidence that just this week I read in Acts the account of Paul's conversion and how .he caused so much trouble preaching in Jerusalem when he first went to see the disciples that they had to rush him out of town and back to Tarsus. That's the sort of thing new Christians do when they try to rush ahead of the Lord.

Paul needed a little time to study how to *be* the Lord's person before he started trying to *do* anything for Him.

I suspect the man who called me was not willing to wait. He said he had tried and failed and was now discouraged.

Near the end of our conversation, I asked him to consider going back to one of the groups with whom he had worked and hanging in there through the tough waiting time. I also asked him to go back to reading the Bible, particularly Psalms.

Along The Way



"There's great strength in Psalms, isn't there," he said as he hung up.

Maybe the seed will grow after all.



Remember Moses

I have said, "Remember Moses," to one eager young Christian friend of mine so often she is beginning to say it before I do.

She is full of enthusiasm and energy. She wants to be out and doing — there is so much to be done and she is so willing.

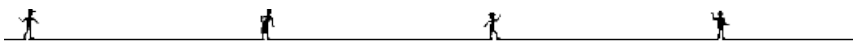
I reminded her that Moses felt called to help his people and rushed right out to do it — only to find himself in trouble.

It took 40 years of tending sheep — and getting to know God better — before he was able to hear God's instructions for him.

And even then, Moses wasn't able to obey without some quibbling. He still thought God must have it wrong. Since he thought he couldn't speak well, God couldn't be right in asking him to go talk to pharaoh. But finally, he was convinced.

"Remember Moses" came to mean: Don't rush in; wait for the Lord to tell you how and when and where He wants you to serve Him.

It's good advice — but not always well received.



The ex-prisoner who called me didn't want to hear about tending sheep and growing in knowledge of God. None of us really wants to hear "wait."

Then one morning this week, I read about a person who faced an even longer time of waiting than Moses and of the agony he knew would be involved in doing it the Lord's way instead of his own.

In *Daily Thoughts for Disciples*, Oswald Chambers writes about when Jesus went out into the desert right after his baptism. After years of staying quietly at home, he had suddenly come into a special, open relationship with God — and attracted Satan's attention.

Chambers spoke of when Satan offered Jesus a way to "save the world," Jesus saw the span of years and the pain in doing it God's way. Jesus saw the whole length of history and the vast number of people who would be lost.

Imagine. He was offered a means of "working salvation out" in such a way that *no one* would be lost — or so it seemed. But Jesus was obedient to His Father. He yielded His will to the will of God.

Have I any idea of what it means to wait — especially when there is some "good thing" right there for me to do? But what if it is not God's good thing — or I am not the one to do it? And how am I to know?

I guess I just tend sheep until I hear *God* — and then surrender my will to His. I guess I must "Remember Jesus."

Along The Way



God Anticipates Our Needs

In romantic novels, the lover sometimes anticipates a small need or desire of the loved one.

You know what I mean. He snatches the heroine away for an unexpected drive into the country just as she thinks she cannot stand the city another moment. It shows he's been paying attention to her.

I have a lover like that. He gave me a beautiful gift just last weekend.

I am an avowed evangelical Christian. That means I believe in telling folks about Jesus and the good news of His coming to make the lame walk, to give sight to the blind and to set the captives free.

So far as I know, I haven't brought many people to Christ. I have helped maybe one person make that important decision about Jesus.

That's a pretty sorry record for someone who thinks it's important for people to know that Jesus is our Lord and Savior and that God raised him from the dead. But that's the way the record looks.

The realization that I'm not much of a success as an evangelist hit me hard last weekend. But almost as quickly as it came, it was driven away by a simple gift of love.

One of my friends took the time to share something with me. This friend has a very special ministry now through music, telling the story of Jesus' birth, life, death and resurrection in songs of his own

Barbara White

and some written by others, put together with narration into a program called "He's Alive!" Lots of people are coming to know Jesus everywhere the program is performed.

Well, this friend said he had been preparing his testimony — the account of his coming to know Christ — so he would be able to share it with others and tell them what a difference knowing Jesus has made in his life. He said while he was thinking back to moments of change in his life, he realized that a retreat at which I had been the so-called leader had been one such time.

"You remember," he said. "It was that time when you stood up and admitted you didn't know what you were going to do next, but you were trusting the Lord — and the Holy Spirit made it all come out right. That time made a big difference in my life," he said. "Somehow, I just wanted to let you know."

It was no coincidence that he picked that moment to tell me. He who is love itself put it into his mind.

By the way, my friend didn't mind being a messenger of the Lord's love.



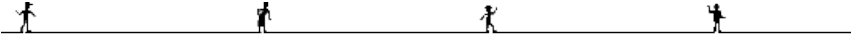
When God Can Not Be Felt

A friend asked me how she could believe in God when she could not feel His presence.

It's hard, but what are the options?

Either God is or He isn't.

Along The Way



He isn't real only when I can feel Him. If He is real any time, then He is real all the time and my feelings have nothing to do with it.

God says, His name announces, I AM.

I have only two responses: to believe or not to believe.

Feelings are wonderful, but not a reliable gauge of truth.

I paid a visit to my grandson last Sunday afternoon. The living room was full of people of all ages when I arrived. Russell was one of the small people.

He spotted me as I came through the front door and dropped what he was playing with to rush toward me.

"That's my grandmother," he announced to anyone who might be listening as he raced to fling himself into my waiting arms.

I can't really describe the way I felt when I was holding him — better than wonderful. I would love to have that feeling every day.

I would love to be able to run to God and throw myself into His arms, too. I would love to feel safe, held gently and securely in His arms, my head against His breast.

I know that's quite anthropomorphic — describing God as if He had arms and legs and so forth, just like me.

God is spirit and yet, sometimes I do feel as if I am held in His arms. Maybe that's because I know God through Jesus and He has arms for holding.



Sometimes I don't feel a thing — or worse, I feel as if I have never been held, as if those former times were just a figment of my imagination.

That is when I must come back to the original question. My original question that is, not my friend's.

Do I believe God is?

Since I do believe that, I may say I do not feel Him, but I will not say I do not believe in Him. I may say my feelings are a mess, but God is still God. While my heart aches with loneliness or throbs with dullness and fatigue, I will know that God is still God. When everything seems questionable, I will stand on the fact that God is still God.

Russell is my grandson on days when I don't see him or hold him in my arms.

God is my God on days when I don't feel Him, either. It's that easy — and that hard.



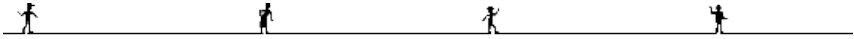
Learning To Call

I will be attending a women's retreat when this is published. Actually, I will be the speaker.

My topic for the weekend was suggested by a favorite song of the president of the women's group. The song is *Take Time to Be Holy*.

What happened to me while I was preparing the talks may not have been an exercise in being holy, but it was a fairly typical example of the way that the Lord

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works in my life. I believe that what God does in our lives is designed ultimately to make us holy.

It started off well enough.

An idea would pop into my mind, and I would write it down on a piece of paper. I would come across a passage in my reading that seemed appropriate and I would underline it.

After a couple of weeks of doing that sort of thing, however, it dawned on me that I was not keeping the pieces of paper in any particular place and that I was not keeping a record of the pages on which I had underlined material.

I found some of the material — but not all. I remembered other bits, but vaguely.

So I did the only thing possible. Like the people in Psalm 107, I cried out to the Lord in my trouble, and he delivered me from my distress.


The process of becoming holy involves learning to call on the Lord in our distress; learning to rely on him when there is no distress is another.

Among the definitions of "holy" in *Webster's Third International Dictionary* are these: set apart and dedicated to the service or worship of God or a god; infinitely good; spiritually whole, sound or perfect.

If I thought that I had to achieve that I could easily give up before I got started.

But holiness, like the gifts of the Holy Spirit, is received, not achieved. That is, I have a part to do, but holiness comes as a result of what the Lord does.

My part is to "call upon the Lord." My part is the act of will that surrenders my will to his. My job is to determine to set myself apart from the world for him,


to put every aspect of my life trustingly in his hands —
and leave it there.

His part is to change me into the likeness of Jesus.

He will not do it unless I let him. My surrender and his action combine to produce holiness, spiritual wholeness.

Unfortunately, it usually involves suffering. I do not instantly become totally set apart and entirely spiritually sound in a moment. I can only grow into it, and growth is often painful.



Prayer Burdens

I used to hear people talk about "having a burden" for someone. I used to wonder what they meant, but never asked. I thought that they were either speaking in metaphors, exaggerating or just being dramatic.

Now I know better.

When the Lord wants you to do something, he can really press upon you until you do it. And it can feel like a real weight.

I know because I carried one of those burdens recently.

I carried it longer than I might have because I did not want to do what I felt the Lord was asking me to do.

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There was no direct message. I just saw clearly that *someone* must do something, and the burdened feeling I used to wonder about told me that I was the someone.

I knew in my mind that if the Lord wanted me to do a thing, it would turn out right. I knew that it would not be the disaster that it looked to be.

I knew — but still did not want to move.

My feelings yelled "Help!" for all they were worth. My feelings told me that I couldn't possibly go where I was being sent and say the things I was being told to say.

Yet I also knew that all I had to do is trust the Lord. He would give me the right words to speak when the time came, if I would just be obedient and put myself in the right place.

Out of the conflict of mind and emotions I discovered another aspect of this "burdened" state.

Praying before you act — even when you are pretty sure the burden is being laid on you by the Lord — can make a big difference. Talking with the Lord about the burden gave me an opportunity to listen to his point of view about the situation. In this case my confusion and lack of enthusiasm kept me from rushing in before I was ready.

It took several prayer sessions before I began to see past the details to the heart of the matter — or at least the part of the matter the Lord wanted me to deal with.

During the process of discussing it with the Lord (actually I think arguing is probably a more accurate word), I slowly let go of my preconceptions and



allowed the Holy Spirit to raise in me a "disinterested" love for everyone concerned.

Now I believe I see the people involved the way Jesus wants me to see them, and I am able to trust that he will give me the right words to say.

Now the burden is light and easy to bear. And by the time these words are printed, I will have been obedient and put the burden down.



No Need To Pray?

When I called to tell a friend. that her husband had been taken to the hospital, I was so careful not to scare her that I almost overdid it in the opposite direction.

Several of us, including her husband, had stayed after the church service to finish a project. Her husband complained of pain, so others in our group took him to the hospital I was the one who called her.

I said her husband had complained of discomfort that had not gone away, so he had been taken to the emergency room. When she asked if I thought she should rush right off, I hesitated. We really had not been sure that anything much was wrong — it might well have been indigestion — and I knew she had a house full of company, and those who took him had said they would call from the hospital.

She said later that she was only teasing when she asked her next question, but I was thunderstruck.

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She wanted to know if we had laid hands on her husband and prayed for him before taking him off. It had never crossed my mind.

How could I have forgotten to bring the Lord into the situation? How can I believe he does heal — and I do believe that — and so often not remember to ask him to?

I expressed my remorse over the phone and then did the next best thing. I asked if she and I could pray together at that moment. We did.

Her husband's pain was a heart attack, a very serious one.

Somehow, I thought heart attacks looked more dramatic. I did not know they could resemble indigestion — and still be so terribly life-threatening.

But that is no excuse for not committing it to prayer. I did not think about prayer and decided that the situation was not serious enough to warrant it. I simply did not think of the Lord at all at that moment.

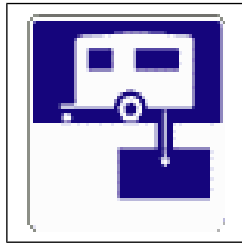
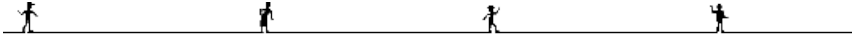
We are told to "pray continually." It is not easy. It means thinking of God continually, and in our busy lives, that does not come naturally.

Through my friend's question, I saw clearly how easily I had forgotten him.

There was consolation from the Lord even in my failure, however.

She told me later that the words we said came back to her — and sustained her — while she was waiting outside the emergency room that day, when things were touch and go.

She has forgiven me — and taught me — and so has the Lord.



Different Things, Same Cat

I have an old red ex-tomcat (he's been neutered) who helped me understand one of the Lord's teachings.

The cat's name is Foxfire. He was named by my son — in honor of the lounge, I suspect, though the young man has always denied it. Foxfire was a half-grown kitten when I got him from my veterinarian, who was helping someone else find a home for him.

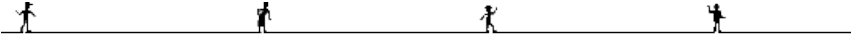
At his first home, older cats had given him fits, ordered him around and shut him out of the circle of the people in the family. That was why the former owner decided he needed a home where he could be important, too.

For a time, it didn't work that way at my house, either. I had another kitten, his age and smaller in size, but Foxfire was so conditioned to being bossed around that he let the smaller cat dominate him. Although he would allow no rat, mole or squirrel in the yard, he was easily intimidated by one of his own.

Years passed and the two cats worked out an amicable arrangement, but Foxfire was still standoffish with people. He would let you pet him a little, but he wouldn't stay around for long where people were.

Then one day the other cat met with an accident and was no -longer there.

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Slowly a change came over Foxfire. He began to spend more time inside, to ask for more petting, and even to stay on my lap when put there.

But he doesn't know how to *get* on my lap by himself. I have to put him there. I pick him up, all stiff-legged, and lay him on his side on my lap, and he stays almost exactly as I put -him.

This week at work I overheard a conversation between a couple of editors and a columnist who had turned in his column earlier than usual.

The writer said he hadn't been late because he enjoyed it. In fact, he said, "I like getting it in early."

"You've turned over a new leaf," said one editor.

"It's like being born again," said the other.

I remembered my cat and decided there is a difference.

My cat now wants to have things different from the way they were, but he is still the same old cat he has always been, with all his old habits and with only his old abilities.

When we turn over a new leaf, we are still dealing with the same old person. When we are born again, we aren't trying only to retrain ourselves. We are made new and can be filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, Who can truly change us.



**In All Thy Ways
Acknowledge Him,**

Barbara White



And He Shall Direct Thy Paths.



God's Answers

It has been a week of random thoughts and unfinished lessons:

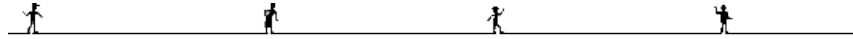
A bird flew through the old screen on my back porch and then could not find the hole to get out.

I locked my cat (the mighty hunter) in the house and tried to shoo the bird through the open door to the back yard. The bird simply flung itself in a panic against the screen on one side and the wall on the other

I went back inside, slightly distraught because I did not know how to help the bird without hurting it.

A series of thoughts flew as quickly as the bird: God has the same problems communicating with us. God gave man dominion over the creatures of the

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Earth, but we blew it. The bird does not accept my authority and I cannot help.

Perhaps, I thought suddenly, if I claim that authority and command the bird to find the door, it will. Not quite sure of the theology of all this, I went to the sliding glass door and looked out onto the porch. No bird.

As I stepped out to shut the screen door, I wondered if I had missed an opportunity or been saved from making a mistake. I wondered what the Lord was teaching me.

For the last week or so, a medication has left me with a sour stomach. The pharmacist and my doctor's nurse told me that was a common side effect of the drug and would not cause permanent harm.

Then I found myself wondering if God were still in control. After a week of having everything taste rotten, of feeling rotten in general, I decided that the world was an awful place and that the situation would never get any better.

My mind told me otherwise, but my emotions — and my physical state — said other words loudly, over and over, and I began listening to the wrong voice.

Wednesday, I found myself not kneeling in prayer but burying my face in the seat of the chair at which I say my morning prayers, telling the Lord that my world seemed all wrong, but that I knew He was still God.

I admitted I did not have a bit of joy in it, and was sorry about that, but I knew that He was still the Lord and that I would just wait until joy returned..



Not Everything That Looks Bad

I belong to a group of women who meet once a week for Bible study and prayer.

We formed this small group a few months ago — and almost lost it this month.

The first night the seven of us met in the den of one member's home, we commented how "right" it felt for us to be there. Someone said it was as if we had been called together, and the rest of us agreed with her.

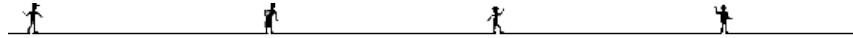
We chose to begin with a study of prayer, since that was to be one of our on-going purposes for meeting. We wanted to let the Lord speak to us through Scripture on this subject and to share our ideas so that we could pray in unity and grow in understanding.

All went well for a few weeks. In fact, some wonderful things happened, and we saw changes taking place in our lives and the lives of those we loved. We recognized the presence of the Spirit in our midst and rejoiced in it.

Then things began to get in the way. One after another, members began finding it hard to come to our meeting.

At first, all the reasons for missing were real — trips out of town or ailing children. Then other things began to interfere. Invitations to do other things

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intruded, or it seemed better to stay home when family visited rather than invite them to come, too, or leave them behind.

Then family crises began to occur at our weakest points: children, marriages, neighborhoods.

Finally, one night only two of us showed up. We wondered what to do and prayed for guidance. The guidance came to another member of the group, who was sick in the hospital.

She said that while she was lying in her hospital bed, she felt a need to call the members of the group and talk about what was happening to the group. She felt a strong concern to ask us to consider our commitment to the group.

Her gentle, hesitant approach — she didn't want them to think she was fussing — produced good fruit. Almost everyone was back at the next meeting.

As we talked it over, we decided the Lord does intend to use us as a group. He intends to teach us through each other and to use us in prayer and service for each other and for others.

"We must be worth something together for Satan to come against us so hard," one member of the group said.

Not everything that looks bad to us is from Satan. Sometimes it is the Lord directing our way and helping us grow closer to him. But Satan is there and we need to be aware of it.

First Peter 5:8 says: "Be sober, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour."

He is a deceiver, liar and accuser, so we need to be knowledgeable about his practices and on guard

against him. But when we are, we don't need to be afraid.

Satan is an enemy, but a defeated one. The Lord has overcome him and intends us to do the same, in His name.

In 1 John 4:4 it says, "Little children, you are of God and have overcome them; for greater is he that is in you than he who is the world."



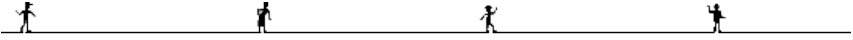
Complications

Some weeks nothing particularly interesting happens and I have a hard time finding something to write about. Other weeks so much happens I have a hard time sorting it all out.

This has been one of the latter; many things have happened.

Among the major things were the death of a young friend and the memorial service that was a celebration of her life with Christ; the news that another friend faces surgery; the preparations for my daughter's homecoming in a few days; my son's decision-making process about college, job and further surgery on an old wound; and my survival of a six-month evaluation as community-news editor for the *Jacksonville Journal*.

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Among the minor things were the need to decide whether to have a permanent or only a haircut and to select a roofer to repair my carport and utility-room roof. Some weeks either of those could have ranked as a major event, but not this week.

Many of the recent happenings will find their way into future columns — when I've had time to think and pray about them — but now they simply overwhelm me. Only fragmented thoughts will come.

I begin thinking about Bonnie's death and jump to the need to find Mary a job. I try to evaluate the possibilities for Nathan and find myself planning my next day's work.

I have so many questions — and so few answers. The king in *The King and I* has a line that goes something like: "I wish I were more certain of what I'm absolutely sure I know."

When I am uncertain, I fall back on the one thing I know for absolutely sure and certain.

The day I finally committed my life, or as much of it as I knew how to, to Jesus as Lord and Savior, I was led to a portion of Scripture that has been a lodestar, a directional marker for my life. When things get confusing and I feel in danger of losing my way among the many threads of life tugging at me, I return to this passage, which I think the Lord gave me that day.

After years of trying to understand life and the meaning of events around me, the Lord told me that it was only vital for me to know one thing: Jesus Christ and Him crucified.



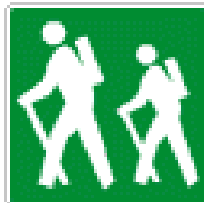
Although I thought I was to read all of the second chapter of 1st Corinthians, the first few verses mark the road for me.

Paul writes to the church in Corinth: "When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you ; the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power."

Life has been throwing a lot of complicated questions at me lately. I ask some questions because I need the answer to be able to live. I ask others simply because they are interesting.

I don't know the answers to all the complicated questions, but I know the one who does.

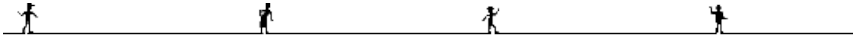
And to the right question, the one that determines eternal life, Jesus doesn't just know the answer — He is the answer.



Small Things

I hope there are lots of readers out there who are weary and heavy-laden today, because I have some really good news for them. Walking and not fainting is

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as pleasing to the Lord as running so as to win or soaring with eagles' wings.

It hasn't taken a terribly perceptive reader to know from recent columns that I have been weary lately and have felt heavy-laden, weighted down with cares and concerns, and even with the burden of good things to be done.

I have not despaired in the midst of all this because I know Jesus and He is my joy and my peace and He knows me. He has given me His spirit so that I might overcome.

But overcoming seemed more than I could do some days. Hanging in there was about all I could manage.

And then I found out about walking and not fainting. It comes right after the bit about soaring and running.

It is in Isaiah Chapter 40.1 will begin at the beginning of the passage that describes what kind of God we worship, a living God, not an idol:

"Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the Earth. He does not faint or grow weary, his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint."

I am one of the world's great spectators when it comes to physical activity. The only exercise program I have ever maintained for any length of time was

Barbara White



walking with a friend two or three miles, four or five times a week, for about a year.

Although I enjoyed the time spent with my friend more than I did the walking, I was getting exercise at the same time. I slept better afterward and felt better in general.

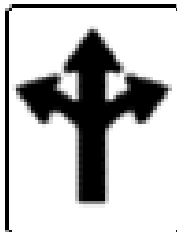
Then my friend moved and I quit walking.

I went to running instead — but not a jogging program or anything like that. I just started running from one activity to another, from office to home to meeting. And "running" isn't an accurate word, for the car engine was the only thing getting exercise.

But physical exercise is not really what I am talking about — any more than it is simply what Isaiah meant. I'm talking about soaring, running and walking in the spirit.

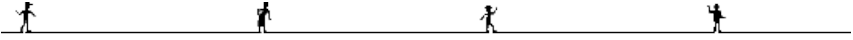
It is so easy to succumb to the temptation to think I must always run (do great things) or soar (reach great heights), when the truth of the matter is that walking (keeping on quietly in all the small things) is an equally acceptable method of glorifying the Lord.

It may even be a tiny bit better in that only the Lord knows those small ways in which we walk, while we so often receive credit from men for our running or our soaring.



Decision For Christ No One Time Deal

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When I made my "decision for Christ," I thought that would take care of decision-making for the rest of my life. Since then, I have learned that every time I make a choice, it is a repeat of that most important decision.

Two prayer and Bible-study groups that I belong to have been studying *What Happens When Women Pray* by Evelyn Christianson. A chapter near the end of the book asks the reader to consider to whom he prays. The author points out the danger of not knowing the God we serve. It is easy to serve false gods instead.

At the same time that we were studying that chapter, I was preparing a talk on Scripture passages that were picked for me: Joshua 24:14-25 and John 6:60-69. They also happen to be about making choices as to whom to serve and follow.

Joshua told the people to choose the god they would serve, if they would not serve the Lord who brought them out of bondage and led them through the wilderness to the land he promised them.

Joshua knew that we would serve some god — whether we wish to or not. If we will not serve the Lord, we will serve someone or something else.

The people said they chose to serve the Lord.

In the passage in John, the people were upset by something Jesus had just said to them. He said his flesh was the bread of life and his blood was wine indeed and those who ate that flesh and drank that blood would have eternal life.

Many were offended by his words and stopped following him.



They had made decisions to follow Jesus. They had left whatever it was they were doing and had followed him — until he said something too hard for them, something that offended them.

I am not offended by his words about eating his flesh and drinking his blood. I see them from this side of the Lord's Supper and this side of his death and resurrection. I would not stop following him over those words.

But he has other hard words to say, and sometimes I do not want to hear them, sometimes I choose not to listen, and that is a form of turning away, of not following him.

After my divorce, I did not want to hear his hard words about sexual relations. Society's voice was much more to my liking. The world's voice told me I had come a long way and should take life with all the gusto I could. As long as I did not hurt anyone else, I could do what pleased me, the world said.

That is not what Jesus said.

I had to choose.

He also said that coming to him was the only way to the Father.

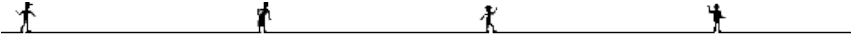
People I cared for said he could not really mean that the way it sounded. They said God is love and love would not be so hard.

