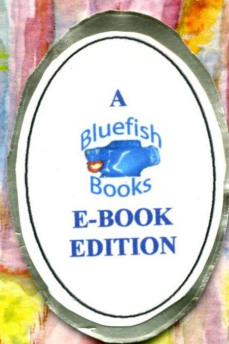


Book Two of the *Along the Way* Series

Further Along the Way

by Barbara White



Barbara White ©



FURTHER ALONG THE WAY



Barbara G. White

**John W. Cowart,
Enditor**



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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 prayer and by visiting paralyzed stroke victims in a near-by nursing home.

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 the second 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

**The Lord Knoweth The Way
Of The Righteous
But
The Way Of The Ungodly
Shall**



FURTHER ALONG THE WAY



In The Valley

I got sick to my stomach my first day back from vacation.

My first thought was to wonder if I was letting my return to the office get to me. Then I decided I might be coming down with a "bug" of some kind.

I was relieved to learn it was caused by a medicine I was taking.

Sunday morning, during the adult Sunday school class, I was reminded of my original thought. Our teacher was talking about living in the valley.

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Coming down from the mountaintop into the valley can be a real shock, he said. He said Moses' two trips down from Sinai exemplify the two ways we can respond to our own journeys back into the world after a mountain top experience.

The first time Moses came down the mountain after being with God, he blew it. He became so angry with what he found going on in the valley that he threw the tablets of the law to the ground and broke them.

The second time Moses came down from Sinai with another set of tablets, he managed to keep them safe.

His reaction the first time is certainly understandable. After all, the people were behaving in a most ungodly fashion. They were dancing around a golden calf. While he, Moses, had been away dealing with God on behalf of these people, they had been dealing with the world, the flesh and the devil.

Our teacher pointed out that Moses couldn't claim surprise as an excuse for losing his cool. He had been told by God what the people were doing down at the foot of the mountain. In fact, he had talked God out of destroying them.

I was delighted with the way this lesson seemed to be a continuation of the thoughts I expressed in last week's column.

It also sparked some other musings.

The first was, it appears that theories about dealing with people are a lot easier to accept than the fact of it. Or, to put it another way, dealing with God about people is easier than dealing with people about God.



Don't get me wrong. I work with some very nice people. No one was dancing around a golden calf when I walked into the office that first day back.

Actually, the office *was* being transformed from rows of messy desks and computer clusters far from the telephones into neat cubicles, each with its own telephone and computer.

But although most of the telephones and computers weren't working yet, and although all our earthly belongings — at the office, anyway — were packed in boxes, nothing else unusual was going on.

The situation was basically normal. The people were just being human and the office was just being institutional.

So I was pretty discouraged when I started getting a tummy ache and I thought it was because I wanted to run back to the mountain where God had seemed so close and life had seemed so heavenly. I thought I knew better than that.

While I had been on the mountain, God had talked to me about the valley. He had made it clear to me that he was as close to me in the city as he was on the mountain. I had understood this in theory, but it seemed I was letting reality give me a pain. And I was ashamed of myself.

The Sunday school class helped me see that if I found the world a little unsettling, I was in good company.

But I learned more than that. Our teacher asked us to consider what it means to have a mountaintop experience with God and then to return to the valley, which is where the world lives its daily life.

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Mountaintops are where God makes us who he wants us to be, he said. Valleys are where he wants us to put what we have become into practice. Mountaintops are where God works on us. Valleys are where he wants us to work for him.

That truth cannot be the only one to be found in this lesson. I have too many other questions.

At home Sunday afternoon, I read on in Exodus about Moses' other trips up and down the mountain. I read that the second time Moses came down from speaking with God, he was not only able to deal with the people in the valley, but his face was aglow.

The glow on Moses' face reflected the light of God's countenance into the darkness of the valley.

But the glow faded. Did he then look like he did before or was there a telltale sign left to indicate his time on the mountain? And once the glow was gone, was he any different? Could he possibly be the same after being on the mountain with God?

And what about me? Did I draw close enough to the Lord to reflect his light? Did my face look any different when I came down from the mountain? And did God change me during my time with him on the mountain?

I can't answer all those questions yet. But I'm beginning to believe I found my latest "mountaintop" in the valley. This time I believe God has been closer to me and has changed me more since I came home.





God Sends Us Back Down The Road

A new poster decorates my work space. I moved one with a sailboat and its reflection in the water in misty morning light to a different place in my cubicle to make room for one with a really cute kitten on it.

The new one shows a tiny, dark, tiger-striped kitten with a white muzzle and blue eyes, sitting with his tail curled about his feet, gazing thoughtfully into the distance.

Both posters have short sayings — words of wisdom — on them.

The one with the sailboat carries the words, "Do not be afraid of tomorrow; the Lord is already there." The one with the kitten says, "Christ loves me the way I am, and too much to let me stay that way."

I must confess to ulterior motives in both selections. Among my co-workers are those who love sailing and those who love cats. My hope was that in admiring the boat or the kitten, they would absorb the words as well. And I might have a chance to talk about the message.

It's a very soft sell, a kind of sneaky evangelism.

So far, however, absolutely nobody has asked a single question about either message. One person did comment on the kitten. He said nobody would want anything that cute to change, that the kitten was perfect just the way he was.

And I wasn't quick enough to respond that outward appearance isn't the whole story. The commentator was gone before I could say a word.

The kitten's slogan has come in handy for somebody else, however. A Christian friend whose son

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is married to a non-Christian girl used it when her daughter-in-law asked why she kept trying to convert her.

"I love you the way you are," the girl said. "Don't you love me the way I am?"

"Yes," my friend responded, "but I love you too much not to want to share with you the best gift I have, the saving grace of Jesus."

Actually my friend is not pushing her daughter-in-law into a decision or trying to force or trick her into anything. She just keeps sharing what the Lord has done in her life and what he has shown her in Scripture every time she is asked a question. It's the daughter-in-law who keeps asking for more.

Of course, my friend also lives a life in which Jesus Christ is visible. He is not just a motto under a picture. He is a living presence with her everywhere she goes. Perhaps that's why her daughter-in-law keeps asking questions.

And my friend knows from experience that God changes even good things into better ones. After all, our goal is to mature into the image of Christ, to become just like him. And all of us must change to do that.

This week I found another use for my kitten's motto.

I already knew it was a message for me. I am under no misconception about the state of my own goodness. I know the Lord has *lots* of work yet to do with me.

No, this week I decided the motto is for my little church.



After weathering some very heavy seas, we have known in recent months a time of relative quiet and calm waters.

Perhaps I am the only one who has become so comfortable with things the way they are that I don't want to think about any change. Perhaps, but I doubt it.

I suspect most of us have enjoyed this time of peace and harmony so much that we really want things to go on just as they are. We may even have seen this as the evidence of God's love for us.

But we have also been in the process of searching for our next minister. And now the search has ended.

I was one of the people involved in the search. As time went on, I became very aware of the Lord at work in the process.

Though few in number, we were a very mixed group. We thought differently, some direct, some roundabout. Some were businesslike and factual, others intuitive and emotional.

And although we had the same basic idea of what kind of person we should call to be our minister, we also had some very different details in mind that we thought must be present — or not present — in our final choice.

But as we met regularly to talk to each other — and to the Lord — we began to see that he was bringing us into alignment with each other and, we believe, with him. As we prayed about our choices, we found we had come from our various starting points and through our various methods to the very same place.

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I am more than contented with the process and with the result.

I am hopeful for the future.

But near the end of our efforts I began to see that things will probably not stay the way they are. It began to dawn on me that God may have had a different future in mind for us all along than the one we thought we saw.

But we must not be afraid of the changes that will come, even if they carry with them some choppy seas and some rearranging of our priorities.

Rough seas and shaken certainties are not a sign that God doesn't love us. They may very well be a sign of quite the opposite.

So I am growing more certain that my poster's motto is the Lord's message for us right now. He loves us just the way we are, and too much to leave us that way.

I wonder if it would help if I bought another copy for the bulletin board at church.



The Silence Of God

The toughest thing about a tough time is God's silence.

Have you ever noticed that just when you need him most, he seems to disappear?



I have. It seems to me that many times when I'm in a tight place and want to ask him a lot of questions, he isn't there to answer them. At these times silence is the only answer to our prayers.

Well, I heard something about that silence at a conference in North Carolina recently. It filled me with joy.

What I heard was: The teacher doesn't talk during the exam.

This means that God's silence is NOT a sign that we have been abandoned by him. And it isn't a sign that he is angry with us, either, or anything else like that.

It is a sign that we are going through one of God's tests.

The teacher doesn't talk during the exam!

God's silence is simply so I can take the test.

And that means that God is in the process of seeing — and showing me — how well I can use the truths he has been teaching me. And since God is supervising the test, I can stop worrying about the outcome and start looking into what he has already taught me for the solutions.

Imagine. The teacher doesn't talk during the exam.

That thought still brings shivers of delight. From the moment I heard it I knew it was true.

First, I knew from my own experiences as a teacher, which may have happened years ago, but are still very vivid. That IS the way things are in the world of education.

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Then, suddenly, joyfully, I understood from my own experiences of being tested by God — which are neither distant nor dim — that this is the way things are in the Kingdom of Heaven as well.

I have known for a long time that God tests us. But somehow it had never crossed my mind that he would act like a teacher.

I didn't talk to my students when I was supervising a test. And when God is giving me a test, he doesn't talk, either.

Years ago, when I was a classroom teacher and was giving a test, I wouldn't respond to questions about the test itself or gives clues to the answers. Oh, I might give instructions, or say something like, "You have 20 minutes to complete this section," but nothing else.

I wasn't being hard on them either. I knew I had covered in class all the material included on the test. I knew that if my students had been paying attention during class and had done their homework, they would know the answers. All they had to do was use what they already knew and they would pass the test.

The same thing is true for God's tests.

God does all that the human teacher does — and does it better. He teaches us what we need to know for our course — whether you call it discipleship, being shaped into the image of His Son or learning to live like Jesus.

His textbook is the Bible, the wise words of those who know and walk with him, and the still small voice of the Holy Spirit. Our classroom is the world.

Then, every so often, he tests us.



And we either pass or fail the test.

We may not like them, but tests are necessary.

Tests show the students — and the disciples — how well they have mastered the material being covered in the course. They also make clear what has not yet been learned and must be gone over again.

Of course God always forgives you when you fail a test.

I've known that ever since I knew anything at all about him. What I do not always remember — at least not well enough to live my life by it — is that he wants more than repeated failure and forgiveness. He desires our growth in understanding and skill in discipleship.

God forgives, but he does not stop there. He is teaching us how to live in the Kingdom, so he isn't about to let us off with simply being sorry for failing the same test over and over again. He has provided for something more.

Even if we pass the test, he will — experience and my reading of Scripture agree — give us other opportunities to strengthen our grasp on the lesson.

If we fail, he will re-teach and re-test.

The reason he does is because he wants obedience. He wants us to do what he has told us to do.

Not to gain salvation. To show we love him, to make us like him, to set us free to enjoy the resurrection now.

I have to confess that I have usually had a very negative emotional response to God's silence. I have felt alternately afraid and angry, as if he had betrayed

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me or abandoned me, leaving me to face the pain, loneliness, shame or sorrow all by myself.

Now I will try to remember that the teacher doesn't talk during the exam.

With that in mind, I should be able to see my test failures simply as missed opportunities for obedience and not as proof of my unteachable character. Then I should be much more willing to get up and try again.



Up Close And Personal.

Do you remember those "up close and personal" film profiles television showed of the individual athletes during the Olympics?

You got to know quite a bit about the person from watching the segments. You almost felt as if you would recognize the person if you met him or her.

But would you really? Would you be sure enough that's who they were that you could walk up and say, "Hello. You must be So-and-So and I've really wanted to get to know you personally."

Chances are I wouldn't, anyway.

It's not that easy to recognize people, even people we know. They may have had a haircut or be wearing an outfit we have never seen them in before. All sorts of little things change a person's appearance.



But only for a short time. Eventually, you do recognize them. And the closer the relationship, the quicker the recognition.

According to the Bible, even the people who had lived "up close and personal" with Jesus for three years did not immediately recognize him during the period between his resurrection and ascension. His appearance was different enough to throw them off at first.

However, they did know him finally. According to the accounts of Mary Magdalene in the garden, of Peter out fishing and of the two who were walking to Emmaus, it sometimes took a little time. But eventually they just knew! Someone would say, "It's Jesus!" or something like that, and they'd all gather around, close to him.

They didn't ask him who he was, to be sure. They knew it was Jesus, even though he looked different somehow.

But their certainty did not rest on physical evidence alone. They acted on their faith that this person was who they thought he was.

We have to do the same today.

The Easter season is a good time for thinking about those resurrection appearances. I did that one morning this week almost all the way around my morning mile-and-a-half walk because "up close and personal" is the way I want to be with Jesus.

Those appearances happened during a specific period of time nearly 2,000 years ago. Do they have anything to say to me about the way I encounter the Risen Lord today?

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I think they do.

In the beginning, I "knew" Jesus about the same way I "know" those athletes. I had watched movie versions of his life and had read some "up close and personal" stories about him, including those in the Bible.

It wasn't the kind of relationship that gave me much assurance that I would recognize him if I met him in an unexpected place.

I would probably recognize Brian Boitano if I saw him in person — *if* he were wearing a costume and a pair of ice skates. But I probably would not recognize him in a pair of jeans at my neighborhood grocery store.

In the beginning, I could recognize Jesus in a weekly worship service, but I wasn't very sure it was him in that same grocery store. Or at my side at work. Or in any of those places in my daily life where it hurts or where I am tempted to turn away from him.

But I have noticed a change. I am getting better at recognizing him.

What has made the difference?

Time.

The more time I spend consciously being with Jesus, aware of him and of his concern for my life, the easier it is becoming to recognize his face when I "see" it and his voice when he "speaks."

It still takes time. Sometimes it takes *lots* of time. But, like the disciples, I'm learning.

I can't tell you exactly what Jesus looks like. I can't explain precisely how I know it's him. But the



best test of my certainty is that when I'm sure, I do what I see him doing.



Dry Spell

They call a long period when you cannot hear or feel the presence of the Lord a "dry period."

It seems an appropriate name. One remembers that Jesus, too, spent a period in the desert.

He is living water so the dry period will not last.

But while it is going on, it can be very painful. I described the technique I used for getting through one of these periods some years ago as "refusing to stay face down in the mud." I might fall down, I said, but I will get up again and go on.

Since then I have discovered that a much better technique is to develop a trust level with the Lord *before* one of these contrary phases comes along. That way I don't have to rely on my own efforts.

Trust — means having faith in.

It says in Hebrews that "faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."

Have you ever been asked to play a "trust" game? One where you stand with your eyes closed and fall back, trusting that a member of the group

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will catch you? And someone does, of course. And you do feel better until you realize one day you may do that and not get caught. And would you, while blindfolded, cross a busy highway if one of these persons told you it was all right to do so?

Abraham is the measure of trust in the Old Testament. He trusted God to the point of raising the knife over his son's bound body.

Mary is one of the most beautiful examples of trust ever given. "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; let it be unto me according to thy word," she said to the angel who told her she would in a miraculous way bear the Savior.

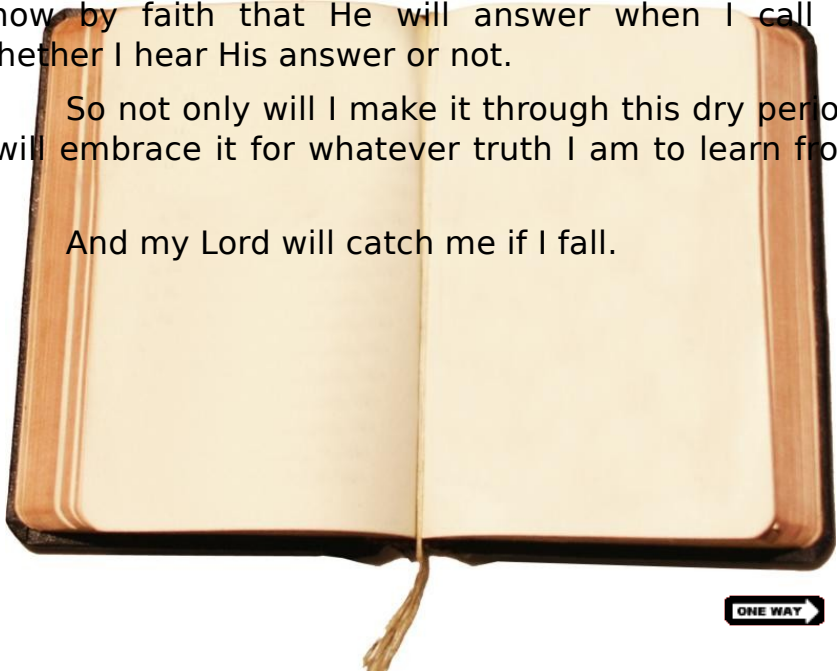
Trust like that is too much for me.

Peter trusted the Lord when he stepped outside the boat and stood upon the water. As with most of us, his faith faltered and he began to sink. But he called out to the Lord and He lifted him again.

Perhaps Peter's measure of trust speaks for me best. I trust — and even when I don't **feel** that I trust, I know by faith that He will answer when I call — whether I hear His answer or not.

So not only will I make it through this dry period, I will embrace it for whatever truth I am to learn from it.

And my Lord will catch me if I fall.





**And thine ears shall hear
a word behind thee, saying,
This is the way,
walk ye in it...**



The Healer, Not The Healing

While I was home sick with the flu last weekend, a church member stopped by to bring me a bowl of chicken and dumplings — a relative, I suppose, of chicken soup as a healing agent — and a book to read.

The book didn't look as appetizing as the chicken and dumplings. The food was delicious, but the book's title was *Anointed for Burial* and that didn't sound too good to me, in light of the way I was feeling at the time.

But I'm always willing to sample new reading material, so I propped myself up on a couple of pillows and looked it over.

Lines on the book cover spoke of the last days of Cambodia. It turned out to be the story of a young missionary couple, Todd and DeAnn Burk, and the two

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years they spent ministering in that country just before the takeover by the Khmer Rouge.

The story, so matter-of-factly told, was incredible. The young missionaries and their converts received guidance from God through reading Scripture and through prayer, visions and dreams. Physical as well as spiritual needs were met, demons were driven out and the sick were healed through the power of the Spirit.

How is someone supposed to respond to such accounts? With flat disbelief? Hoots of derision? Angry rejection?

Perhaps with skeptical wonder? Or tentative longing?

Or maybe even with praise and thanksgiving?

My friend thought the book would lift my sagging spirits. She was convinced it recounted true happenings and that reading about them would stir up my faith.

The same sort of message has been coming to me from all directions lately.

Jamie Buckingham, Christian author and analyzer of the world scene, told me during an interview recently that he believed miracles, particularly of healing, will mark the coming rising tide of the Holy Spirit in the world.

A few days later, I spent some time with another friend who wanted to tell me about a healing she had just experienced. She wants to know more about how you pray for healing and she is taking classes in how to do that.



I could not reject her account. I have experienced in my own life the power of the Holy Spirit to change lives. I do not believe the Lord intends me to set limits on his actions not set in Scripture.

But I had some questions for my friend, words of warning. How will you guard against making healing itself the focal point? How will you keep people from seeking only healing and not the healer?

What purpose will healing serve today, I wondered, and wished I had thought to ask Buckingham that question.

Buckingham had said that speaking in tongues had been a divisive element among Christians. Would miracles of healing be any less divisive?

Then I came in my regular morning reading to the second chapter of the Gospel according to Mark, and to the story of the healing of the paralytic whose friends let him down on a mat from the roof into the presence of Jesus.

The New International Version of the Bible gives the account from that point in these words: "When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'Son, your sins are forgiven.'

"Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, 'Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?'

"Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, 'Why are you thinking these things? Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'?

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But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins..."

He said to the paralytic, 'I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home.'

"He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, 'We have never seen anything like this!' "

The people were amazed. We are always amazed at miracles that happen before our eyes, the ones we cannot ignore or refute.

But did they learn to believe Jesus had the authority to forgive sins? That is the real question. Did they begin to believe he was the one he said he was?

Can miracles of healing lead to changed lives, lives set free from slavery to sin? Are miracles necessary to confound the doubters and the arrogant?

I don't have the answers. The Lord's ways are past my understanding. They are too great for me to comprehend.

But I do know that Jesus responded to the faith of the paralytic's friends and to the reservations and doubts about him he saw in the hearts of others present. He both forgave sins and performed a healing miracle.





Fellowship

The word fellowship has a warm, fuzzy connotation. It conjures up pictures of friends sharing meals together, playing together, having a good time together.

Although I have been doing those sorts of things lately, I still have had a kind of hungry ache inside — an ache that felt exactly like I was hungry for fellowship.

And it was affecting my prayer time, my ability to praise the Lord, my whole outlook on life.

I began to wonder if my original understanding of Christian fellowship was all it should be.

I checked my dictionary and found one definition of fellowship as a company of equals. But just being equal isn't always good. It can include being equal in all the evils the flesh is heir to.

A chain gang would have qualified as a fellowship based on that definition. It was a company of equals, in the eyes of the law anyway, doing things together.

A service club could fill the bill. These are folks who get together to raise money and give it away. This seems to be a satisfying relationship.

Is a Christian fellowship different?

In Acts 2:42, Luke says the early Christians "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." What was fellowship to those Christians?

In his book of studies of key Bible themes, *God's Words*, J.I. Packer compares the social aspects of fellowship with the dessert after the meal. He says

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sweets are fine, but if they are all you eat, you will not end up with a healthy body.

So what comes before the dessert? Packer pointed out that instead of the word fellowship in that Acts passage, the New English Bible says they met to "share the common life."

The meat that we share is knowledge of God.

In John 15:15, Jesus says, "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you."

We become Jesus' friends when we let him share what he knows about the Father with us. We become friends with each other when we share what we know of God with each other.

That's not the same thing as sitting around eating a meal together. It's much more.

That passage tells us that the source of our fellowship with each other is our relationship with God. That's what makes a fellowship Christian. And as we experience this sort of fellowship, we strengthen our relationship with God.

That explains why I have been so hungry. All I've been doing is socializing and that has left me feeling anemic. Real strengthening sustenance comes from sharing, the giving to and receiving from others knowledge of God.

And I have not been doing that. Foolishly, I have been trying not to lean on my Christian brothers and sisters because I thought I would be too heavy a



burden. All I have done is cut myself off from the very food I need to receive and they need to give.

Back in the McCarthy era, when politicians were hunting for communists under every rock, they sometimes called a person a "fellow traveler." But I think that phrase well describes a Christian fellowship.

We are a fellowship of Christians traveling together. And sharing what we know of the Lord is a vital part of helping each other over the rough places in the road.

A chain gang is put together by outside authorities and the members have to belong to the fellowship. A service club comes together out of a common interest and is held together only as long as the fellowship continues to satisfy the members.

Unlike the member of the chain gang, a person has the freedom to choose whether or not to be a member of a Christian fellowship. But like the chain gang, we don't always get to choose our walking companions.

Like the service club, the portion of the Body of Christ to which we belong is the one that satisfies our immediate needs. Unlike the service club, this fellowship is for eternity.

A chain literally ties the members of a chain gang together. A shared interest joins the members of a service club. The Spirit of the Lord unites the members of a Christian fellowship into a company of those who give and receive the Lord.

Now that I know what I need, I must risk asking others to share with me as well as offer to share what I have.

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It really shouldn't be too hard. My fellowship is wide enough to provide all the help I need. In Psalm 119, the psalmist spoke these words to the Lord: "I am a friend to all who fear you, to all who follow your precepts."



Clay Or Granite?

God offered me a couple of tough options last Sunday.

He asked me which I wanted.

I think he meant I was to choose one.

But I could be wrong.

He hasn't finished telling me yet.

I did not hear him audibly, but I was quite sure he was the one speaking.

It sounded just like him to me. I've found that the more you talk with God, the easier it becomes to recognize his voice when you hear it — even when it isn't your ears that do the hearing.

This particular conversation happened during church — during a time of singing.

A line in one of the songs started me thinking about some of the things I know need changing in my life.

God agreed with me.

Some things do need changing, he said.



And they will be.

Then he asked if I wanted to be clay molded by a potter or granite shaped by a sculptor.

Well, it didn't take me any time at all to decide being clay was a much better bet.

I have worked with clay and I know molding clay can involve mashing, pummeling and pinching as well as patting and rubbing.

But none of that sounds as extreme as the processes involved in shaping granite. That requires chisels and other sharp pointed instruments to be struck by mallets and things like that.

So a little prodding and pushing sounded preferable to being chipped away.

I did wonder, briefly, if I really had to choose at all.

But that thought did not last long.

After all, I had initiated the whole thing by acknowledging the need for change.

Besides, I can't pretend that I don't know the importance of change.

God's purpose for my life is that I should be conformed to the image of His Son.

And that will require lots of change.

But can the change come only from the two choices I was being given?

Or was I just being given the opportunity to think about what is going on in my life from a new perspective?

Along The Way



Well, it's true that in this part of my life I am like clay being molded and in that part I am like granite that must be chiseled.

Can I stop being granite and become clay?

I think I can. But it takes more than wishing.

I can say I want to be clay, soft, yielded clay, waiting for the hands of the master potter to gently shape me according to his pleasure.

But if I refuse to budge from my chosen stance, I am really granite all the time.

In which case, it will take chisels and mallets.

If I'm granite, I'm granite, no matter what I say.

But I think granite begins to soften the minute I surrender my will to God.

The catch is, it has to be a real surrender.

If can't just be saying words of surrender.

It has to come from the heart.

Which reminds me — Scripture talks about hearts being made of stone or of flesh And that's kind of like granite and clay, isn't it?

In Ezekiel 11:19, God says, "I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my law. They will be my people and I will be their God."

Who was he going to give that to? Those who had removed "all the vile images and detestable idols."



So I'm back to the choice of how to remove the images and idols — by being molded into someone without them or by having them chiseled out.

I still think clay is better.

But if I'm not yet clay, then have at the granite, God, as you must.

And where I'm clay, let the shaping be according to your will.

As it says in Psalm 51:10, "Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me."

But, please, keep reminding me it's you at work.



Keyholes

Elizabeth Elliot gave me a couple of wonderful new "keyholes" during her talks here recently. This kind of keyhole is a small thought that, if you enter into it, will open out into a much wider world of understanding. I collect them because they are easy to remember and because the world they open into seems to keep growing.

I've written about them before. An example is the article I wrote about Bob Mumford's remark, "The teacher doesn't talk during the test." I just haven't used the name before.

One of Elizabeth Elliot's keyhole statements was, "Conversion is a crisis decision followed by daily choices."

Along The Way



Let me show you how that works as a keyhole for me.

I am reminded first of the truth that conversion is a turning point in a life. You are not the same person afterward.

The surrender of your life to God in response to his gift of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ is not a casual affair. It is not always a traumatic one — not everyone is knocked off his feet or blinded in the process — but it is a definite, specific action.

That means we should know when it happened. We should be able to point to a day when we decided to accept Jesus Christ as our Savior and our Lord.

And if you can't remember the date — I had to ask for help in pinning down the date of my conversion, but I then wrote it in the margin of my Bible next to the first Scripture passage the Lord brought to life for me that day — I think it would be a very good idea to stop right where you are and claim a day as close as possible to the time when it happened, or claim this day right now as the one you will remember as your decision day for the rest of your life.

Why is this important? I think it can help protect us from unnecessary doubts as to whether we actually ever DID make the decision. We are subject to just such doubts and need all the help we can get.

It's like planting a flag. It's like Jacob building an altar of stones to help him remember the day and place where he encountered the Lord.

Conversion is more than just a crisis decision. You were *made* new at conversion, but learning to *live* in a new way is not automatic. It takes daily choices to work our salvation into our lives.



So this keyhole idea reminds me that I need to yield my life totally to the Lord each day. And then I must choose over and over again to make what I think, say and do reflect that fact.

And there may be other thoughts behind this particular keyhole. The next time I enter into it, I may find even more.

Another of her keyholes was about marriage. This pithy statement went, "You choose to marry a person because you love her. Then you must choose to love her because you married her."

Now that I've shown you how to do it, do you want to try going through this one by yourself?

OK. Then close your eyes for a minute and begin to think about her words. When you're through, come back to this spot in the paper and read on to see if we came up with any of the same thoughts.

This starts off by hurting. It speaks so clearly of what we — my former husband and I — did not do in our marriage.

But it doesn't leave me hurting. It lifts me beyond the pain for it has something to say to me today even though I am no longer married. It speaks of the incredible demands of commitment.

We choose to marry because of the way a particular person makes us feel. Then, if we have listened very much at all to the world's version of marriage, we expect to have all our needs met, all our desires satisfied, all our longings fulfilled.

And when that doesn't happen, we believe love has failed and we feel free to walk away.

Along The Way



This keyhole points to a totally different point of view. It points out that we have been called by God to love others in his name, not to be loved by them.

Can we meet a mate's needs, fulfill his longings and enrich his life? Is this even possible?

And can we do it joyfully? Can we do it with peace in our hearts? Can we do it with thanksgiving?

Not if we only try in our own strength. But then, it wouldn't have been possible for the other person to do that for us, either.

At the very least this can be an awakening to our own impossible demands upon our marriage.

But that is not all. There is something beyond the human impossibility.

The possibility is the choice. We can choose to do through Christ what we cannot possibly do by ourselves. We can choose to die to self so he can live in and through us.

Perhaps one day I will see more through this keyhole. I guess that's the best the Spirit and I can do with it for now.



Receiving Gifts

We celebrated my granddaughter's second birthday this month.

What fun it was to watch Nicole open her birthday presents. What a difference there was between this time and her first birthday.



Last year she didn't really know what to do. Her mother — and occasionally both grandmothers — had to give her a helping hand with the ribbons or the tape. We had to show her how to find a loose edge on the wrapping paper so she could begin to tear it off.

Sometimes we had to take the present and almost open it ourselves and give it back for her to finish so she could enjoy the excitement of discovery for herself.

But not this time.

She had received lots of practice just a month ago in opening presents by herself — at Christmas. She was able to put her new-found knowledge into use immediately.

When Nicole's mother brought the stack of birthday presents into the room where her father, brother, grandparents, aunt, uncle and cousin were waiting, she immediately took charge of the situation.

She walked over and picked one up and brought it back to where her mother was sitting. She snatched the bow off and flung it from her. She turned the box over a time or two until she found a place to grasp the paper and begin to tear it off.

Bits and pieces of paper followed the flying ribbon until she could pull the box free and open it. The tissue paper was no barrier at all. And there it was! She pushed the appropriate spot — her mother did have to show her once where to push — and listened to the music from her new toy.

She pronounced it "efelant," and carried it around the room so we all could hear the music. (Elephant comes later I suppose. For now it is *efelant*.)

Along The Way



Then she put the toy down and headed back to the stack for another surprise.

Not even a box almost as tall as she was slowed her down. She lugged the package, which fortunately was not heavy, to her "unwrapping spot" and performed the same procedures on it that she had on the others.

How we laughed as we watched her successful efforts. What a delight it was to see how much she has learned in such a short time.

Later, at home, I smiled to myself, relishing my pleasure in this child.

As he often does, the Holy Spirit took this occasion to show me how the Lord works in my life.

The Lord gives me gifts, too, just as we give them to Nicole. And, like Nicole, I have learned a little bit in the last few years about how to "open" them.

The first gifts he gave me after I became a new child of his, came already unwrapped, all open and obvious for me to see. God knew I needed them that way. Like an infant, I did not have the ability to find them otherwise.

Then, as I grew in understanding, he sometimes wrapped up his gifts, using many different coverings. But he made sure I could easily find the place to begin the unwrapping process, even leading me to the right place to look for them.

Often now he waits for me do it myself. He places the gift where I can find it, and even puts out clues for me to see, but I must be alert to spot them and to follow them.



He has other gifts for me that I have not received because I do not know how to unwrap them.

We wouldn't give Nicole a priceless, breakable treasure or a sharp, dangerous tool to unwrap by herself yet, Until she refines her techniques a bit, she might hurt herself or someone else.

But she and I should, in the natural course of events and with proper guidance and practice, develop better control and maturer judgment and be able to receive these other gifts.

For I believe God has gifts waiting for me just as surely as we already have gift ideas for a 3- and a 4-year-old Nicole.

And I believe it delights God, too, to see his children open his gifts to them.



Hard Feelings, Soft Words

Being caught in the middle is no fun.

I am friends with a group of people who are on the outs with each other. Each one has come to me with reports of how poorly one of the others has behaved.

If their accounts are true, they have good reason to feel offended by the other members of the group.

But those other members also have grounds for hurt feelings. Everyone has managed to offend someone, and some have offended everyone.

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I try to point out mitigating circumstances, but it does no good. I "just don't know enough about it," I am told.

Perhaps. Sometimes I wish I didn't know *anything* about it.

I really like all these people very much. I am not willing to cut any of them out of my life.

I can fix it so I don't have to listen to their problems by staying away from them for a while or by not being available to listen.

But I do not know how to fix the situation, how to mediate the real differences between these people.

They could go their separate ways and have nothing more to do with each other, of course, but that would only ease the symptoms. It would not solve the problem of un-forgiveness.

Jesus was very clear on the need to forgive even our enemies. We will be forgiven, as a matter of fact, only as we forgive.

How do we forgive someone who has truly offended us? It's hard to do when the person asks for forgiveness, but what about when he does not? How can you forgive someone who does not even say he is sorry?

He may not know he needs to. I think that is the case with my friends. Each sees his own hurts clearly, but has missed the hurt he has done to the others.

There is an answer to this one in Scripture, too — a hard answer. Jesus said that if I have been offended, I must go to the other person and tell him he has hurt me. He may not have known about it, and once he



does, he might want to say he is sorry, and we can be reconciled. If he does not know, how can he repent?

I do not much want to suggest this to my friends. It is hard to ask someone who has been offended to take the first step toward reconciliation. What if they only get hurt again?

It is hard, but I do not see any other way.

God took the first step in being reconciled with us. He came to tell us that we had offended him and to offer the means of reconciliation at the same moment.

Jesus tells us to follow God's plan. I guess I cannot think of a better way.



Why Does God Let Children Die?

A friend told me recently that the death of one's child is the very worst thing that can happen.

Why, she asked, would God allow such a thing? If that is the kind of God He is, she went on, how can anyone stay close to Him, think about Him in the same way after the death as before?

Recently I wrote about Scripture being the sword of the Spirit that can defend us from the assaults and temptations of Satan.

There is another aspect of calling Scripture a sword that I didn't go into. It may also be a sharp, cutting tool in the hand of God, used to cut away

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things from our lives that hinder us from coming closer to Him, to cut into the misconceptions we have of Him and His goal for us.

Hebrews 4:12-13 say: "For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from Gods sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of Him to whom we must give account."

In what way is Scripture sharper than a two-edged sword, capable of separating our joints and marrow?

Let me show how Scripture could be like that sword to my friend.

My reply to her is that God also had a child who died — and we have a Lord who knows our pain.

Chapter 4 of Hebrews goes on to say, "Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.

"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are — yet was without sin.

"Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of trial."

If she is willing to listen to real answers to her questions, she could start by reading the Bible until



she discovers God's relationship with Jesus and why He let His Son die.

When she understands that, she might then be ready to hear God's answer when she asks Him — not me — why her child died, too.

The sword of Scripture could then be a scalpel to cut through her belief that death is the ultimate horror or that her loss is forever. It might cut deep enough to reveal the place she has given her child's memory in her life.

Matthew 10:37 says: "Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not-worthy of me.

"Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."

She asked hard questions.

The answers are not easy, but they are there.

And as she reads, believing, the Holy Spirit could then show her how God would use even a child's death to bring about His good purposes if she were willing to be called by Him to do his will.



A Knowing Faith

I was given a wonderful opportunity last week to teach the entire book of Romans in 45 minutes.

Along The Way



I took the place of the regular teacher of our introductory, "Through-the-Bible-in-a-Year" adult Sunday school class.

Presenting the book of the Bible that changed Martin Luther's life and started the Reformation in less than an hour is a challenge.

But I didn't panic. I accepted it as an opportunity to give the class a good introduction to the book and teach some of the great, ringing truths of doctrine it holds. To do that, I immersed myself in Romans.

I re-read books I had studied in the past, read through the scripture in a couple of translations, outlined major themes and underlined verses.

I made masses of notes. Then, of course, I had too much material for a 45-minute class.

So I stopped and turned the lesson over to the teacher, the Holy Spirit. You choose, I prayed. You direct my thoughts and words to the areas the members of the class most need to hear.

Sunday, I thanked the Lord for His word, and plunged in, giving the broad sweep of the book and sketching the themes of man's need and God's action, the relationship of God and Israel, and how all this affects our conduct.

A question or two moved the class right along. And then there was almost no time left.

I told the class that different parts of Romans had spoken mightily to me at different times in my self. When I was making my mental acknowledgement of the sonship of Jesus into a total commitment to Him as Lord, the first four chapters shouted at me. Since then, chapters 5 through 8 have fed me often.



One verse stood out suddenly: "Do you not know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death?"

The phrase "Do you not know. . ." is found several times in this epistle, I told the class. The key word is *know* — not just think or hope or even believe, but know — deep, gut-level, life-changing knowing.

Half an hour later our minister opened his sermon by explaining the difference between knowing and being convinced.

He had read once that salt was bad for him, he said, and being convinced, he quit using salt (except on French fries and eggs).

He also read that coffee is harmful. He knew it was probably true, but wasn't convinced. His life wasn't changed. He still drinks coffee.

That's what I meant. That's what the Spirit gave us both to say that day.



Blessing Envy

I had lunch this week with a woman who has no home, no job and no prospects of either — but who is full of joy.

It's all part of the way the Lord is teaching her to walk with Him, she said, one of the ways He is teaching her to trust Him.

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For a moment I was really challenged by her joy; it seemed so contrary to her circumstances. My circumstances are so much better than hers — I have a job and a home — and I have not been nearly as full of joy.

My friend's joy came out of the depth of her understanding that her circumstances were from the Lord, that He was in charge of it all, and out of her belief that she had been told the exact day this trial would be over.

This was also challenging. I'm in the midst of making some pretty important decisions — but I have not had that gift of certainty about the details.

How easy it would be to envy my friend her special word from the Lord, or to feel less blessed. Comparisons are such a trap.

I see what the Lord is doing in another Christian's life and decide He should be doing the same thing in my life at the same time. I decide there must be something wrong and stop what I am doing to see what the reason could be.

There isn't anything wrong with letting her example wake me up if I have been nodding.

Perhaps the Lord is using her story to shake me and make me examine my life for barriers I might have put up between Him and me.

In truth, my envy of her experience would become that very barrier. I should be looking to see what He is working on in my life and listening to His directions for me.

But even if He wanted to teach me the same lesson He is teaching her — a lesson about trusting



Him every day for all my needs and knowing peace in the midst of difficulties — would He necessarily use the same methods?

And am I really willing to walk the same path she has walked to get the same blessing? Do I want to lose my job and my house?

I want what the Lord wants for me — and I ask for the power of the Holy Spirit in my life that I might be able to pay the price.

The truth my friend is learning is a truth I am also learning, in different ways and at a different pace. I praise the Lord for her joy, for the evidence of His presence in her life. Her example gives me courage to persevere.

But the only way I can get where He wants me to be is by trusting Him to know what's best for me. I will never be the person He wants me to be unless I let Him do it His way.