Choosing to following Jesus would mean walking away from them.

I had to choose. There is no such thing as not choosing, for that is a choice in itself.

Jesus asked the disciples whether they would turn away, too. Peter's answer is my answer.

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"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the holy one of God."

I have come to *know* him. That is what keeps me following him. What makes the hard choices possible is that I want to know him more.



Problem Solving

If this were not a weekly column, I think I would have skipped this week. It's not that I have nothing to write about. I just don't want to write about it.

I read somewhere that today's young people have learned to expect all problems to be solved in 30 minutes or an hour, the length of time allotted for solving problems in TV shows. A really serious problem could take 90 minutes.

I know better than that. Some things take much longer.

But somehow, in the years that I have been examining my life, column by column, wrestling with problems and solutions, I have come to expect there would be a solution, at least to the immediate portion of the problem, within a week.

Reading the Old Testament should have taught me better. Promises that God made to the prophets were fulfilled, but sometimes years, even hundreds of years, later.

But I want my solutions now, and with as little pain as possible.



I want my family to forge ahead in peace and love for each other. We are learning; it is just that often the process seems so slow, the lessons so hard.

I want everyone I know to love one another. I want us all to love the Lord more than we love ourselves or anything else. I want us to be able to walk together — and that's where the problem comes in. Whose version of the path should we follow? Can I walk with others when the path I see seems to go in a different way? Am I right? Are they?

Although I sometimes forget to remember it, I know the Lord is the Lord. But working out how to walk with Him through what may be years of painful lessons sometimes seems more than I can bear.

Growth comes with suffering. Even Jesus was taught through suffering.

I guess sometimes I just don't want to grow.

As I said at the beginning, I'd have skipped this week, except the Lord would not let me. He knows I'm just looking too much at the problem and not enough at Him. He knows that putting all this down in words will make it easier for me to turn it over to Him. He knows there is no other solution.

It doesn't do any good to argue with God about His timing. It's a bit like tensing up just before the nurse sticks the needle in. It makes it hurt worse.

It's time to take the lesson on trust He gave me last week and practice it here, too.

It is time to listen to Him say through the psalm, "Be still and know that I am God," and to reply, "The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold."

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Actions Speak Louder

Some things are better left unsaid.

Proverbs 29:20 says, "Do you see a man who is hasty in his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him."

In his second letter to Timothy, Paul wrote, "Remind them of this and charge them before the Lord to avoid disputing about words, which does no good, but only ruins the hearers."

And Peter wrote that wives should be submissive to their husbands, so that some of those husbands, even though they did not obey the word, could be won over without a word by their wives' behavior.

That business of winning someone over by what you do, not by what you say, is true for people in general, too, not only wives and husbands.

Recently I was sorely tempted to do a lot of talking about a problem.

I'm sorry to be so vague, but I can't be more specific — without talking about it. And that's exactly what I am not to do.

I was concerned about something, then I became anxious about it and finally was afraid it wouldn't turn out the way I thought it should.

As a confirmed worrier, I thought talking the problem over with others who care about me was a



reasonable, even a productive, thing to do. But day by day the Lord led me to the Scripture passages at the beginning of this article.

It was not easy. In fact, it was very hard. I would tell myself that I would not talk about it, and then I would run into someone or someone would call and I would start in again.

Finally, last Sunday in church, I managed to get my tongue still and began to listen.

I heard prayer and praise. I heard joy in the singing and even in some tears. I heard an invitation for all to come to the Lord and I heard glad responses.

And, finally, I heard the Lord. He reminded me that the Holy Spirit is not constrained by my expectations. He is not limited to acting the way I understood His actions in the past.

The Lord helped me realize my position is not as arbiter of what He does. It is as obedient servant and thankful child.

The Lord did not promise me there would never be any difficulties. After all, we are still people. But He reminded me He would always be the Lord.

He also accepted my sincere repentance for my lack of trust and said He would teach me to understand Him better. And He reminded me of His promise that He would never, never leave me.

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Trust God To Lead

A friend who is facing a career crisis asked me a question this week. "How do I know when the Lord is speaking to me? How do I know what He wants me to do?"

I've heard those questions before. I've asked them more than once myself. There are some very helpful guidelines.

The first one is: If the thing in question is contrary to the plain teaching of Scripture, don't do it.

Adultery, for example, is plainly contrary to God's word. No matter what the makers of current movies tell us, sex outside of marriage is not all right — not for Christians.

That kind of behavior is not usually the sort that brings on the questions. If we want to do that, we don't ask God about it. We are already pretty sure how he feels about it; we just don't want to hear it. No, the questions usually come when the issue is which one of two equally confusing paths to follow: which job to take, which college to attend, which life-shaping direction to choose.

The Christian wants to choose the "right" one, the one that will produce happiness and fulfill God's



plan for him. He wants to hear from God which to choose. I don't think anything in my life is too small or insignificant to be of interest to my Lord. He cares about everything. And He knows which choice is best for me in every case. The Bible says that if I lack wisdom and ask Him for it, He will give it to me. I take that to mean that if I ask him which path to follow, He will tell me.

The best way I know to listen to God is to ask Him to speak to me through His word, to ask Him to bring Scripture to life for me.

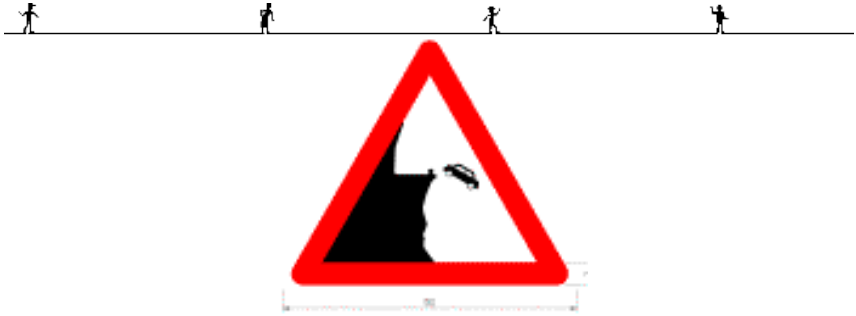
It takes being quiet for a period of time — His voice is usually very soft. And it takes practice.

The difficulty is, if I am not used to listening to God's voice, I may miss what He is saying to me. If I have not been asking the Lord questions on a regular basis about my daily life, such as how He wants me to approach Him in the morning, how I am to forgive someone who has hurt me, how I can dare to approach in love someone I have offended. If I have not made a habit of listening, it is going to be hard to hear Him in a time of crisis.

And even then, sometimes I miss what He is saying. If I want Him to say one thing too much, I can't hear Him when He says something else. Where does that leave my friend when he wants to know the Lord's will for his life and needs an immediate answer?

I guess it is just a wonderful opportunity to learn about trust. If my friend is not sure he is hearing the Lord, he can ask the Lord to open the right door and shut the wrong one — and then trust Him to do it.

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Confirmed Worriers

In a recent column, I called myself a confirmed worrier. A reader rightly took me to task for that.

"Do you know that worry is the worst form of atheism?" she wrote. "If we truly believe in the Lord, we will not be anxious, worried or concerned about *anything*. We will tell Him our troubles and problems — cast our care on Him — He careth for us. So instead of talking over your problems with 'others,' talk them over with the Lord, who can, and will, help you in your time of trouble."

She is so right that when I *do* worry, I immediately feel guilty for worrying.

I am very glad she called my attention to that phrase in my column. What I wrote definitely needs to be talked about.

By nature, before I became a Christian, I was a confirmed worrier. Now I am a new creation — meaning that human nature has been changed.

Sometimes I still catch myself worrying. Does that mean my faith in God is a sham? Does it mean the promise that I am a new creature is not valid?

I don't think so. I believe my faith is real — and I believe the change is there, but I must work at letting what God has put in me rule my life.



In Philippians 2:12, Paul writes: "Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure."

It is hard work, turning away from worry. Saying "Don't worry" to myself doesn't automatically work.

I ask myself some questions at times like that: Did God make the world? Did He die for me? Does He who holds the world together care about me and my future? By the time I answer those, I know in my head I don't have to worry, but sometimes the pit of my stomach lags behind my head.

The only thing I know to do then is say to myself that I *do* trust the Lord, no matter what my stomach says.

And then, sometimes, I sing praise songs out loud. It serves two purposes: It lifts my eyes to the greatness of my God — and, as in *The King and I*, if you whistle (sing) a happy tune, you can't (worry).

I am glad my reader stopped me short. She is right, and I need to proclaim the best I know to be true.

I thank the Lord that I now see myself worrying almost as soon as I start, so I can turn from it to Him, who is my strength and my salvation.

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More About Worry

The light has finally dawned. Or if it isn't yet completely day, it is definitely brighter. This week, I looked back over last month's columns and discovered I have spent a lot of time worrying and dealing with the worry.

I worried about my children, my church and even my friends. And almost everything I was worrying about was something that had not happened yet — and might never.

I learned a lot about trusting the Lord through the process of recognizing worry for what it is — doubt that God is able to do anything about my circumstances or doubt that He cares enough to do it. Since I know both of those to be false statements, I grew in trust.

And as always, at just the right moment, the Lord brought the lesson home with Scripture.

As I sat with a cup of coffee and my Bible early one morning this week, I found myself sighing over how long it takes to walk with Jesus. The way just goes on and on, I thought. Jesus had to walk it for only three years, I said childishly, and I have to keep on going.

Perseverance is learned by keeping on, just as patience is learned by having to wait. Both character



traits are favorably mentioned in Scripture as virtues that produce good fruit, like peace.

For several days before that particular day, I had read in Hebrews during my quiet time. That morning, I opened to Chapter 11. No one will ever make me believe it was a coincidence — even though I had started reading Chapter 1 almost two weeks before.

The chapter that begins with the definition of faith as "being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see" goes on to give examples of people who lived by faith. Two of my favorites are Noah building the ark for a flood he couldn't see and Abraham leaving his home for a land he knew nothing about.

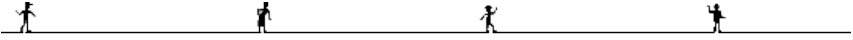
And then I read verse 13. I know I have read Hebrews 11:13 before, but this time I read it with my heart, not only my mind.

"All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth."

They kept the faith for years and years — until they died — and they did not receive the thing promised, but they kept right on having faith. Abraham rejoiced that God would make the promise true, even if he wouldn't see it.

I don't know whether — during the early days of their walk with God — Noah or Abraham ever let a little worry slip in and had to deal with it. Scripture doesn't say. What it does say is they kept on keeping on. Even if they had a tiny doubt some dark night, they didn't let it take root. They dug it out and persevered.

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That's what I want to do. And, through the grace and power of the Holy Spirit, if I will to do it, day by day, He will do it in me.

What I have faith in is the Lord of the promise, the Lord of my children, my church and my friends — and all my tomorrows. What tomorrow holds for any of us is in His hands.



Scripture Wards Off Temptation

The Bible has been called the Sword of the Spirit.

Jesus used that weapon as a defense against the attacks of Satan. He quoted Scripture when He countered the temptations Satan held out to Him.

Scripture can be a weapon against attacks and temptations for us, too, but only if we use it.

The first time I changed something in my life through the use of a scriptural sword was shortly after I surrendered my life to the Lord. It helped me with anger at someone who was showing up at my house just before dinner every day and hanging around to be invited to a free meal.

This went on for several days, with me getting more and more perturbed. Finally I came home from work very tired one day — and right behind me came



my friend. I felt resentment rise and was tempted to tell him off on the spot. Instead, I asked the Lord for a word from Scripture that would help me defend myself from the temptation to be self-righteous in anger.

I said, "Lord, I know You don't want me to feel this anger. You want me to love, but I sure don't know how to do it right now."

Into my mind came a passage of Scripture I have heard many times before: "In as much as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." (Matthew 25:40)

I made it through dinner fine that night — and was able to talk with my friend later, with no anger, about not coming every day.

Scripture not only warded off the attack, it changed me. Instead of the angry person I was by human nature at that moment, I became a supernatural (having more than nature), loving person through the power of the Holy Spirit. He who brought the words to mind gave me power to let them change my life.

Another time, when I was in great emotional distress, when it looked as though the particularly stressful situation would last forever, I "remembered" a portion of Psalm 30:5, "Weeping may tarry for a night, but joy comes with the morning," and I was able to hang on through the dark time.

This doesn't happen automatically. There are some things I must do. before the Spirit can do his part.

I must believe that my God exists and that He desires to help me. It says so in Hebrews 11:6, a

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passage that has helped me through a rough time or two.

I must trust that Scripture is the word of God, the living word through which He can still speak to me.

And I must have read enough Scripture to have something in my mind for the Spirit to remind me of. The only part of the Bible the Spirit can recall is the part I have put in.

I must be like the psalmist who wrote in Psalm 119:11, "I have hidden your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you." For if I have, and ask for that kind of help, it will be given. It may not always change the situation, but it will change me.



The Stealer Of Victory

Two remarks I heard this week have been going around in my head. They were made by a young woman who was talking about her marriage, and I think they are worth sharing because they have something to say to all who are trying to walk the Lord's way.

The young woman was talking to a churchwomen's group about how her marriage had begun to come apart. She said the couple had come very close to breaking away from each other — that, in



fact, they had both faced the need to be submitted to the Lord just at the moment when they had been feeling the most hopeless about their life together.

As they wrestled with the problem of individual commitment to the Lord and as He dealt with them, they found themselves able to yield to each other, too.

She almost gave up but, instead, began to use Scripture as the basis for her prayers, she said. She put herself and her husband in the Scripture passages she read and prayed that what she read there would come true in their lives.

With tears in her eyes, she told us in her husky voice how the love they had known for each other, even in the bad times, had almost been lost in their desire to go their own ways.

But it was renewed. Their relationship now is better than ever, she said, for now it is based on their relationship with Jesus.

Looking back, she said, it frightened her to realize how Satan almost robbed her of the victory Jesus was waiting to give her. Satan almost made her give up — just before the joy was to come.

My guess is that all married Christians could benefit from her story. However, her words really offer a message of hope to every Christian who will ever face a trial.

The message is twofold:

First, don't let Satan steal the victory the Lord has for you. Don't give up; wait, trusting. It really is blackest just before the dawn.

And get yourself in a right relationship with Jesus by opening yourself to Him through Scripture and

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prayer — or as the once-troubled woman said, praying the Scripture.

Scripture is both practical — having to do with life — and powerful — able to bring about change. When we pray the Scripture, we begin to see ourselves in direct relationship to what God says is His perfect will for His people. That opens us to let the word of God blow through us like a cleansing wind and, like wind in a sail, to change the direction of our course.

Jesus told Peter He had prayed for him, that after he had said three times he didn't know Jesus, he would turn again and strengthen his brothers. In a way, that is what the young woman was doing.

Satan sifted her as he sifted Peter and in her married life she, too, denied knowing Jesus. Then she repented, turned again to the Lord and is now able to strengthen her sisters with the knowledge of how Jesus works in their lives.



Today & Tomorrow



One school of thought says never put off until tomorrow what you should do today.

Another says never do anything today you can put off until tomorrow — because by tomorrow you might not have to do it at all

The writing of this column seems to swing, somewhat like a pendulum, between those two approaches. Two weeks ago the pendulum swing produced a gap in this series. I left the writing of the article until deadline day — and then was suddenly too sick to get one done.

Jesus said we are not to worry about tomorrow, that each day has enough problems of its own. He also told a long parable about workers hired at different times of the day and paid the same thing — which shows it's not too late to enter the kingdom of heaven right up to the eleventh hour.

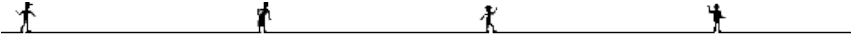
But I don't think I can use either of those ideas to bolster my habit of waiting until deadline to write a column.

Scripture also tells us not to run ahead of the Lord, but to wait on Him.

The parable about the workers is not simply about eleventh-hour conversions. Jesus was also talking to the Pharisees about their tendency to think they were in charge. He was telling them off for thinking they could tell the Lord how to run His kingdom.

My pendulum also swings between that pharisaical tactic (trying to run my own show) and the ability to wait for the Lord of my life to tell me what to do with it.

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Sometimes I wait to write my column until the last minute because I have been too busy doing my own thing to get around to it. Sometimes I wait until I know what the Lord wants me to write about — even if it is the last minute.

Some weeks, I'm not sure which is operating — until I see the fruit. If I have waited upon the Lord, someone tells me the column was just for him, that it spoke right to his need, or I hear another teacher giving out the same message, which I take to mean we were both listening to the same Spirit.

Waiting for the Lord to direct my column does not mean doing nothing until I hear from Him. The guy in the parable of the talents who did nothing with his one talent was not called a good servant. It means asking for His guidance before I write, but then beginning to write — and expecting Him to speak as I write.

Waiting on Him touches more than column writing, too. Each of my days belongs to Him.

Not worrying about tomorrow is only part of it. I'm not really to worry about today, either. I'm just to use it for Him. This is the day the Lord has made. I will rejoice and be glad in it.



Whatever Became Of Hell?

Three comments, two in the form of questions, on the subject of hell brought to my attention something I had not thought of since I bought a copy of Karl Menninger's book, *Whatever Became of Sin?* some time ago — but never read.

The first question, posed by a fellow worker, was: "You never seem to hear anyone preaching about going to hell any more. Why do you suppose that is? Aren't there any hell and damnation preachers around now?"

The second question, from a member of my family, was argumentative: "I don't believe people go to hell for everything everybody believes they go to hell for. Do you?" Which, when translated, turned out to mean, did I believe that you could "go to hell" for something like shoplifting — or even, necessarily, for murder?

The first, being mostly rhetorical, required little in the way of response. "M-m-m-m," was my reply as I recall.

I don't remember hearing a hell-fire and damnation sermon in a long time. The preachers I listen to on the radio or watch on television don't seem

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to be using that theme much now. Lately no one has tried to scare me into being good.

Even Billy Graham, who used this sort of thing extensively in his earlier years, does not seem to go in for it much any more.

But a check with a few local ministers discloses that there are occasional hell-fire and damnation sermons preached here and there, mostly, as one preacher put it, "out in the hinterlands."

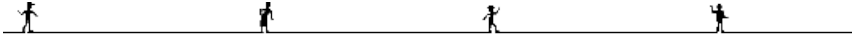
The second question called for more of an answer. But experience has taught me that only the first few words I said would be heard and that's not an easy question to answer in five or six even well-chosen words.

"No — and yes," I said. "No, I don't believe you 'go to hell' automatically if you do something wrong, even if it's murder. But yes, I do believe you could end up in whatever hell is, if you absolutely insist on doing so.

"In other words, shoplifting won't necessarily make you a candidate for eternal damnation, but if you think it's all right to do that sort of thing — that idea of what is right could put you in the dangerous category."

These two conversations tumbled around in my mind in the following days. Have we been so busy teaching the love of God that we have missed the fact that there truly is a right and wrong? Have we lost sight of the Truth, with a capital T?

What we do either brings us closer to God or takes us further away. We need, certainly, to be convicted of the error of our ways.



But somewhere between inevitable damnation brought about by a single, unforgivable action and a Love that makes no demands at all there is this Truth: Love makes demands, but is not eternally angry when we fail — and are truly sorry for it.

So much of what we do would qualify us for rejection by God, for hell, if it worked that way. If we were to be judged only on our merits we would be in serious trouble. Thank Goodness, a ransom has been paid and we, if we let Him, may be redeemed from that end.

The third comment came from a mentor in the faith. Told of the comments and my thoughts of recent days, she reminded me gently of a fact I had overlooked.

"Remember, God didn't make hell for man; He made it for Lucifer, for the fallen angel. But if we insist on following him, that's where we will end up."

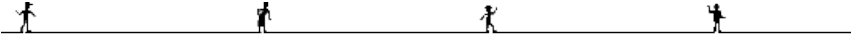


Accepting Forgiveness

A lot of people are interested in hell.

A previous column, "Whatever became of hell?" drew quite a bit of response. Several persons — including a couple of ministers — called to invite me to hear "good old hell fire and damnation" sermons at their churches.

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And I stopped at my favorite nursery to talk about my inoperative lawnmower and instead found myself in a conversation about "going to hell."

"It's really simple," said one of the men. "You either accept Jesus or you don't."

It's that simple — and that complex, I responded. Acceptance is not a matter of saying it or thinking it. It's a matter of living it. Which means what you do makes a difference.

If your whole life is involved, your actions are, too. If accepting Jesus is more than lip service, then your approach to life is based on His approach.

So the intention, not the action, seems to me more important.

There is a cliché about the road to hell being paved with good intentions. It isn't failed intentions that move one closer to hell, it's refusing to admit the failure and accept forgiveness.

Love, forgiveness and acceptance are active verbs — not emotions. And actions affect the way one believes. The fact of the matter is, the more often you do something, the more accustomed to it you become. If the action is contrary to the example of Christ, it cannot help but draw the "actor" further and further away from Him.

Somewhere in his writings C.S. Lewis urges the reader to "act" as if God existed; he will find that He does.

If you say you love, but act out hate, you will end up hating.

If you act out love, you will learn to love.



I am reminded of a story about forgiveness. If you throw a rock at a plate glass window — and immediately afterward are deeply sorry, wish it had never happened, and ask forgiveness, the forgiveness will be gladly given — but the rock will not stop its flight until the window is broken.

When a friend's young son left a playmate's house with a toy not his own, he and the toy were returned immediately to the owner's house. There the boy admitted his guilt (he didn't just feel guilty, he was guilty) and, tearfully and sincerely, said his apologies.

And he was forgiven! By the other child, by the other mother, by his own — and by his Lord.

I'll go to my room, he told his mother afterward. That won't be necessary — now, she answered. What you did was wrong and had to be faced up to, but now it is over.

He may not have equated going to his room with "going to hell" — though one day he might. But the lesson of forgiveness was clearly expressed.

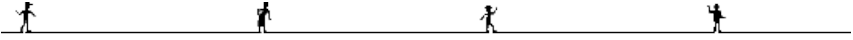
"I don't know if he heard me," my friend said, "when I told him we all do things that are wrong, but our Lord loves us enough to forgive us — if we let Him."

Mae West is not known primarily for religious commentary. But she certainly put together pithy comments on the ways of men — and women.

One such comment was recounted to me recently by a reader. He told how, in one brief, marvelous scene from one of her movies, Mae West succinctly came to grips with the whole problem of sin.

In this scene she admits that she used to do things that made her feel guilty, but not any longer.

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She is asked how this happened. "Did you stop doing those things?"

"No," replies Miss West — in her own, inimitable way, "I quit feeling guilty about them."



The Art Of Contentment

My mother is a remarkable woman.

The most recent example of her indomitable spirit can be seen in the way she has handled a major change in her life — at 89.

In the last chapter of Philippians, Paul speaks of learning the "secret of being content." By her example, Mother has given me an amazing lesson in how to practice the art of being content.

She moved into a retirement community in the Jacksonville area this fall — leaving the house in which she had lived for nearly half a century.

From among the many familiar and cherished items in that home, she chose those few that would fit comfortably in her small, new apartment. The others she left behind with apparent ease — as if it didn't matter at all

She does not demand attention, but always has a ready smile when I come by.

Many of her friends are no longer alive, but she knew she would not see the ones who remain, as often, after she moved to Jacksonville.



But she was not afraid. She was willing to meet new people and to wait patiently for some who might be particularly compatible to appear.

Even her daily routine had to change. Instead of a 7 p.m. dinner, she would be expected to appear in the dining room at 5.

She appeared on time daily, without complaint.

"I have determined to make the best of the situation," she said when I complimented her on how well things were going. "I will do all I can to make it work."

How does Mother do it? I think I know the answer.

There is a little prayer I have sometimes heard her say at breakfast. "Lord, give me strength of mind, body and spirit for the needs of this day."

In that passage from Philippians, Paul goes on to say, "I can do everything through him who gives me strength."

Paul learned he could do everything and still be content in all sorts of situations, both good and bad, by relying on Christ.

Mother's opportunities to practice the art of contentment have not been the same as Paul's, but she has had her own. And, like Paul, she has called upon the Lord.

Paul and my mother both know Who gives the kind of strength that makes contentment possible. God alone can give that kind of strength. *tie* gives Himself, His Spirit, our strengthener.

The Spirit *is* the only strength of mind, body and spirit that can make us able to meet the needs of the

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day. If we let Him, He will give us the strength we will need to fulfill every task God has set for us to accomplish.

With the examples of Paul and Mother, I have decided to start today to practice the art of contentment. I hope to reflect a little of his light when I am her age.



Prepare To Face The Camera

I almost had my picture taken last week. It was to appear in the newspaper in an advertisement for the *Religion* section.

Fortunately, the photographers and I were so busy that somehow the picture was never taken.

But I had a surprisingly strong reaction to the prospect of having my picture appear again in print.

The first thought on hearing of the proposal that my picture would run in an ad for the expanded *Religion* section was, "How long do I have to get ready?"

Told it would have to be done immediately, I thought, "Then I can't go shopping for a flattering outfit or get my hair done. The whole world will see me as I look today, all put together anyhow." After the scare passed, I was reminded of what may be a made-



up story a friend of mine used to tell She said her mother told her never to wear underwear that needed mending because you never knew when you were going to be in an accident and when they went to undress you in the hospital, it would be seen.

Being photographed without notice is just like that. What I could ignore in private would become public. I wasn't a bit happy at the thought, either.

That reminded me of cartoons I have seen of bearded men wearing robes and sandals and carrying signs that said, "The end of the world is coming! Are you ready to meet your Maker?"

And I asked myself, "Am I ready for that, either?"

Jesus told several stories about people who are ready and those who aren't Like the virgins waiting with their oil lamps for the bridegroom to arrive. And the steward who didn't know when his master would return and let his job go to pot while lying around drinking with his friends.

Jesus told those stories for the same reason my friend's mother told of possible accidents and unexpected trips to the hospital. He wanted us ready for public inspection. He did not want us to be ashamed of anything in our lives. He knew that one day everything would be revealed in the light that shines in the dark places.

Two events in the church year mark special times of the coming of that light. Christmas marks the birth of Jesus, Emanuel, God with us. Easter marks his coming as risen Lord, victor over death and the grave.

Some denominations set aside special times of the year for preparing for those special comings of the

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Lord. For them, the four weeks before Christmas are called Advent. Lent is the six weeks preceding Easter.

Tomorrow is the first Sunday in Advent.

It's a time for remembering that I want to have oil for my lamp, for realizing how important it is to be a good steward of all my Lord has given me to do. It's a time for checking priorities, for examining my life.

It's not a time for mending underwear, or for doing something about my outward appearance. It's for mending holes in my prayer life, for scouring my inner self so it will reflect his light.

My Lord may not come in Advent or Lent. And those are not the only times I need to be prepared to have my private life made public. But they are practice times for the real thing, whenever it comes.

I think I need all the practice I can get.

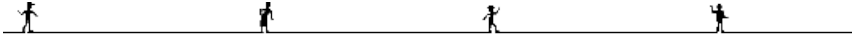


All Gone. Any Difference?

A friend asked a challenging question this week. She asked if I thought it would make any difference to life in Jacksonville if every Christian in the city were suddenly taken away.

Now my friend wasn't feeling good physically and that undoubtedly had some effect on her mood.

But most of her negative feelings were the result of recent dealings with some Christians who appeared to her to be interested only in their own activities with each other and not at all in the lives of people around them or, for that matter, in Jesus Christ.



But even after discounting her remarks for these reasons, I still found the question disconcerting.

Would it make any difference if all the Christians were gone?

It didn't take me long to come up with some positive answers. Contrary to my friend's momentary skepticism, life would be harder for quite a few people in Jacksonville if the Christians were zapped away.

True, there are self-centered Christians around, those whose lives never touch any others for their betterment. But that is not the whole story.

And I'm not just talking about organized charities, either. I know individual Christians who serve neighbors and strangers alike as a result of their love for the Lord. Records may not be kept on their activities in the city, but they happen.

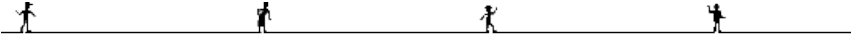
Certainly life in Jacksonville would be *more* different if more Christians were better at living what they knew of God's forgiving and giving love. It is true that we fall very far short of doing all we can, but it isn't true that we make no impact at all.

With that comforting thought, I tried to dismiss my friend's remark from my mind.

But then it changed and I had to ask myself, "Would it make any difference to life in Jacksonville if I were taken away? Do I make any difference as a Christian?"

Now, I wasn't about to say it would go completely unnoticed if I left town. After all, I've seen the old Jimmy Stewart movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*, several times. That's the one where he wants to kill himself because he thinks he is nothing but trouble to everyone around him.

Along The Way



An angel, who looks more like a friendly bum, helps him discover how much worse the world would have been without him. In the end he is able to face all his troubles with hope and love — and, of course, it all works out right in the end.

So while I wasn't ready to write myself off as a total failure, I couldn't claim to be a great shining light either.

Oh, I believe I offer encouragement to some within the Christian community. But what about the rest? What difference do I make in easing pain and suffering for those outside that community? What difference do I make in the battle against evil?

I am honest, kind and charitable, but that isn't enough. I know non-believers who are as kind, as caring, as charitable as I am. Yet there is one thing I can say for myself. I am committed to the Lord.

Perhaps I have much to learn in terms of service in his name, but as long as I keep my eyes on him, I know I will learn eventually.

Perhaps my friend's question was the beginning of the next lesson.

FAMILY SNAPSHOTS

Barbara White

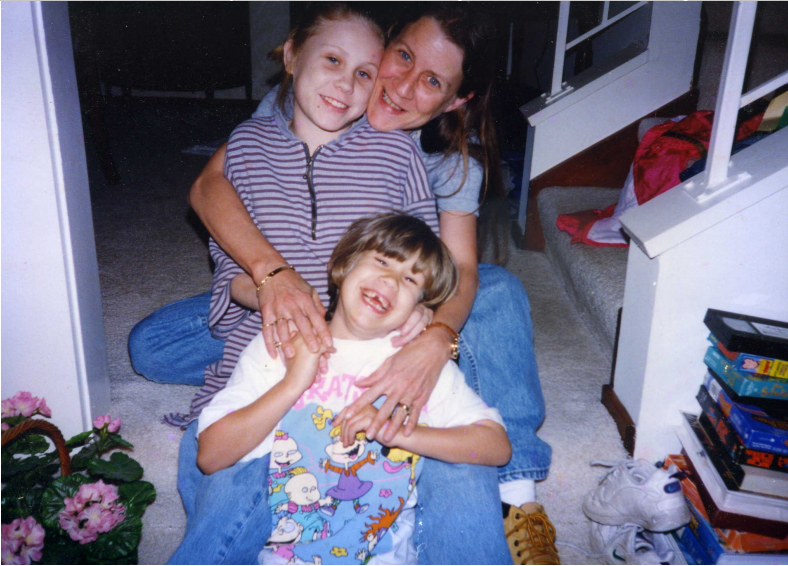


**Me with my daughter, Mary; my son, Nathan;
and my grandson Russell**

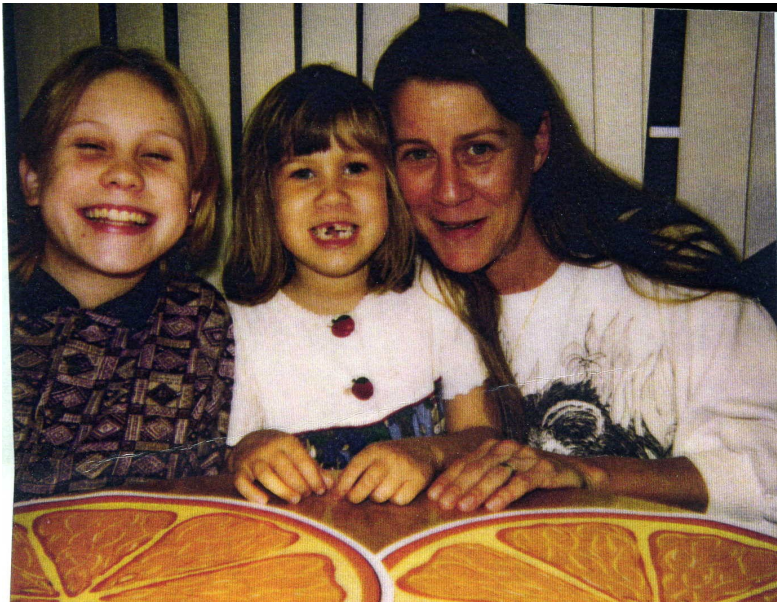


FAMILY SNAPSHOTS

Along The Way



Mary with my granddaughters Nicole and Brittany





A Lamb Makes A Mark

My friend Nancy told me this week about something she learned from some pictures.

Nancy had been given a print by friends who were moving. It was a picture of Jesus nestling a lamb on his shoulder, showing more of the lamb than Jesus.

"And the lamb has this incredible expression on its face ... of blissful happiness to be that close to the Lord," she said.

Nancy was delighted with the gift, seeing in the face of the lamb a picture of how she feels when she is close to the Lord.

She wanted to frame it right away and so decided to reuse a frame that had been around the house for 25 years.

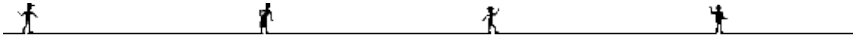
"In taking the frame apart, in lifting the wood block print that was in it away from the matting it was on, I was amazed to find the imprint had come through on the matting," she said.

The plain, heavy paper of the matting had been pressed against the picture for so long, it had taken on the appearance of the picture itself.

Nancy said that while she looked at the mat and the original wood block print she had taken from the frame, the Lord spoke to her.

"He said, 'Nancy, if you want to *look* like that little lamb, nestle up close like that lamb. If you stay

Along The Way



close to me, like that mat was close to the picture, you will look like me and you will become like I am.'

Nancy said her gift means more than ever to her how.

"It reminds me that we need to stay close to the Lord, as close as that little lamb is to Jesus, and that if we stay long enough, we will be imprinted with his character and become like him."

Our problem, she said, is that we don't want to do the things we have to do to stay close to the Lord long enough for the process to take place.

"Later that day I ran errands — put gas in the car and bought groceries — and everywhere I went, people spoke to me," Nancy said. "Nothing special, just friendly conversation.

"And I wondered if my face looked different somehow. I had spent the whole morning in prayer and praise."

That set me to thinking fiercely. I can't spend my mornings at home. Does that mean I can't receive this same blessing?

I don't think so. True, Nancy doesn't have a regular job outside the home and can spend a morning in prayer if she chooses to. But that doesn't mean she will

If she had spent her time concentrating on cares and problems, chances are that something special would not have been in her face when she got to the grocery store.

Perhaps I can't sing or pray out loud while I am at my desk in the newsroom. I can still think of my Lord, I can pray to him and praise his name in my mind.



Perhaps I can't read the Bible during my working hours — except sometimes when writing a column. I can draw close to him during the day with verses I have memorized.

The best part is that the Lord does most of the work. Just as he lifted that little lamb into his arms and held him, he lifts me and holds me close to him. He only puts me down if I insist. It's my choice.



Living In Heavy Traffic

I have just discovered what a blessing it is that one of my temptations to sin happens almost every day.

It provides me with a regular reminder of the grace of God.

The real me pops out from behind the lace curtains of my good behavior almost every time I drive in traffic.

It happened again recently. Only this time I realized how gracious my Lord is in keeping me ever aware of the true state of my heart. Otherwise I could not appreciate the greatness of his love in paying the price of my redemption.

Last week, I was meditating on the statement that Jesus did not come to make bad people into good people but to make dead people into live people.

I was thinking about it while driving to work. I was mulling it over just as a big, fast car cut into the slow moving line of traffic right in front of me.

Along The Way



I immediately stopped thinking about it.

Instead, I thought about how much I would like to do something rude.

Now I didn't do it. I never do.

But that time I had to admit what I was thinking.

That is what my heart is really like without Jesus Christ. Without him, my heart is full of depravity.

A rude gesture is depravity? Yes, I think it is.

At least, a person who has the ugly thoughts I had that day is capable of much worse than rudeness.

It isn't the purity of my heart that keeps me from doing things like that. I just don't want anyone to see that side of me. I don't want to see it, either.

But God sees it. All the time. And now I've seen it, too.

Only when we see how we look to God can we begin to know true remorse. To mourn over our condition. To desire to be different.

And only then can we ask God to forgive us. To change us. To make us new.

So it is a great blessing to know we are dead without Christ. To see what that death really looks like.

Seeing ourselves as we really are on our own serves another important purpose, too. It makes us much more charitable toward others.

Jesus told a parable about a man who could see other peoples' faults, but not his own. Jesus said that before we try to take the splinter out of our brother's eye, we had better look at the logs in our own.

Now that I have seen my log, I will approach the task of identifying splinters with great care. As long as

Barbara White



I keep seeing it, I will be much less likely to judge anyone else harshly.

I wish I didn't harbor ill will toward other drivers. I really do.

But as long as this kind of death is still in my heart, I'd rather know it. Gratitude to a rescuer is only real if we believe in the reality of the danger.



Apples

I have heard it said that one bad apple can spoil an entire barrel of good ones.

That is a pretty discouraging thought.

It implies that one rotten person — someone who is regularly immoral — can corrupt a whole group of people, can contaminate his neighbors.

I'm pretty sure my mother used the comparison to warn me off from certain relationships when I was little.

And there is plenty of evidence around to support her doing so. It seems to happen often enough.

But just recently I heard someone say it works the other way around.

He said one righteous man can make the whole society righteous.

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Nahum Sarna, a Jewish biblical scholar from Brandeis University, Waltham, Mass., was guiding a class in Hebrew literature at the University of Florida through a verse-by-verse look at the First Psalm.

In the first verse, Sarna said, the psalmist spoke of one righteous man in an immoral society. In the next to the last verse, the psalmist spoke of an assembly of the righteous in whose presence the wicked who will not be able to stay.

In the intervening verses the psalmist explained how things would change from one righteous man to an entire righteous society.

He explained the catch. You knew there would be a catch.

This man would not walk in the counsel of the wicked, or stand about with sinners or sit with mockers. He would delight in the law of the Lord and meditate on it, read it and think about it day and night.

The psalmist said this man was like a tree planted by streams of water, receiving nourishment for life and growth daily, not in the uncertain dribbles and dabs of the occasional rain in a desert country.

Then, with this constant source of life-giving water, the tree — and the man would be able to provide leaf for shade and fruit for nourishment to those nearby.

And those so fed would become like the one so rooted, the one providing the shade and the fruit.

Is it true? Does it happen?

It certainly isn't logical. Logic says one good apple does not make a barrel of bad apples into edible fruit.

Barbara White



Sarna said there was just one reason the psalmist believed it would happen. But it was an overwhelming reason.

In the last verse the psalmist said righteousness will flourish and wickedness perish because God has chosen that it happen that way. It is the divine will.

Now, *that* is good news.

At Christmas we celebrate the manifestation of that good news to mankind. God, who decided that righteousness will be the victor over evil, became one of us so we might become like Him.

Jesus is the tree, the living water and the fruit. He can change all who come to him.

And I am to be his servant, to be like Him.

My part is to determine how I walk, with whom I stand and where I sit. My part is to delight in His law.

Then, because He flows through me, I will produce shade and fruit, too. I will be a tree capable of nourishing others.

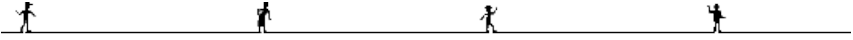
Because He has willed it.



Rough Roads Ahead

It is so hard to comprehend God.

Along The Way



It's like trying to fathom the unfathomable or to describe the indescribable.

And yet, it is worth the pain of the struggle to try. It is worth the disappointments of failed attempts.

Even learning to ride a bicycle is worth that. The bloody knuckles and skinned knees that sometimes accompany the process cannot compare with the joy of riding with the wind in your face.

And the gain here is so much greater. Every time I succeed, every time I manage to grasp some new insight into the way God operates in people's lives, I find I have made more room for him in my life.

I am not talking about understanding some complex point of theology. I'm talking about learning how to put your feet down safely among the sharp rocks on the road

For I am not a theologian — I am a pilgrim.

And God is the way. Not just the destination.

That's why I want to understand how he walks among us. I want to walk the way he walks..

The road has been particularly bumpy lately. In fact, some of the rocks have looked more like boulders than pebbles. Some look like mountains to me.

But my Lord walks through them with a sure step, at peace with all around him. He is not afraid of a rock slide. Or an avalanche.

Can I learn to walk that way? Can I be at peace the way he is?

So often when I think of peace, I remember the verse from Philippians 4 that describes the peace of God as something that "passes understanding." That



means I can't understand it. And, of course, I can't. Not completely.

But I can understand it more and more.

Other verses help:

Psalm 119:165 says, "Great peace have they who love your law, and nothing can make them stumble."

Isaiah 26:3 says, "You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in You."

So peace involves being steadfast in doing God's law, trusting him for the outcome.

How does that convert into walking along the way?

Let me give you an example. My heart became very sore and troubled recently when a series of actions and reactions drove wedges between me and someone I care about. The anguish I felt drove all sense of peace far from me.

Fellowship had been broken. It seemed, like Humpty Dumpty, past putting together again.

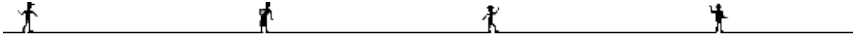
How could I find peace again? How could I keep the rocks of discouragement, of pain, of anger, of fear from driving peace away forever?

I set my mind steadfastly on walking the way my Lord walks. '

I remembered how much I have been forgiven and I set my will to: forgive again and again.

I remembered that he knows we are but dust, and I stopped expecting so much from myself and others.

Along The Way



And I was at peace again.

Then I was able to reach out in love to the one I had hurt and who had hurt me — and found a hand held out in welcome.



In Obedience To Logic

I met a young man this week who is not a Christian, but who challenged me by his passionate devotion to what he believes.

Leonid Feldman once taught classes in scientific atheism in his native land, but now believes that God is the most important thing in life. This 32-year-old Russian Jew's journey from atheism to active Judaism happened only a few years ago.

It did not happen while he lived in the Soviet Union, or in the three years he spent in Israel after leaving Russia. He said it happened in Los Angeles.

"I was lucky," he told me. "I was exposed to very talented teachers. They explained that to be religious I did not have to abandon reason. I came to God eventually, not suddenly. And I came through logic, not faith like you Christians who have to believe in Jesus.

"Judaism is not just a family. It is a way of life. It made logical sense to me, precisely because I was a physicist."

Feldman said we need someone to tell us what is good and bad. We need a system.



"The law is the core of life in Judaism," he said "It's not enough to say it is nice to be charitable. Judaism says 10 percent of what you have does not belong to you. It belongs to God.

"It is not enough to say it is nice to be kind to people. The law tells you exactly what you must do."

He came to God through changing his behavior, he said.

That thought interested me.

One of my favorite Christian authors, C.S. Lewis, said he came to believe in God the same way, by acting as if it were true.

But he came to believe in Jesus suddenly, and by faith.

In his book about his conversion, *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis wrote that he did not believe in Jesus at the beginning of a motorcycle ride across the country but that he did believe in Jesus at the end of the short journey.

Lewis, like Feldman, continued to act on what he believed.

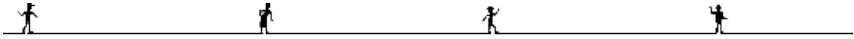
Do actions dictate faith? Does faith dictate action?

Like the chicken and the egg, or the acorn and the oak tree, the relationship is a continuing one. They follow each other in repeating cycles.

In the New Testament letter of James, the writer says:

"Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after

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looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it — he will be blessed in what he does."

Not many Russian Jews become rabbis, Feldman said. The years of scientific atheism taught them in the Soviet Union have taken their toll.

But a few have become Hasidic rabbis, where they are told everything they must do, Feldman said. A few others have become Reform rabbis, where they are told almost nothing they have to believe, he said.

But, he will be ordained soon as a Conservative rabbi, one in the middle of the road.

He does not expect to take a pulpit any time soon. He has other goals that don't mix well with regular weekly pulpit responsibilities.

"I travel a lot, speaking to people about communism and about God," he said. "Most pulpit committees can't put up with that."

But it is something he says he must do.

He says it isn't faith. But his obedience to the logic he professes fits the description of faith found in that same letter of James.

"What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such a faith save him? Suppose a brother or, sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, 'Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

Barbara White



"But someone will say You have faith; I have deeds. Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do".



The Almighty Remembers Us

One of the hidden blessings in calling my doctor's office is the reminder that I am not unique.

My very human desire to think I am special — which Madison Avenue plays up for all it's worth in planning advertising campaigns — wants to believe this is true.

It is true that my fingerprints are unique. And I understand that my voice print would be unique if anyone ever took one.

But my name is not.

When I call my doctor's office, the receptionist always asks for my birth date so she can tell me from all the other Barbara Whites who also go to my doctor.

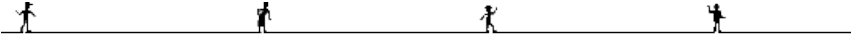
It's daunting. Even a little deflating.

Perhaps useful for shrinking the overweening ego.

If I had to identify myself in some way when I called my God, how would I do it? Would a birth date be enough? Worldwide there might be another Barbara White born on the same day I was.

What would I say so he would know who was calling?

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I think I would try to remember what he and I have shared together, to recall the times we have been together.

"Hello, God. You remember me. I'm Barbara.

"You remember. The Barbara you found crying in the library at boarding school all those years ago, wishing with all her heart that there really were a God who loved people the way the stories said he did.

"You must remember. You impressed on my heart that day that you really were real and that you loved me.

"I'm the Barbara who read so many books about you. I know I didn't read your very own Book, but I read a lot of others.

"You must have spent a lot of time during those years trying to get my attention off deciding with my head and onto following you with my heart.

"And I'm sure you remember speaking sternly to me the day life seemed so painful I didn't think I could continue. You told me, firmly, that some things weren't allowed for those who knew your love. You promised me you had another answer.

"You held me up that day, God, and many days that followed. Surely you haven't forgotten.

"I'm the Barbara you came to one Sunday in Miami when I knelt down and asked to be able to surrender all my life to you.

"I knew you rejoiced with me that day. You gave me the gift of healing tears to cry.

"And you brought your Word to life for me that day. Remember?



"You led me to just the passage in 1 Corinthians which I needed to read. You placed my feet on the one true foundation rock. You wrote in my heart Paul's words of knowing one thing and one thing only, Jesus Christ and him crucified and risen again to life.

"I'm also the Barbara you've had so much trouble pushing through the refiners fire. I keep squirming out of the oven, Lord, making you start the process all over again.

"And, Lord, I'm the Barbara you taught to sing. I know you won't have forgotten that. You taught me how to forget about myself when I sing, and how to concentrate on you.

"You taught me how to praise you and tell you of my love in ways I never knew before.

"Father . . . Daddy ... I'm your daughter, Barbara."

I could go on and on, but it isn't necessary.

I know he knows who I am. He knows at the first whisper of a prayer or the first indrawn breath of a cry.

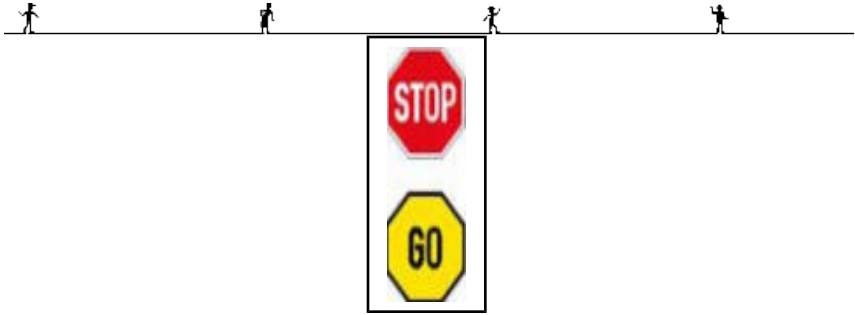
He doesn't need all these reminders.

Do I?

If so, let me add God's own reminders, his own promises, to them. In 1 Corinthians, Paul says:

"The man who loves God is known by God." and In 2 Timothy, he quotes from the Old Testament when he says, "The Lord knows those who are his."

Along The Way



I Saw The Light

In his Friday collection of tidbits in the *Jacksonville Journal* last week, columnist Bob Phelps included an item about a man who wrecked his car trying to speed through a yellow light. It seems the three cars in front of him stopped.

I can identify with that.

One day not too long ago I glanced up as I went under a traffic light and saw it turn from yellow to red. Guiltily, I looked in the rearview mirror to see if anyone had noticed that I was squeezing the light a bit. And I saw two more cars come through the light behind me.

The soft voice that speaks truth to me told me I had not only broken the law myself, I had contributed to others breaking the law as well. Was I being obedient myself and was that really a loving thing to do to my neighbor?

So I determined I would pay strict attention to traffic lights. I would plan ahead of time to stop on yellow lights as I was supposed to do. Of course, my decision was immediately put to the test. That's the nature of decision-making when it involves any kind of spiritual truth.