Simple And Complicated

When Jesus says something, he makes it sound so simple.

I often make it complicated.

Along The Way



In Matthew 5:44, Jesus says quite simply, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

That's pretty straightforward, isn't it?

It means pray for the Russians or the Iranians on the international scene and for the secular humanists on the religious scene.

That's not all that hard to do.

This week, I discovered the passage also means to pray for people close to you who hurt you in any way.

The New King James Version of that verse from Matthew says, "Pray for them which despitefully use you."

I don't know that I felt persecuted, but I sure felt despitefully used.

In her book, *Lord, Change Me*, Evelyn Christenson writes about what happens when we pray for others. In preparation for leading a discussion for a small group, I was studying this chapter when I came across the section on praying for those who have hurt us. The last section of the chapter helped set me free.

I know why we are supposed to pray for those who hurt us. Jesus told me in the Lord's Prayer — "Forgive us our debts as we have forgiven our debtors."

He told us that as we forgive others, we are forgiven.

But I still felt despitefully used.

I guess I either didn't know how to get rid of the injured feelings, or I wanted to hug them to my breast and wallow in them.



I didn't want to forgive the one who hurt me. I wanted that person to change.

Mrs. Christenson writes about what will happen to me as I pray for my enemy. She started with a passage from James 3:11-12: "Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water."

Can I produce anger and resentment in my heart and bring forth love at the same time?

Can I harbor ill will and unforgiveness for someone and be of any good to anyone else?

Can I pour forth the salt water of rejection and be united with the living water of acceptance that comes from Jesus?

Convicted by these words, I knew I wanted to change. For the first time, I truly wanted to pray for this person.

Mrs. Christenson suggests four steps for praying for an enemy:

- First, forgive that person.
- Next, thank God for something good about him.
- Ask God for his love and blessing on the person.
- And then think of one specific need in his life and pray for God's action in meeting that need.

I knelt and prayed through the four steps, and I changed. Can you pray for someone and still feel anger at them?

Along The Way



The situation is the same, but I am not. The problem is still there, but I feel peace.

I do not have to solve the problem. I have to do my Lord's bidding.



I'm A Single At Weddings

I am awash in weddings.

Not only that of the Prince and now Princess of Wales, but of lesser folk as well. Friends, both young and old (well, older).

As a result of attending three weddings recently (two in person and one by television), I have heard some powerful sermons on Christian marriage.

As a Christian single, I have found all that food for thought sometimes hard to swallow.

I don't mean hard to swallow as to its truth and effectiveness. The problem is exactly the reverse. What I have found hard to swallow is the lump in my throat created by my sad realization of all I did not know about marriage when I was married.

I also swallow hard wondering how the Lord will work in my unmarried life the blessings he has established for those in the wedded state.



There are advantages to being single. I can do what I want when I want to — within reason. I can avoid the pain and humiliation of looking at the weaknesses of my character. I don't have to keep loving someone who proves to be unlovable (as unlovable as I) once the romance is gone. I don't have to risk being hurt.

However, the sermons said marriage is a healing sacrament, established to help the partners become the people God intended them to be — the people who, without each other, they will not be.

Through the process of learning to live with someone who is not compatible (there are no compatible people, one minister said), we see our faults, our weaknesses, our selfishness, our fear. We learn to be less selfish, less afraid, less demanding, more giving, more accepting, more loving — more Christlike.

This only happens in marriages where both partners are submitted first to Jesus and then to each other. That is commitment that allows for trust in the relationship, for time for solutions to be found, and for strength to try again.

That doesn't exactly sound like "happily ever after," does it? It sounds painful. But it's worth it in the long run — and Eternity is a long time.

So where does it happen for the single?

Whom do I get to tell me how impossible I really am — while loving me anyway and staying around to see if I improve? Who will help heal me and whom may I help heal?

I am committed to Jesus, but is that enough? Will it do the job?

Along The Way



It must. Isn't God able?

I guess I'll just have to walk it out. He never said it would be easy.

Were you expecting an answer? I don't know the answer. But I do know the Answerer.



Trials Along The Way

After listening to several friends recount the trials through which they were going, with varying degrees of pain and anguish, it was a relief to find one friend who said her life was on an even keel right now.

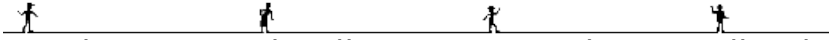
The relief was somewhat shaken, however, by her next remark. It was funny, she said thoughtfully, but she didn't feel as close to the Lord right then as she did when she was going through a rough time.

Even those of us who know the Lord forget Him when things are going well, my friend said. We slip right back into thinking we have our lives under control.

"When things are going our way, we do tend to go away from the Lord," she concluded with a small sigh.

I think that is a fair description of something called original sin — the desire to be our own god.

So what is the answer? Do I need to ask the Lord to send me difficulties so I may stay close to Him?



That seems hardly necessary since we live in a place filled with human beings and ruled by the prince of this world.

But just a minute. It is the Lord's desire to make me holy, and that may involve changing me, and change is often accompanied by trials and problems. So do I ask for that?

It is a rather scary thought. When I ask the Lord to make me holy — or consent to His plan to do so — I am setting myself up for trouble. That's because the only way He can make me holy is by stripping away the many human failings that have been grafted onto me through the years.

And this stripping process can be painful.

It took some time for my friend's remarks to get inside my defenses, for the Holy Spirit to show me the need to *ask* the Lord to keep me close to Him, to *ask* Him to take from me anything that separates me from Him. But eventually I said that prayer.

For I also told Him — and reminded myself — that I know He is love, that He will not give me more than I can bear, that in the end it will have been worth the pain, and that I would rather be close to Him than anything else I can think of.

So there is a message for that group of friends now in trouble: be glad, because this dark time will bring you closer to Him, if you will let it.



The Hard Choice Between Good And Best

Along The Way



I had to leave a discussion before it was finished the other day — a situation that causes me to return over and over to the unsettled question.

In this case the topic was that portion of the Lord's Prayer in which we ask Him not to lead us into temptation, or not to put us to the test.

What does it mean, asking God not to lead us into temptation?

The suggestion was made that it meant asking God not to put before us really hard choices — not choices concerning things we can see are wrong, like adultery or stealing — but choices between Him and good things we hold really dear.

For example, one member of the group told of realizing right in the middle of a Little League soccer match that he did not know where the Lord was in the whole thing. He shared the strange feeling the thought had given him and said he hoped he would not have to choose between soccer, which he loves, and his Lord.

What could possibly be wrong with having that kind of fun, asked another member of the group. And we began to consider the importance in our lives of "having fun."

Football fans in the group stood solidly by their intention to watch the Super Bowl. They said they did not think that made them awful persons — a conclusion with which I agree, by the way.

What the hockey fan meant was not that hockey was "wrong," but that he hoped (prayed?) that God would not lead him to the point of having to choose between hockey and the Lord.



Having fun is not wrong — unless the Lord has asked us to leave that fun and serve Him in another way. It is not having fun that is wrong, but our pursuit of happiness (a national right!) when it takes us along any road that is not the one our Lord has chosen and marked out for us.

There is nothing wrong with such innocent pleasures for anyone before whom God has placed a specific choice. It may still be all right for every other Christian, but the Lord may say, "It is wrong for the you I want you to be, so choose."

The degree of difficulty in that "test" will depend on the degree of attachment sports has for you.

But what if the Lord puts a choice before you between serving Him or pleasing your mother and father? What if He puts the choice of helping a stranger or helping your children?

God wouldn't ask that, you might say, indignantly.

But I believe He might and that is the kind of test I ask Him not to put before me, though I think that is exactly what He meant when He said we had to be willing to go instantly to the marriage feast when called.





On Center Stage Today:

In his letter to the church in Rome, Paul put into words one of the great promises of Scripture, and described one of the great truths about how the Lord works in and through His people and His world.

I like the emphasis of the amplified version of Romans 8:28:

"We are assured and know that [God being a partner in their labor], all things work together and are [fitting into a plan] for good to those who love God and are called according to [His] design and purpose."

I claimed that promise for a labor of mine this week — after I blew it.

Members of a Methodist Church invited me to speak to their ladies missionary group at an evening meeting and I did. I told them a great deal about how I didn't know the Lord for such a long time and how I finally came to know Him.

I had intended to summarize that quickly and spend most of my time talking about how He is dealing with me now, day by day. But somehow I never got around to it. I talked on and on about how I did this and how I did that and ended with how I finally asked Jesus to be the Lord of my life.

The women were very kind and assured me afterward that it had been a blessing to them. But on my way home, I was very uncomfortable about the whole thing, though not sure why.

While reading *Guideposts* the next day, I discovered the reason for my discomfort in a small article about a teacher. She was being praised right and left at a retirement party, and all eyes were on



her. When she rose to respond, she told how her children had taught her about Jesus and how close they had made her feel to Him. She made them look at Jesus instead of her.

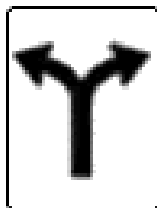
That is what I did not do in my talk. I was the star, and Jesus was just a supporting actor. I talked a great deal more about *me* than I did *Him*.

It's an old trap, my desire to be in the center of the stage. I thought it dead and gone, but obviously a shred or two still lives.

How grateful I am that the Lord brought it so quickly to my attention, so I could ask His forgiveness and healing in this matter.

How thankful I am that He can redeem the talk I gave and let it be more than it really was, that He can use flawed messages as well as flawed people to witness to His glory.

I'll send a copy of this article to that group of women and ask their forgiveness, too. Perhaps that will be part of the promise coming true.

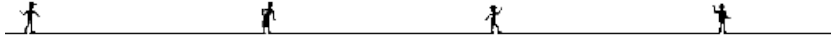


Decision Making

Sometimes decision making is a matter of trust more than of knowledge.

That was the case with a decision I had to make this week. I had taken on a responsibility to a group of women to go with them to work on a project. Then a

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 situation arose at home that made me wonder if I should stay instead.

I prayed about it and tried to listen for the answer, but heard nothing.

So I moved in the direction that seemed to me best and found peace in the going.

The Lord had given me several indications recently that He is in charge of my family situation. The letter mentioned in last week's column is one, a promise by a friend to pray for my family is another and a severing of old chains is a third.

Last week, I was reminded that other people often speak to my children better than I do and that I am not in charge of my children's adult decisions, just my own.

A friend who read that column, and knew I was going to be out of town this weekend, came to me with a promise to pray especially for my daughter this weekend, so I could be free to work for other mothers' daughters.

I had given both my children to the Lord some time ago, but chains of that type are sometimes hard to disentangle. Another friend helped me ask the Lord to cut those chains for me. And He did.

So my decision to leave the family behind and fulfill my commitment was based on trust that all those steps were along His way. The peace that came with packing and gathering the necessary equipment for the weekend was the only evidence that I was making the right decision.

But peace like that, which is truly beyond understanding, is only given by the Spirit of the Lord.



The enemy cannot produce that. Satan can only accuse and confuse. He can mimic many things, but not that kind of peace.



At 14, And Now

I made a decision for Christ — although I didn't know to call it that — when I was 14. More than 30 years passed, however, before I yielded my life to Him.

There is a major difference between the two actions: one may be only mental, the other is mental, physical and spiritual — it involves all of life.

The result of the first was the knowledge that Jesus was the Son of God, that He had been born (somehow, authorities differed) into the world, had died for the sins of the world, including mine, and had been raised from the dead.

It seems strange now, but it was possible for me to know all of that mentally and have it make little difference in my life.

It made some differences, of course, but only surface ones, ones that easily could be changed any time I changed my mind.

For example, I went to church on Sundays.

I decided to go to church regularly. I understood it to be the right thing to do, the proper response to the action of God in redemption.

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But any time I decided to quit believing that, I could simply quit going to church. If the whole thing was even seriously in question, surely the matter of regular churchgoing would be in jeopardy, too.

In fact, if any part of it were to be snatched out of the realm of certainty into the area of maybe or perhaps, then churchgoing would become a matter of weekly decision.

Do I believe strongly enough this week to require me to get up, get dressed and go to church?

Do I get enough out of the fellowship, does the music give me a lift, will the sermon give me any clues as to how to live my life?

In the yielded life it's different.

God is with me all week long, not just on Sundays. I go to church now because He is specially present in His collected Body and, as part of that Body, that's where I want to be.

Besides, there is such joy in sharing worship.

There is a more important difference. As a person who had made a decision for Christ, I never felt any compulsion to share my decision with others. It could be kept a very private matter between my Lord and me.

As one whose life has been given to Him, I know that it is not enough to give myself to Him daily and try to do the good works He has given me to do.

I must believe in my heart and profess with my lips. I must tell others about whose I am and who He is.

Now, I'm not putting down making a decision for Christ. It was certainly part of the process for me.



But becoming a disciple is something more.



From Crisis To The Humdrum

If you live in crisis situations long enough, returning to regular daily life can be something of a shock.

Mind you, in the midst of all my crises, I thought all I wanted was a bit of humdrum living. But humdrum has its own problems.

A marriage counselor once told me it wasn't the major problems that broke up marriages, but the little everyday annoyances. There is a certain truth to that — married or otherwise.

Washing dishes, vacuuming the rug and mowing the lawn aren't very exotic, compared to grappling with life-and-death issues, but they are the stuff of everyday living.

We don't consciously want to stay in the midst of problems, but at least while they are going on, we have so much support.

We feel so close to Jesus during the difficult times. We call upon Him in our pain and know that He

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hears us. He is with us in our desperate hours — and that is a blessing that almost makes the pain worthwhile.

Peace in the midst of these troubles is not possible, not humanly possible anyway. So when it comes, we know Who the giver is.

But finally, the crisis is over, the pain subsides, and desperation gives way to exhaustion.

And then, if we are not careful, we let down our guard. We put down the armor we have been wearing in daily battles against the forces raging against us. Our devotion to Scriptures may become perfunctory, our prayers may begin to sound rote, our praise listless.

At least, that is what I did.

And the Enemy was quick to take advantage.

The fact is we cannot live a victorious life — the abundant life — without devoted, prayerful attention to the Giver of that abundant, victorious life. We cannot live spirited lives without the power of the Spirit.

But — Good News — that's ours for the asking.

All it takes are simple acts of contrition and acceptance to have it. If we know we are His, we have only to confess our weaknesses and humanity, ask for forgiveness and the power to live for Him, and we find Him already there, waiting to supply our need.

Then we must use it — and life won't be humdrum any more.



Rely On God's Promises

Do you keep your promises? When you say you will do some-thing, do you *always* do it? The Lord does.

When the Lord says something is, it is. When He says something will be, it will be. No ifs, ands or buts about it.

What an absolutely incredible, overwhelming wonder that is — to be able to trust the Lord.

Knowing that, I am even more amazed by the number of times I don't trust Him.

I think I do, but when I look at the way I'm acting, I can tell I have not been holding onto the promises of God and believing He keeps His word.

What keeps me from experiencing the promises? If the promises are real, what stands in the way, what keeps the Holy Spirit from operating in me to bring about the blessing promised?

Are there secret "catches" to the promises, conditions that must be met before the promises will be kept? If so, are the conditions too hard for us to meet?

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There are conditions, but they aren't secret and they are eternal. Though they are not easy, they are not too hard for us to manage and they are real.

In Romans 10, Paul tells of two of them. He says that if we confess with our lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in our hearts that God raised him from the dead, then we will be saved.

We must confess and believe.

Confessing has two parts: I must confess that Jesus is Lord — and that I'm not.

That means confessing my sins. And the primary sin is thinking that I am the lord of my life.

Every time I rely upon myself, I don't let the Lord fulfill His promise. And I do it so many times, in ways I'm not even aware of.

So confession also means asking the Lord to forgive me for the sins I know and the ones I don't — like in the old prayer that says, "For those sins I don't remember, Father, forgive me."

Believing is more than an intellectual activity, too. I can't just say I think the resurrection happened; I must believe it in my heart. I must let Jesus be resurrected in me, must let Him live in me:

The promises of God are fulfilled through a yielded and forgiven people.





The Person Least In Your Regard

My ability to memorize is diminishing with the passing years. In junior high I learned long poems with the greatest ease. Now I find I can't even remember the words to an often-sung hymn and have to keep looking at the book

What a shame — just as I finally realized there are so many passages of scripture I would like to know by heart.

There are benefits from knowing scripture by heart. The Lord strengthens His people through His Word, arming them from the attacks of the world, and the more of it I know, the more ammunition I have.

It works this way:

One evening after working late and arriving home at dinner time, tired and not a bit hungry, I found unexpected company coming up the drive right behind me. I really felt put upon by the world.

Resentment became anger.

I retreated to the kitchen, almost in tears from the emotions that filled me.

"Lord, I don't want to feel this way, but I can't seem to help it," I prayed. "I know You don't want me to be this way, it isn't Your way. Please help me.

"Lord, I don't know much scripture by heart, but, please, bring to mind something that will help me through this situation — Your way."

The prayer had hardly ended when the answer came — crystal clear in my mind.

"In as much as ye have done it unto one of the least of these, my brethren, ye have done it unto me."

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I couldn't remember exactly where that is in the Gospels, but I knew what it meant. And it isn't a matter of opinion; it is a simple truth, therefore powerful.

"Yes, Lord," I said, claiming that truth for my life.

And I fixed dinner with a light heart — no longer tired, no longer angry, but strengthened for His service by His word.

I still don't memorize easily. But I keep on reading as much of His word as I can, as often as I can.

And when I have a need — and call on the Holy Spirit to bring to mind His word for me — it always seems to be there.



Marriage — God's Anvil

Marriage is used in the Bible to describe the relationship between Christ and his church.

It works both ways. The relationship of Christ with his church also tells us about marriage.

I've done a lot of thinking about this lately because several persons close to me are contemplating that step. From my talks with them come these reflections on relationships, marriage and sanctification.



Everybody, of course, wants the perfect mate. But none of us is perfect; everyone has flaws. There are no certainties that the loved one won't turn out to have lots of little flaws and maybe even a big one or two.

Making us perfect is one of God's purposes for us. It's called sanctification and it's what we do with the rest of our lives after we accept salvation from His hands.

Christian marriage is one of the ways I believe God uses to help us become the persons He intends us to be. That's because of the emery-paper effect that working at living successfully with someone else has. It scrapes off some of the things about us that need changing.

For example, if the man (woman) we love has a very irritating habit, do we wish, even pray, that he (she) will change?

Okay, but what about the possibility of wishing, praying, that we might change? That we might become more patient, more tolerant, less judgmental, less selfish? That we might be more able to love as He loves?

Any one of those changes would make us more like Jesus, wouldn't it? And that is the real goal.

The marriage in which both partners are surrendered to the Lord is good ground for working out our sanctification; there are so many opportunities for finding areas that need change, a loving framework within which change may take place and time enough for it to happen.

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That is what Christ does when we let him. He shows us areas of our lives that need changing and then he helps the change come about.

He is the savior — and the sanctifier.

It's all pretty risky, of course. But the rewards of letting God work in a committed relationship are uncountable.

A marriage blessed by the presence of God is still a marriage of two very human persons. But its painful periods, its sorrows and disappointments may well be steps in our growth toward God.

Christian men and women joined in marriage in Him form one whole that can only be seen by those who see in the spirit.

Without His presence I don't know how anyone ever dares to marry anybody.



A Mother's Prayer

There is a story I would like to share with you. I may not have all the exact details, but there is a message in this little story that speaks to me plainly.

St. Augustine's mother was a Christian. Her husband was not, nor was her famous son as he was growing up. She prayed daily for her son, who not only wasn't a saint yet nor even a Christian, but was



sometimes a pretty libertine fellow and a follower of pagan philosophies.

Monica prayed for her son Augustine for a long time, asking God to take care of him in one way or another, but always asking God to bring her son to Him, to let her son know Him, love Him and serve Him.