Running yellow-turning-red lights may not seem to be a spiritual issue, but it is. It involves being



obedient to the civil authority and loving my neighbor enough not to entice him into error by my example.

My resolve was tested through two incidents. In the first, I almost took the brunt of somebody else who did not want me to stop. In the second, I was left behind by somebody who waited until the last minute to start through an intersection.

I stopped at a traffic light on San Jose Boulevard one morning last weekend and a pickup truck almost plowed into the rear of my car. In fact, the driver avoided a collision only by slamming on his brakes.

The first I knew about it was when I heard the brakes squeal as the truck slid onto the paved shoulder of the road.

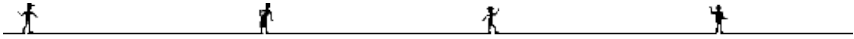
Surely, I thought, that driver was going too fast. Like the man in Phelp's column, he had been so sure I was going to go through the light, he had picked up speed. When I did not go through, he had to quickly apply his brakes.

As I gave a prayer of thanks for my safety — and that of the other driver — I wondered if he had really been going too fast or if I had not given enough warning and had braked too suddenly.

A couple of days later, on my way to work, I stopped behind a van at the intersection of University Boulevard and Phillips Highway. When the light changed, the cars ahead of the van started forward, but the van did not move.

When I realized the driver was not paying attention, I honked my horn gently, then more firmly, and began to fume when nothing happened. At the last possible moment, the driver shot forward, making it into the intersection as the light turned yellow. I

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hesitated a moment, my foot hovering above the accelerator, and then applied the brakes.

I could have made it through, I thought. I *should* have made it through. And I *would* have made it, too, if that dumb driver had just been more alert.

Then I heard my own thoughts and was ashamed. What, I wondered, was happening to my noble experiment in obedience and love? Was it a total failure?

Not at all.

For one thing, I learned that it is obviously a lot harder to be obedient in a watchful way than I had first thought. I have a lot to learn about being alert to what is happening around me so that I make allowance for all sorts of contingencies.

It can also be dangerous to your own health to be kind to your neighbor. That does not excuse you from doing it, however.

I also learned that it is very difficult for me to be patient and charitable on those occasions when doing so conflicts with what I want to do for myself.

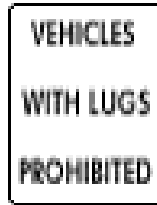
But I am supposed to reflect the character of Jesus. And the good news is that Scripture says I can be like him.

The bad news is that the process of change is sometimes painful and sometimes slow.

In the Epistle of James, we are told to rejoice in trials when they come because they produce perseverance and perseverance helps us mature and become complete, lacking nothing. Which means to be just like Jesus.



My recent experiences were the kind of trials James was talking about. They showed me that I have a lot to learn about taking care of and loving my neighbor.



I Don't Know!

"I don't know" is such a good answer.

I should use it more often.

One of the people who received the gift of sight from Jesus certainly knew how to use it well.

The first time the man who had been born blind was asked how he could now see, he gave a detailed answer.

He told his neighbors all about Jesus making mud and putting it on his eyes and telling him to go to Siloam and wash. He told them that he had gone and had washed and now he could see.


But when they asked him where Jesus was and the man replied, "I don't know."

The next time he was asked about regaining his sight, he gave a shorter answer. He told the Pharisees, "He put mud on my eyes and I washed and now I see."

When the Pharisees called him back for a second round of questioning, he grew even more terse.

When they started by saying that Jesus was a sinner, the man with the new vision replied, "Whether

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he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!"

That makes him a most unusual person. Backed into a corner, he didn't begin to embroider what he knew with what he thought.

When I am asked a question, I usually try very hard to come up with an answer. I start with what I know, but then move into what I think, what I suppose and what I imagine might possibly be true.

Lately I have been learning to say, "I don't know." So far I usually don't do it until I have exhausted all of the above, but I'm working on getting to it quicker.

It helps to do it that way. If I really should know the answer, but don't, then the sooner I admit I don't know, but will find out, the better off my questioner and I both are.

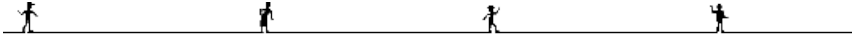
What makes me feel such a need to give an answer? Am I just being defensive because I think I am about to look less than wonderful?

That's possible, but foolish. How much better to admit my ignorance. That is certainly a necessary step if I expect to learn the answer I don't know.

It is all right to give an opinion, as long as I am clear about the difference between opinion and fact.

The man who was born blind offered an opinion the first time the Pharisees questioned him. When they had asked what he thought about Jesus, he said he thought Jesus was a prophet.

But this was an opinion he was willing to change later when he had more information on which to base his understanding.



When Jesus heard that the Pharisees had become angry with him and had thrown him out, he came looking for him. When Jesus found the man and asked if he believed in the Son of Man, he did not give an opinion. He asked Jesus to tell him who this Son of Man was so he could believe in him. When Jesus said he was the one, the man replied, "Lord, I believe."

When truth himself supplies us with the answer, we have no trouble knowing what to believe and what to say.

And to whom. The man born blind professed to Jesus that he believed in him. He was overheard by some Pharisees, but he wasn't trying to convince them of anything. He was talking to Jesus.



White Painted White

Cleaning out sepulchers is not pleasant work. No wonder we tend just to slap on another coat of whitewash.

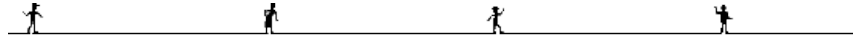
And as tired as I have been lately, I didn't think I had the energy for it.

But whitewash won't keep us healthy as will clean hearts — which is what clean sepulchers is really all about.

I am resting well now, thank you.

Resting well was part of what the Lord told me to do for my. mental, physical and spiritual fatigue.

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But he didn't stop there. He told me to stop doing and start listening.

And that's where cleaning out sepulchers starts — with listening to the Holy Spirit. First he uncovers what has died and is lying around stinking up the place. Then I have to dig it up and throw it away.

I don't need to go into details. My old trash is probably no worse than most people's.

Actually, I have yet to find anything unusual in my garbage or anyone else's. As it says in Ecclesiastes, there isn't anything new under the sun.

I suspect that only pride would have us think that the Spirit could uncover something unique in us. Pride says, if I can't be the best, perhaps I can be the worst.

But that doesn't mean there wasn't some horror at what I found, and some embarrassment. Although probably more shame than shock. After all, this is not my first cleaning out period and I am not as easily shocked at my "old nature" as I used to be.

But some shame, some shock and a good bit of sorrow is inevitable.

Fortunately, I did not have to do the digging and throwing all by myself. Or bare the shame or feel the sorrow all alone, either.

The Lord puts us in bodies so we will have encouragers and helpers standing by for when we need them — if we can only admit we need them and accept their help when offered.

This is frequently the abrasive, or scouring, part of the process. Telling someone else you have trash that needs to be cleaned out can be a very good way to scrape off pride bumps.



It may involve asking forgiveness. It may involve giving forgiveness, *really* forgiving and then forgetting, too.

That's part of the throwing out process. It's the part where I refuse to give the thought of resentment even a tiny foothold in my mind. Where I make a deliberate decision to think about something else instead. Like reciting Scripture verses from memory. Or singing praise songs. That will do it every time.

But this can be the polishing part, too. The love of others, their acceptance of you the way you are, their support and encouragement can bring back the luster to some pretty dull spirits.

So some of what I have been doing lately is not exactly pleasant, but the promises make the effort worth the sweat.

In Chapter 43, Isaiah speaks out God's promises, "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine."

Micah responds, in wonder and awe, "Who is a God like you, who pardons sins and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy."

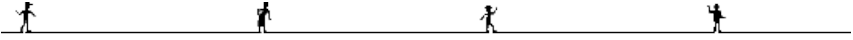
In John 6, Jesus tells us not to work for food that spoils but for food that endures to eternal life, food which the Son of Man gives us.

He says the real work of God is "to believe in the one he has sent."

And, finally — a Scripture I always seem to return to — the writer of the 23rd Psalm says that, because the Lord is my shepherd, I shall lack nothing.

"He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul.

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"He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

"You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

"Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."



Commendably Decent

Now I know how the company that makes Kleenex feels when somebody calls some other tissue by that name.

I have just learned that *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* says the word Christian can be used to describe someone as "commendably decent or generous."

The person doesn't even have to believe in Jesus Christ.

Kimberly-Clark Corp. has fiercely protected the use of the name Kleenex.



Obviously, Christ's followers haven't done the same about the word Christian.

We have allowed what it means to follow Christ to be so watered down that being commendably decent is enough to earn that precious title.

Jesus, who died on the cross, was not just commendably decent.

He was a great deal more than that. I believe His followers are to be more than that, too.

He was tenderly loving to sinners. He was passionately confronting to hypocrites. He abandoned His own interests in obedience to the Father — to the point of death.

I'm afraid people don't see that when they look at us. That's why Christianity has become something so wan as to qualify for the description of merely decent.

The problem is most of us really don't "die."

We surrender to God here and there in little ways — in decency and generosity. But we do not "die" in the big ways — in surrender of our wills to His will or in giving our lives for others.

We just don't.

So I suppose we have earned that new definition.

Sadly, many of us appear to be satisfied with that definition. It asks no more than we can easily give.

These Christians ask very little of anyone else, of course. They settle for this least common denominator and call it love and acceptance.

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On the other hand, some of us ask a lot more — only we ask it of others. And we don't ask, we demand. Then we condemn those who don't meet our demands.

Jesus could speak pretty harshly when He chose. But mostly only the Pharisees received the brunt of His harshness. And it was their insistence that other people follow their dictates that brought out Jesus' strongest words of condemnation.

Some people have embraced a weak imitation of Christianity because of the teachings of certain Christians.

Some have turned their backs on Jesus because of the actions of others.

What a quandary.

Do I have a solution? I think I do.

As a follower of Jesus Christ I believe I must be tremendously tough and enormously loving and tender.

I must demand a great deal of myself in the areas where God has spoken to me. My God will deal with me according to His wisdom, power and goodness — if I am willing to let Him do it.

He will show me what is needed to make me like Jesus — much more than commendably decent.

And I must allow others to be dealt with the same way — by God. I should tell them what I believe to be God's truth, but I must leave the Spirit room to work.

Jesus said that when He is lifted up He will draw all men to Him.

Barbara White



So Christians need to lift Jesus up. That means we need to become so filled with Him that He is all people see when they look at us.

I'm afraid we have been too busy lifting up our own versions of who He is and not the Lord Himself. I'm afraid we will lose sight of who He is ourselves if we do that long enough.



Ugly Tire Tracks

Someone has been driving a car across the yards of houses on corner lots in my neighborhood recently, leaving tire tracks in the grass from one street to the other.

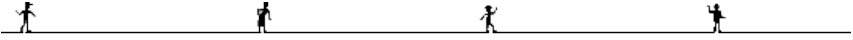
Since I have one of those corner lots, I am one of the homeowners with tracks through their yards.

This has happened before. The grass was revived, eventually.

This time, the damage came at a time when it could be used by the Lord to teach me a lesson about loving your enemy.

One set of those tracks ran on either side of the stop sign that stands at the corner of my yard. The sign was bent over where the car had apparently driven completely over it.

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The week after the tracks appeared, my Sunday school study class arrived at the 12th chapter of the book of Romans. In preparation for the class, I sat down one day to read over the chapter, pad and pen at hand in case I wanted to make any notes.

I came across these words: "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse" and "Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord. On the contrary, 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.'"

Somebody asked Jesus who his neighbor was and Jesus answered by telling the parable of the good Samaritan.

I don't remember anyone ever asking who his enemy was.

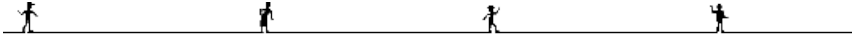
I guess that's because we're pretty sure we know our enemies.

Our enemy is anyone who hurts us in any way, gets in our way, or does anything that bothers us — like the person who was driving that car.

I had decided that whoever it was was an enemy, someone to be despised for his destructiveness, to be punished if possible.

But if it was true that he was an enemy, then I had not done as Paul was telling me to.

I had not loved my enemy.



Instead I had wished that his car had been damaged by the stop sign or that it had been flipped over — of course, without really *serious* injury to the driver — so we could have nailed the culprit for the police.

Whatever good there was in me was definitely in danger of being overcome by the evil of these thoughts and the anger that rose within me every time I looked at the tracks.

The difference between what the Apostle Paul said we should do and what I was actually doing was so great I couldn't avoid recognizing it and then admitting it to the Lord. I had read the words. Now I needed the Holy Spirit's help in knowing how to put them into practice.

It was fairly easy to decide to leave punishment of the person to God. After all, God knew who he was and I didn't.

But more than that was required. I needed to find a way to bless this unknown person rather than curse him with my anger and resentment.

How could I do that? Well, I could pray for his safety and for the safety of other people, so he would not hurt himself or anyone else and wouldn't have to live with the knowledge of having caused injury to anyone.

I could pray that God would turn the unhappiness of his life to happiness by becoming real to him. I can't think of a better blessing. That much at least I could do — and did do.

Amazingly, I can now look at the ruts without anger. Instead, they remind me to pray again and

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again for the future of this person who needs to know the Lord.

And — even more amazing — as I do, I believe I come to know the Lord better myself.



Patience Breeds Anxiety

I hope I haven't been depressing you lately with all tales of spiritual crises. This obviously has been one of the periods when the Lord uses steel wool instead of soft soap to scrub me.

But I can report another bit of clean, though tender, skin this week.

A friend and I had started a remodeling project at my house what seemed like years ago. It was only several months, actually, but the perception of time is certainly variable and this has seemed like a very long time.

Recently a friend spent his Saturday at my house trying to complete, among other things, the construction of a door frame.

He brought a stack of supplies with him and set to work. My job was to be sure he had a glass of iced tea handy and to keep track of his eyeglasses.



Part way through the job, he realized he needed just one more piece of flat molding, one that was three inches wide and 7 feet long.

Since he had other work he could do before needing that strip, he stayed put and sent me, by myself, to a nearby hardware and building-supply company.

After wandering around just a little, I found the bins of moldings and searched diligently through them for a piece the right width. No such luck. I found lots of four inch stuff, but nothing three inches wide. And I don't have the proper equipment to change the one into the other.

So I went to find someone to ask.

I found one man putting tape over tears in sacks of something, perhaps fertilizer, but he said he couldn't help because lumber wasn't his department. He directed me to the service center at the other end of the store.

I was sixth in line — a very, very slow line — waiting to check out with the only clerk in the service center.

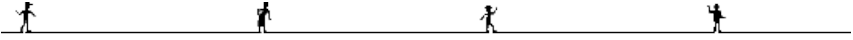
Well, I reminded myself, each of us receive the help we need when it's our turn. I can wait.

When I finally reached the desk and told the man behind the counter of my need for help. He picked up a microphone, told the warehouse man to come to the service center and turned to the man behind me.

He paid no further attention to me at all.

Twenty minutes later, I left. Without the piece of lumber and with a headache.

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I had tried very hard to be patient, to spend the time of waiting in prayer, to do something positive instead of negative.

Galatians says that the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

I had told myself to be patient. I had reminded myself I should be kind. I had tried to exercise self-control.

In fact, I had tried very hard to create all those things in me. But the fruit is produced only by the Spirit, not by human effort.

This fruit — and you will note that it is one fruit — cannot be hung on the outside, like a Christmas ornament on a tree. It must grow naturally from within.

All I achieved by my efforts was the headache.

After driving home that day, I reported in to my friend, took two aspirin and lay down on the sofa.

In a little while I was able to hush the jabbering of my mind and begin to talk the whole thing over quietly with my Lord.

That was when he reminded me that patience and all the other wonderful attributes of the fruit of the Spirit must come from the Spirit. They cannot be generated by our own efforts.

One more time, Lord, I thought. I've done it one more time. I'm still trying to make myself into the image of Christ instead of letting you do it

Will I ever learn, Lord? I asked. Is there hope for me?

He told me there was.



Then he told me something that would have bowled me over if I hadn't already been lying down. He said waiting patiently — actually I was standing around steaming — wasn't the only thing I could have done.

I could have asked again for help or I could simply have acknowledged the venture's probable lack of success much sooner and just gone on home.

Neither would have caused me the wear and tear I inflicted on myself by demanding from myself patience, love, forbearance and all the rest on the list.

What I had not done, the Lord impressed on me, was ask him what to do. I had simply assumed I knew what lesson the Holy Spirit was working on.

All of my lessons are not in developing patience, he said. For that is not the true goal. The goal is to develop a childlike, moment-by-moment trust in him, in his wisdom, power and goodness, no matter what comes.

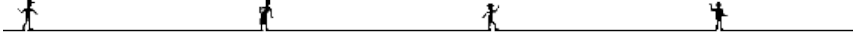


Prayer For South Africa

I came away last week from a gathering of State, Department officials and religious leaders with a lot of information and a vague sense of frustration.

It was a good experience, however. The information should be of good use to me and I think I

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 have learned something positive about my frustrations.

The group of religious leaders — and a few media types — had been invited to attend a conference in Washington sponsored by the State Department's Working Group on South and Southern Africa. The title of the conference was *The Church as a Force for Peaceful Change in South Africa*. Speakers included religious figures and people from the State Department.

This was the first of a series of meetings that the working group plans. Other conferences on South Africa will be held for business leaders and educators.

Although 1,500 invitations were mailed only a week before the conference, almost 500 people came, including half a dozen pastors from South Africa.

Joseph Ryan, a Presbyterian minister on leave for a year to work with the State Department, said the level of the response was an indication of the level of interest.

Talks were given by Secretary of State George Shultz, two other State Department people, a university professor from South Africa and two ministers.

The political issues concerning South Africa are not simple, and this gathering did not find them so.

Participants had a brief time after each talk to ask questions, but almost no one did. Oh, several people spoke, but not to ask questions. Instead, most gave mini-speeches of their own.

Participants spoke to the issues from many different points of view. Some saw communists



behind every leader in South Africa; some saw no communist activity at all. Some saw economic sanctions as the best answer; some, including those who spoke for the Reagan administration, saw it as — if not the worst — a very bad answer.

The moral issues raised by the two ministers seemed much clearer. The issues boiled down to the fact that people who are suffering need help and God is still in the business of reconciling people to each other and to him.

But, again, the questions seemed to be more on politics than religion.

I became very restless, wanting some practical advice about how the church could be a force for peaceful change. After all, I thought, isn't that why we're here?

Although I am a reporter, not a politician or a religious leader, I was a Christian, a member of the church that the State Department invited us to talk about. And I wanted the conference to offer some direction.

And at the end, they did present a panel of people who could talk about ways to minister to people and groups, such as business, hospitals and schools in South Africa. Most people still seemed more interested in making speeches about their points of view than in asking questions.

Later I tried to decide what value the conference had served — what good would come from it — and found myself wishing there had been input from more of the participants.. I wondered if a less diplomatic moderator could have held the orating questioners in line or if small group discussions would have helped.

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Usually I reflect on simple things, finding major meanings for my life only in minor matters. This was not at all simple, in fact it was complex and subtle and the meanings not easily come by.

A little time has passed, allowing for some perspective on the conference, and I have found some answers.

Both ministers and politicians spoke of the need for personal involvement and for prayer, especially for prayer.

If I can't build clinics or fund schools or promote small business — and I just might be able to do more than I think — I know I can pray.

Prayer is one of the very best avenues of change. And the things it changes best is the one who prays. If I truly pray about the problems in South Africa — and with the information I now have, I have more to pray about — then God can straighten out my wrong ideas and bring my will in line with his.

Of course, I have to be *seeking* his will in my prayers, not just making speeches with God as my audience.

As always, when I seek to come closer to him, the Lord also fed me with a kernel of truth during my time of reflecting on this conference. Not a new truth, but one that never changes and can bear repeating.

He reminded me that he stands above all the conflicting and confusing ideas and opinions of the world. And he is trustworthy in his wisdom, his power and his goodness.

That is why prayer is so important. Prayer can help us understand that.



Small Problem At My Fingertips

I don't want to gross you out, but I have some kind of infection growing under my fingernails.

Some of them, anyway. And it's pretty disgusting.

Not only that, it will take months, lots of months, to get rid of it. I will probably be treating the problem twice daily until Christmas!

I understand it is not an unusual condition. My doctor told me lots of other people have the same problem.

What a drag.

It isn't really painful. Just a pain in the neck.

I guess one reason it bothers me so much is that I have always thought I had attractive hands. Long slender fingers and well-manicured nails. One of my better features, in fact.

And now this.

Ah, well.

It really is kind of humiliating.

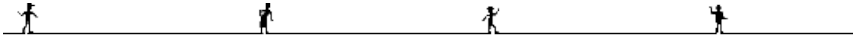
Do you think it could be a lesson in humility?

I can always use another of those. You can hardly have too many lessons in humility.

Perhaps. But another possibility strikes me.

It turns out I have been harboring this fungus for years. I knew something was wrong, but as long as I

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faithfully wore fingernail polish, the condition never seemed to get out of hand — no pun intended.

I actually asked another doctor about it several years ago, but my religious use of polish had subdued the problem so well he didn't see anything wrong.

This time I ran out of polish and kept forgetting to stop and buy some more. After a week or more of naked fingers, the irritation went on a growing kick and caused one nail to become very painful. Thus the trip to the doctor.

All he had to do was cut off part of the nail — a dead part, no pain — and everything was immediately better.

Now I am just painting away. Ointment under the nails and polish on top.

I'll admit it takes a certain kind of mind to find a spiritual message in that, but I do see one.

Or two.

Ignoring problems won't make them go away. And covering them over with a shiny layer of something that merely hides them from view may not be the best way to deal with them.

If I have a spiritual problem and I smother it with a righteous-looking practice that only sits on the surface, my heart will not be changed. I may need help in digging deep enough to bring the problem to the surface, but that is the only way to begin real healing. Also, some conditions take longer to cure than others. It depends on how long they have been hiding and how deep their roots go.

Of course, the Lord can make the change happen overnight — or faster — but he does not always choose to do so.



And Scripture certainly stresses the value of perseverance.

So I will derive some spiritual truth from my funny predicament. Every time I take up the paint brush — either of them, in fact — I will use it as a time of prayer. A time for remembering the power, wisdom and goodness of my Lord.

A time for praising him and thinking him for who he is. A time for rejoicing that he had revealed himself to me. A time for yielding my life to him once again and for asking what he wants me to do today.

By the time the irritation is healed, I may have become clean in more ways than one.



Down From The Mountain


Coming down from the Mount of Transfiguration must have been hard for Peter, James and John. But last week I decided it couldn't have been much harder than it was for me to come back from the mountain on which I spent my vacation.

About half way through the week, I wanted to drop everything and flee back to the quiet I had found in the mountains and, even more precious, the closeness to the Lord.

You know what coming back from vacation is like.

A pile of mail and telephone messages awaited me. And as I worked my way through those, I found

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that things I had thought were going to be done while I was gone somehow were not done.

The result was a sudden shift from dreamy rest to dreadful reality.

Followed by a hollow feeling in the pit of the stomach as deadline approached.

Mountain top experiences throw things out of sync. They upset the normal routine and disrupt the customary way of looking at things. This can be good because they can make you examine your priorities.

While I was in the mountains, I found myself better able to focus on the greatness and holiness of God. Human foibles, while not absent, did not seem so important while I was concentrating on the Lord.

But how quickly I forget. I found my concentration slipping the minute I began to be caught up into things at work and at home.

Let me share one somewhat humorous aside. In the mail waiting for me when I returned was the July issue of *Christianity Today* magazine. It was all about rest.

When I first saw the magazine, I thought rest was the last thing I would need to read about. After all, I was all rested and raring to go. About half way through the week, I picked up the magazine and read a few of the articles.

But what helped most of all was remembering what followed that first mountain top experience. Jesus came down from the mountain and went to Jerusalem to die. Peter, James and John came down and stumbled around until Pentecost. Then they set about the task they had been commissioned by Jesus to do. And they did it in the everyday world.



I don't know anyone who gets to stay on the mountain top all the time. Not even Jesus.

It's into the world and grappling with all that for those who follow him. That is where the work gets done. That is where we witness to Jesus, where we reflect the glory of the Father through the power of the Holy Spirit.

God, who commanded men to do many things, also ordered them to rest physically. He knew they would need it for the journey ahead. And he promised to give them spiritual rest through his presence with them on that journey.

Jesus also knew we would need rest in the midst of our work of believing in him and serving him. In Matthew 11:29, he says, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls."

He didn't tell us to go to the mountain top to find him. He told us to put on a yoke, an instrument of work. But not just any yoke. His yoke.