One day she heard Augustine was going to "Sin City" — Milan — to teach at a university there.

She prayed, the story goes, that God would not let her son get on the boat and go to Sin City — and that He would, of course, bring her son to Him.

Augustine got on the boat anyway and went to Milan. And there he met persons who told him about Jesus in such a way that he believed.

This little story, which was told to a group of us who were studying prayer, is a great favorite of mine. I think of it often, especially when things are not going just the way I want them to with those I care greatly for, family members and close friends who are in trouble and who do not know the Lord.

As I pray for them, I often find myself telling God exactly what I think is the best thing for Him to do for my loved ones — and adding somewhat like an aside or an afterthought, "Oh, and bring them to You, Lord. Let them know You."

And when my specific prayers are not answered — at least not the way I want them answered — and my great prayer is not answered either and they go on their way not yet knowing Him, then I remind myself of St. Augustine's mother.

She prayed for her son for a dozen years before that fateful trip to Sin City where he was converted..

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I haven't been doing it that long yet.

And so I go on, still asking God to keep my loved ones from going to Sin City, but remembering Monica and Augustine.



Learning To Serve

I was a waitress one evening recently. It was a one-time occasion, so was in no way the equivalent of working fulltime. But in the process I thought a little about what it means to be a server — and an evangelist.

The dinner was the “super special” the *Journal* auctioned off during a fund-raising drive for the Cummer Gallery and the waitresses and busboys were Journal staff members.

Pat Patti of Patti's restaurant, chef of the evening, gave us a crash course in serving. For example, when it is time to move from the first course to the second, we should remove the soup dishes — whether the diners have finished or not!

"Service in French restaurants," Patti said, "is always arrogant." He explained that French waiters are told they are in charge, the customer is simply eating.



He said it with a smile, so I'm not sure he was being perfectly serious. Maybe he was just bolstering our courage.

In any case, I never did manage to feel arrogant. But then, I never felt subservient either.

I did identify some pertinent things about being a good server — other than the need for good feet.

A good server watches over everything, so half full water glasses never became empty water glasses. A good server must be on his toes to meet needs as they arise. In fact he should anticipate a need **before** it arises. The best service is unobtrusive; it doesn't catch the eye of those served.

Obviously, being a good servant demands planning, sacrifice and dedication.

A waiter or waitress expects, of course, to derive satisfaction from his efforts: perhaps some personal gratification, but usually a financial one, a tip. The better the service, the bigger the tip.

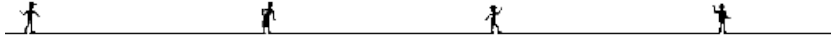
But when the waiter or waitress is through, the diner is the same person he was before. The service alone, no matter how good, has not made a difference in his life.

Jesus had some things to say about being a waitress — waitresses come in the servant category. He came to be one and he said we should be one, too.

I can't, imagine anything more satisfying than serving our Lord, and He says we do when we serve each other.

But the server Jesus talked about must not expect a tip. In fact, when he has served perfectly, he

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has only done what is expected of him, Jesus said, nothing more.

The accolade, "Thou good and faithful servant," is not said of the excellent server. It is said of the servant who goes out and brings more in to his master.



When They Read Your Will

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 ever actually tried to do this, I suspect you'd find in short order that everybody had something terribly urgent they had to do. They can probably come up with as many excuses as did all those guests Jesus spoke about who were the first ones invited to the banquet!

But there is one time when I believe most people can count on their families listening to what they have to say — when their wills are read.

That is why making the will a last will and testament is such a good idea.

The testament part is a statement of what the person believes, and it's a pretty good bet those present at the reading of the will would hear him in that context.

My first will was written when I realized if you have children, even if you think you have no worldly



goods, you need a will to handle naming a guardian and all that.

I have updated my will only once, when I became a single parent.

Now that both children are legal adults, I think I will redo it again — and make it a will and testament.

It is quite a challenging idea: summarizing my faith and putting what I want to tell my family about it all in one short statement. I've thought about it for some time, but keep putting off the actual writing.

The testament, of course, would be followed by the distribution of my worldly goods, such as they may be. But worldly goods cannot compare with the legacy of faith and without that legacy, worldly goods are dust and ashes at best and snares and traps at worst.

Let me try now, going, as the cliché says, back to basics.

"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 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 sends 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, my brothers and sisters.

"I long ago surrendered each of 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

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relationship with Him, which is the greatest treasure of all."

A decision has been made to end this column. It was suggested that a farewell column be written for next week, but this one seems &i appropriate place to stop. Let my last gift to you be this same legacy.



Who Knows When?

A funny thing happened on the way home from a church conference last summer.

I thought it was funny, anyway, and so did at least one of the two ministers who were returning to Jacksonville from the same conference.

The three of us were standing, talking, in a waiting area of the airport when I spotted someone I thought I knew but hadn't seen in a while. (I suspect you could meet everyone you ever knew in the Atlanta airport if you stayed around long enough.)

Anyway, I went to speak to the person, leaving the two ministers deep in discussion. When I returned one had a funny expression on his face and the other was laughing.

It seems the former had suddenly realized I was not there and for a moment he thought the rapture had come and I had been taken.



"It wasn't so much that you were gone," laughed the second minister. "It was that he thought he had been left behind!"

I bring this up now because I was asked the other day what I thought about the rapture.

I answered that I don't think about it much at all. As with all such end-times events, I am content to leave it in the hands of the Lord.

My questioner pressed a little harder, wanting to know if I didn't think it would help me do more about the spread of God's Kingdom if I thought the rapture was coming right away.

My reply was that if it did that for her, fine. Anything that helps her pay more attention to God's will for her is OK in my book.

But what if the rapture takes too long to get here? Will she be able to maintain the fervor born of expectation of the Last Days? If that is her only reason for wanting to serve God, human nature will probably let her off the hook shortly, for it is hard to keep up that kind of fervor.

The funny thing is, none of us knows when our own "last times" will come. We may not be here for the rapture.

Jesus gives us advice on how to be aware of time in His stories of the 10 virgins waiting, with their lamps of oil, for the coming of the bridegroom and about the rich man who, if he had known when the thief was coming, would have been ready and waiting for him;

If we become too entranced with looking to the future, we can forget to look to today. What I think the

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Lord wants is our attention now to whatever it is He wants of us now.



Why Me?

"Why me, O Lord?

Why did this happen to me?"

I could ask those questions at the beginning of every day. But I wouldn't be asking about the bad things that happen to me and those I love.

I would be asking why the Lord brought me through safely to morning? Why I escaped the dangers of the night that befell so many others?

I could ask why He blessed me so, but too often I don't.

We don't often think about these questions. We blithely accept the gift of life from God's hands with barely a hint of thanks. A rainbow may make us appreciate life for a moment; the smell of a rose may remind us of its blessings.

But most of the time "Why me?" means "Why did this terrible thing happen to me?"

If we compared what we do and what we are with the perfect goodness of God, we would not be surprised at the tragedies and troubles that come our



way. If strict justice were meted out by God, I'd be in a heap of trouble, as the saying goes.

And I'm trying to be good. I'm trying to be a witness to the action of the Spirit of the Lord in my life. I'm trying to love God with all my heart and all my strength and all my mind. And I'm trying to love my neighbor as I love myself.

And I'm doing a rotten job of it.

I don't steal or kill or commit adultery But while the law bans killing, Jesus commands us to love one another — as He loved us. And love is an action verb.

It means *doing* for the other person, not *feeling* good about him. So I can't use the excuse that I don't feel warm affection for someone; I should try to do for them what Jesus would have done, no matter how I feel.

But I don't. Not always.

I don't know anyone who does, always.

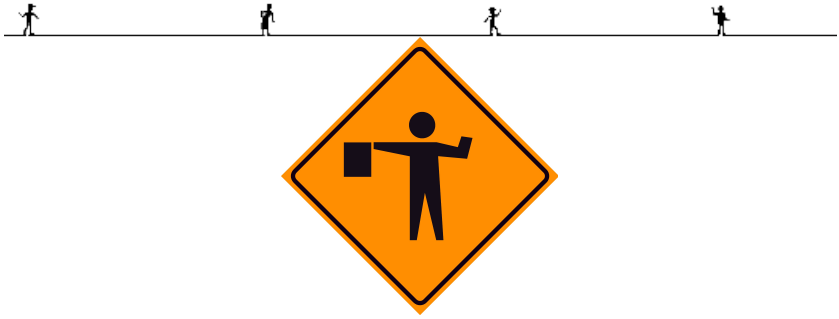
Yet, we are not judged strictly by either the law or Jesus' commands, He provided for that by His death. We try to do His commandments not for fear of retribution, however much deserved, but because we bloom in the wellspring of His love and we desire to please Him.

So, why me, Lord? Why do You love me so?

Thank You that You do.

And when those tragedies and troubles come?

Then the question is still not "Why me?" It's "What do You want me to learn from this, Lord? How can we use it, You and I, for Your purposes".



Sometimes Another Carries The Word

A recent letter from a reader blessed me in several ways.

One way confirmed that I had done something right. I had spoken the message God wanted me to speak — it had served His purpose for at least one person.

Another blessing takes a bit more explaining.

The letter, written by someone who signed herself "A friend in need" and "A Mother," was in response to the May 17 column, "Big Question is 'Why Me?' "

The letter read: "It [the column] really shocked me and I wondered why you were prompted to write it. You see I have been praying for my son who at 20 years of age was living the drug route and alcohol."

She went on to describe briefly the difficulties her son's lifestyle had brought him, his arrest and time in jail. There, she said, he encountered a young worker from a drug abuse program and volunteered to enter the program.

"The night before he was to go, he sat on my bed and said, 'Why me?' He is not a criminal or rapist or a wicked person. Just trapped in a hell-bent society



and emotionally immature. It has been difficult for me to understand.

"I read where you said, 'What do you want me to learn from this, Lord?' I think now I can mail this article to my son and he will understand."

Her son asked a man from a nearby church for a Bible; he asked his mother for copies of her religious poems. "He always seemed bored with them before.

"So who knows what God has planned for him? My prayers may be answered and a brilliant young life saved to serve others. If the ending is a happy one, I'm sure you shall have helped."

I am so like that other mother. I, too, have a troubled child. It blesses me that the Lord used me to help someone with my same pains.

My voice was used to speak to her and perhaps to the young man as well.

When I try to speak to my own child, there is no response. She does not seem to have "ears that hear" where my voice is concerned.

But there are many voices proclaiming the truth of salvation offered in Jesus Christ. This unknown friend has reminded me that there is a voice out there that can reach my child's ears and go into her heart.

I may never know who will speak His name in a way she can hear. It doesn't matter. I thank the Lord now for the speaker and praise Him for His promise to hear our prayers and answer them.

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For Parents

There is absolutely nothing as potentially depressing as learning how to raise your kids — after they're all grown.

I sat in on the second of a seven-film series recently on raising children.

The series features Paul Dobson, author of *Dare to Discipline* and *Hide or Seek*. His reasoned approach in that second film to handling problems of parental anger, of shaping the child's will without crushing his spirit, was eye opening for some of us in the group. (The first, looked at the strong willed child and the difference between childish irresponsibility and willful disobedience.)

I could see very clearly how much better it would have been if I had done this instead of that, if I had just known the techniques he was teaching.

After we broke into small groups to talk about what we would do in some hypothetical situations, our discussion leader passed out sheets of Scripture quotations.

Why ask any man for advice on raising your children, he asked, without asking the One who made children what He has to say on the subject.

He stressed that he was not talking about the use of scripture as clubs in the hands of dictatorial parents, but about our need to know what the Bible



has to say about how God sees parent/child relationships and how to raise children.

I had to leave at that point and missed the end of the discussion. But it stayed in my mind — the whole business of raising your children and finding guidance for doing it.

I did a lot of thinking about Dobson's points: about acting before you get angry, of planning instead of just reacting, of setting limits on the will while bolstering the spirit.

And I realized that even if I had known all those good things while my children were still little, I could not have done them all. I could not have made it work for me, not the way I would have wanted it to work.

This is not to knock the suggestions Dobson makes. I think he is right on target. But the fact is that our efforts to be perfect parents are hampered by the fact that we are not perfect anythings. We are imperfect human beings.

Being good Christian parents is possible only for those who know where the wisdom to do it right comes from, who know they will be forgiven for errors in judgment and in love, and who are supported by a larger Christian family to keep trying.

Young Christian parents can find the Way the Lord intends them to do everything in the Bible (including child-raising in particular) and then they can take advantage of such good man-made advice as Dobson offers.

I can just thank Him that He is still at work in my children's lives.

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God's Will

How do I know if I am doing what the Lord wants me to do, what the Lord's will for me is?

For a long time, whenever I had a major decision to make, I went through asking myself that question. Then someone shared a three-fold procedure that I think is a pretty good starting point for knowing His will for us.

If a decision must be made, these three steps will help keep the decision within God's will:

First, how do you feel about it in your heart. How do your own insides feel about it?

Next, what does the Bible say about it?

And finally, what does the body of Christ, the community of believers, have to say?

But this description — or prescription — is only the framework. There is more.

For example, the way you feel in your heart will only have merit as a way of directing your choices toward God if that heart is one in which Jesus lives.

To understand what the Bible says about the particular issue, you must look with eyes that see spiritual things. This is not a matter of looking up a word in a concordance and reading a passage that seems to speak to your problem. The devil can quote scripture very well, you know.



It is a matter of coming to the Scriptures on a regular basis, asking the Lord to open them to you and then reading with faith that He can and will do so. You must see with spiritual eyes and believe that God can and does speak to you now through them.

Finally, to see what the body says about it, you have to be a living, functioning part of that body. This is more than institutional membership or knowing what the official pronouncement is on a subject. That is important, but it is not all.

With that is needed the response of believers who know the Lord and you.

But I have found this whole process is a waste of time unless I really want the Lord's will for me to be done — and not my own.



Responsible Generosity

It is more blessed to give than to receive.

So say the scriptures and this may be especially true for those ministers whose outreach is great and to whom much is being given — the men who lead television ministries, for example — and the people who support them financially.

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Quite a bit of attention has been paid recently to television ministries and the money they take in. Sometimes subtly — and sometimes not so subtly — the commentators on these shows have suggested that the money is being mishandled, if not deliberately, at least by poor management.

On one show an ex-child evangelist said such ministries are a form of con.

They may be, in some cases. And in others the money may not be doing all the good the supporters of these ministries hope will be done.

But there is an aspect of this subject that the commentators and the supporters seem to me to be overlooking.

It certainly is right that people who believe in the work of these television ministries support them with their donations. Everything we have is the Lord's in the first place, so all a Christian is doing is returning to the Lord what is already His.

And it is certainly right for a minister to ask for the support necessary to spread the gospel.

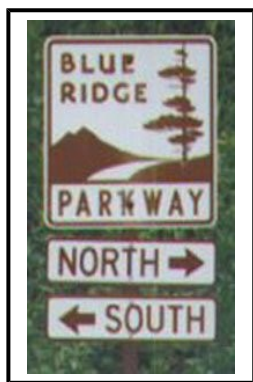
But the minister is responsible for what happens to the money and for seeing that it not only does what he told the supporters it would do, but that it does what the Lord wants it to do.

And when a supporter simply says that whatever the minister does with the money is all right with him, he overlooks his responsibility for a fellow Christian and especially for those who serve as leaders.

Shepherds will receive a special blessing for their work in taking care of the sheep, but they will also receive a judgment based on that care. It is not



enough for a Christian to say, I have done the right thing by contributing; the rest is between the minister and God. We may not be able to assist in the management of funds, but we can pray that these ministers will stay within God's will and then ask the right questions to help them do it.



Do Mountains Sit?

A couple of years ago, while on vacation in the mountains of North Carolina, I wrote a poem about a mountain, God and me.

In fact, I wrote a lot of poems that quiet week in May I spent by myself in the mountains. But this particular poem was about how long the mountain had been doing God's will for it — just being there, wearing ever-so-slowly away — and how short a time I have been trying to do God's will for me as I, too, grow older.

A friend who writes poetry read my effort and commented on a line she thought rather odd. The line reads:

"O aged mountain sitting there clothed in your spring's fresh green...

Along The Way



"Mountains don't sit," my friend insisted. "They stand. I never heard anyone say a mountain sits!"

I couldn't refute her impression, but I didn't change the poem. Such as it is, it reflected things as I saw them.

This year, back again at the same spot where I had created the poem (my mother's house in the Blue Ridge of North Carolina), I discovered something about perspective.

Sitting on the porch of the mountain house, I looked with level gaze at that mountain. The house is almost at the top of a ridge and from that point of view, my head was almost as high as the top of the other mountain.

I was sitting — so the mountain was sitting, too!

Point of view, perspective, can make a great difference.

When I talk about Jesus now, what I say is very different from what I said a few years ago. I wasn't sure who He was, not really sure. I acknowledged Him to be the Son of God (whatever that meant), the One who died and rose again that mankind might be at one again with God (whatever that meant), and I even called Him Lord and Savior.

But though I called Him Lord, I did not acknowledge Him as Lord, here and now, not only of creation, but of my life.

To my eyes He was almost 2,000 years away — a distant figure too high, too broad, too deep to be seen by me — and certainly not Someone who should be sovereign of my daily life — my future, perhaps, but not my today.



Then my point of view changed when I finally answered His question: Who do you say I am?

Now I see Him as a living Lord, as my Lord, and from that perspective I see Him looking back with chiding, correction, forgiveness, teaching, encouragement, promise, joy and love — but most of all with love.



Getting Started

People have been telling me for years the Lord helps those who help themselves. But when the Lord told me, I finally got the message.

Along The Way



Getting away for a vacation takes a bit of doing — especially when all the work you would have done if you hadn't gone must be done before you go.

Before I left on vacation, last month, I decided I would never get everything done. It seemed impossible that I should actually accomplish all the jobs I was supposed to in the time allotted.

So on Tuesday, three days before I was scheduled to leave, I panicked.

"Lord," I said, "I know that Jesus had all the power He needed to do anything — and I know that He is in me — so that means I have in me all the power I need to get all this work done.

"But, Lord, when are you going to give me that power, when are You going to turn it loose in me?"

The answer came right back. "As soon as you get started."

As long as I was just sitting around moaning about how much I had to do, I didn't need much energy. Complaining and worrying aren't done with His power.

What I had to do was get up and get going, then He could give me the energy to keep going.

And that is exactly the way it worked, too. Once I began the first job, I found myself completing it. The same with the second and so on right through the long list of things that had to be done.

All I had to do was step out in faith that He would be there and would do what He said.

A recent letter from the Jews for Jesus contained a little series of drawings that caught the spirit of this lesson. It showed a man who had fallen off a cliff and



was hanging onto a small branch, calling for help. "Oh God — if there is a God, help me!" he cried. "I'll do anything!"

The Lord answered back, "Then let go of the branch and I'll catch you."

"Anything ELSE," the man said. "I'll do anything ELSE but that."

Sometimes people put Peter down for sinking when he tried to walk over the water to Jesus. But Peter trusted the Lord enough to get started, to set foot over the side of the boat and let go.

And he may have started sinking, but he didn't finish that way, you know. He finished with Jesus supporting him, all the way back to safety.

What could be better than that?



Product Placement

Some time ago, when I was taking a battery of tests administered by an industrial psychologist to see in which field I would be most productive and happiest, I tallied a high score in salesmanship.

That surprised me because I had always thought that if I had to make my living by selling, I would starve to death.

Looking back over the questions, however, I found they showed I had knowledge of sales techniques, not that I would do well using them.

Along The Way



Let me give a typical question: If you have presented the benefits of your product and the prospective buyer says he is interested and will think it over and call you back, do you:

- 1) suggest a time for the return call
- 2) go over the benefits again
- 3) plan to call the customer yourself the next day?