Since work is inevitable, how wonderful that in wearing this yoke our burden is shared by the Lord himself.

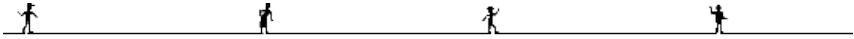
My time in the mountains was wonderful. I am grateful for it.

So is my time of daily labor of the lowlands. For there I find a precious kind of rest, one that has nothing to do with lying down on the job.

And I find in Scripture my hope for being able to keep on keeping on.

"The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. . . . They will

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soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint." (Isaiah 40:28-31)

In a little craft shop in the mountains I found a small painted plaque with these words from Isaiah 30:15 on it: "In quietness and confidence shall be thy strength."

This is a quietness that allows the Lord to speak to me through the noise of the busy world. This is a confidence that says I can trust the one with whom I work.

That's as good as a mountain top. Maybe better. For it's true for every day of my life, wherever I am.



Witness To The Light

When television gets too violent and movies get too bawdy, I want to get together with Christian friends for a chat.

We can talk about the wonderful things we have learned about the Lord in our last Bible study class. We can enjoy ourselves in peace and safety.

We can close the door on the world and ignore all the ugliness outside.

I was the guest of a group of Christian women last weekend at a breakfast meeting. We talked about this very thing and it seems most of us want to build



walls around an encampment of Christians and let the rest of the world go by.

But that, we had to acknowledge, was not what Jesus told us to do. He told us to go into the world, to be his witnesses there and to minister in his name.

And you just can't do that from behind closed doors.

It's easy to understand why we would want to withdraw from the world. For one thing, it is so unlike the Kingdom of Heaven that we can feel alien in it.

Also the world can be a dangerous place for Christians. While part of us is feeling alienated, the rest of us is responding to its lures.

We are so susceptible to temptation. And the world has something for everyone in its mixed bag of tricks. Before we know it, we can begin to compromise our relationship with the Lord for the sake of relationships with the world

But it seemed pretty clear to all of us that God does not call people to him just so they can be safe and comfortable. Scripture says plainly that he intends to use us to further his goal of bringing all people to him.

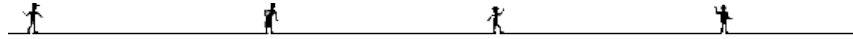
So we have to come to some kind of terms with the world.

I picked up a couple of good tips about being in the world but not of it at that breakfast meeting.

As the general conversation began, we agreed that the world is an arena for spiritual warfare.

Somebody pointed out how easy it is to cling to the law for protection, to make the law into a wall that

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separates us from everyone who does not know the Lord.

We are to live according to the law, true, but we are not to do it for the sake of shutting out the world. We follow the law because we follow the Lord.

There is no conflict in this, for he both obeyed the law — in fact, he fulfilled it — and he still went into the world.

Once we decided that we really are expected to be witnesses for him, we talked about how difficult it can be to witness to old friends.

The friends you had before you became a Christian may be people you really like, but now you find yourself uncomfortable with them and they find themselves uncomfortable with you.

One of the women, who is an artist, suggested that learning to witness in different ways can be compared to learning to paint pictures by different methods.

She said she tells her students not to be nervous about trying to paint, or not to try to paint just like anyone else, that each one will develop a style of his own as he works

Just as everybody does not have to paint the same way, everybody does not have to witness the same way, she said. The Lord made people different and he uses the differences.

Another woman said she hesitates to witness to her friends because she does not want to drive them away. Sometimes, when you try to talk about Jesus, they head in the other direction for all they are worth.

Barbara White



Another member of the group asked us to think about lighthouses. They come in all sorts of sizes and shapes, she said, but each one puts out a ray of light.

It not only shines into the darkness, it is a fixed point of light, one by which passing ships — and even old friends — can chart a course, she said.

If we stand in the same place, this new place in Jesus Christ, and shine our light into the world around us, old friends may drift away for a time, she said, but when they need a light to steer by, they will know where to find one.

The Lord who is that light is our example.

He knew what it was to be tempted by the world and he knew how to guard against temptations.

Also, Jesus had his close group of friends to whom he could talk easily about his Father.

But, while Scripture reminds us often of our need to be with and support each other in Christian fellowship, that isn't all there is to it. As much as he loved that fellowship, Jesus loved the Father more — and went into the world on his behalf.

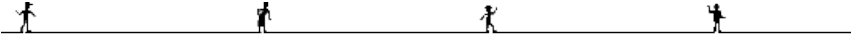
We are to do the same.

We just have to be sure what — or who — we love the most.



Patience Provides The Means

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Recently, I've spent part of my time with the Lord each morning taking a brisk walk around the neighborhood.

The original reason for combining my exercise program with my prayer time was to allow me to sleep a little longer. But since I started doing it a few months ago — as soon as it was light enough early enough for safe walking — I have found another good reason for keeping it up.

There is something about the early morning sky that is conducive to thinking about God. And I need all the help I can get.

I tend to spend all my prayer time thinking about problems — mine and other people's — and too little time thinking about God.

I *mean* to ponder his greatness and the wonder of his love each day. I *intend* to think about at least one aspect of his character every day, but I don't.

Before I can get my mind heading in the right direction, it has slipped sideways of something and I am going over a current problem one more time.

When I first started walking in the mornings, I found each day that as I reached the corner near my house and turned east, I saw the rising sun reflected in the sky.

Every day the sky was different. Every day the Lord was the same — a fact to examine, to test, to praise and to give thanks for.

For several days in a row recently, with a new stack of problems to ponder, I walked around that corner with my head down. I never looked at the sky. I ended the walk as confused and distressed as I had started it.



Then one morning the glow of the invisible sun that reflected on a few low clouds demanded my attention. I lifted my head and drank in the beauty. Immediately my heart began to sing a praise song to the Lord.

I began to think of the joy that knowing God brings to my life, of the brightness that is mine because he loves me.

The next day I looked again and saw a bright streak of light coming from the midst of large dark clouds.

I remembered how persistent my Lord is, how determined to bring us out of our darkness into his light.

On the third day, I saw a dull, lowering mass, hesitating just overhead, waiting to deposit its load.

My God rains on the just and the unjust, I thought. He pours himself out for all of us, too, because he wants us to know him, love him and serve him.

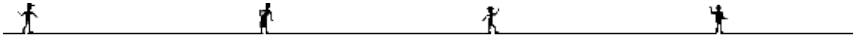
I made an interesting discovery at the end of those three days. No new solutions to the problems that had been concerning me had come to mind. The people who had been hurting were still in pain. The possibilities for disaster that had existed were still lying in wait.

And I still cared. But not in the same way.

I cared, but I was not defeated by my lack of answers. I was free to care and to love the Lord anyway.

I remembered the darkest moment of those days in which I had not thought of God except as the one who can solve problems. It was the moment when I

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realized I wanted solutions for my problems more than I wanted the Lord himself. And I couldn't seem to change. I couldn't make myself want the Lord. I only wanted everything to come out right.

At the end of that third morning, I still wanted happy endings. But I had begun to remember that God wants happy endings, too.

The difference, of course, is that God is willing to wait for the right time, for the happy solution, for the true happy ending. And I want mine right now.

If one of us has to change, you know who it will be.

That is what all those sunrise skies were all about. Changing me. Making me into a person who can wait. And who can wait without giving up hope.

My help comes from the Lord — the maker of heaven and earth, says the psalmist. If I forget about him, I forget about his help and I lose hope.

The psalmist lifted his eyes to the hills and was reminded of God. We don't have many hills in Florida. But my God made both heaven and earth, and we do have beautiful morning skies.



Narrow Path Leads To Wide Array

I decided this week that I'm becoming too narrow.



Not physically — sigh — just mentally. I think about the same things all the time. The church, the people I know and love who go to church and the people I know and love who do not go to church.

And when I am around other people, unless they want to talk about the church or questions related to walking with the Lord, I just do not have much to say.

But being single-minded does not mean thinking only about one thing. It means thinking about everything from one point of view.

I did not do much of anything but think on Labor Day.

Well, I cleaned out some dresser drawers, but that is not what I mean. I did not think about anything new.

I planned a quiet day. I thought I would really enjoy a day alone at home.

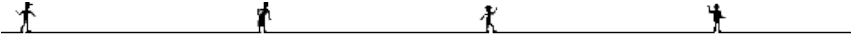
And I did. Most of the time. But there were moments — a couple of long moments — when I was lonely instead of just alone. During those moments, I wanted someone other than my old orange cat around. I wanted something different to think about.

It was during those lonely moments that I began to wonder if I was not overlooking something.

I remembered reading, years ago, a book of letters from a priest to his niece. He was offering her guidance on how to live a full, rich Christian life. One of the things he told her was not to limit her interests. For example, she was studying the violin and he told her to keep up her lessons.

I wondered if that meant I should rush out and take music lessons, learn to fly a plane, get involved in politics or start writing a novel? I concluded it did not

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mean that, but did mean that if I really wanted to do one of those things, I should think long and hard about finding a way to do it.

Some people think Christians should spend all their time "doing good," that all their activities should look like service, that even activities outside the church should be limited to avenues for ministry.

But as I remembered it, this priest was not making that point. He was telling his niece that as a person with more than one interest, she would have a wider life in which to experience the Lord. Not only that, she would have more to offer him.

OK, I thought, I understand that. Of course, the "wider life" has to fall within the boundaries of the narrow way; that is, it cannot include doing things that are illegal or immoral. But that still leaves a lot of room for good choices.

Perhaps too much room to suit me. I immediately came up with two objections. The first was, "Yes, but I don't have time." The second was, "Yes, but I don't know what I want to do."

Time is a factor, of course. People may say you always can find time for the things you really, really want to do. It is not impossible, but it is hard to do. It takes setting priorities.

The other "Yes, but. . ." caught me short. That was when I asked myself if I have become so narrow that I have little room for the Lord to enter and little to offer him. Now that my job, as well as my inclination, is directed to the field of religion, have I limited myself too much?

Will not all church and no world make a Christian a dull person, and a very poor servant as well?



But is there anything I want to do bad enough to struggle to find the time?

I ended the day on a confused note, full of questions and no answers.

Fortunately, the Lord did not leave me in that messy state for long — only long enough for me to get ready to hear his answer.

He spoke through the scriptures, as he often does.

Two days later, I came in my regular Bible reading to this familiar promise from Proverbs 3:

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths."

And to this in Psalm 32: "I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you."

And it finally dawned on me the question I needed to be asking myself was not, "Am I too narrow?" but, "Am I following the Lord?"

Not should I add or subtract activities from my life, but am I walking according to his will?

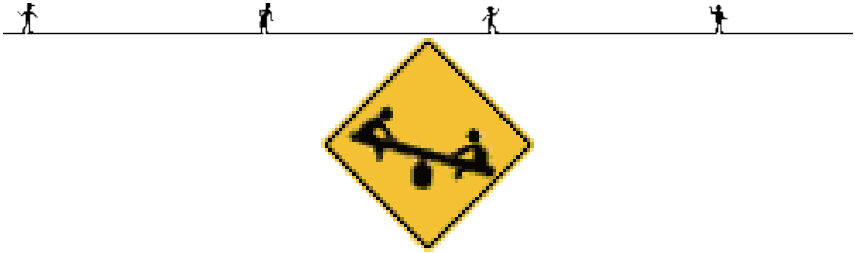
And the truly good news is that I do not have to figure that out by myself. The Lord, who desires to lead me, will correct me if I wander, gently if I am quick to follow, or firmly if I am stubborn or dense.

My part is to stay close to him and I do that best by planting his word in my heart.

That is not narrow, except at the beginning, like the narrow gate.

But it opens into the widest world imaginable.

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Prayer And Law

My granddaughter, Nicole, speaks English logically — which means she frequently uses incorrect grammar.

That is, she uses logic to expand her rapidly growing command of the language and, of course, English does not work that way.

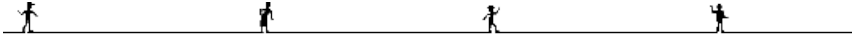
"I do-ded it," she proudly announced to me recently, meaning she did whatever it was.

I understood her perfectly, but being by nature an English teacher, I replied, "Yes, you did it," slightly stressing the "did."

She is very quick and I hoped she would pick up the correct verb form without my having to make a particular point about it.

Actually, it is perfectly appropriate for her, at the ripe old age of two years to add an "ed" to the verb to make it past tense. In this case she also added an extra "d" because she needed it to be able to pronounce what she thought was the proper form of the verb.

She simply was trying to follow the rule. The problem is that the rules for our lovely language are counterbalanced by the many exceptions. To speak correctly, you have to learn both the rules and the exceptions.



The same thing has been true for me in my efforts to follow Jesus.

When I first started trying to live the Christian way, I learned some rules and applied them everywhere. If I found a circumstance in which the rule did not quite fit comfortably, I made it fit even if I had to twist something a little in the process.

Usually someone was pinched by the poor fit. But I did not know any other way to do it correctly — and I really wanted to be correct.

Sometimes I ran across a new rule that seemed to contradict one I already knew and it upset me. Not knowing what was correct gave me a feeling of insecurity.

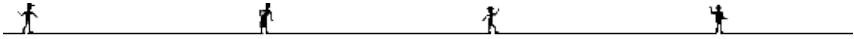
You may think I was making mountains out of molehills, but it felt like I think how it must feel to climb a mountain without any safety gear. Maybe lots of people can go skipping over the rocks, but knowing the rules seemed like a matter of life and death to me. And these rules were more complicated than English grammar.

Anyway, just about the time I became so confused that I did not know which way to turn, I saw somebody else move with surety and skill right over the danger spot. I imitated their actions and all was well.

But mimicry alone will not do. You do not always have a model to follow. You have to develop the ability to make the right decision by yourself. You just have to learn the rules and the exceptions.

Let me try to show you how it works in my life. My example may be on the level of Nicole's sentence

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structure, but all I hope to do by sharing how I operate is to set you thinking about how you operate, too.

"Love your neighbor as yourself" was one of the first rules I learned. Jesus said it and that made it especially significant.

But it is a very broad rule and I caused myself and others some pain in trying to apply it.

For example, I have a friend who was always asking me for help with a particular problem. Over and over again, I did all I could to do what appeared to be the loving thing and meet her need.

But while I appeared to be helping my friend, actually I was preventing her from having to face the consequences of her own actions. I thought I was following the rule and loving my neighbor, but I was making it easier for her to go further away from the Lord..

I did not know what else to do until I read some passages in the Bible that indicated that sometimes God disciplines us to get us to change direction. God tests us with fuller's soap and with refiner's fire, to do away with the dross and bring out the gold. And sometimes our difficulties can be that soap or that fire.

I realized that in this case it actually might be more loving to let my friend hurt than to rush one more time to ease her pain. When I was finally able to dare letting this happen, I found it was true. She suffered — and learned. And so did I.

Does that mean the rule of love is that you *never* help anyone out of a predicament because it might be the Lord working to turn them around?

No, it is more complicated than that. And it is simpler.

Barbara White



It might appear easy just to memorize the rules and apply them every time, but it would not be following Jesus. It would just be following the rules.

To follow Jesus, I need to look for him ahead of me. And I will not do that if the rules are all I need.

So how do I apply the rules and the exceptions?

Prayerfully.

That is actually another very important rule. Only when I keep in close touch with the Father will I know what he would have me do. Only then will I know which rule or which exception to apply.

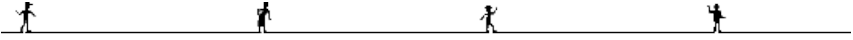


You're Never Alone!

Sometimes there is so much going on in my mind that I'm not able to think of a single thing.

I'm filled with bits and pieces of ideas and themes, but I can't seem to take just one thought and pursue it to its logical — or more important, it's spiritual — conclusion.

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Usually I can count on the Lord to drop a fairly good sized thought-pebble into the pond of my mind. Then I just let the ripples come and go until they form a pattern. Eventually something I already know is strengthened so it leaves a deeper imprint on my mind or a new thought is formed.

Everything has been right on the surface lately. And the surface has been decidedly choppy.

Instead of one or two good sized ideas, all I've been getting are bunches of tiny gravel-like notions. They cause brief bursts of mental activity, but never seem to go anywhere.

I have started a dozen columns only to have the thought slip away before it could be grasped.

I like it when there is a tidal wave of mental activity, for I hope for an earth-shaking conclusion. But sometimes there is only the least little ripple.

I have learned, however, that you cannot always tell how deep the water is by looking at the surface movements.

For example, a woman stopped by my desk recently to drop off a notice of church activities. She apologized for interrupting me and said she was delivering the notice in person because she wanted to thank me for my column.

I assured her I wasn't doing anything she could interrupt, that I was beginning to wonder what my column would be for this week. I said I had asked the Lord what I was to write about, but that so far, I had received no answer, or had missed it.

She responded that when she has to write a notice for the church, she also asks the Lord for help.

"And he always gives it," she said brightly.



She talked for a minute about the joys of being able to rely on the Lord.

"People ask me how in the world I can go off to Pensacola all by myself," she said, then laughed. "I tell them I never have gone anywhere by myself in my whole life."

As she walked off, she was still smiling to herself.

And I was left thinking, She knows she is never alone because she knows God is always with her.

Is that my column theme?

It isn't a great thought. In fact, it's rather a cliché.

Only it wasn't a cliché to her. And it isn't to me.

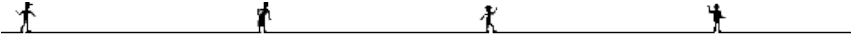
She greatly enjoys the fact that she is never alone. Actually, she was relishing that fact that her Lord is always with her.

She was not questioning this. She had not raised it as an item for theological discussion. She wasn't interested in arguments about whether God stays with you when you don't stay with him. She didn't want to discuss what it means to be yoked with Jesus. She wasn't in the least interested in talking about how you know God is present with you.

She was as unconcerned as a loved child whose parent has never let her down. Like that little child, she trusted that what she had found to be true was the truth.

And she had been glad to share her joy with me. She had identified me as a brother, a child of the same Father.

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She did not bother to explain her meaning. She was sure I would understand what she meant, that I would have experienced the same thing.

And she was right.

It's not a great thought. But it is a deep one. It goes all the way down to the bedrock on which we have built our lives. We are children of the same Father and lovers of the same Lord.

We spent only a few minutes together, but it was enough.

She recognized me. I recognized her.

It reminded me of home.

Oh, we probably could have found areas of differences if we had tried. Brothers and sisters often do. But I don't believe they would have hurt the joy of our sharing, the joy of knowing we are family.

Suddenly it seemed to me that all I had been doing recently was fuss with the differences. It is easy to do, especially when you are busy covering organized religion as news.

I am no longer fussing. I am remembering how often my Father has blessed me with glimpses of our family, his and mine.

And I am thankful to him for dropping that tiny little moment into my day.



When A Marriage Dies

I have been swamped lately with opinions and questions about marriage, divorce, remarriage and what the church has to say about all of them.

I have had to sort out my own opinions and during the process, have left behind some old trash that was still messing up my life years after my own divorce.

It started with an after-dinner conversation with some friends. One man took the stand that the Bible says marriage is forever, so the church is wrong when it welcomes people back with open arms after they remarry.

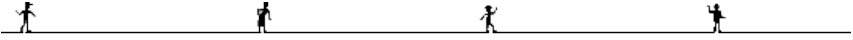
But, said another, who had done that some years before, God has provided forgiveness for our all our sins, and that includes divorce.

Well, maybe, said the first. But what is the church saving to the spouse who was left behind when it rejoices at the return of the prodigal? And what is saying about God's standard for marriage?

The evening ended with no resolution of their different points of view.

Later, I talked about this with a friend whose spouse left to marry someone else.

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We agreed that forgiveness is real and so is God's expectation. And we wondered how both things can be true at the same time.

My friend said almost every area of a Christian's life is lived in this kind of tension between two truths that don't seem compatible at all.

If we make the absolutes of God's laws the only truth, we deny the saving grace of Jesus Christ's death on the cross and we can spread condemnation with ease. If we make the breadth of God's forgiveness the only truth, we deny that God cares what we do and we reject the possibility of our growing into the likeness of Jesus Christ.

Only by trying to live with the tension between these two truths can we acknowledge the need to strive to keep God's laws and the need to receive his forgiveness.

That kind of tension makes us rely on God instead of ourselves, my friend said.

Only he can make the desire to live by his laws so real in our hearts that we will surrender our way to his way. Only he can make our failures and our need for forgiveness so real that our hearts can break and we can ask for forgiveness.

For we not only need to forgive, we need to be forgiven. And only the Lord can so convict us of our sins that our hearts are broken and we can confess and receive his forgiveness.

All of this has had special significance for me because I, too, was a "left behind spouse."

In trying to minister to me at the time of my divorce, people told me that when a marriage dies, the only thing to do is bury it and .get on with your life.



But this advice didn't work. The past just wouldn't stay buried. When I least expected it, left over anger would get in my way.

Something was wrong and it was years before I knew it was forgiveness.

The world — and some in the church — had told me that a dead marriage is only a problem. But you don't need forgiveness for having a problem. You need forgiveness for having sinned and nobody told me I sinned.

Forgiveness is available for everybody involved in a divorce, or a remarriage. But forgiveness can only really be accepted if it follows repentance. And repentance is only real if you know you have sinned.

Those who advised me were right in one sense. Marriages can die, but they don't die natural deaths. They have to be killed. And it is the killing of the marriage, not just the divorce, that is against God's standards.

God has a vision of what marriage should be and anything less is missing his mark. That's where repentance and forgiveness come from.

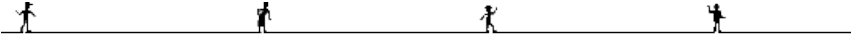
That's good news. But there is even better news than that.

There is an alternative to sin and divorce, even when followed by repentance and forgiveness.

It's sin, repentance, forgiveness, and change.

God, who made us and designed marriage, knew we would need changing before we could make it work. So he provided not only standards for marriage, but a vision of what marriage was supposed to be and guiding principles to live by that can make it happen.

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I don't believe it can be coincidence that I learned this week of a program that teaches this truth and gives principles for making it work in your life.

I don't know first hand whether or not these principles work. But they are based on God's word and that's the best recommendation I know.



Simple Singing

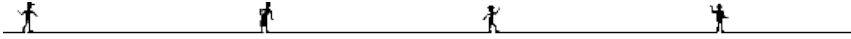
It's frustrating when I hear a favorite operatic aria and I really want to sing along, but can't get it to come out right.

I guess I just don't have the right equipment for opera. I can hear it perfectly inside my head, but when it goes from inside my head to outside my mouth, it doesn't sound right to anyone listening.

I'm better off — and so is everybody around me — when I stick to singing little everyday songs, and when a lot of other people are singing at the same time.

But this isn't a serious problem. It raises only minor or momentary frustration. I have no real expectation of being able to sound like an opera singer. And it doesn't hurt anyone else that I don't succeed. (In fact, there may be more suffering involved for all concerned when I try!)

I feel a much deeper frustration, however, when I hear many current discussions of vital moral issues and I want to get my point across in such a way that I will sweep all arguments before me, but I can't get it to come out right.



I feel incredibly sad, my heart comes close to breaking, because what I hear in my head and know in my heart has the power to change lives, to loose chains and to set people free — not only in marriages, but in all relationships. And I can't seem to say it in a way that can make them hear it.

This is not a minor frustration because there is more than minor suffering involved in these issues. And I believe the possibility for avoiding this suffering, or for turning it into an opportunity for blessing, is very real.

If only I could say what is in my heart with such clarity that no one could deny it. If only I could convince my listeners to believe in it enough to give it a try.

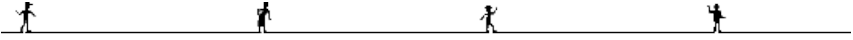
I guess I don't have the necessary equipment to make that happen. My mind is not sharp enough, my theological education not wide enough or my spiritual maturity not deep enough. I cannot refute all the arguments or blend all the differences into one complete whole that no one can deny.

But this time is does matter. It hurts me so much when I try and don't succeed. And I believe those who listen, but do not understand are hurt even more deeply.

Perhaps I am better off telling simple everyday truths to the one or two people who are ready to receive them. And hoping a few others will think about what I have said.

What brought all this up was my attempt last week to make a strong, authoritative, creative and life-changing statement about marriage.

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I believe the world has so twisted the truth of God in this area that it is amazing when any marriage survives. And I believe that God's truth has such power that the way the world sees marriage could be changed completely.

But like so many people concerned with marriage, I found myself focusing on the pain of failure and the need for reconciliation and healing.