The "right" answer, of course, is immediately to go through your sales pitch again in an attempt to translate the interest into a sale.

I know the right answer — but I wouldn't do it.

The ability to persuade someone beyond his own level of commitment is risky. Do I really want to be responsible for talking someone into doing something he doesn't want to do?

But what about in matters of faith?

When someone believes very strongly that his "product" is the one to give you everlasting life and all those good things, you can understand his desire to sell it to you, even if that means overwhelming you with his arguments.

Most of us have at one time or another run across this kind of salesman for a particular brand of faith, a particular set of understandings.

But Christians are not called to belief in a set of principles. We are called to a relationship with God in Christ.

We are to be more than decision-makers; we are to be disciples. We are not to understand about Jesus, but to follow Him.



God chose not to overwhelm us, not to **make** us surrender our lives to Him. He could do that easily, but He doesn't. When we surrender, He takes us where we are and walks patiently with us as we grow through many different stages of maturity, each at our own pace of growth.

It matters what we understand about Him, of course, -because we live that understanding. And it matters to us what our fellow Christian understands, because he is our brother.

So we may challenge his understanding, but we are to love him with Christ's love, support him while his faith matures, and take care that we do not cause him to stumble and fall away.

For we cannot in the end tell him what to believe; each of us has to make up his own mind.

But, we can rejoice, for the Spirit is the perfect teacher and we can pray to Him to bring us all closer to Jesus.



Model For Living

If I had created the world, I sure would have made people more alike!

I mean, why couldn't we all be one color? Then we wouldn't have race problems.

And why couldn't we all like change — or all like keeping things the way they have always been — or all

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have the same sense of humor? Then we wouldn't think the other person was strange and nobody would ever be wrong about anything, because everyone would agree.

Think how much easier it would be for us — if we just didn't have all those differences.

Then I wouldn't have to deal with people I don't understand, who do things I don't do and who don't even look like me. And I wouldn't have to try to love them.

Why couldn't we all be alike?

Why couldn't we all be like — me?

But, if everybody was like me, we'd have no science or technological advances, no opera singing, no surgeons.

If everybody was like me, there would be too many hurt feelings, too much anger, too little understanding, too few solutions to problems.

Okay, who should be the model?

There is only one answer to that — Jesus.

Maybe learning to appreciate those other colors, to understand those different personalities, to love those others — maybe that's growing like Jesus.

In Him, the differences not only don't matter — they seem to have a purpose. Those differences seem designed to fit into our own empty places. They add up to a whole — when put together — like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle — or the parts of a body.

The Body of Christ, you know, is not made of just one thing. Christians aren't all one uniform building block.



The One who made us did not want even one of us repeated forever. We aren't all to be the same thing — even the same good thing.

We're just to be the thing, the part of the whole, He wants us to be.



Believing And Proof

A friend of mine says she was happy with the faith she had — until she decided, "I want what you've got" — a personal relationship with Jesus.

But so far, she says, the relationship has eluded her, though her pursuit has been determined.

The thing is, she wants proof, proof so strong there can be no doubt.

She wants to be so overcome by His presence in her life that all her hesitation, all her doubts, all the intellectual barriers will be overthrown and she will know the Lord is there.

But our Lord does not overpower us, even with His love, unless we give Him permission.

For even if she were one day given overwhelming evidence of the Lord's presence in her life, another day would come when she would have to believe on faith. The experience of the past is subject to reinterpretation. Did it really happen? Did I imagine it? Was it indigestion instead of the Lord?

Thomas wanted proof; he wanted to see and touch the wounds. And the Lord acceded to Thomas's

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demand — but for a reason. He wanted to teach us how much better it is for us when we believe without having seen, without proof.

Jesus did not stay with Thomas so he could always touch His hands and side. If He had, we would not have the Spirit as we do. We would not be able to step out in the kind of trust that has no basis in this world, that accepts the fact that there is no incontrovertible proof.

The rich young man, who told Jesus he was doing all the right things now, but wanted something more in his relationship with God, was told to sell everything and follow Jesus — to surrender completely, not to expect to keep any control of his own life.

Jesus said it was an evil generation that always wanted a sign. "But no sign shall be given to it except the sign of Jonah."

The fact of Jesus' death and resurrection, and our own rebirth in Him, is the only sign.

It isn't what we feel but what we become as we are born again, made "new," that gives us the certainty Jesus is in our lives.

Our relationship with Him does not depend on proof, but on trust born out of faith and demonstrated in surrender of our wills.

Jesus explained how to have a relation with him: "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love."

Do it. Don't wait around for an experience. Surrender the demand for proof, believe in Him and act as you would if it were true — for it is.



Shared Pain

The death of any man diminishes me, says John Donne in his famous "no man is an island" passage.

It is a powerful passage, speaking as it does of the commonality of all men, of how lives touch other lives and leave invisible marks on them so that they are never the same again.

There is an even more powerful way to describe the commonality of believers, however. They are one body, the Body of Christ.

Jesus comes into our hearts one by one, but He calls us to become part of His body. It is there that we find safety — the "you" in the passage "The gates of Hell shall not prevail against you" is plural.

It is there that we work out God's purpose in the world — the hand alone cannot do it all, nor can the eye by itself.

Being in the body is good for us, individually, and for the world.

So many people I care about are in pain right now.

Some are in physical pain, recovering from operations or illnesses. Others face truths about themselves that hurt. Some face the pain of loss and separation from loved ones.

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As I think about their situations and their pain, my own heart aches within me. I want to reach out somehow and touch them and take the pain away.

And I am struck all at once with the thought that if I can hurt so much for them, how much more must the Lord know the pain that goes with love.

It is very hard to understand this vulnerability that God chose, but it is the strength that makes our union with Him possible.

Love is weak in the world's eyes. Through love we may be hurt. But through His love we are brought through the hurt to joy.

How can God bear all that pain!

When He hung on the cross He not only carried all our guilt, accepting the separation from God that sin causes, He also accepted the pain that comes with that separation.

He closed that separation for us, so that we are no longer alone, but are joined to His body, to the body of believers both for the healing of our own hurts and for the building of that Body, the spreading of His kingdom.

It isn't an easy thing to do, being in the body. It goes so against the grain of our singleness, our individuality.

We spend so much time learning who we are, or trying to. And our relationship with our Lord is such an individual thing.

But only as we become a vulnerable, loving, sharing part of the body of Christians do we become partners in His life.



Claiming Promises

A thoroughly unhealthy dose of contradictory, negative feelings has led me to a new insight into what it means to be part of the Body.

Lately I have found myself tired of people, wanting to be alone — but as soon as I was all by myself for any length of time, I felt rejected by my friends.

I have felt so exhausted, not wanting to do anything — but as soon as I collapsed on the sofa with a novel, I felt guilty about being idle.

The Accuser has been having a field day with me. He has been pointing out all my inadequacies — and there are many.

Sometimes I just can't seem to get anything done — or done right, at any rate.

I have been trying for months to clean out the utility room — and it looks just like it did in December.

There are no curtains on the windows in the living room because I took the rods down when I painted — last May.

Now that's a pretty silly list, nothing very serious compared to inflation and recession or salvation and sanctification, but the accuser often works that way.

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To make it worse, though, the feelings of inadequacy spilled over into my prayer life. I skimmed on my time with the Lord (which should be even longer), because I didn't seem to have anything to say, except the same old excuses: I'm too tired, I'm too stupid, I'm too afraid.

Then, while reading in Philippians I stopped at this verse in Chapter 2: "It is the Lord, for his own loving purpose, who puts the will and the work in you."

And a day later I found this in Chapter 4: "I can do all things in Him who strengthens me."

Now I know that my inadequacies are not all that important — but I forgot to lay claim to the Lord's promises.

What I learned about the Body is that when I forget, not everyone else does, too.

The Spirit is the strengthener, but if I forget to ask for His strengthening, that is where the Body and intercessory prayer come in. When we pray for each other, we release God's strengthening power for us.

There are people praying for me, not just when there is an urgent need, but daily, just because we are part of the same body. I know they are, and I am praying for them, too, by name.

But maybe I'll just call and ask for a little extra attention that way.





Death Reveals Hidden Beauty

It seems only right that spring is beautiful. All that glowing new life should take one's breath away with its tender magnificence.

It's less "reasonable" somehow that fall should also be stunningly beautiful, that the approach of the "dead" season should have its own power to stop the heart.

We celebrate life, not death.

Yet every year hordes of people drive into the Georgia and Carolina mountains to "see the colors" as the leaves turn red and gold and crimson. Radio stations announce the progression of the change, newspapers headlines proclaim the day and cars by the score take to the highways.

For a half-dozen years I have been joining them. This year I was too late — most of the bright leaves were gone. Trees lifted naked branches to the sky and mountainsides were brown with fallen treasure.

This year as I drove down a nearly empty Blue Ridge Parkway, gazing deep into valleys revealed by autumn's purge, I pondered the beauty of nature's dying for a season.

When the leaves are gone, other beauties that would have been hidden forever without that death now stand open to the eye.

When the season is at its peak, whole mountainsides of color assault the eye. This time, rounding a corner I found one lone tree ablaze with flame-colored leaves, glowing amid the barren branches of its neighbors.

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And, standing on a familiar mountain ridge, usually swathed in foliage, I looked through the open spaces and saw whole mountain ridges beyond.

And, tucked into a pleat in the mountainside, I spied a house with flowers in front and curtains in the windows.

What hidden treasures might appear in our lives if we let the dead leaves fall off?

Not only that. Leaves die and fall off; the tree lives and grows.

Perhaps it is true that as we die to ourselves, as those parts of us that keep us from being what God intended us to be fall away, we may just possibly become more beautiful.

I remember, about three years ago, when I "made it" at exactly the right time. My parents and I joined the slow-moving line on the Parkway and found a vacant parking place in an overlook.

I waxed eloquent: "Isn't it wonderful of God to take something just before it dies and make it so beautiful!"

Mother's shoulder lifted in a tiny, characteristic shrug; one eyebrow moved, a prerequisite to speech.

"Wouldn't it be wonderful if He did the same with people?" she asked.

Back down to earth, I looked at her nearly transparent face, with its tissue-paper wrinkles that do not hinder the light within from shining out, and thought (but dared not say aloud), He does — and He doesn't even wait until the last minute!



Promises

If a friend makes you a promises, can you count on him to keep it?

His intentions might be very good, and if he is really a friend, then perhaps you can count on his good will toward you. But is he reliable? Can you trust him to remember his promise? (What if his memory is like mine!) Will he go out of his way for you — or expend himself on your behalf — or risk himself for you?

And even if the answers to all these questions are positive, does he have whatever is needed to make the promise come true?

A realistic approach to human nature requires you to acknowledge that even a good friend may break a promise.

If a stranger makes you a promise, the chances of it being kept become even more uncertain. What does a promise mean to him, anyway?

If a stranger does not keep a promise, we may remind ourselves of how untrustworthy people are and wonder at our naivete in trusting in the first place. If a friend forgets a promise, we can probably forgive him, knowing we have done the same.

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How then should we regard the promises the Lord makes to us?

Well, if He is a stranger, it is going to be hard to trust Him. His promises are so incredible — things like life everlasting, an abundant life, a peace so deep it passes our understanding, to be with us always, to be heirs with Him of the Father's kingdom. How can you believe those promises will be kept if you don't know Him?

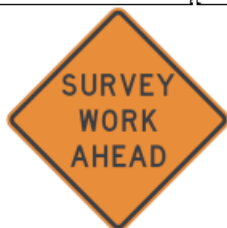
If you have only heard about Him, you may hope He will keep these promises, but you may not be sure. Will He remember to do them, or wish to do them or be able to do them, really? Perhaps, you think, you didn't hear the promise correctly. You can't hold someone to a promise you misunderstood, can you?

And after all, there are so many promises, too many to recount here. (David Wilkerson has collected 800 of them in a little book called *Jesus Person Pocket Promise Book*.)

But if you know Him in your heart, not just your head, then you know He is God, not a god created by man but the Living Lord who rules all things. Then you know He is **able** to keep His promises. And He has proven His good will toward us — He came to be one of us, died to save us and sent His Spirit to empower us.

There is a small sign stuck to the refrigerator door in a home I love to enter. It reads:

"The Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it."



Search For Meaning

When I began writing religion articles nearly three years ago, I thought I was a committed Christian who could "write something meaningful."

And I wrote, with all the skill I could muster, articles about issues of the day, such as to pull or not to pull the plug on life support systems at the time of the Karen Ann Quinlan case, the difference between atheism and agnosticism, and the growing gap between Christians and non-Christians.

During this time I also met and listened to people who knew the Lord in a way I did not. Bishop Festo Kivengere of Uganda talked about the love of Jesus that can overcome persecution; the Rev. John Stott, rector emeritus of All Souls Episcopal Church in England, talked so clearly about the lordship of Jesus; and Lawrence Hammond came to Jacksonville to speak to the Full Gospel Businessmen's Association, and to me, too, about the healing power of Jesus in his life.

And there were other ministers and laymen who knew God in a way that I did not, although I have been a Christian since I was 14.

They knew Him in their hearts and I in my head.

They had given all of their lives to Him; I was giving only part of mine.

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There grew in me such a hunger for what they had: the peace, the joy, the love, the assurance of a life lived His way.

But warring with that hunger was a fear — of doing something embarrassing. I was afraid to give my whole life to Him because He might ask me to do something I did not want to do.

I was not afraid of being asked to die for my faith, probably because that seemed highly unlikely.

The question of life or death seemed not as hard to cope with as the question of making a fool of myself or avoiding doing that.

The hunger outweighed the fear and I offered Him all my life — all I could and the part I couldn't, I asked Him to help me turn loose.

And I found that my wanting to write "something meaningful" had really been wanting to write something people would admire, something that would bring me recognition and praise.

So I gave the desire to write to Him, too. And He gave it back, for me to use in His way.



In Awe Of God



The universe is marvelously complex and we are learning more and more about it. Recently, for example, television and news magazines carried photographs of Jupiter and its moons, sent back to earth by Voyager, the latest thing in camera-carrying space probes. It all adds to the wonder.

As scientists and philosophers struggle with theories of the beginning — and meaning — of the universe, the person who knows God can spend time praising Him instead.

I've praised God this Lent for His work of creation, creation of the world — and of me. But what if I did not know God, did not know to praise Him?

How do we know God? Not by the efforts of man. All the deep thinking of philosophers, the agonizing research of scientists, the analyzing of historians and the questioning of theologians is not able to show us God.

God alone is able to let us know Him and this He does through the Person of Jesus.

He who has seen Me, Jesus says, has seen the Father.

They called it blasphemy — and if it were not true, that is what it would be. They crucified Him for saying it, but it is true. He is God and to see the Father, one must look to Jesus.

The prophets listened to God and told what they heard. We learn **about** God from their messages. But we only know to **know** Him by coming to know Jesus.

And we can only come to know Jesus when we let Him enter our lives.

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I am as complex as the universe. So I will praise God for the thirst He built into me, the thirst for living water, the thirst for Him.

"O God, thou art my God; early will I seek thee: my soul thirsteth for thee in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is . . ." (Psalm 63, King James Version)

If she had known who he was that asked for a drink of water, Jesus said to the woman at the well, she would have asked him for living water — and he would have given it to her.

That's all you have to do.



Birth Hurts

Russell Albert has not been "born again." He has just been born the first time.

Giving birth is hard work, my daughter told me shortly after she was delivered of my first grandchild.

"And it hurts," she said, "but it's worth it."

Sometimes being born again is hard work, too. But the benefits are incalculable.

Russell complained about leaving the nice, quiet, warm and comfortable world he had lived in — the only one he had known.

Can all that pain and buffeting be for anything good? Is there something worthwhile beyond this safe



and secure world that I know? Don't make me go through this; I can't possibly take it.

And, heaven knows, there are no guarantees that all will go well with him. It's a hard world, and there are frustration and pain in living in it, as well as coming into it.

But Heaven does know. That is why heaven came to earth — to offer another birth, a new life. I pray that his pains may be few. Of course, there will be joy and beauty, too.

There will be times when Russell will know a sense of fulfillment, the joy of touching another person in love, the passion of caring for something and someone deeply, the satisfaction of a job well done, the freedom of laughter and carefree fun.

And I pray that he may see rainbows and sunrises that give a glimpse of a beauty beyond anything man can produce, that he may see stars and planets — and grains of sand and maybe even atoms — that hint of mysteries deep and broad.

But the person born just once struggles to be the creature he was intended to be. So much of joy is mixed with pain, fulfillment with frustration.

To live in this world as a man is the gift of birth. To live in this world and the next as a son and heir of God is the gift of being born again.

After a good night's sleep, one may wake to a new day and feel refreshed, renewed. Being born again is more than that. One is not renewed, one is new — a new creation.

We go, most of us, kicking and screaming into the new life, just as Russell cried on entering this one;

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not believing it can possibly be good to die to self in the only world we have known and to live as new persons in Jesus.

To "die" willingly is not easy, even if you have the evidence of others who have done the same thing right before your eyes.

The evidence is seen in the lives of those who have been born again: love, joy, patience, gentleness, kindness, self-control and longsuffering, but the greatest of these is love.

So, Russell, I wish you love.



Listening Prayer

Prayer is conversation with God, someone once told me. If this is so, the talking part is hard enough, but what about the listening?

A bird died outside my bedroom window one morning recently.

It took a long time dying — from sometime in the deep darkness to sometime during those moments of first streaming light.

I heard its cries in the dark. I saw the feeble fluttering of its wings in the dawn.



It must be diseased or something, I thought, because the cats — hunters all three — are paying no attention to the cries or the fluttering.

What should I do? Should I go outside and "put it out of its misery?"

Isn't that the same thing as mercy killing? Do I believe in that? Does a bird's death have a place in God's plan; does its life?

I don't know whether I CAN deliberately kill something other than a fly or a bug — but in any case I didn't.

I prayed instead, something like this:

"O, God, you know when a sparrow falls; be with this, your creature. All life is held in the Person of your Son — this life as well as mine — and all dying is now part of His death. Thank you that this is so.

"And I'm sorry I didn't know what to do."

I didn't listen for a reply.

Later, as I buried the bird, I thought about my prayer. I wondered, briefly, if it was a "proper" prayer, with all the theology correct.

Then I began to ponder prayer in general. Whom do you pray for — in a world of people needing prayer. How do you know what to pray for them that will be within God's will?

As for whom: Brother Luke, of the Order of the Holy Cross, spoke to this question in a seminar on prayer at St. John's Cathedral a few years ago. One suggestion he made concerned praying "for the world." As you read the paper, he said, pray right then for those individuals, nations and situations that seem to call for your prayers.

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What if you don't know what is best for someone but want to pray for them?

In one of the novels by Charles Williams (a contemporary of C.S. Lewis) one of the characters is concerned about her niece. Williams has the aunt pause in what she is doing (one shoe on, one in her hand while dressing) and turn all her attention to praying for the girl, but all she does is mentally lift up her image in the presence of the Lord.

What about praying "in the Spirit?" What does it mean? How do you do it?

Two interpretations came to mind.

One, recounted by a friend who believes she heard it from Oral Roberts, involves the use of a "prayer language." The Holy Spirit is the communicator; he teaches us all we need to know. So, first pray in your prayer language, then the Spirit can teach you what you should pray, your prayers will be directed where they should go and you will know how to pray according to His will.

A somewhat different version of praying in the Spirit came from another friend who has given it a great deal of thought.

His conclusion, much simplified, is that praying in the Spirit involves living in the Spirit. Then all one's thoughts will be turned to the Lord and simply thinking about a person or situation will be a prayer. And when two or three such persons come together to talk about Him and to share concerns, this, too, becomes a form of praying in the Spirit.

As I patted the final shovelful of earth over the small grave, I paused and wondered if I had been listening.



My Chartreuse Hat

There is an entire society of women who wear red hats and have fun together, attracting attention along the way.

All by myself I managed to do the same thing, only my hat was chartreuse.

My eyes were bothering me the other morning in the arts room so I went next door into the Boutique – which is the fancy name we give the place where we dispose of things we no longer need or have room for – to see if they had a hat. And they had a red one, but it did not fit, too small.

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The one that fit was chartreuse, and soft and bouncy.

You can roll it up and shake it out and it goes right back to its original shape. I think the slightly rolled brim goes up and down as the wearer moves, but since I was the wearer, I paid no attention to that.

For the best thing about the hat was that it shaded my eyes from the fluorescent lights.

I enjoyed the shade so much, I wore it into the dining room for lunch and there it attracted lots of attention and comments. Mostly positive.

I don't think I will wear it everywhere, however. I don't have that much that chartreuse goes with and I'm not really energetic enough to become - and maintain being -- a character.

I got my brace back at about 3:15 yesterday afternoon. It is so much more comfortable than the old black fuzzy boot. With its Velcro bindings and over all rigidity.

Today is an all-mine day, nothing scheduled to do for anyone else.

So I did basically nothing all morning. Not a bit productive.

I think I will go paint a while this afternoon. At least that produces feelings of contentment in me, if it doesn't do anything for anyone else.

While I concentrate on the picture before me and on how to make it look the way I want it to look, I can't think about what I could, or should be doing instead.

Like finding a deeper, spiritual meaning in this column.



My Chartreuse Hat, Part II

There is a deeper meaning to the event of the chartreuse hat (see the previous item for the original story).

I thought of it during Sunday School this morning when the teacher made an of-the-cuff remark.

He said, “How profound we are in our shallowness. We can drown in a puddle.”



The “deeper meaning” of my finding a chartreuse hat to wear while painting – and getting lots of positive feed back from folks who saw me wearing it – may only be puddle deep. But it’s there.

But when there hasn’t been much rain, a puddle is still water.

What I received with the hat was laughter. A floppy yellow-green hat with a turned up brim seen on top of a quite wide old lady made me laugh when I looked in the mirror.

And I think it amused God, too. I think He planned it that way and I was fortunate enough to see the plan.

Every morning I pray, “Give us this day our daily bread.”

Along The Way



And I believe He does.

The trick, if I may call it that, is to learn to see the widely – and sometimes wildly – different forms bread can take.

It can take the form of a chartreuse hat.

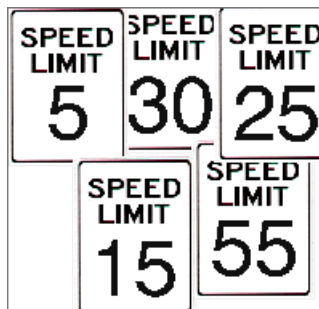
That hat with its floppy up and down motion and outrageous color fed my spirit with the idea that God picked it out for me and left it in the Boutique for me to buy.

You don't think He does things like that?

Maybe. Maybe not.

But Scripture says He knows my sitting down and my rising up, my going out and my coming in. He knows my thoughts before I think them.

There are certainly deeper proofs of this than a chartreuse hat, things deeper than a puddle. But I believe you can find your own deeper meanings if you try. Or God will show them to you if you ask Him to. Or at least give you hints and clues for you to ponder while wading.



Over The Speed Limit

The speed limit is a good teaching tool. Well, it is teaching me something about obedience.



Obedience, as a word and a concept, is not much in vogue right now. "Do your own thing" has sort of supplanted it. At best, obedience is seen as something you do just enough of to avoid getting in trouble.

My lesson began while I was visiting friends out of town. It seems the husband had driven from one town to another one Sunday morning with a priest who was to conduct services in both places. The minister had stayed so long chatting with the first congregation that he was going to be late reaching the second.

"He was driving about 85 miles an hour," my host said, "and I couldn't even pray for the Lord's protection because we were breaking the law."

"You could have prayed," said his wife, with a stress on the you.

"After all, you weren't driving." : Now, I had noticed when being driven around by either of these friends that we always drove the posted speed limit, but I hadn't thought about reasons for this.

As I prepared to drive the 75 or so miles back to Jacksonville at the end of that visit, I was conscious of my foot on the accelerator.

I am a rather law-abiding person; I usually only drive five miles or so over the speed limit. I mean, that's hardly noticeable and the highway patrol doesn't stop people that close to the mark and besides it's so hard to keep the car at 55 when everyone else is going 65. Right?

Well, that day I became aware that driving 55, and no more, was obeying the law. Driving 60 was "obeying" my version of it.

Along The Way



Drivers who passed me on the Interstate may have wondered why I was laughing so. I'm not sure I could have explained. It wasn't just the sense of freedom that came from not having to worry a bit about the highway patrol stopping me for speeding — since I wasn't. That somewhat smug feeling of self-righteousness was just a side effect. It was the joy of understanding a little bit more clearly what my relationship to God is.

Obedience is seen in actions, but it comes from the free surrender of the will. I obey the law, not to avoid penalty, but to please the One who asks it of me.

There is a difference between legalism and obedience. Legalism is doing what is the law because it is the law; obedience is doing what God wishes, because He is the Lord.

An urgent telephone call this week brings up the matter of my prayer for the dying bird again. The caller said she had been so glad to read that I had not "gone out to" the bird, but had only prayed for it.

"Then, last week, when I read what that reader said about going to it and comforting it and 'perhaps healing it,' I just had to call."

A person who is dear to this caller is dying now, from a disease picked up from trying to nurse a wild bird.

"The doctors say they just don't know how to cure her," she said. "Tell people to be careful."



Testing

Friends and I were driving back from Fernandina Beach recently, after a covered dish supper at church there, and the conversation turned to the testing God seems to put us through.

I have two children. Both have been going through very deep waters lately — and neither has much of a grip on the life preserver. When really painful things happen to us, or to those we love, we wonder why God tests us so hard.

I don't pretend to understand the mind of God, but Scripture gives us guidelines for dealing with that sort of wondering.

Jesus pointing out that if we, as human parents, give our children good gifts, how much more will our Heavenly Father give us good gifts.

The premise can be applied to "testing." When our children are growing up, we give them freedom and that freedom, by its very nature, tests them. We don't deliberately test them by giving them freedom they can't handle. But we want them to grow, to mature, and that means they have to learn how to handle decisions, making choices for themselves.

Along The Way



When our children make the wrong use of freedom, the result may seem to them like being tested beyond their ability to bear.

But think how much worse it would be if that were not true. If we never said to them, "Stop! You're on the wrong road!" they could go further and further astray. Loving parents do not want this to happen.

Our Father is a loving parent.

He lets it hurt when we make wrong choices.

When we make the right choice, I suspect we never even knew the test was going on.

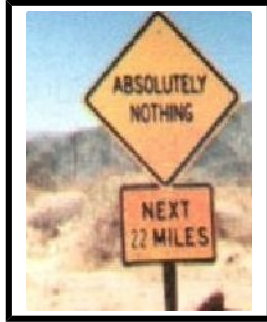
But when we make a wrong choice, the fruit of our action is automatic — it leads us away from God. But that doesn't always show, so if there were no pain, we might keep right on going away.

Sometimes it may seem the pain is too much, more than we need to turn us around. But it only seems that way to us because we cannot see how far we are from Him.

We hope our children learn from their pains and don't keep making the same bad choices. And when they hurt themselves, we try to soothe the pain, to "make it better."

But if we sometimes act in love, God IS love.

We want our children to live a good life tomorrow; He wants them to live with Him forever.



Beauty Within

I think I must be trying to do too much. When I sat down to look over my life for the past week — to see what I could write about — I found it all a blur.

No message or event stood out for me to grasp, but several random thoughts finally proceeded from the scrambled images that came to mind.

I went to a really moving service last Sunday, one where people were sharing their love for the Lord.

Someone gave me a big hug and told me I was a beautiful person.

Now it's not false modesty when I say I'm not beautiful. But I know what the friend meant — and it thrills me.

Jesus asked a man why he called Him good, saying that only God is good. The same thing is true of beauty. I am not beautiful, so if this person saw beauty where it does not exist, then, what he saw was the beauty that is the Lord — in me.

That's beauty enough for anyone.

Almost every week the mail brings a letter in response to my column. This confirmation that He *is* speaking through me is a great help.

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What the letters say is that, with His usual exquisite timing, the Spirit of the Lord is bringing out the things that are necessary at just the right moments.

For example, I received a letter from a woman who said my column on answers to prayer had really helped her. The column centered on the fact that the answers we get don't always look like what we prayed for.

It seems the woman had been praying that her daughter would enter a deeper walk with the Lord. She learned her daughter was going to church, as she had prayed, but not to her church. She read the column, she said, while she was crying about the news that her daughter was choosing to walk with the Lord in her own way; it helped her see past her human disappointment to the joy of the answered prayer.

Back to being busy. Almost everything I'm doing, I'm doing because I want to. Each activity is a "good" thing.

But is each one my good thing, or should some of them belong to someone else?

Succumbing to the temptation to take on every job in sight that in the least fits my spiritual job description is not necessarily what my Lord wants me to be doing right now.

If I don't ask Him, I won't know.

And if I'm so busy, I have no time to talk with Him, chances are I'm too busy.



Provisions = Real Needs

Lately I have been spending money at a greater rate than usual — a greater rate even than caused by inflation. Emergency expenditures, I think it's called on my budget, but it is simply needs being met.

Shortly before the series of emergencies began, I received a statement from the credit union and noticed, happily, that there was more money in my account than ever before. How nice, I remember thinking. But how, I wondered, had I managed to let it accumulate like that, without dipping in for this or that?

When the needs arose, I met them, though worrying about the fast outflow of cash. I tried to tell myself to be glad I had enough to cover the crises, but I worried about it a lot more than I should, as one who knows where it all comes from anyway. And I worried about whether these particular needs really **should** be met.

Then while reading the Bible this week, I found myself in Exodus plodding through the directions for building the Tent of Meeting and all that.

Why, I asked myself, am I plowing through all these cubits and half measurements, and all the purple stuffs, crimson and red, the fine linen thread and gold hinges? I know the Lord speaks to me

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through scripture, but how is He going to do it in the middle of all these repetitious details?

Then the people started supplying all the things needed to make the altar of incense and the altar of dedication and the mercy seat and the ephod and the ... well, all the things that God had spelled out so minutely to Moses.

The people brought gold and jewels, fine linen thread, goats hair, skins, accacia wood — everything necessary for the artisans to follow God's design. Not everybody brought things, but those whose hearts were touched by God brought what was needed.

Gold and jewels? They were slaves in Egypt, weren't they?

But on God's instructions, they had asked their Egyptian neighbors for gold and other precious things before they left Egypt.

He touched the hearts of men and women and they gladly, joyfully, brought their treasures to be used for the Lord's purposes. But He had provided them with the treasures to bring.

What He would need, He had supplied. What He would ask His people for, He had already given them.

That is true not only of gold and jewels, or money in the credit union. It is also true of everything He needs us to have to do His will. Whatever He will ask us to give to Him, He already has given us first.

That is the way He acted long years ago. But my God is not changeable; He acts the same way still



Receiving From God

The only service that counts is the service we give to God.

And the only really free gift is the one God gives — himself. All other gifts are barter, something given in return for something.

Those words of wisdom were spoken at our women's prayer breakfast Saturday.

The first speaker talked about the meaning of service.

She talked about service to our families, our churches and our communities.

But whomever we serve, unless we serve them as if we were serving God. we do not offer true service, she said.

The other speaker had been asked to talk about giving, but had said she couldn't because she didn't give anything to anybody. (It isn't true, but that's the way she sees it.)

However, she said she could talk about receiving, because so many people give to her. She has a medical condition that has put her in a position to be offered a lot of help.

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As she began her talk, she said she had learned you can't talk about one without talking about the other.

Babies are total receivers, she said. They need everything given to them. And at first they don't really give much of anything back. They just are.

But soon they learn to respond and the bartering starts. And it never stops.

Some bartering is easy to see.

I give you a Christmas present. You give me one. You invite me out for dinner. Later, I invite you.

But some bartering is more subtle.

We give money to charity because it makes us feel good about ourselves. If we are able to give a big enough gift, sometimes we get special recognition, maybe even applause.

Giving to get is just part of what we are as human beings, she said.

The perfect example of giving that is not barter is found in one of the most familiar verses of the Bible, John 3:16:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life."

There isn't really anything we can give back to God, she pointed out.

All we can do is receive his gift.

But we can let him give to others through us, she said. We can give as a response to God's free gift of himself to us.



Which tied back into what the first speaker said. Service is one kind of gift, and when you serve someone as if you were serving God, you are giving a gift that is as free of barter as we can make it.

Sometimes, the second speaker said, something within us gets in the way and won't let us give or receive in this godly way.

She told about an anger she was carrying around in her heart and how she had finally come to the point of being able to give that up.

And how she had then received some very special gifts. Gifts she was sure came from God, even though he used some very real people as his instruments.

If your heart is dark, she said, you cannot receive what God has for you, either spiritual or material things.

You have to have a pure heart.

Oh, I know. Human hearts are never perfectly pure. But as we deal with the darkness God shows us, as we admit our fault and ask his forgiveness, we are forgiven and our hearts are pure.

We may have to deal with other dark spots later, but that's just part of the process.

Serving, giving and receiving are all part of the process — the process of growing more like Christ.

Afterward, the second speaker was asked how she was able to be so positive in the face of her very real problems.

She laughed and said too many people right there in the room knew she wasn't always positive.

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She complained, she said. She whined about her problems.

And she not only did it to her friends, but she also even did it to God.

But she also listened. And she responded to what she heard.

The process is going on in her life and she's growing.

Those talks were part of the process for me. I hope I'm growing, too.



Helpless!

I don't know that I have ever felt as helpless as I do now. I have this huge problem facing me and absolutely no ability to solve it. .

I've tried everything I know to try. And when nothing worked, I tried all the same things again — harder.

Someone told me that a definition of insanity is doing the same things and expecting different results.



Then I remembered a talk I heard a Baptist minister give on the strength of weakness. And I pulled out my notes to reread them.

God is looking for weak people whose strength is in him, Jack Taylor said.

And more believers fail because of strength than because of weakness.

Taylor reminded us of Paul's famous thorn in the flesh (see 2nd Corinthians 12:7-10) and how he asked three times for it to be taken away — and of God's refusal to do so, saying that his grace was sufficient for Paul and that his strength was made perfect in Paul's weakness.

Taylor also reminded us of King Uzziah, who prospered as long as he leaned on the Lord.

"But after Uzziah became powerful, his pride led to his downfall," says 2nd Chronicles 26:16.

Uzziah quit looking to God for his strength because he thought he could do it himself. The result was disastrous.

We still have a lot of problems being weak, Taylor said.

For one thing, many of us think nothing should ever be wrong with us.

"When we have pain, we're not supposed to have it, so we have two pains," he said. We have the original problem and the pain of feeling guilty about it.

What we need, Taylor said, is to learn how to benefit from the strength of weakness.

And he listed three specific things we need to know about it.

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First, we need to know that the strength of weakness always seems to start with brokenness.

Pain is a gift, Taylor said, because it is a command for change and a notification of where to start.

Second, the strength of weakness generally progresses in bafflement.

That means that we don't usually know what is going on while it's happening.

But it is all right to be baffled. We don't have to understand everything.

If we build a system of understanding, God will just break it. He wants us to rely on him, not on systems.

And third, when we respond properly to our painful situations, the strength of weakness always leads to graduated blessings.

God's grace really is all you need, Taylor said.

It is always there for us. And whatever we are going through is part of it.

This is easier to believe looking back.

After Paul looked back, he said he could boast in his infirmities and could delight in being insulted, persecuted and in distress because only when he was really weak was he really strong.

So somewhere in the mess I'm in there is a strength for me that is not my own.

But until I quit throwing my own weight around, I'm not apt to find it.

That's scary.



Maybe I shouldn't admit it, but it is.

It make me feel like a drowning person whom no one can save until I quit thrashing around and begin to sink.

I've heard it is risky to try to save people who are still trying to save themselves because they can pull you down, too.

But as the drowning person, it seems that you have to get just one hair's breadth from death before you can be given life.

Well, I guess that's about the way it is.

I don't think I wanted to hear that.

What I really wanted was a rescuer who would appreciate my best efforts and just make them successful.

Of course, if you knew — really knew — that the lifeguard could keep you from drowning, you wouldn't thrash around until you were waterlogged and gasping for breath.

You would relax and let it happen.

I hope I can learn this soon.



Reaching Our Limit

Along The Way



I looked out my front door the other day and realized my pine tree was dead.

All I could think of was Job.

I mean, the whole world is being shaken: heat waves killing man and beast, earthquakes tumbling buildings, political figures dying and changing the future of nations, armies trembling on the brink of war.

And all I could think of suddenly was that my world was coming down around my ears, my house falling in, my children swept away, and even my beautiful tree dead.

Not only that, friends are reminding me of the goodness of God (I know that!), the fact that He loves me (I know that, too) and the need for patience.

They're right, of course. On every count.

But, oh. it hurts.

It isn't the tree, of course, or the house. It isn't even the children.

It's hard to give yourself voluntarily into the hands of a God who burns and scrapes away the dross in your character so there will be room for the gold of the character of Jesus.

He never gives me more than I can bear — Scripture says so. But He gives me no less.

Somehow I never thought of myself as a capable person, but I must believe it's important to be capable. I keep trying to find reasonable, sensible ways to function in the world, to save my children, my house, even my tree.



Sometimes pride is behind my desire to solve all these problems, so I can look good in the eyes of the world. Sometimes fear is the motivator, fear it will get worse.

The worst is the feeling that my very efforts to make things better have the opposite effect and make things worse.

Or is that the worst? Maybe it's the beginning of wisdom.

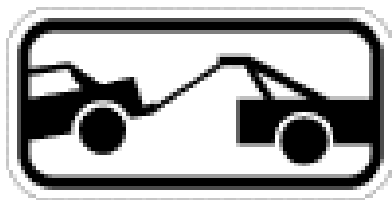
Not only is my God good — and loves me — and works in His own time; He also intends that I should be perfect, as He is perfect.

And He intends that I should love Him more than children, house, or tree — or security, safety, or self-respect.

That won't happen if I do it my way.

I don't have to be capable, but faithful. I don't have to be brave, but trustful. I don't have to be anything, but His.

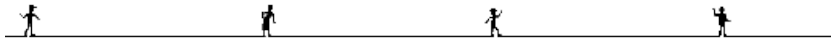
These are hard lessons You teach me, Lord. But I want to be as close to You as I can. If that means hard lessons, so be it. I will learn to praise You in the pain.



Practice. Practice. Practice.

I took piano lessons for four years, but I never learned to play. Unfortunately what I did was take first

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year piano four times — with long intervals in between.

Now I love to sing, and can read music fairly well when singing, but I'm no musician. My left hand never knows what my right hand is doing — especially when they need to be doing it together!

The problem was lack of self-discipline and practice.

Life is like that. If we want to do something well, even something that comes easily to us, we must practice. Something that doesn't come easily takes a lot of practice.

Being Christ-like definitely comes in the latter category.

It doesn't come naturally and it doesn't come easily.

The power to mature in the faith is freely given, but the ability to let the Spirit use that power in our lives requires hard work.

If that sounds like a paradox, it should. It is a paradox. How can something be free but "cost" a lot? All I can say is that's the way God seems to work, or that's the best we can do now in understanding Him.

It is a paradox that it requires both surrender and self-control of our wills. I can't make myself a more mature Christian, only the Spirit can do that. But only I can let it happen and that takes a conscious act of my will. I must work to control my will so I can surrender it.

And that involves practice — daily, regular, voluntary and planned.



All the small decision I make every day are my practice sessions. Each time I consciously exercise my will to surrender it to Him, I strengthen the muscles I use in making Christ-like decisions.