That is certainly important — especially in light of the determination with which we walk the wrong path. We are awash in divorce because so few people ever see marriage the way God sees it, as the place where we can most perfectly show the world what it is like to live and love like Christ.

They only see their own wants and desires. However, in focusing on the need for repentance and forgiveness, I allowed the truth that points toward the better course — to the way of surrender to God and of the fulfilling of his will for mankind — to become a brief note at the bottom of this column.

At my best, I couldn't have said all I wanted to in one short column.

But I really, really wanted to.

Where, O Lord, are those who can speak your word today with great clarity and power? And where are those who can stand in the gap?

I do wonder why God has given me such a heavy heart for marriages and has not given me the ability to speak his truth more clearly.

Perhaps he wants me only to sing little everyday songs about his truth instead of trying to tackle the biggest aria in the libretto. Perhaps he will take my



little snippets of his truth and weave them into his own pattern of change for people's lives.

So I didn't change the world with one column. I won't become despondent.

I will remember that only the Word of the Lord is able to change lives. And I will rejoice that his Word is still alive today and that his purpose will be achieved.



An Ordinary Life That's Willing

Oh, joy! I'm not going around in circles after all.

I'm not eternally coming back around to the same place. I'm actually moving toward a goal.

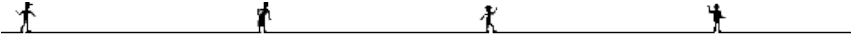
I realized this while attending a conference in North Carolina last weekend. And I am full of joy at the discovery and elated at the sense of freedom I now feel.

I won't try to tell you all about my conference. I couldn't, anyway.

But since what I regularly do in this column is share how God works in one ordinary life, I will try to tell you about one way in which I already see how he is using what I heard there to change me.

I heard an exciting teaching about cyclical and linear Christians. It was exciting because it made clear some things that had been causing a great deal of confusion in my life lately. And because it gave me direction for the days to come.

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It is one thing to hear a new teaching. It is another — even more precious — thing to find out for yourself that it really works.

God has taught me a great deal through my time behind the wheel of my car. In fact he has taught me so much there I wonder what he used as his classroom in the days before automobiles.

The first major lesson came several years ago. God showed me I was not to get angry at the folks behind the wheels of the other cars.

But I am still getting angry.

I am ashamed, saddened and frustrated that this is so.

Occasionally I am overcome by a sense of futility. I think, if I can't succeed at this one dumb thing, how can I possibly hope to grow in maturity, as Scripture says I am supposed to do? How can I hope to become more of the image of Jesus Christ?

I know God forgives. I am enormously grateful that he does.

But am I doomed to keep coming around to the same place, doing the same thing and having to ask for the same forgiveness over and over again?

I learned this weekend that I am not bound to return forever to the same place. I am not going around in circles. I am on my way to a new me! Not because of what I am doing. Because of what God is doing. And because of what I am trying to do.

In John 14:15, Jesus says, "If you love me, you will obey what I command."



So I understand that the primary point is obedience. And I have been trying to obey. I just haven't been succeeding.

But I have let my lack of success discourage me and sometimes I have not really been trying very hard. It seemed so hopeless.

I have been focusing on the right thing — obedience — but I have been trying to do it for the wrong reasons. I have wanted to be right. I have wanted to avoid being wrong. I have wanted to escape punishment. I have wanted to secure a prize.

Now I see that what I really want to do is show the Lord that I love him.

Making me into the image of his Son is God's business. Being willing to love him more than I love myself— and working at doing it — is my business.

It really is true that he is the potter and I am the clay.

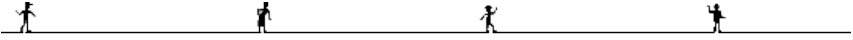
Now clay does do go around and around on the potter's wheel. But it isn't the same each time it comes around.

The clay is different each time — if the potter's hand is on it. It has been stretched, prodded or pulled more into the shape the potter intends it to have in the end. It isn't just circling in futility. It is on the way to the goal.

And that is true of me. too. I am being shaped by the Lord. And I am on my way.

For example, God is working to shape me in a particular way through all these lessons in the car. He is determined to make me more conscious of him than I am of that person in that other car. And more aware of what obedience really means.

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Jesus also said that if we don't love our neighbor whom we have seen, how can we expect to love the Lord whom we have not seen?

He wants me to love the neighbor in that other car. And I have been trying — and failing. Now I know that only God can make me a lover of other people.

And the love I have to give to that other driver is the amount of love I have for God. And I won't know how much that is unless I'm willing to focus on the Lord first.

I haven't licked my problems with other drivers — yet. But I have learned that if my mind is set on God and the wonder of his love for me, then my approach to my neighbor is totally different.

Let me be specific.

I was driving along, inching my way toward a traffic light, rejoicing about the fact that God is in charge of making me more like Jesus, that I don't have to do it myself, I just have to be willing. And somebody raced up in the fast-moving lane and wanted me to let him pull ahead of me so he could make the turn I had been waiting to make.

I did, too. I let him in.

And I felt the anger start to rise. But this time I was able to turn it aside. Not because I wanted to be perfect, or pure or even right.

The truth is I wanted something more than I wanted to be angry. I wanted to please the Lord and to give him joy in return for what he has done for me.

Is that the "proper" response for every Christian in such a situation?



I don't know. But it was right for me. I was obedient to what he has commanded me.

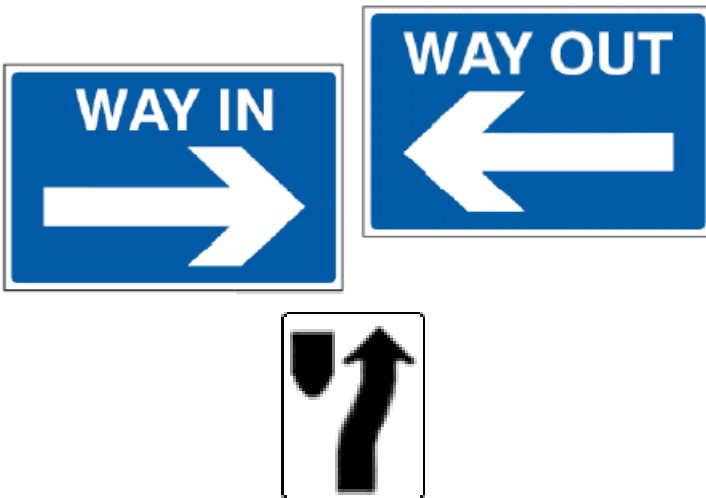
And I felt his pleasure.

Eventually, if I let God work on my clay long enough, I believe I will learn more ways that please him. And, in the meantime, I can rejoice because I am moving toward the goal he has set for me because I am trying to be obedient.

I know that obedience does not gain salvation. That is mine through faith in what Christ Jesus has done for me, not in what I have done or will do.

But obedience is the container in which I put my faith so I won't lose it.

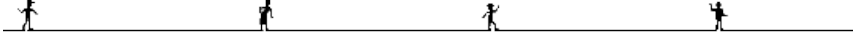
To stop going around in circles and to move forward to the goal of becoming more like Christ, I have to keep trying to obey. And trying starts with being willing to WANT his way more than I want my way, even if I can't always make it happen.



Simplicity Sets Standard

It really is hard to keep your relationship with the Lord simple. The human tendency — mine at any rate

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— is to make it complicated because it looks more intelligent that way.

Last week I was all worn out with thinking about the follies of institutions — church, government and even family institutions.

A friend, who could identify with my plight, reminded me of an easy little kind of Bible study that definitely can put your perspective back where it belongs — on the Lord.

It is really a very simple little technique. The trick is to *keep* it simple.

What you do is take a passage of Scripture and write down what the passage tells you about God. That is, for each verse or section of the passage, you finish the sentence, "This verse tells me that God is _____ .

After you have a short list of things you have decided Scripture has told you about God, you look each word up in an ordinary dictionary and write out a definition.

Then you think about what you have written down.

The results may amaze you. Even more important, they are sure to lift, your spirits.

I chose one of the most familiar of all texts, the 23rd Psalm.

And came up with this list: God is a shepherd, provider, caretaker, refresher, restorer, guide, guard, comforter, feeder and anointer.

And that's not an exhaustive list!

Then I took my trusty *American Heritage Dictionary* and came up with these definitions, which



are based on the dictionary, but aren't always exact quotes:

A shepherd is one who herds, guards and cares for sheep, one who cares for a group of people. A provider is one who furnishes or prepares, who makes ready, makes available, one who takes measures in preparation and who supplies the means of subsistence.

A caretaker is a person employed to look after or take charge of goods, property or a person. A refresher is one who revives as if with rest, food or drink, one who makes clean, who stimulates.

A restorer is one who brings back into existence or use, who re-establishes something or someone to a previous condition, who puts someone back in a prior position, gives or brings back or makes restitution. A guide is one who shows the way by leading, directing or advising, usually by reason of his greater experience with the course to be pursued.

A guard is one who protects from harm, watches over and defends. A comforter is one who soothes in time of grief or fear, who consoles and who helps or assists.

A feeder is one who supplies food and an anointer is one who puts on oil as a sign of sanctification or consecration.

Then I began to think about this God who is trying to reveal himself to me, who wants me to know him so I can love him and serve him with my whole heart, my whole strength, my whole mind, my whole soul.

I thought about what it means that he is a shepherd — and I am a sheep. And not only me. You,

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too. And all of us together. A body of Christ made up of sheep. And an organized church made up of sheep.

I thought about him as my caretaker. And I decided that taking care is not always the same as being a caretaker. Jesus was not paid to take care of me. He was the one who paid the price.

He certainly refreshes me and restores me. Also he shows me the way I should go. And, note, he *leads* me; he does not push. And he keeps me safe.

Finally I thought about him as a feeder and an anointer and I thought how much more this means than is expressed in the dictionary definitions.

He is both the feeder and the food. Jesus gave himself to be the food we need for eternal lives.

Isaiah says, "As the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it."

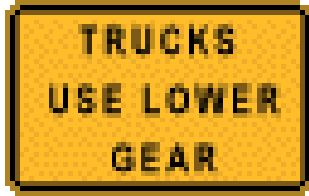
Also, he is the one who anoints and he is the power of the change anointing stands for. He sends the Holy Spirit and the Spirit sanctifies and consecrates.

I thought more than this, but none of it was very deep or very sophisticated. I managed to keep it simple and I managed to keep it focused on the Lord instead of on me.

And in the end I could no longer fret about the state of the world or the church. I had been reminded

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of who this God is who has called me to be his child,
and I was content.



Decide For Yourself

A person who has turned away from a particular way of living or thinking often becomes a strong advocate for the newly chosen style. He thinks he has made the right choice and wants others to benefit from his decision.

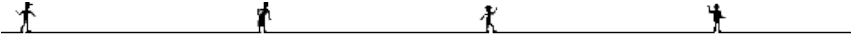
But he often does it in a very negative way. The ex-smoker, for example, complains loudly about the stupidity of smoking — and the former liberal gets hot under the collar about the blindness of those who do not understand what he now sees so clearly.

Well, last week I got hot about some people who seemed to look at the Bible through what I considered to be blind eyes.

The occasion was a lecture by a visiting college professor, who is not a Christian, to an audience of primarily Christian clergy. I didn't agree with the professor, but that didn't bother me. I hadn't expected him to say that New Testament writings proved that Jesus was the Messiah — and, of course, he hadn't.

My problem was with the Christian clergy who sat quietly, listened politely and said nothing. And I wanted them to defend Scripture as the reliable, trustworthy Word of God!

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Of course, the visiting lecturer had said that most scholars agreed with him that these writings were the very fallible work of men. Then he said that if somebody didn't agree with him, he didn't consider him a scholar.

He was smiling when he said it, but I suspected there was as much truth as humor to the remark.

Anyway, I was very perturbed about all those Christian ministers who had either agreed with the professor about the unreliability of the Bible or weren't willing to speak up on its behalf.

Then the Lord began to deal with me.

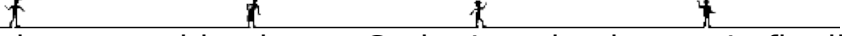
I remembered the time when I would have agreed with what liberal theologians were saying about the Bible — for many liberal Christians do.

And I wouldn't have said anything about the part I didn't agree with because I wasn't sure enough of what I did believe to take a stand on it. I mean, if it all depended on the best reasoning man was capable of, you couldn't ever be sure of anything, could you? Scholarship could always come along with something new and pull the rug out from under your position. I thought it was better to be flexible all the time.

And God hadn't blasted me right off the face of the planet.

Instead he had loved me and come close to me. He had become for me a safe refuge from the stormy winds of confusion and a strong shield against the doubts raised by the enemy. And he had become God Almighty, both Savior and Lord.

I don't know which came first, my decision to believe in what God said about Scripture or in what


Scripture said about God. I only know I finally surrendered to both.

My goal had changed. I no longer wanted to know facts. I wanted to know God. And I found the best source for that in his Word.

Before then I had thought fundamentalists were stubborn and foolish at best and ignorant and insufferable at worst.

I hadn't realized that meant I was saying God was absent or ineffectual, unsure of what he wanted or unable to get his point across.

I remember the first time a friend, in a shocked tone of voice, told me I had become a fundamentalist. I said that if believing God meant what he said made me a fundamentalist, then I must be one.

Like the other Christians at that lecture, I didn't say anything. I was an observer, not a participant. And it wasn't the lecturer I wanted to talk to.

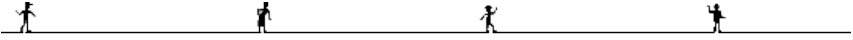
I would have liked to remind the ministers of something I heard from John Rogers, the dean of Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry. He said he could not understand how Christians could believe God created the world — however he did it — and got himself born into it and raised from the dead, but couldn't get Scripture written the way he wanted it.

I'm with Rogers. I don't understand it, either.

But I know people do believe it. I did.

And I know they may believe it just as sincerely as I now believe God did get Scripture written the way he wanted. For I once held that position.

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I just know that now I am enormously grateful that I believe I have a totally reliable and completely trustworthy guide for my life in his word. It isn't easier this way. It's often more difficult. But it brings his peace in my heart.

I guess, like the ex-smoker, I want everyone to believe me when I tell them life really is better my new way. But I know you can't argue anybody from one position to the other. And you sure can't make them change by getting mad at them.

Each person must choose for himself.

My task is to be obedient to the light he has given me. Perhaps then someone will believe the truth of what they see in my life.



Spirituality? I Have No Idea

Someone asked me recently how I had developed a spiritual life. I had to admit I had no idea

I've read several books on developing a spiritual life, but I haven't ever really tried to follow one or a combination of them.

But I believe I *have* a spiritual life, so I decided to try to figure out how I arrived at it.

But wait, what is a spiritual life, anyway? What do I mean by "having a spiritual life?"

I think it must mean that life within me which is in touch with God. I think it means knowing God, who is spirit, and responding to him.



In the account of Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well, recorded in John 4, he says to her, "A time is coming when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. For God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and truth."

So my spiritual life is that part of my life that sees the Father as spirit and truth and responds in the same way.

My spiritual life is the sum of all my experiences with God and the imprint they have made on the way I now live.

Which leads to a paradox: I can't know God except as he chooses to reveal himself to me, and I can't know God except as I choose to be obedient to that revelation.

My spiritual life, then, has been developed by my obedience to the revelation of God given me. And your spiritual life has been developed by your obedience to the revelation of God that has been given you.

So I believe the answer to the original question can be expressed in two words: surrender and obedience.

The first thing to say about my own spiritual life is that I did not develop whatever spiritual life I have. God did.

I'm not in charge of its shape or its development. After all, the Lord is the potter and I am the clay. He is in charge of shaping me. And my spiritual life is part of me, not something apart from myself.

That is very good news to me.

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I remember the kind of job I did in shaping my life back in the days when I was in charge of it. And I don't think I could do any better at producing a spiritual life for myself now if I were in charge.

How comforting it is to know that the Lord sees the finished "me" and is working to shape me according to that picture.

But I do have a part to play in the process. It's surrender and obedience.

Not a half surrender. A whole surrender.

Obviously not a perfect surrender, of course, but I find that any real growth in my spiritual life has come when I have *made* it as complete as I can at any given time.

In fact, although I accepted Jesus as my Savior when I was 14, my spiritual life really began to take shape only 10 years ago when I acknowledged him as Lord as well as Savior and gave God permission to shape my life as he chose.

I have given him that permission almost every day since then. I intend to do it every day, but it wouldn't be true to say I do. I forget sometimes.

I believe that once a person has given the Lord that initial permission, once he makes that original surrender, God considers the person his to work on anyway. But, I also believe that the amount of cooperation the person comes up with at any given time can depend on how clearly he remembers that commitment.

One very important aspect of my part in the development of my spiritual life has been for me to identify and record what I see God doing.



The first recorded meeting between Jacob and God came when Jacob was running away from home after deceiving his father and stealing the blessing that was supposed to be given to his brother, Esau.

Jacob went to sleep and God revealed himself to him in a dream. And the next morning Jacob built a pile of rocks and poured oil over it because the place was so holy.

And that was the beginning of Jacob's spiritual life.

He had a lot more to learn about God, but a beginning had been made. He had learned that this God is awesome God, and a God who makes promises. And I believe Jacob's pile of rocks and offering of oil became a means of remembering this truth.

Not all of God's revelations come in forms that demanded recognition. For example, I have never seen anything like the vision Jacob saw, but I know that God has revealed himself to me, his truth and his spirit.

But I want to remember everything God tells me about himself. I want my life to be shaped by them all.

So I do what Jacob did. I pile up rocks, the important truths I have been given, and I pour the oil of the Holy Spirit over them. That is, I ask the Spirit to imprint them on my heart so that when I need to remember this truth, he can bring it back to mind.

To summarize: My spiritual life comes from truth about God revealed to me by the Son through the power of the Holy Spirit which leads to surrender and obedience from me, directed and empowered by the grace of God.

That's all. Nothing to it.

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Angry At God; Hungry Too!

A heavy weight was lifted from me last week. Unfortunately not the kind that shows up on the scales.

It had to do with the scales, too, and my weight.

I made an annual visit to the surgeon who did my cancer surgery four years ago — four years! — and the first thing they always do is weigh me. The result was *terrible*.

Suspecting that the news wasn't going to be good, I slid the marker way up, higher than I thought it would need to be, expecting to be able to slide it down toward the correct weight — a downward movement seems so satisfactory on a scale — and found it had to go up higher!

I was shocked. I was upset.

And as the day went on, I became more than that. I became angry and resentful.

But I didn't admit that until the next evening when I was eating dinner in a restaurant with a friend.

I was being very "good," by the way, eating a salad and a small beef patty. No bread and no dessert.

Anyway, I shared my encounter with the scales and I admitted to my friend that the whole situation filled me with anger and resentment.

Later, after Bible study, we prayed together and as I asked God to take the anger and resentment from me, I suddenly saw them for what they were — not



anger and resentment against some impersonal fate or even myself, but anger and resentment against God.

I also saw with sudden fear how easy it would be for anger and resentment to become a root of bitterness against God that would contaminate my whole relationship with him.

Bitterness would grow from my resentment that I couldn't eat the things I liked to eat without gaining weight. Bitterness would grow from my anger because it seemed to me that being able to eat what you want was certainly little enough to ask.

And I remembered that God made me the way I am and if I turn against myself in anger, I am actually turning in anger to the Lord. It was as if I said to God, "It isn't fair that other people can eat all the stuff I like and not gain an ounce!" It was as if I said, "You have no right to make me this way."


Hearing those words in my head brought deep sorrow and shame. God has every right to make me the way he chooses. I gave my life to him completely — including his right to make me any way he wants to. If he chooses to make me a person who gains weight easily, then I must not hate myself nor him for that fact.

I remembered that I had not been angry at God when the doctors found cancer in my body. I had gladly surrendered my future into his hands.

So why in the world was I all angry and resentful about my weight problem?

Because weight doesn't look like a spiritual problem. So I was able to refuse to see the spiritual problem that was hiding behind it. Until that moment I

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had been able not to see that the problem was that I wanted what I wanted when I wanted it.

The real problem was not my weight, but my resentment at not being in control. The real problem was that I wanted to be god in this one, dumb thing. I wanted to decide something for myself.

I confessed my anger and resentment as what I now saw they were, sin. And I asked God to help me to accept myself and deal with my life in a positive, healthy way.

With his help, I am able to reject the world's goal for my body. With his help, I can aim at God's. If that means losing some weight, then I must — with his help — change the way I eat.

But with acceptance and joy, not with resentment and anger.

Oh, I am sure I will not always *like* the process of bringing my eating habits under much stricter control than I would like. But I will like working with the Lord to make me according to his will.

And when I slip, he will help me stand again and try again.

And the weight of anger at God will be gone.

When I first surrendered my life to the Lord, I knew the surrender was going to be real. I knew he did not intend it to be some kind of symbolic promise or ceremonial act that I could later ignore.

I knew that if God is God, then surrender must be total to be real.

What I did not know was how much would be involved in working that surrender out in my life. I didn't know it would take years and many struggles.

Barbara White

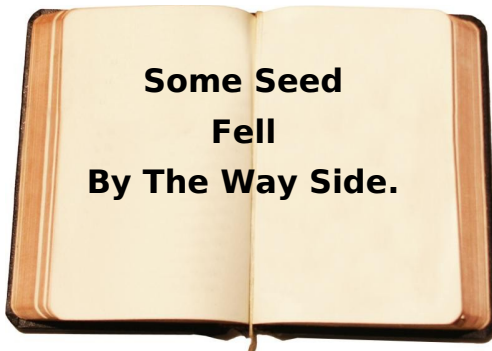


And I didn't know then that the so-called little things could be as hard to handle as the big ones. And sometimes even harder, because we don't see them as significant or "spiritual," so we try to hand them by ourselves.

When my friend and I finished praying that night I felt *pounds* lighter.

It didn't show on the scales or in the fit of my clothes, but a weight had gone just the same.

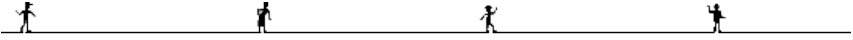
Where I had been a prisoner, now I was free. Where I had allowed anger to grieve the Spirit will in me, now I was able to come into God's presence rejoicing.



Moral Decline

When Rhett Butler walked out on Scarlet in *Gone With the Wind* with his famous exit line and its first recorded swear word, I wonder if any man or woman then alive could have guessed where it would lead.

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This "relaxation" of public standards has produce one small change after another until I realized we now have advertisements that show real people in their underwear.

But there is something worse. All this has been part of such a change in society that most people either do not notice the ads or think nothing of them.

"You see more than that on people at the beach," I was told by one person I asked about a recent ad.

"Would you really be as happy for people to see your daughter walking around in see-through underwear as you would for them to see her in her bathing suit?" I responded.

"Well, no," my friend replied. "But that's just cultural."

The worst my friend could say about the ad was that it was in poor taste.

"What worries you about it so?" I was asked.

"It leads first to over-stimulation and then to numbness," I replied. "And neither is a healthy state."

I can remember the steps in getting where we are. We moved from blushing at the mention of an undergarment to the "freedom" to talk about such things. From there, we moved to allowing them to be pictured — but not *ON* anybody. Now we have them modeled by real people in television, magazine and newspaper ads.

The next step will be to copy the suggestive pattern of European lingerie ads.

And we will.



I suspect my friend thinks I am overreacting to something fairly innocuous. But I believe I have just seen how much ground we have yielded to the world.

I called it compromise. Another friend said accommodation was a better word.

After looking them up in the dictionary, I think each has something to say.

To compromise is to settle differences by concession, with each side making concessions. To accommodate means to contain comfortably or have space for.

Some people have compromised. They have given a little and taken a little. They have taken a stance somewhere between what they used to believe and what everybody else said they believed.

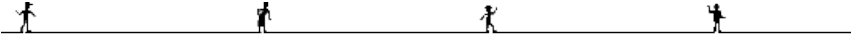
But even those who have tried to maintain their original stand have accommodated the world's standards. We have made room for them in our businesses, our schools and even our churches.

Oh, it isn't just lack of modesty. It isn't just swear words. It's really a sinful world in one form or another insidiously creeping further and further into our lives.

I read an item recently by an Episcopal priest who wrote, "My Old Testament professor said once that sin was not 'crouching' at Cain's door (Genesis 4:7) as in some translations, but 'couching.' If it had been crouching, like a lion ready to spring and devour Cain, it would have been recognized as sin. But it was couching, lying comfortably at the fireside like a family pet."

But how do you handle this family pet? What's to be done?

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When God directed the Hebrew people into their new land, he told them to kill off all the enemy so they would not have to face this sort of infiltration.