When I feel anger rise in me at a rude shopper in the grocery store, or when I see a chance to break in at the check-out line ahead of another person with a full basket — and I consciously reject anger as the director of my actions and I refuse to yield to my selfish impulse to get ahead of that other shopper — I have surrendered my will to His in small ways.

Then when a really hard one comes along, my "surrender" muscles may be strong enough to make that surrender possible.

I would like to be able to say that eventually, with enough practice, I would get so proficient at being mature like Jesus that I could expect the right muscles to respond in every situation. My reading of Scripture, especially Paul's letters, indicates it won't ever get that easy.

But it's worth the full-time, life-long effort, for that's how I become a child who glorifies my Father's name and His good and faithful servant.



A Baby In Church

I paid a visit to a new Christian Sunday; I spent the day with her in prison.

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Visiting hours begin early enough to allow us to attend the church service together. The early morning drive to an unfamiliar place took longer than I had expected and I barely made it in time, but a few minutes after I arrived we were walking with other prisoners and visitors across the compound to the chapel.

This was the "baby" Christian's first time for making the Sunday morning service. She went weekly, she said, to the Wednesday evening service, but had not had appropriate shoes to wear on Sunday.

The choir sang, a guest soloist sang and a visiting minister preached on looking after not only your own interests, but the interests of others as well, as Christ does (Philippians 2:4 ff).

Afterward we walked back to the visitors' center and spent the rest of our time talking. Mostly we talked about what the Lord is doing in her life and in mine.

She is keeping very busy, she says, earning a certificate in horticulture. "I learned to pull weeds the first day," she laughed, jogging around the track, seeing a counselor, going to school (getting ready to take the GED test), going to Vespers and reading her Bible.

And not only reading, but doing.

Commenting on the morning's sermon, she recalled reading where it said we must be kind to those we don't even like — and accepting that as an order. Looking up from her reading, she said she saw a woman in her dormitory to whom she had refused even to speak in the past.



"I used to look right through her if she spoke to me," she admitted.

"I'm not rushing over and being friendly now. But I speak back when she speaks and I sometimes even speak first."

It isn't much, perhaps, but she means it and the Lord honored her effort.

"This morning she offered me her dressy sandals to wear to church," the new Christian said, amazed and pleased.

She will, she said, continue to read and try to live the messages she finds in Scripture.

The Lord has her in prison, she says, for a reason. She isn't sure what it is, yet, but she is sure she wants to cooperate with Him on whatever it is.

In the meantime, she knows she has a long walk ahead of her.

I do too, of course. We all do.

She and I may not walk much of the way together, but I am so very glad our paths crossed — even in a prison visitors' center.



Speeding Again

Along The Way



It isn't enough to make an outward show of obedience to God. What is required is the kind of obedience that follows whole-hearted surrender.

Jesus made that very clear when He said it was not enough to keep the law. What we must "keep" is the willingness to do what the Lord wants us to do.

As with most of the lessons He teaches me, I learned that one through a very simple exercise.

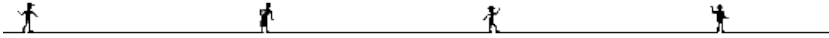
I was driving downstate to visit someone in prison. Obviously a "good thing." Through what I considered no fault of my own (I was ready to leave on time) I did not get away as early as I meant to. The visitors' center closes for more than an hour around lunch-time and I wanted very much to get there before the gate was closed.

So I caught myself pushing just a bit harder than usual on the accelerator.

Now, long-time readers may remember that the Lord taught me about obedience through the speed limit. I know I am to drive no faster — not because it is necessarily right, but because my Lord requires it of me.

I eased up on the pressure and let the needle drop back to 55. But my heart wasn't in it. Wouldn't it be all right just this once? I asked. I'm on my way to do such a good thing. Speed limits were made for man, not man for the speed limit, I argued, paraphrasing Jesus' words about the Sabbath.

As I argued with myself (or with the One who lives in me,) I found the speedometer needle edging up — and again lifted my foot.



It may or may not be true at some future time that I can speed and still be obedient to my Lord. But it definitely wasn't true that day.

What I finally had to do was surrender the whole thing to Him.

He knew whether it was important for me to get to that prison before the noon closing. He knew whether it would be better for me to wait until the afternoon visiting hours began. He knew.

And I didn't have to worry about .it.

So I gave the problem to Him. Instead, I drove at the speed limit and spent my time in praise and thanksgiving to Him. (You can do that sort of thing when you're driving 55 on a divided highway and there's not much traffic.)

As a matter of fact, I arrived at the visitor's center with 15 minutes to spare and was able to have a longer visit with my dear friend.

And the message of trust and surrender in obedience was drilled in just a little bit deeper.



Faith In God's Answers

Recently I received a letter from a reader in which she shared the story of a healing which had taken place in her life and the walk with the Lord she is now taking.

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There is something exciting about hearing reports from other Christians of victories in their lives. They give us heart to go on. They fill us with joy at the wonderful love of our heavenly Father.

Occasionally, they produce a very opposite reaction.

Back at Thanksgiving I developed an abscessed tooth — not a major disaster in the list of possible disasters, but a real one, none the less.

I asked for and received prayer for healing. I also went to the dentist and eventually to a dental surgeon. But the tooth was beyond saving, and last Monday it was pulled.

Every now and then throughout the whole process the thought crept into my mind that my lack of faith kept the prayers from "working," or that God really doesn't concern Himself with such insignificant things as teeth.

Occasionally the thoughts took another, equally wrong, tack: that somehow my non-healing was a sign of special merit, like Paul's thorn in the flesh. I don't know why my prayers for healing were not answered in the way most of us would consider a proper answer — by my abscess disappearing and everything being okay.

I don't know *what* the Lord had in mind. But I'm sure He had something. One day, when I have become accustomed to my pretty new teeth (a false one between two which have been capped), I may discover it has improved my appearance or something like that.

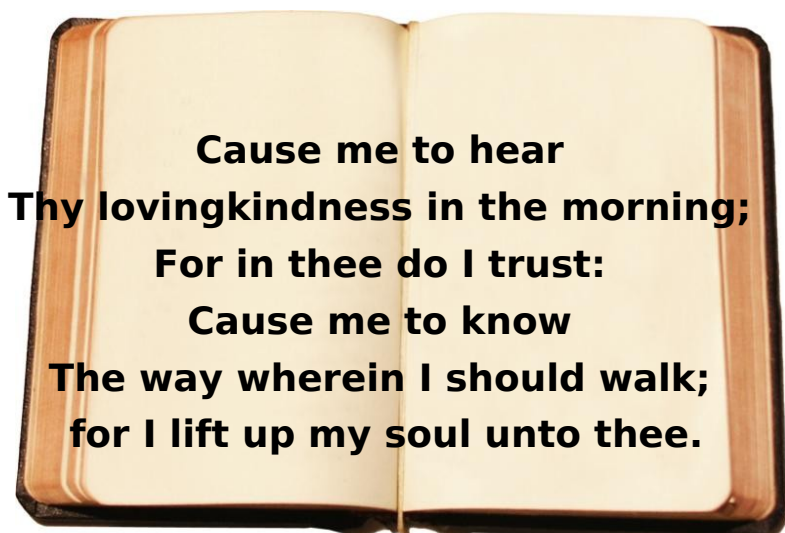
Or I may discover that I better understand the pain my son has lived with for three years since a motorcycle accident.



I may even discover I have a stronger faith — one that believes in Him and His word, even when I can't see it in action.

I am glad the Lord worked a visible miracle in the life of my correspondent. He is a wonderful God. His majesty is absolute and His love is perfect. And He has her life in His hands.

Just as He has mine.



A Round Tuit

My sister-in-law says she is going to give me a round tuit.

She says she has heard me say once too often I would have done something, but I didn't get "around to it." So she will supply the "round tuit" and I can get on with things I mean to do but don't.

Like writing letters. I tried to write a note to tell a special friend how much our relationship means to

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me — for we are now sisters. I tried, but the result was very stiff and unsatisfactory.

It is hard to make words say what we mean; emotions come out trite or sentimental. Unless a writer is very skilled, he binds an idea up and makes it smaller than it is. The efforts of some authors live because their words work the other-way — like key holes through which we look into a larger world.

When I write letters, words just refuse to do that for me. And since I work with words, I am sure everyone expects me to write a wonderful letter — and I don't.

Of course, I could show my love through things I do instead of things I say. I could watch for ways to show my love, instead of just talk about it.

I'd really need that round tuit there!

Some people think of wonderful things to do to show love. Mostly I just think of traditional things — or never get around to it at all.

While I was fidgeting in shame about my poor performance, I was struck by the difficulty God had trying to express His love for us. He tried to tell us — through His acts in history, through the law and the prophets — but we don't understand the words we use when we talk to each other, much less when God talks to us.

We did not understand the Word when He came to be among us, either. Instead, we rejected Him, hurt and killed Him.

I am always a little afraid, I suppose, that my words — or I — will be treated the same way. Rejection is a form of death, without an actual crucifixion.



So I have this protective wall between me and my brothers and sisters — a wall that I think keeps them from seeing all my flaws.

But perhaps if I take it down, I can say love in my simple ways and it will be heard and understood. Perhaps if I forget about myself, I can show the love that really counts, His love.

Only I can't take it down by myself. But if I let Him, and ask Him to, the Lord will take it down.

Good Friday is not here yet, but as it draws closer, I think about the meaning of His action on the cross. It isn't enough to say the words only. We must become His word for those we love, risking misunderstanding, rejection — and death — for their sakes.

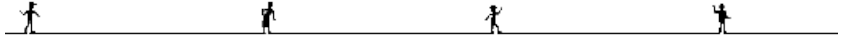


Guidance

My son worked very late one night and, when he called to say he wouldn't be home for dinner, he said he would have to go back in early the next morning.

As I prepared to leave for work that next morning, I felt a mother's concern for her child

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(though he has not legally been a child for some years now).

Normally he fixes his own lunch, although I make sure there is something on hand with which to prepare it.

That morning, however, I whipped out the egg salad I had made the night before, the peanut butter and jelly and started making sandwiches.

As I spread grape jelly, I thought querulously that I noped he wouldn't expect me to do it every morning.

It had taken quite a while to get him to accept the job for himself and I certainly didn't want him to revert.

I mean, I wanted to show him I love him, but I sure didn't want to keep him from accepting responsibility for himself.

I wanted him to grow and mature, not stay a baby.

Then I remembered little gestures of love my heavenly Father has given me and still gives — and I've been an adult far longer than my son.

And I began to think about the way a parent helps a child grow up, and the way our heavenly Father helps us grow up.

When I became a child of God, He cared for me as a parent does a baby. There were special blessings, extra tokens of love and affection.

His protection was all around me, keeping me from harm and even from worry or anxiety.

Barbara White



He made decisions for me, it seemed. There was very little for me to do but bask in His love.

My Lord did not want me to remain a child, any more than I want my son to.

He wants me to be a mature Christian.

So He began to intermingle times in which I must make my own decisions, allowing me to face the world as it is, so I could practice making choices, so I could learn to respond to life as He wants me to.

But, although it sometimes seemed unlikely, my Father God planned those times and places of testing.

A loving parent does not let the world design every lesson he wants his child to learn. He plans occasions and events that are not beyond the child's ability to deal with and he lets the child make real decisions, not play ones, for that wouldn't lead to growth.

Far too often I have not wanted to grow up. I have wanted to stay my Lord's well-loved baby. I have questioned His planning for me and complained about the growing pains.

Looking back, I know I didn't always plan growth situations for *my* children; I just let them happen.

But the chance to help them grow is still here, mostly now in the form of support and prayer while they solve their problems.

With His help, I may still learn to be a better parent to my child — and a maturing child of my Father.

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Prayer

A woman asked the other day if I knew how to get in touch with Homer Lindsay, pastor of First Baptist Church. I told her my only route was the same as everyone else's — through his secretary.

Then I asked why it was so urgent that she reach this particular man. She replied she had a friend in great need who said he would not trust anyone else.

"I've tried everything and I don't know what is left," she said, anxiety threading her voice. "There's just nothing left, I guess, but prayer."

Later that same day another woman told me of receiving a call from a friend who said her husband was sick and would not be able to attend a meeting at which he was expected.

"My 3-year-old was listening and when I hung up," she said, 'Mommy, we ought to pray for Grant.' That's being taught by your child, isn't it," she laughed.

Prayer also came up in an article I read in a Catholic magazine about that same time. It was about an active family who had been taught about prayer by their children. In their grace at meals each day they had asked God to help those in need until one day the



children suggested a better prayer: God, help us help those in need.

Prayer is the ground on which the action of God in the lives of men is based. He has ordered it that way.

If we act before we pray, inevitably we will either believe our success is the result of our efforts — and rely less on Him — or we will let failure lead to defeat and perhaps to despair.

But if we pray first, then God can direct our action — and our inaction, if that is His will.

I don't think it matters so much *how* we pray as it does *that* we pray.

There are, of course, many guides to prayer, but the best two were given by Jesus: the model prayer He gave the disciples (Matthew 6) and the prayer He prayed Himself (John 17).

One of the things the Spirit has taught me about prayer, during my study of those two Scripture passages, is to begin with praise. God lives in the praise of His people and it's a good way to pull my attention on Him and His will instead of letting it stay focused on my fears and desires. When I declare the nature of God, which is praise, it helps me know how to bring my petitions and intercessions before Him.

There are other things He has yet to teach me, but I shared some of what I know with that anxious woman and offered to pray with her for her friend.

Prayer is not the last thing. It is the primary thing. It is not the only thing left to do. It is the best thing we can do.

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Guilty But Free

Every so often you hear of someone who was arrested for breaking the law and who was later released because of a technicality — the search warrant was not in proper order or the police forgot to warn the suspect or some such thing.

The person was probably guilty, we think, but he didn't have to pay the price. He was not punished, but not because he was innocent.

This could also be said of Christians.

It is actually a statement of our predicament. We are guilty of not obeying God's law, but we do not have to pay the price. We will not receive the punishment we justly deserve, but not because we are innocent.

I wonder sometimes if the person who escapes punishment, who avoids prison, for example, only by a slip of the system, knows how lucky he was. Does he ever turn his life around and try to do better? Does he think before he acts next time, or does he forget or say to himself, "I got away with it once" and "I'll never get caught."

The difference, of course, between the person who is not prosecuted by the state and the Christian who is not punished by God is that the state ends up exacting no price from anyone and God exacts the full price, from Himself.



God doesn't just wipe the slate clean and say it never happened. Signs on the side of the road remind us that "The wages of sin is death" and that quote from Scripture is true.

Unlike the unconvicted lawbreaker, we stand convicted.. God does not need a search warrant. He has the evidence. He knows what we are and how we have behaved. He even sees into our hearts and knows the thoughts of our minds. No matter how we try, we cannot conceal anything from Him.

And we cannot claim ignorance of the law. He came Himself to tell us.

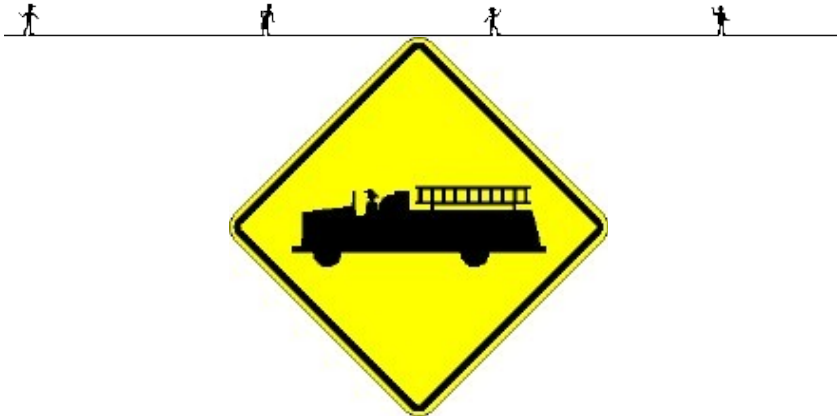
So we are not really like the person who was "let off" because his guilt could not be proved. Instead we are the guilty who are not punished, we are the convicted who are pardoned.

Because someone else paid the price. And we are different in another way. Even if the lawbreaker tries never to break another law, he may still do so, either by accident or design. It isn't possible for us to change our human nature.

But the Holy Spirit can change that nature. Not only are we pardoned, we are made new. God not only makes it possible for us to avoid punishment, He makes us children and heirs.

And that's the Good News.

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Old Letters

I moved to a different desk at work last week. Some wag once said that one fire is as good as two moves for getting rid of extraneous stuff. That may be true in houses, but I think he underestimated the value of moving from one place in the office to another.

In the process of sifting through papers in the desk I was leaving, I found a stack of letters readers have sent me about these columns. It slowed the moving process, because I found myself rereading many of them.

Two thoughts lingered after I finally packed up the ones I am STILL saving and stowed them in a back corner of a drawer: I almost never write letters anymore, and there is a blessing in the sameness of the lives of those who follow Jesus.

I doubt if more than a few of those letter writers ever received a reply from me. I kept all the letters in the beginning because I firmly intended to answer each and thank the writer for his words of encouragement. But I never did. That same wag may be the one who first said, "The road to you-know-where is paved with good intentions."

Barbara White



I am thankful for those letters, both the ones that simply blessed me and the ones that shared moments of the writers' lives as well.

The ones in which people told me I wrote exactly to their own situations, however, are special. Perhaps the Lord gave me my experience so I could help those readers with their own. He uses people that way, and I am blessed at the thought that He used me.

Also, shared experience is a strong bond. I have a kinship with each of those people. They told me so as they described their own, similar experience.

There is a special kinship among all who have surrendered their lives to Jesus. We have shared the experience of having our sins forgiven and we were all made new. We are now part of the same Body.

How much we have that would bind us together — if we would let it.

If I were to answer those letters, I would tell the writers they have strengthened my sense of community with all believers.

Rereading has helped me understand that all His children are brothers and sisters to me. They reminded *me* that our differences from each other are much smaller than *pur* differences from Him. They dulled the edge of criticism I might have used against another Christian and showed me how much alike we all are.

I'm not unique — except to my Lord. Others have known the pains and joys I have known.

I guess I'll never get around to writing answers, though — unless this column counts.



Living In Heavy Traffic

Traffic has never brought out the best in me — driving in traffic, that is.

A strange thing always happens to me when I find myself behind the wheel of a car in even moderately heavy traffic: I become frustrated, then irritated and finally just plain irate.

I drive in a more aggressive manner — or will not, but grind my teeth the entire time. I try not to be angry, but do not succeed.

I can manage to stay behind the slow car in front of me, but I cannot manage to do it without ill will.

Not any more.

Last week I looked at myself in that condition and knew there was no way God wanted me that way.

I had just been working on material for a series of talks on being holy — and there I sat, all full of unholiness.

So I did the only thing I know that works. I asked God to deal with it.

Specifically, I told him that I knew he did not want me to feel that way. He already knew it, but he wanted me to remind myself by telling him.

Then I surrendered my right to determine what my emotions would be. I gave him that right and said I would let him choose what my emotions should be.

Barbara White



He did; I drove toward downtown without a thought to the traffic, in fact, without a care in the world. I even found myself humming along to the Christian song coming from the radio.

I did not become oblivious to traffic around me. I drove as well as ever, moving through traffic with as much skill as ever — and a great deal more patience and a great deal less pressure.

I also drove the speed limit without having to check the dial every other minute.

When you ask the Lord to handle a problem, he really handles all of it.

As I thought about it all, it struck me as so funny that I had ignored that particular area of my life for so long, when I had known it was there, ready to flare up at any moment.

I guess I thought it was too insignificant to offer up to the Lord.

How foolish of me.

Everything in my life is of significance. It is all part of me, and one area touches on so many others. The residue of ashes left behind by the hostility I felt while driving had tainted many other parts of my day.