But he has not told us to do that. And I certainly don't want to kill off folks in advertising or marketing.

I don't want to kill anybody!

Besides I'm a lover, not a fighter. Left to myself, I'd just move over a little and give up a bit more ground. That's what I've been doing, accommodating, making room.

But for some reason, I just can't do that anymore. I may be making too much of underwear, but I choose not to wait until things get worse.

Perhaps it's because I asked the Lord to clean my conscience and to make it sensitive again to his word.

A sensitive conscience gives me a moment to choose how I will respond to something. Will I choose to walk within the will of God, or will I choose to go the world's way.

I'm not telling anyone else what they have to do, but I guess I won't be able to ignore things anymore. In this case I have registered complaints about the ad with the company that sponsored it and the medium that carried it.

They may not care — what's one person among so many — but I will have stood my ground.

There is something else I can do, too. I can pray for the world, starting with me.

I will continue to ask God to cleanse my heart, my mind and my conscience so that I can see his way

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in the world, so that I can see when I have taken the wrong road and can choose to repent and turn again.

And I will pray that his Spirit will bring the same choice to the attention of others. I will love them enough to want the best for them, too.

Who knows, maybe, just maybe enough other people will care and we will be able to make a difference. And maybe, just maybe the tide can be turned back.

Of course, that part's not for me to worry about. Turning back the tide is God's business. And fortunately he has experience in these matters. My business is to keep my heart single toward God and my conscience tender toward his commands.

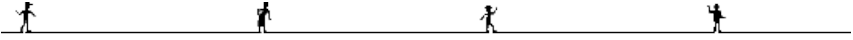


Spiritual Illusion

I wear trifocals so I can see to drive, to read, or to work on my computer, but none of these lenses helps me focus on what I most want to see clearly — the face of God.

How I wish I had a triple-strength cleanser for the glass through which I see so darkly.

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After three intense, fully packed days listening to Southern Baptists and others talk about the Bible — each one struggling to make his point so clear that he must carry the day — I saw gleams of light coming here and there through the tinted glass that stands between us and God.

We all sat around at meals and talked about what we had heard. And I tried to tie the clear bits of insight I had found into a window pane through which we could all look. But I couldn't.

And neither could anyone else.

The reason, I believe, is that although we were made new by the spirit of Christ in our second birth, we are still human. And we will not see clearly until we stand before the Lord in heaven.

The King James Version of First Corinthians 13:12 says that we see through a glass darkly; the New International Version says, "Now we see but a poor reflection; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known."

So what do I do in the meantime?

I rely, as it says in an earlier part of First Corinthians, not on the wise and persuasive words of men but on the demonstration of the Spirit's power.

Back at the building of the Tower of Babel, God confused our language to prevent us from relying on man's wise and persuasive words. For if we could do that, nothing else we planned to do would be impossible for us.

But nothing we did that way would bring glory to God. It would only glorify man with a false and



transitory glory. Look at man's reasoning in that story in Genesis 12.

He builds, he says, "so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the earth."

But we are scattered — and by God's design.

We Christians struggle together today to speak truth to one another. And we struggle within ourselves to see that our speech is a demonstration of the Spirit's power and that our faith rests on God's power alone.

But we do not achieve victory in either realm with any great regularity.

How much easier it would be to turn aside from the struggle and stand only with those who now understand and agree with us.

But the Lord Jesus Christ has called us to a more difficult and often painful task — to find the common ground in which we can experience that unity of spirit for which he prayed.

And that can only be done by reliance upon the promise of the Father, the love of the Son and the power of the Spirit.

So we must continue to work — for the "then" that Paul spoke of has not yet come and there are practical matters that must be handled.

If we struggle first within ourselves, before we struggle with our brothers and sisters, we may be able to reflect God's image a little better even now.

For James says, "the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure, then peace loving,

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considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere."



Read The Fine Print

I'm not sure the nurse saw anything funny in her last request to me before I left the outpatient center of a local hospital this week.

I had been there for a medical procedure and had been sedated in the process.

Friends were waiting to drive me home when the nurse approached to go over instructions for my next 24 hours.

She said I was not to drive a car or operate any equipment. I was not to drink any alcoholic beverage, including beer. And I was not to make any important decisions or sign any papers.

"Except this one, of course," she said as she handed me a pen.

And she had a perfectly straight face as she did it, too.

I laughed and so did she. But she may just have been humoring a slightly incoherent patient.

Later, chuckling again over the absurdity of the little incident, I thought suddenly about the eternal significance of the way we approach rules and the results that inevitably follow.



We often say something like that nurse said to me. We say, "Don't ever do this — except for this one tune."

Rules, it seems, are made to be broken. They just don't allow for the variety of circumstances in which we find ourselves.

The framers of the rules may do their very best to make them applicable to all situations, but they don't succeed. At least not to our satisfaction.

Actually, I believe we like our rules to be specific. If they are narrow enough, we can claim our circumstance was too different to make the rule count. That way we can break the rule and still feel good about ourselves.

Of course, if the rule is broad and general, we can slip through a loophole, say our situation is not covered at all and quite easily go our merry way.

At heart we are simply rebels and law breakers. And that affects the way we approach all laws.

The truth is that we don't like anybody else telling us what to do.

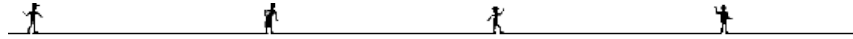
We don't like it even when the rules are for our own health and well being.

We don't like it even when the person telling us is the Lord.

We say, "Thank goodness we have a Savior instead of merely a code of law. He understands our circumstances and will excuse us for not sticking to the letter of the law."

That is partly true. We have a Savior who understands our circumstance. But he does not excuse us. He forgives us. And being forgiven is more than

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being excused. It follows repentance, which means a turning around and a going in a new direction.

Jesus calls upon us to keep more than the letter of the law. He calls on us to be molded into the image of the very spirit of the law.

That statement I signed at the outpatient center was not a law. If I chose to drive a car, however, and had an accident, I would have to take the consequences of my action myself. The hospital could prove I had been told driving was not a wise thing for me to do and I could not blame the results on anyone else.

The same thing is true if I choose not to do what God says is the healthy and safe thing to do. I have no one to blame by myself and unless I truly repent, I will bear the consequences alone.

But perverse as we are, I don't believe a single one of us would keep the rules just to avoid the consequences. Fear alone is not enough to keep us to the line.

Thank goodness we have a Savior who both knows us and loves us anyway and has made provision for our weakness.

Jesus said that the proof of love for him is the willingness to keep his commandments. But we have to know him to love him. So he also said he would send another just like him to stand with us — the way he stood with the apostles — and this person, the Holy Spirit, would help us see Jesus every day as both with us and within us.

That presence — Jesus — is what makes it possible for us ever to keep the rules or to return to them when we fail.



And that practice — obedience coupled with repentance for disobedience — is what makes it possible for the Spirit to shape us more and more into the image of the One he glorifies.



Rule-Breaking

My desire is to be an obedient servant of my Lord, but my prayer is not simply that I break God's rules less, but that I learn to love him more.

Rules are NOT made to be broken. Not God's rules, anyway.

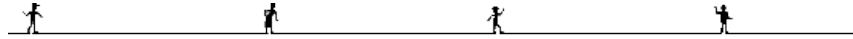
God's rules are made to be kept for the simple reason that they describe the only lifestyle that can produce that which can make us truly happy — a right relationship with God, peace with him and joy in that relationship with him and with other people.

We keep God's rules because the very act of keeping them is the expression of our love for him.

When the dentist tells us to brush our teeth and use dental floss to keep our gums healthy, we don't do it because we love the dentist. We do it — or don't do it — because we know it will be good for us or because we fear the consequences of gum disease and cavities.

When those who pass laws tell us to wear seat belts and obey speed laws, we don't do it because we love the lawmakers. We do it — or don't do it —

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because we know it is for our own safety or because we don't want to get a ticket.

But it's different with God's rules.

When God tells us to have him as our only God and to abstain from stealing, or murdering or lusting, we don't do it because we are afraid of hell — for most of us cannot believe in eternal damnation for more than a moment or two. We either keep his laws because we love him or we don't really keep them at all.

Jesus said, "If you love me you will keep my commandments."

Keeping his rules is a response of love.

Jesus did not give us rules to test our love, however. He gave them to us to guide us into the only true happiness available to those made in the image of God. The rules reflect God and we are to reflect God. When we keep the rules, our reflection lines up with the One we were made to reflect.

How else can we expect to be truly happy except by fulfilling that for which we were made?

If we break God's rules, God is not changed, but we are. If we steal, he is still the same, but we become a thief. If we commit adultery, God's kingdom is not shaken, but we become adulterers. If we hate, heaven stands firm, but our hearts begin to harden.

And it is from our hearts that true obedience comes.

Failure to keep Jesus' commandments — and we do fail over and over in the weakness of our selfish human nature — is nothing less than a failure of love.



It is true that provision has been made for that failure. The cross of Christ brings us back from failure and that involves repentance.

But repentance is not, "I'm sorry, God, but you know I couldn't help it. After all, you know what I am. So I'm sure you forgive me."

It is the searing pain of seeing yourself the way you really are: as one who loves something — mostly yourself — more than you love God.

Our hearts break because we see we could have kept the commandments if we had just loved the Lord more than we loved ourselves.

And this is the broken heart which Scripture says God will not despise. This is the way that leads to a true turning away from the pleasure that comes from following my own desires rather than seeking to follow God's way.

Jesus told us over and over again that it was the state of our heart that mattered, not the outward observance of the law.

We can manage to keep the outward appearance looking good most of the time. We cannot keep our hearts pure before the Lord. Our only help is Christ within us, our hope of glory.

So what are we to do?

If we stay focused on the keeping or the breaking of the law, we will go round and round the same ground. We will try to keep the law, fail, repent and try again. A never-ending cycle.

There is no peace and joy in that.

Of course I am grateful for the promise of forgiveness when I repent.

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But I believe my real hope of peace and joy is in learning to love Jesus more than anything and everything else. I believe that is the only way I will find obedience possible.

And He has promised to make it possible for me to learn to love him more. He promised to send me the Holy Spirit to be with me always, to shine the light of God into my mind and heart, to make me able to see Jesus more and more clearly as I walk in obedience to the light I already have.

The commandments of the Lord are not made to be broken. They are made to be kept as a sign of our love.

And in God's economy, every act of keeping them because we love him is designed to increase our love.

The law of the Lord is not made to be broken, followed by repentance.

That happens, but oh, how different that is from the way the psalmist feels about the law of the Lord.

He sings a love song to the law of God in Psalm 19. He sings a love song to the Lord who is his law.

"The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes. The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever. The ordinances of the Lord are sure and altogether righteous. They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey in the comb."

So my prayer is, "Oh, Lord, revive my soul. Make me wise and give joy to my heart. Give light to

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my eyes and let me taste the sweetness of obedience that comes from love."



Other Signs

I reached out to greet my daughter, Mary, with a hug the other day just as she bent down to help her daughter, Nicole, with something.

As a result, I hit her on the side of the head with my hand.

After a bit of general confusion, we managed to connect properly for the hug.

A little later Nicole turned to her mother and asked, "Did Mema sock you?"

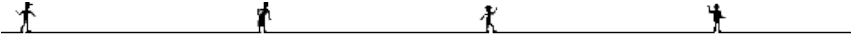
That's the way it had looked from her perspective.

Obviously, the evidence of our eyes is not always accurate. Sometimes we need to check it out with other references.

Nicole was delighted to learn that things were not what they had appeared to be. She really did not want to think her grandmother had hit her mother.

How glad I am she asked!

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Thinking about this later I realized that I reacted very much the way Nicole did recently when the new minister at our church pointed out that some people have a distorted picture of what is happening in our denomination.

"It's too late for the church to commit suicide," he said.

There was a time when the church appeared to be trying to kill itself, he said, but a close examination of the evidence today reveals that the church is not dying after all.

"The Holy Spirit is doing a work in the church," he said. "Renewal has come into her life and it will not go away."

Some people have become so disheartened with what they saw in this denomination that they have been ready to call the undertaker — or to engrave the tombstone. But the evidence that appeared so clear to them was not all there was to the story.

If you look at the evidences of the work of the Holy Spirit, he said, you will have to admit that the picture of a dying church is not true. Life still exists within this body. In fact, it is not only not dying, it is showing definite signs here and there of strong new life.

I was delighted to be reminded.

Actually, I already *knew* about the signs of new life, but I was so busy focusing on signs of decay that I forgot the other signs. Or I discounted their meaning.

So, like Nicole, I was pleased to be reminded that my viewpoint was not completely accurate or that, at the very least, I was not taking in the whole scene.



But while I was sitting there, basking in the warm fuzzy feeling of being so humble and teachable, I began to wonder if I am always that happy to be told I am wrong. I wondered if I am usually as open as Nicole to being told that my viewpoint is inaccurate.

By trying *very hard*, I was actually able to think of one or two very insignificant occasions when I had NOT been that reasonable.

I have insisted at times that my viewpoint was the only right one. I have refused at times even to listen to any other possibility.

These instances can often be identified by the presence of "Yes, but.." in my response. That's "Yes, but..." as in "Yes, but you don't see this from my point of view" or, "Yes, but it looks this way to me."

On the other hand, there are times when we must stand firm on our own point of view, when we must stand firm even if we cannot prove the fitness of our position to everybody else's satisfaction.

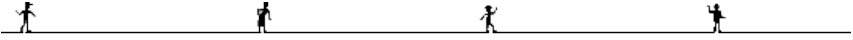
But that's not the same thing as being unwilling to examine the evidence. That's a kind of stubbornness that should come after sincere, prayerful examination of the evidence with the help of the Holy Spirit.

And that's not easy.

It is easier either to change our opinions every time somebody gives us a new piece of evidence — a new slant on the picture — or to refuse even to consider the possibility that you don't have the right — the only true — view of things.

But nobody ever said being a disciple of Jesus Christ was going to be easy. And we are to find the narrow way that lies between the extremes.

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In this matter of viewpoint, we are to be both childlike and mature.

We are to be as teachable as little children. In Matthew 18, Jesus says, "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

And we are to be as strong-minded as mature adults. As Paul says in Ephesians 4:14, "Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming."

The trick is to combine the two.

And that comes from being taught by the Holy Spirit and then standing firm in him.

When that happens, we will, as Paul says, "grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ."

And we will become like the good soil on which the seed fell and it produced a crop yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.

No, it isn't easy. But it really is worth the effort.



Life On The Train Tracks

If you had to decide on one interesting thing about yourself to tell people, what would it be? That was our assignment as an ice breaker at a conference I



attended recently. And my choices ranged from the sublime to the ridiculous.

We had each been asked to choose one piece of candy from a dish that was passed around. But not to eat it.

Later all the peppermints, all the chocolates, all the caramels and so forth were told to gather in groups and tell each other one interesting thing about themselves.

I was a butterscotch.

I had almost chosen the tutti-frutti nougat, but had changed my mind at the last minute.

Half way through the exercise I thought longingly of the nougat.

That was right after I had my turn.

I told them I wrote a weekly column, putting that ahead of my status as a grandmother because the group was composed of writers and ahead of my status as a child of God because it was a group of Christians.

Everybody smiled and looked at the woman sitting next to me.

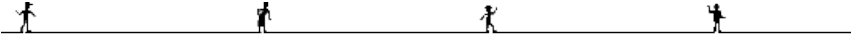
Well, almost everybody. One woman asked me what kind of column I wrote. What did I write about?

I replied, "I write about trying to live the Christian life and failing and trying again,"

That, she said, is my problem. I keep trying and Christians aren't supposed to try. They are supposed to surrender to God and let him do it.

And I had to bite my tongue to keep from giving her a complete lecture on the subject, but managed to keep quiet.

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Later, of course, I thought about the exchange and acknowledged that she had a point.

It is true that God is the only one who can change our lives and make us more like Jesus.

But it is also true that we have a part to play. We have to be willing for it to happen.

Being willing doesn't always come that easily to me. So I have to try.

So I guess we were both right.

I believe the old saying about God making things simple and man making it complicated. But some things are less simple than others and that includes all the areas of paradox — seemingly contradictory statements that are nonetheless true.

Predestination and free will form perhaps the best known of the paradoxes.

I have heard several good ways of explaining this pair of truths. As the two tracks on which the one train travels. And as the expression on the fact that God sees from the beginning to the end while we are still on the way, so he knows what our choice will be before we arrive at the choosing point.

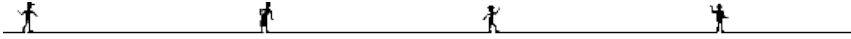
These things help, but they don't cover all bases. Not for me anyway.

I still don't understand why I responded and other people didn't. I don't understand why God filled me with a hunger for him and didn't fill everyone.

So I'm not sure about that other lady in the group.

But in my heart of hearts, I believe God shows ME these paradoxes so I will have to rely on him by faith and not through understanding alone.

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At least, I keep trying to do it that way.



Obedience And Freedom

I don't often think fondly about obedience, being by nature a rebel.

But lately, in lectures I have attended and books I have read, I have been faced with the importance of obedience.

One man said that the church makes the issue forgiveness, but the Bible makes it obedience. Another wrote that we are not to approach God with confidence; we are to approach him with obedience.

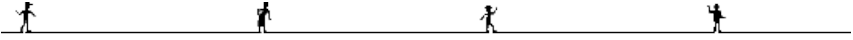
And I said to myself, Hey, wait a minute. I thought Jesus came so we *could* approach God with confidence, not obedience.

I pondered their statements until I thought I understood what they meant. And went right back to doing what I was doing before.

Then I talked with a friend who was struggling with a dark, dry period and who could not feel God's presence at all. And I realized the need to establish obedience as a principle of daily life.

I can feel confident of God's love and His forgiveness. But I must not approach God as a spoiled child who is confident that it does not matter what I do. For it does.

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Scripture tells us to be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect. And I have NO confidence in my ability to do that, especially when I do not feel the Lord's presence.

But Scripture says that Jesus did not come merely to relieve me of the penalty of my sin. He came to release me from the sin itself.

What does it mean to be truly free from sin itself? What does it look like?

Like obedience.

If forgiveness is all that counts, I will keep on sinning forever. I will say I am going to do what God wanted me to, but I won't actually do it. I will rely on God to keep forgiving me.

He will. That's absolutely true.

Scripture says, "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life." (John 3:16)

It is also true that God loves me so much he will not leave me burdened by sin, which is lawlessness. God, who created me, wants me to experience true freedom, peace and joy.

And that comes from obedience.

Jesus knew that kind of freedom, peace and joy. He was always obedient to the Father, all day every day, in the little things as well as the big. He did only those things which he saw the Father do and said only those things he heard the Father say.

And he said we should do the same: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 7:21)



It was easy for him to be obedient. It isn't at all easy for me. In fact it was impossible when I tried by myself.

But we have not been left to do it by ourselves. Jesus pours out his Spirit upon us and within us to make us able.

Able to be perfect right now? Perhaps not. Able to practice obedience?

Definitely.

And you know what practice makes.

In 1st John 3 we read, "Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure.

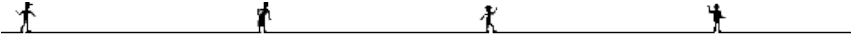
"Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness. But you know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin. No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him."

God's laws are not arbitrary rules set up to make life miserable. They were not given to inhibit our freedom, bind us up or put us down. That's what disobedience does.

God's laws define the behavior he knows will set us free and fill us with glorious joy and heavenly peace. That's what obedience does.

So I approach God with confidence. The love he has for me in Jesus Christ assures me he will not condemn me for my failures.

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But my heart's desire is to approach him with obedience. An obedience born of trust that he is just and right whether I understand what he is doing or not. An obedience that is not the expression of cold duty but the product of love for him.

Jesus said, "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him." (John 14:23)

Do I love him even when he seems absent, as he does now to my friend and as he has at times to me? If so, then simply, everyday, loving obedience is the channel that will most quickly bring light into my darkness and the water of life into my desert.

This is the law of the Spirit of life.



Stop On This For A Moment.

I talked a lot about the importance of obedience in last week's column. But perhaps I didn't get sufficiently into one particular aspect of the practice.

My minister talked about obedience last week, too, during his sermon. And he showed through an example just how hard it can be to achieve.

He cited the best possible role model we can have — Jesus — and a time when being obedient was tough even for him.

A concept like obedience is frequently easier to explain through examples than to define. It seems that the more I try to define it, the smaller it gets. But when I examine how it works — especially how it



worked in Jesus' life — my understanding grows and grows.

The example in the sermon focused on Jesus and Peter. It concerned the time Jesus turned on his disciple with some heat and called him Satan.

That was right after Jesus called Peter blessed and said that his confession of faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God, must have been given him by the Father.

One minute Peter was called blessed. The next he was compared to Satan.

The difference was obedience.

One minute he was obedient.

The next he was not.

Not only that, he was tempting Jesus to disobedience just the way Satan had done in the wilderness.

Jesus had told the disciples that he had to go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the leaders there. He had said he would be killed and raised to life on the third day.

That was when Peter said, "Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you!"

And Jesus said, "Out of my sight, Satan. You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."

Stop on that for a moment.

That's a pretty good definition of obedience: having in mind the things of the Father instead of the things of men. For we tend to do what is in our minds.

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My minister speculated whether the strength of Jesus' response to Peter might not have come from his human desire to avoid this particular obedience. Whatever Jesus knew about his future, he knew it would not be easy.

The struggle to be obedient is real.

It was real even for the sinless Son of God. Later, the night before his crucifixion, in the Garden of Gethsemane, the struggle produced a sweat of drops of blood.

He went to that crucifixion willingly, but not without a struggle.

He went to Jerusalem willingly, too. But he called his disciple Satan when he tempted him not to go.

Jesus knew that obedience was not something to take lightly.

He knew how hard it could be to decide to be obedient and to stick to the decision when Satan and the world and even your friends tell you God can't possibly want you to do something that hard.

He thought and prayed about obedience.

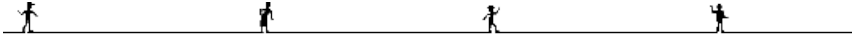
And I hardly think about it at all

I have not struggled to be obedient to my Heavenly Father to the point of sweating blood.

Mostly I have just given in and gone the world's way instead.

I have told myself what Peter told the Lord, that God could not possibly want *that*. That, whatever it is, is too hard. A loving Father would never ask that of me, of you, of us.

But he can and he does.



And he does not always — or even often — explain ahead of time what he is about. He expects us to remember today what we know of him from our past, to believe what, we remember and to stand by an act of will on what we believe.

He gives us the opportunity to choose.

For that is what the struggle is all about, choosing the things of God over the things of the world.

Did God really say I must not desire this that is not mine?

Did he mean it when he said I must not engage in that forbidden pleasure?

Is it true that he expects me to love the unlovable and to care for the uncaring?

Yes. Yes. Yes.

And sometimes this will carry an incredible price tag. The pain of surrendering what is, momentarily at least, my heart's desire.

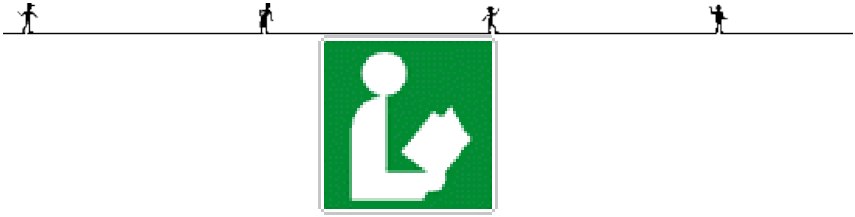
It's worth it. I've learned the truth of that.

But I only learned it afterward. Not before. So obedience still often means a struggle.

But each little moment of successful obedience carries a reward many times its size. I may not have experienced the reward of freedom and peace until after I was obedient, but I have experienced it.

The struggle is real. But so is the peace.

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Reading Matter

OK, Barbara. So obedience is how you show God you love him. So it is hard for you and was hard for Jesus.

I still don't know what you mean by obedience.

Is it keeping the law? If so, which ones? Must I keep track of a lot of "do's" and "don'ts?"

And what does all this have to do with grace?

These were among the responses I received to last week's column.

Well, they have a point. Theory is all well and good, but most of us can use some "how to" help along the way.

In fact, what many of us would like is a recipe for achieving perfect obedience. Something clear cut and simple that we could do regularly — without the pain and uncertainty of decision-making — and know that we were in good standing.

But the best answer to the question of how to be obedient is very simple. But it leaves plenty of room for choice.

The answer is: know God so well you know what will please him, then do it.

So the operative question is, how do you get to know God that well?

Each of us has to do that for himself. No one can do it for us.



But, in case it might be helpful, I can share as guidelines some things I have found helpful.

First, we must realize that we could never know God at all if he did not tell us about himself. We can learn a lot about God from other sources, but that's not the same as listening to him ourselves.

If you read a biography of a person, you may learn a lot of facts about them. You may even pick up some hints as to his character traits, but you still don't really know him.

You can talk to other people who do know him and you may get some idea of what it would mean to have a personal relationship with him. But you still don't know him.

The only way to start getting to know somebody is by listening to what he says about himself.

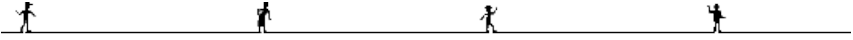
When the person you want to get to know is God, this means listening to the Word to hear God speak about himself. It means reading the Bible in the sure certainty that in it God is speaking about himself.

For me that meant reading straight through the whole thing twice. That was the beginning of listening to the Lord speak. I needed at least two readings to grasp the big picture, the whole sweep of God's revelation of himself.

It also kept me from focusing only on favorite passages, from taking them out of context or from skipping some tough parts I didn't understand.

This kind of reading is not study in the proper sense. I had done lots of that over the years and by itself, study had not helped me know God.

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This is different. It's more like paying attention. The way you would pay attention to the sayings and actions of a new boss, for example, if the job was extremely important to you and you wanted to know him so well you could become an approved worker.

Psalms 123 says it this way: "I lift up my eyes to you, to you whose throne is in heaven. As the eyes of slaves look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maid look to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the Lord our God, till he show us his mercy."

You read to begin to hear God's voice speaking, to begin to recognize his hand at work.

Fortunately, all this does not depend on our own abilities alone. Although we cannot rely on other people's ears and eyes, we have a helper. We can rely on the Holy Spirit to give us eyes that see and ears that hear the spiritual truth of who God is.

After all, the Spirit's primary task is to make us know that Jesus is *there* — that he is real and is the full revelation of the Father — and that Jesus is *here*, with us to reveal the Father to us as he did to those before us.

And fortunately we do not have to wait until we have read the Bible through twice to begin being obedient. We can start with each little bit of hearing, of recognizing.

But that's step number two. More on that next time.



More Reading Matter

Just when I thought I had everything all organized and outlined and ready to go, I discovered I had left out something very important way back at the beginning.

I emphasized the importance of reading Scripture in the process of coming to know God and began to talk about the importance of doing what you know to do, when suddenly I realized I had done a disservice to study.

It is true that study does not take the place of receiving his revelation in meeting God in his word. I believe this truth seems enormously important to me because I spent so many years in futile study.

But I was brought up short as I started on this column by the thought of the many, many teachers — speakers and writers — who have helped me along the way.

I cannot leave you with the impression that it has been just me and my Bible and the Holy Spirit as my only teacher. God has used other people and books in addition to the Bible in the process of revealing himself to me.

None of them takes the place of reading the Bible. But when added to Bible reading, they have helped stimulate my thinking about what I have read there.

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The teachers I have listened to and the authors I have read range across denominations and centuries.

At various times I have listened regularly to Charles Stanley, Charles Swiridoll, Bob Mumford. John McArthur and James Dobson.

Books I have read and reread include almost daily doses of Oswald Chambers; most of the works of C.S. Lewis, including his children's stories; books by Catherine Marshall; J.I. Packer, especially *Knowing God*; John Stott; Watchman Nee; Basilea Schlink; Jack Taylor; Charles Colson, especially *Loving God*; Brother Lawrence and more.

I have learned as much from the theology spoken by characters in George McDonald novels as I have from any treatise on Scripture.

Now, this is not an exhaustive list. And it is not *THE* list everyone ought to read. It is merely *A* list of books, those I can recall right now that have helped me think clearly about the revelation of himself which God has been giving me.

I have been blessed by these and other teachers, these and other books. And I am thankful for the blessings.

We all need help and guidance in learning. That's why teachers are a gift of the Holy Spirit to the church.

Our responsibility is to choose wisely the teachers we will listen to on a regular basis and the authors we will read again and again.

I can hear God's voice speaking to me through many mouths and from many printed pages, but to be sure whose voice I am hearing, I need to go to Scripture.



There's another note of warning I want to sound here. Teachers and books must not be put in the place of reading and studying the Bible for yourself. They simply cannot do the same job.

All words have the potential for carrying the message of the Lord who is himself Word. But I believe the Bible is his own account of who he is and who I am.

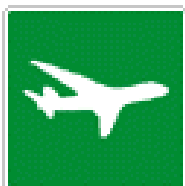
We must also guard against another danger. The Bible itself must not be put in the place of the God of revelation who speaks through it.

All the listening and all the reading in the world — even of Scripture — will not enlighten me about God until I yield myself to him. He *will* be first.

It makes no sense. In fact it's the reverse of common sense. But God does not explain himself so I can believe. I believe so I can understand.

(Not only that, sometimes he does not explain himself to me even after I say I believe. Perhaps he wants to show me whether I really do.)

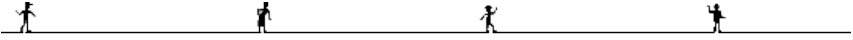
But God has made me for fellowship with him and that is the goal of all the listening and all the reading. It is the goal of his revelation and the goal of all obedience.



Eggs Can't Fly — Yet

I was asked recently if I thought the life I live as a Christian would make anyone else want to be one.

Along The Way



When you try to tell someone about Jesus, my questioner asked, do they draw back because they don't want Jesus to do to them what he appears to have done to you?

If God has not given you the release of joy in your life, the world does not want what you have, he said.

It was a daunting thought. I wasn't at all sure how much joy I displayed in my life and whether it was enough to attract anyone to Jesus.

This teacher, who is also a friend, said I was an egg that could not fly. He said I had the potential to fly, but had not yet developed my potential.

Perhaps I've been too busy being religious — being "God's little helper" or riding my pet theological hobby horse or reacting out of personal hurt feelings or splitting hairs over this or that.

Perhaps I've been using my own zeal for God and my own willpower in serving him, and they just won't get the job done.

The real problem, my friend said, is that I have lost sight of the difference between God's will and God's wishes.

God's will is eternal, unchanging and inexorable. It *will* happen, no matter what.

This will is found in John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life."

This is his eternal, unchanging will, so it will happen.



God's wishes, on the other hand, may not all be fulfilled.

2 Peter 3:9 says, "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."

God does not *wish* anyone to perish, but some may.

God fulfills His will without us. He allows us to have a part in fulfilling his wishes.

I'm here as God's servant to see that his wishes get done, my friend said. And knowing this changes the way I look at everything.

For example, he said, see what this concept does to the Lord's Prayer. When we pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done," we are praying that God's wishes should be accomplished on earth as they are in heaven.

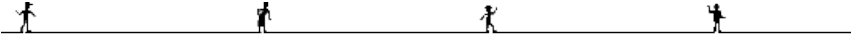
It helps, my friend said, if we understand that we are also praying that we will be available to God to help that happen.

This, he said, is the source of joy in a Christian's life. Joy comes from knowing what God's wishes are and trying to see that they are fulfilled.

God's wishes fall into three areas, he said — our individual lives, the church and the destinies of nations.

It makes you see your job differently if you know God wants you to try to fulfill his wishes in your office, he said. In fact, you will see your home differently, your children differently — everything differently.

Along The Way



Unfortunately, most of us are so immature spiritually that we aren't very good servants. We may see some of God's wishes fulfilled in our own lives. Others may see some victories in their churches. And a few, like Sakharov and Billy Graham, may even make a difference in nations, he said.

Also, he said, we need to be on guard. God is not the only one who has wishes and desires in the earth. Satan does, too. And we don't want to fulfill the wrong wishes and desires.

He gave a simple way to identify the enemy at work. When we think we cannot possibly do anything to fulfill God's wishes, that is Satan trying to hold us back, he said. When we think we can do it all and do it by ourselves, in our own way, that is Satan trying to push us out ahead of God.

What we must seek is a balance between the security of God's eternal will on one side and the opportunity of actually serving him, of furthering the kingdom, on the other.

Most likely we will lose that balance often. But all we have to do is pick ourselves up each time we fall and try again — all the while laughing with joy at the process.

I suspect, my friend said, that if people saw you doing that, they would be a lot more interested in hearing about the One you serve.



Digging Deep



A bunch of folks digging a tunnel from Britain and France under the English Channel met recently.

Two groups of them were digging away underground — and under a lot of water — and they managed to leave France and Britain and find each other somewhere under the English Channel.

I think I heard that the tunnels the two groups dug lacked only a few inches of a perfect fit.

Isn't it amazing what we can do? I'm really impressed.

We have minds that can figure all sorts of amazing things — things that would make meeting under the English Channel look like child's play.

But I'll bet some of the diggers were relieved when the two groups met. I'll bet some of them weren't perfectly sure they would make it so neatly. Life is not an exact science. Even when we think we know just how to make everything work out, there is that element of suspense until it actually does.

That is one of the major differences between people and God.

He is the only one who is never in any doubt of what's coming next. I find that thought really hard.

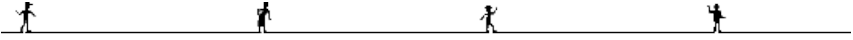
Oh, I can believe it. I just can't fully comprehend it.

But I'm beginning to a little bit better.

It goes along with the business of learning to obey God one step at a time, without knowing what the outcome is going to be.

The only way I could possibly do that would be to trust that he knows what's going to happen Then I can do my part. I can do what I'm told.

Along The Way



I earned a Phi Beta Kappa key at Duke University years ago. I didn't wear it for a long time — it seemed like bragging and besides, women don't have watch chains.

But a few years ago, I put it on a gold chain and now wear it around my neck when the mood strikes me.

It's pretty and I no longer think it means I am especially intelligent. It means I earned a particular grade point average in college.

Which is nice, but will not help you understand what God is up to if he does not choose to tell you.

It won't make you better at obedience.

And it can't help you remember that God did not promise to explain everything to us as we go.

He is perfectly willing to leave us in the dark and still expect us to follow instructions.

But we aren't in the dark about everything.

Recently, while browsing through the chain index of my *Thompson Chain-Reference Bible*, I came across seven great truths the believer may know.

- "I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the Earth." (Job 19:25)

- In John 4, some Samaritan men said, "Now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world."

- "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." (Romans 8:28)

- "Now we know that if the early tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal



house in heaven, not built by human hands." (2nd Corinthians 5:1)

- "That is why I am suffering as I am. Yet I am not ashamed, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day." (2nd Timothy 1:12)

- "Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is." (1st John 3:2)

- "We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death." (1st John 3:14)

Do I know all these truths?

Really know them?

Only if I know them in a way that helps me live as if they were true.

Lord, renew my mind so I can know your truths.



Criticism

I hurt a friend of mine recently by being protective of myself. How much I have to learn about being vulnerable.

In this particular instance, I do not believe my friend meant any criticism of me at all by a remark she made, but I reacted as if she had. I jumped to that conclusion and began to protect myself by putting her on the defensive.

We had some rather warm words and went our separate ways.

It took less than 10 minutes for me to regret my remarks and go back and ask her forgiveness - which she was quick to give.



But afterwards, I wondered if any scars, any sensitive areas, would remain to cause trouble between us in the future. Will we be too careful of what we say and how we say it? Will it put a damper on our friendship?

While talking the situation over with the Lord in prayer, I recalled his promise to make all things work for good to those who love him and are willing to grow into mature followers of Christ as he desires. I asked him to fulfill that promise for me in this situation.

The first thing he did was show me what had caused the problem.

The whole thing need not have happened. If I had been willing to be vulnerable, to risk being hurt rather than cause hurt, our relationship would not have had to suffer.

The Lord left me no room for excusing myself. He convicted me of the truth of the fact that the minute I feel any criticism coming my way, I throw up a protective screen - one that has sharp barbs on the outside.

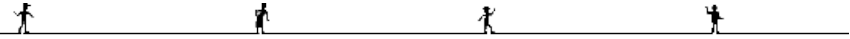
I let someone I think is attacking me bleed rather than let any possible barbs hit me.

That is not the way the Lord did it. He was willing to bleed.

I was deeply touched by remorse by this revelation. I laid my grief and shame at the feet of the Lord in repentance and asked for wisdom to know how to handle such situations in a different, godly, way and for grace to be able to carry out what was revealed to me.

I expected to be told to allow other people to say anything they wanted to about me. I was told to check

Along The Way



it out first, then respond lovingly to what was really being said, not what I thought was being said.

If I had dared to ask my friend what she meant, I might have uncovered a problem that existed between us. Then I could have offered to make a change or at least to work at coming to grips with whatever I was doing that was bothering her.

But I might have discovered that I had misunderstood her altogether, that no problem existed at all - except my touchiness. My assumption that I had heard her say something critical of me might have been simply wrong.

How much better if I had risked hearing something true, although perhaps painful, about myself. I could not have lost that way. Either I would have found out something I would really want to know or I would see I was mistaken. Either way I would have been a winner.

And the relationship with my friend would have been strengthened. We would have seen how trust works.

Also, my defensiveness was something I had managed to hide from myself before this encounter. Perhaps the best thing the Lord will bring from this will be to set me free from this burden.



Man-made Signs

Every time I stop at the exit from the Blue Ridge Parkway on my way from my mother's house in Little Switzerland to the town of Spruce Pine, N.C., I see evidence of man's fallibility.

Facing me at the intersection of the parkway exit and the state highway is a sign which says Spruce Pine is four miles away.

To my right, less than 50 feet away, is a sign which says Spruce Pine, six mile.

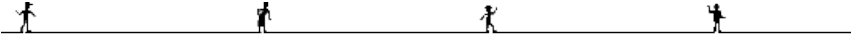
One was put up by the parkway, the other by the state highway department.

Those signs almost caused a break in my relationship with my sister-in-law.

Something came up in conversation one day about how far it was from mother's house to Spruce Pine. I gave one figure, Becky gave another.

Normally we would have deferred to the other. We are good friends and not prone to argue. But in this case, I was so sure I was right - and she was wrong - that I stood my ground. So did she.

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We let the discussion drop, unsettled. But it lingered in the air, palpable as acrid smoke, polluting our relationship.

A couple of days later we made the trip to town together. I don't remember now which one of us was driving, but I do remember the moment when I saw the two signs.

Surely I had seen them both before. I had stopped at that intersection many times over the years. But I had never seen them at the same time.

I called Becky's attention to the cause of our conflict. We dissolved in laughter at the absurdity of it all.

I stopped again at the intersection during a recent visit to North Carolina. I wondered again whether one was right and the other was wrong or whether someone somewhere had a key to understanding how both were right.

Later the Lord reminded me of those two signs, of the whole subject of standards and whose we use. I was reading a newspaper item about a church leader who says the church must minister to homosexuals.

This bishop is absolutely right. But what standard will he use to measure ministry in this case?

The bishop sees a particular milepost that marks the way to God's love. It says God loves everyone, no matter what they do. To demonstrate the unconditional character of God's love, this bishop is active in support of homosexual lifestyles. He has even ordained a practicing lesbian as a priest.

I see another milepost. One that says God has set his face against certain things we do and has called for us to do the same.

Barbara White



The bishop is right about the wideness of God's love. I believe he misses the mark by not seeing that God loves us enough to set limits on our actions.

I believe nothing we can do is so bad God will reject us if we ask for his forgiveness. But I believe many things can separate us from him if we insist on our right to them, if we choose them instead of him. And I believe he has set us free to choose him, to love him most of all.

How far is it to God? Four miles or six? Whose sign is correct, mine of the bishop's?

All man-made signs are apt to miss the mark. Can man measure such things by himself?

But God has not left us without a reliable standard. His Word is trustworthy.

God is not vague about his standards. He paid with his life that we might know him. But knowing is a journey. And Christ, who is himself the way, said the road was narrow and sometimes hard. He provides mileposts because he does not want us lost.

We are not saved by acts of righteousness, by living pure lives. Salvation comes from the grace of God, by faith in Jesus Christ as risen Lord.

But faith lives in a circumcised heart. Repentance and changed lives are the signs of that circumcision. They bring present and future bliss.



Witness

How much witnessing is enough?

Along The Way



Is there such a thing as too much witnessing?

We talked about this at my weekly Bible study group last week, but came to no final answer. So I have been thinking about it ever since.

We are witnessing whether we want to or not, of course. We witness by our lives even if we never say a word.

Some of us take comfort in that thought because we believe it means we do not have to talk about Jesus to anyone but other Christians, where it is a pleasant and easy thing to do.

Of course, this means we must be living very good lives. Otherwise, our life witness won't be all that effective, either.

But the Bible does not let us off even with a very good silent witness. Scripture says people need to hear the word so they can believe. And if no one is speaking, there isn't anything for anybody to hear.

All of us in that Bible study group work in worldly setting. So we struggle a bit with how often we should talk to our fellow workers about the Lord.

"Won't we drive them away from us altogether if we push too hard?" someone asked.

"But if we don't say anything at all, aren't we denying our Lord?" another countered.

One member of the group pointed out that someone who has just fallen in love does talk about the object of his devotion to the point of driving people crazy. He just can't seem to help himself, she said.

Do we feel that way about Jesus?

And, she said, even if you are not in love, even if you have just found a really good restaurant, or an



especially nice place to have fun and relax or whatever, don't you want to tell your friends about it? Don't you want them to have the same good time you did? Aren't you willing to take them with you? Aren't you even pushy about it?

Do we feel that way about our church?

Why do we hold back so?

I found the answer in the Bible.

First, I read what Jesus had to say to the Twelve when he sent them out to proclaim the news that the Kingdom of God was at hand and to heal the sick. The long version in Matthew 10 is full of dire warnings about him sending them out like sheep among wolves and the need for them to be gentle as doves and wise as serpents. He also told them what to do when persecuted, which meant he expected that to happen.

In John 12 we are told that some of the Jewish leaders believed in Jesus, but would not admit it, would not confess their faith, because they were afraid of being put out of the synagogue.

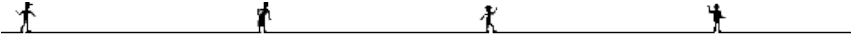
We don't talk about Jesus any more than we have to because we know what will happen to us if we do. Oh, we probably won't be stoned, as Stephen was, but we may be laughed at or rejected.

That's what we're really afraid of. Being ostracized by the world.

It comes down to a decision. We have to decide whether we love the world more than we love Jesus.

In that same passage from Matthew, Jesus says that if we acknowledge him before men, he will acknowledge us before the Father. And if we deny him before men, he will disown us!

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So how do I go about learning to acknowledge him before men?

I could begin by following the example of the man who was born blind and of the woman at the well. Both simply told what they knew about Jesus, personally. They didn't feel compelled to teach a complete, full course of theology to everyone they met. They told only what they had experienced.

To be able to do that, I must know what he did for me.

The man born blind knew exactly what Jesus had done for him. He had given him sight. The woman at the well said he knew everything she had ever done. One had received a physical healing. The other had been set free from the sins of her past.

If I can't speak personally, can't say what Jesus did for me, all I can do is lecture. I can't really witness at all.

But if I do know what he did for me, I will love Jesus enough to risk rejection by the world. I will want to talk about him.

But being human, I will forget even the wonder of what he did for me if I don't spend time with him regularly, reading his word and talking to him in prayer — Oh, yes. And witnessing.



I'm Still Moving Along The Way

Please get a piece of paper and a pen or pencil.



Now write down three things that are on your mind right now concerning your life, things that vie for your attention.

They may be unpaid bills. Or getting a new job. Or what to do about the cracks that are beginning to show in an important relationship.

Now, ask yourself what difference it makes in each of those situations that Jesus died on the cross.

Any at all? A little bit? All the difference in the world?

Be honest now.

Does Jesus' death on the cross change the way you look at anything really significant in your life?

Does it affect the way you feel about these things?

Most important of all, does it have any effect on what you decide to do about any of them?

Some friends and I did this exercise — which was suggested in a sermon last Sunday — together one night this week. It turned out to be harder to do than I had thought it would be. Primarily, I think, because most of us have not thought out the meaning of the cross for daily living.

We agreed that the cross of Christ has brought us salvation, that Jesus paid the price on the cross for all our sins and that we are not condemned by God because of Jesus' righteousness.

But does that matter when you're dealing with everyday life? Or does it only apply when you're talking about eternity?

Take, for example, an issue raised by one of the group: how to handle a new job that has not. turned

Along The Way



out the way it was supposed to and has become very unpleasant and even stressful.

OK, I asked, how does the fact that Jesus died on the cross affect this situation?

There was a lengthy silence and finally another member of the group asked if I meant, What would Jesus do under the circumstances?

No, I replied. That's always a good question and should be applied to most of life's circumstances.

But right at this moment we're not talking about Jesus the role model or Jesus the great moral teacher. We're talking about the fact that Jesus died on the cross. Does *that* make a difference here?

He thought for a minute, then said he gave up, what difference does it make in this circumstance that Jesus died on the cross?

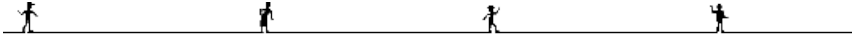
I told him I didn't think anyone could answer that question for anyone else. Each of us has to answer it for ourselves. But I offered to tell him what Jesus' death on the cross meant to me in one of my priority areas.

I am involved in trying to help a friend who has gotten herself in financial trouble — again.

My immediate problem was deciding what help really looks like in this case. Would it be for me to come up with a solution to the mess and then to work it out myself? Would it be merely to listen to her and to make suggestions only when asked for them?

If Jesus had not died on the cross, I would be trying to figure that out with only my wisdom to go by. And I might be wrong.

Barbara White



But because he did, she and I can make it through this tight spot, even if it pinches a bit here and there. We know it won't be fatal — that we will survive.

Because Jesus died on the cross, we don't have to be afraid that we will make a decision that can ruin everything forever. We can be at peace, knowing that God will hear our prayers for wisdom and for guidance.

And because of his cross, we can ask that other question, "What would Jesus do under the circumstances?" And then we can ask him to help us do the same.

Because of his atoning death, we can know his presence with us and his power in us — which makes it possible for us to do in him what we could not do alone.

Because of the cross, Jesus is not just a role model or a great moral teacher, but a present and living Lord who knows us intimately and loves us completely.

Sometimes I forget, but that's what difference it makes in my life.

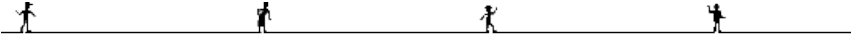


A Happy Ending

Living a Christian life is a very daily affair.

There isn't much "getting" there — only a lot of "going."

Along The Way



In fact in one of Charles Williams' novels, *War In Heaven*, the archdeacon dies at the end. It was his happy ending, his because there was nothing else that needed to be done to or by him, so he was "allowed" this happy ending.

The story of this novel is a sort of battle between the powers of good and evil, centered around the Holy Grail. It had a "current" setting (Williams died during World War II) and the archdeacon is the focal point for the forces of good.

He dies at the end, after keeping the cup (Grail) out of the clutches of the villains.

Only a Christian writer, and this friend and contemporary of C.S. Lewis was a Christian writer, would consider using death as the **best** thing for his protagonist at the end of his book.

The Apostle Paul felt the same way about death, according to one of his letters (Philippians 1:12-24). For him to go and be with Christ, he said, is the best thing for him, but not for the young church.

The moment when one recognizes Jesus as Lover, Savior, and Lord is a truly momentous occasion, one of great happiness. Becoming a Christian is a grand and glorious thing.

But, something fairy tales never tell you, living happily after takes a lot of doing.

Now I do not often feel like Paul about life and death. But some days, as I discover myself again facing a problem I had faced — and thought I had licked once and for all, I wonder if I am going to be encountering that same problem for the rest of my life!

Barbara White

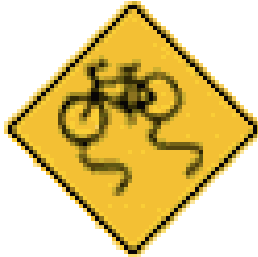


The answer is, probably not. If I stay in His spirit long enough, He will make a change in me. In fact when I recognize an "old foe," it is His help that makes me see it.

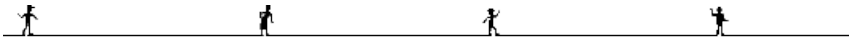
There are days when I wonder why I couldn't just already BE there, instead of having to plug away at the going. When that happens, I remember a saying I came across one day: Be patient with me, God isn't through with me yet.

And the only way He works on me is day by day.

Barbara White



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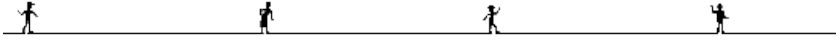
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