Even when I recognized guilt and asked forgiveness, I was left with a shadow of future guilt, knowing it would happen again.

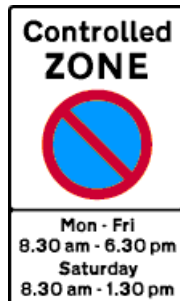
But it does not have to.

That is what being free is all about.

When the Son makes you free, you are free indeed.



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Putting My Life In Order

The pressures of life have a way of coming between me and the things I feel I should be doing.

When life gets terribly busy, I find myself pulling in my head, turtle style, and doing as little as possible.

I'm going through something like that now.

My work schedule has me leaving the office much later than I have for years. I used to work an early shift — 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. Now I have joined the 9-to-5 crowd — only I often don't get away at 5.



For some time I have had commitments that take me out of the house early every Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday evening.

And there are numerous weekend commitments: church on Sunday and frequent Saturday classes or seminars.

I have been finding it more and more difficult to go anywhere, except church on Sunday. The rest of the week, all I want to do is get through the front door of my house in the evening — and stay put.

As a result, I have not, among other things, visited people in the hospitals, prepared dinners for some I would have liked to help or called on others I wish I had called on.

Now, to top it all off, I feel awful about it — full of guilt for sins of omission — but still tired and loath to get moving.

I'm taking vitamins, but it doesn't seem to be giving me any extra energy.

I'm also praying about it, and eventually that will make the difference.

When life gets out of kilter, and things of high priority to me are not getting done, it's time to stand still and take a good look at my life. The best way I have found to do that is to ask the Lord to help me see the situation the way He sees it.

That way, I will be able to see the areas of my life I have not yielded to Him. I will know whether it is pride that keeps me going in the wrong direction with all the energy I have, or whether it is a false sense of obligation, or whether it is just selfishness and laziness.

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Then I will know what to ask Him to forgive and what to change. I will know again the freedom that comes from letting Him choose my path and direct my going out and my coming in, my speaking or my being silent, my serving or my being served.

How easy it is to lose sight of that; how necessary to find it again.



The Relationship

Christianity, my minister has often said, is not a religion. It is a relationship.

It is knowing God and being known by Him — intimately, personally and with no holds barred.

There isn't anything about me the Lord does not know. It is simply ridiculous for me to think there is something about my life so awful that I cannot possibly let the Lord discover it. He already knows.

That doesn't stop me from thinking that way sometimes, until He manages to catch my attention and tells me once more that He loves me, to remind me that He loved me enough to die for me while I was yet a sinner, as the Bible says, or "warts and all," as a friend put it.

Only recently He used a friend and a stranger to bring to me one more time the message of His forgiving and renewing love. I had let myself fall into a



deep blue haze of feeling unproductive, unworthy and unlovable, and He led me gently out of the shadows.

He sent a friend to the phone to share with me scripture on forgiveness and the meaning of baptism for cleansing from sin. The friend did not say the Lord told him to call me. He had just finished the study, and knowing it related to an experience we had shared months before, he called to tell me what he had learned.

Later the same day a visiting priest, the Anglican archbishop from South Africa, spoke at my church, and he, too, talked of forgiveness and of the renewal of the heart brought by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

The Lord knows me and loves me anyhow.

That is a wonder. There is an even greater wonder. I can know the Lord and can love Him, too.

I can *know* the Lord, not just know about Him. I can have fellowship with Him.

I cannot know everything about Him, as He does about me, but I can know Him.

Only I must desire to know Him more than I desire anything else, more than I desire to receive the gifts He has for me. I must desire to pray to Him more than I desire the answers to my prayers. I must desire to be obedient to Him more than I desire to achieve good things for Him.

He intended me to know Him. He desires me to know Him. It pleases Him when I do. He became incarnate so I could. He sent his spirit to live in me so I would.



Child Care

My daughter says I am very nosy. And she is right.

I have often said, as a joke, that one reason I'm in the newspaper business is because I like to know what's going on.

However, that's not what she was talking about. She was pointing out that I ask a lot of questions like: Who was that on the phone? Where are you going? When will you be home? What did your brother say about this or that? What did you say?

I could try to justify my nosiness by saying I need to know what is going on in the lives of my children. Those who have walked with me through the tribulations of the child-rearing years might even agree with me.

But in fact, the lesson the Lord is teaching me through my daughter's teasing (but still serious) remark is that I am not trusting Him to work in the lives of my grown-up offspring.

I have turned both of my children over to the Lord — several times. The hard part is leaving them there. My questions prove that I haven't made it yet.



There is nothing wrong with asking a question or two. It may indicate interest in the person. It might make it easier to be of service to them.

On the practical level, by asking my son and daughter where they are going when they head out the door, I know what to say to people who call them on the phone.

But my daughter knew there was more behind the questions that I had thought were so innocent. She felt the judgment in them: Will I approve of where she is going? Will I approve of the people she is with? Do I think she is doing the right thing at the right time in the right way?

Time is long past for those evaluations. She is in charge of her life and has been for years. The same is true for my son.

What I am really saying by those questions is: Can they survive without me? If I don't remind them, will they make the right choice? If I don't stop them, will they get in trouble? And, worst of all, can I trust God to continue to work in their lives?

That last question is the one that may stop the others. When I saw that unspoken question hiding behind the others, it brought my excuses to a halt. I cannot pretend I do not know what I am doing, any more.

I am available to them. That is my part, what I am to do. Otherwise, I am to turn them loose, to set them free both from my spoken and my unspoken questions. Instead of doubting, I will rejoice in the presence of the Lord in their lives.

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One question I will still ask — of the Lord, not of my children — What can I do for them, Lord, on Your behalf?



A New Accent

One of the speakers at a conference that I attended recently spoke of a simple way to keep familiar Scripture fresh: Put the accent on a different place each time.

Try it, he said, with the first line of the 23rd Psalm.

It works, too. Even a simple run-through of his example shows it does.

The Lord is my *SHEPHERD*.

A shepherd watches over the sheep. He guides them by leading the way and speaking so that they can follow. He knows them by name. He lies down at the door of the sheepfold and guards the sheep from danger. He is willing to give his life so that they can live.

The Lord is *MY* shepherd.

I am his sheep. The Lord watches over me. I am the one whom he guides, the one whom he speaks to. He guards me and has already given his life that I might live. I am one of a large flock of sheep that



belong to this shepherd, but he knows me by name and loves me.

The Lord *IS* my shepherd.

My shepherd is not just a historical figure. He is not just someone who was, but no longer is. He was born. He lived and died. He even rose from the dead — all almost 2,000 years ago. But his care for me is not a thing of the past. It did not stop on Calvary all those years ago. His shepherding of my soul is a day-by-day thing. Jesus is my shepherd today.

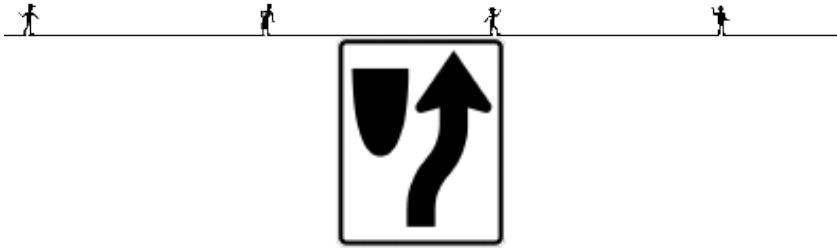
The *LORD* is my shepherd.

My shepherd is not a simple lad sitting on a hillside. He is not just David, although David, who killed the bear and the lion to protect the sheep and who became king, is a precursor of this shepherd Lord. My shepherd is Lord of all. A lord rules, has power over others. A lord has the power of life and death, in fact. The one who leads me, guards and guides me is also the ruler of the world. This shepherd Lord holds the created world in his hand. All authority in heaven and Earth is his. I am Ms.

THE Lord is my shepherd.

There have been many lords on the Earth throughout history. The Lord who is my shepherd is not just any lord, he is *the* Lord. Only Jesus is King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Random thoughts on one short sentence from the Psalms can produce worship as I contemplate the wonder of the shepherd, my shepherd, who is today the one and only Lord.



Praising Jesus

A friend taught me a couple of good lessons last week — about reading the Bible and praising God.

We lead such busy lives, it isn't easy to find a quiet time in which you can read the Bible and ask the Lord to speak to you through His written word.

My friend found a solution. After not reading her Bible for days on end, she recognized a perfect time for doing it — when she dries her hair.

As an everyday shampooer, she knew she would be spending a good 10 minutes daily pointing a dryer at her hair. Her solution was to prop her Bible up in front of her and read.

It was good time alone, she said, because the noise of the dryer shut out distractions.

She is already reaping the fruit of her new effort. Last week, she began reading Revelations on Friday. She read it Saturday and finished it Sunday.

She said she had not read it straight through like that in years, and this time she was struck by the praise being lifted up to God, by the knowledge that there are those in heaven whose only task is praising God.

Her response had been to join her voice with those of the heavenly hosts in praise.



Scripture speaks of praise over and over again. We are told that God sits between the cherubim, the two who stand on either side of the ark. We are also told that cherubim surround His throne, singing praises.

God inhabits the praises of his people, we are told. A place filled with praise is a place He will enter and stay.

I have known, without knowing why, that when I praise Him, I cannot feel afraid. I cannot feel anger, resentment or any other emotion that is not part of the personality of Jesus.

When I praise, He is there — and those other things have no place where He is.

If I praise long enough, His presence frees me from those destructive emotions.

If I continue to praise, I begin to see the thing, event or person who caused the feelings the way He sees them.

My friend said she had thought it would be dull to spend eternity praising God before she knew Jesus. Now, she finds the thought not only comforting, but exciting, something to be longed for.

The difference, of course, is knowing Jesus. I cannot praise one I do not know. I cannot know God until I know the Son who was sent to reveal the Father.



Plane Trip

Two events more than a week apart have shown me the importance of prayer and obedience in my daily walk with the Lord.

First, I asked the Lord to use me as His witness and to bring me someone I could talk to about Him on a recent plane trip. He did, more than an hour later, but by then I had forgotten all about my prayer.

She was a young woman, sitting across from me in a waiting area. We spoke and she even moved over to sit next to me. A little later, as she left to get something to eat, time came for me to board my plane.

I realized as she walked away that she was the one I had asked for.

I had not spoken to her of Jesus by name, but we had talked about her job problems and had shared a gentle moment together. She seemed to feel better when she left.

I looked back over the conversation and wondered if I had done enough. But I felt a deep peace and no conviction of sin. It seemed I had done all I had to do.

A week later, I learned that several people had been praying for my trip, for the Lord to use me during

that weekend. They had mailed letters telling me of their intention, but the letters arrived after I had left, and it was a week before they caught up with me.

The weekend had gone well, I thought. I was leading a retreat for a church in Pittsburgh, and the Lord had blessed us all with His presence.

I was very aware during the weekend of my need to rely constantly on the Holy Spirit to guide me. I was listening more than usual to that inner voice that directs my actions, when I let it.

When I finally read those letters, I knew prayer had made the difference.

I know the Lord hears and answers my prayers, even when I pray alone. I know He hears and answers prayers of "two or three together," too.



Retreat To Pittsburgh

Last week I wrote about an incident that happened to me on my way to Pittsburgh. I'd like to share the beautiful way the Lord taught me how to understand it.

While on my way to lead a retreat, I had prayed that the Lord would send me someone to witness to.

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Later, after talking to a young woman while waiting to change planes, I realized that she was the one.

I thought at first that I had failed, because I had not talked about Jesus. And I wrote the column that way.

Then I felt I should read it to someone whose opinion I trust, so I tried to reach my minister by phone and couldn't. I decided to call a friend I often talk things over with — only to find she wasn't home.

But her husband was. Bill Malone listened while I read the column over the phone, asked me a few questions, offered a few comments, and helped me see it in a different light.

He told me that he thought I was being too hard on myself and using one type of witnessing as the only measure.

He asked if I had felt convicted of sin. The answer was no.

The "Do you know Jesus?" approach to witnessing is not the only one, Bill said. The Lord knows who needs what kind of witness at a particular moment, he said, and unless I had felt the Spirit telling me to speak in a particular way and had refused, then I was being obedient.

"One prepares the ground, another plants and a third waters," he reminded me. "The Holy Spirit knows who should do what at which time.

"If you had spent your time talking about Jesus the way you thought you should, you would have missed a chance to minister to her about her job," he said.



Bill knows the value of leading people into a relationship with Christ. He does it often in his work. He also knows that the Holy Spirit is the one who really leads anyone to Christ, through obedient Christians'.

And so I rewrote the column and claimed that as an act of obedience, a time when I did what the Lord had given me to do.

The very next day, the daily devotional material I read was about how we have let our concern to save souls take the place of our need to be obedient.

I think that's confirmation. And I think, that it is just like my loving Lord to work the timing out that way.



There Are Not Enough Dead Christians

If someone asked you what he had to do to become a Christian, what would you tell him?

It sounded like a very innocent question when the minister who was leading our study group first asked it.

As we tried to supply the answer, however, we realized there was more to his probing than we had heard at first listen.

Different members of the group offered responses, including: accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior; profess with your lips that Jesus is lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the

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dead; come to know the Lord; know that everyone is a sinner; die to self; and be filled with the Spirit.

We concluded all of these answers — and a few I have forgotten — are correct.

Our teacher pointed out that the Scriptural definition of a Christian, a person who is "in Christ," is one who has the spirit of Christ in him — which led to more discussion of how you get and keep the spirit of Christ in you.

Then he brought us back to the item in the list most of us pay the least attention to — the process of dying to self. For a Christian to die to himself means he comes to the full realization that he has no right to things we take as our right. Particularly, he said, we have no right to resent or refuse to forgive anyone anything.

He touched a very tender spot when he used the unfaithful husband as an example. We have no right to expect fidelity, he said.

No one wanted to hear it. We think we have that right. Marriage is instituted of God, isn't it? Of course we have the right to expect fidelity!

Well, if we believe it is our right to expect it, we won't be able to forgive it if it happens.

Actually, it is God who has the right to expect fidelity in marriage partners. Our promises are made to each other in His name. Our vows are to Him.

God has a right to expect us to perform in certain ways — but He has provided relief from His just unforgivingness. He forgives, if we do, too.



All we have to do is give up our right to our own lives and have faith that He is able to overcome the harm that has been done us.

We may believe our lives have been permanently harmed, that the good we might have known is now forever gone. But we must die to that idea of ourselves.

In Exodus 50, Joseph tells his brothers, who sold him into slavery and now fear his unforgiveness, "Do not be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."

I've never told anyone being a Christian meant all that.



Lost Friends

Our lives are not shaped by the circumstance that comes into them nearly as much as they are by the way we respond to the circumstance.

I lost some friends recently.

Oh, I don't mean they died or anything like that. They have just gone on somewhere else.

I'll see them sometimes. But I won't see them every Sunday like I used to.

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That's the circumstance. What is my reaction?

Well, there was rejection, anger, an overwhelming sense of fatigue, a desire to run away and hide, and, I'm afraid, a strong desire to punch somebody or something hard in the stomach so they would feel as bad as I did.

Rejection. It couldn't be true. Surely it wasn't really happening. Surely God wouldn't let them go.

I mean, if I were designing the world, things like this wouldn't happen. I just wouldn't let them.

Anger. How dare they do this to me! How can they call themselves friends and then leave!

Fear. How will I survive without them? Won't loneliness overwhelm me? Won't the world as I know it come to an end?

Frustration. I can't possibly deal with this. I have no reserves of energy or resilience with which to handle it.

Fatigue. I'm just too tired to try anymore. I just can't go through one more trial. I'll just lie down here and quit. Or perhaps if I crawl in a hole and pull it in after me, nothing will hurt me like this again.

The result of all this was that feeling of having been punched in the stomach.

The list is familiar. I have reacted in all those ways before.

But this time, something new happened.

Almost immediately, I remembered that nothing comes to me that God has not sent — or at least allowed.

Barbara White



That helped me understand that deep down I was really angry with God for not letting me have my way. I thought I knew what was good for me and I wanted that to happen — and happen now.

And, of course, that forced me to look who was in charge of my life. I had to ask again whether I was truly willing to let God be God or whether I was going to insist on being god myself.

I turned it all over to the Lord.

And instead of rejection, there was acceptance. In place of anger, there was love. Instead of fear, I found confidence. In place of frustration, I knew expectancy.

Above all, I knew peace.

A few days after I finally began to feel at peace about the situation, I caught Chuck Swindoll's early morning show on my car radio. He was talking about how God had backed the Hebrew people up against the Red Sea. Anything less and they would never have realized that only God could save them. Man could not do it no matter how hard he tried.

In that circumstance, Moses told the people to do four things:

Don't be afraid
Stand still
Watch to see what the Lord is going to do
— and in the meantime —
Don't talk.

I found a parallel between that and my situation.

I had known fear. I had rushed around futilely trying to find safety. I had looked to men for my

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answers. And I had talked so long and so loud, I couldn't hear what the Lord was trying to say to me.

Perhaps I had used my friends to ward off fears that remained just below the surface of my consciousness.

Now I was trusting the Lord to be my Shepherd, to lead me through the valley of shadows to his resting place.

Perhaps I had relied too heavily on my friends to supply my sense of well-being.

Now I was relying on the Lord, instead.

Perhaps I had focused on what my efforts could do.

Now I was waiting to see what the Lord was going to do.

I don't believe God took my friends away to straighten me out.

I could have learned all these things with them right there. But I hadn't.

But when the circumstance came, when my back was up against the "Red Sea," I finally did receive the message.

I heard the voice, not of Moses, but of the Spirit telling me how to turn it all to good in my life.

He has made me able to say — and mean — these words from a familiar hymn:

*When peace, like a river,
attendeth my way,*



*when sorrows like sea
billows roll;
whatever my lot,
thou hast taught me to say,
It is well, it is well with my
soul.*



Joy In Trials

When you don't know why your life has suddenly fallen into a heap — so you don't know what to do to correct the situation — guidance is available.

James tells us that if we lack wisdom about such things, we should ask God and he will enlighten us.

But there are requirements to receiving an answer.

James also tells us to consider our trials as pure joy because surviving helps develop perseverance and leads to maturity, which means to be like Christ. And I suspect many of us don't really want to grow up.

So before the Lord can tell us why we are in the midst of a particular trial, we have to admit that we have some growing to do, acknowledge that we trust the Lord to know what he is doing when he tests us, and rejoice because he is shaping our lives.

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Just as a coach tests an athlete on his ability to perform various feats, God tests a Christian on his ability to hear God, trust him and follow him in every situation.

Such tests show the athlete or the Christian where he is weak and give him the chance to strengthen that weakness.

An article in the May issue of *Christianity Today* looks at how trials strengthen faith, just as exercise strengthens muscles. Writer Peter Kreeft quotes Rabbi Abraham Heschel on Job's testing by God: "Faith like Job's cannot be shaken because it is the result of having been shaken."

God wants to help us develop unshakeable faith, so he shakes us.

If we don't want to have unshakeable faith, we can't rejoice in our trials. If we can manage any degree of willingness to have our faith strengthened, we are ready to ask where we are weak and to hear and accept the Lord's answer.

I really liked Kreeft's article. Probably because I have been going through a bit of shaking recently.

I don't know all about this test yet, but I know it involves the difference between doing the Lord's will and doing my own — even when it seems good. It involves knowing who is the Lord of my life.

Recently the Lord has used me in several ways. I have been able to strengthen people's faith and help them both stand and walk in the way of the Lord.

In fact, I was doing so well, I began to expect good results every time I ministered. I almost forgot I had been empowered by the Holy Spirit for the task



and began to think I was just getting better and better at discerning and encouraging, at teaching and counseling.

But then things seemed to change. I seemed to run out of anything new to say and when I tried to help, I fell flat on my face.

I became confused and discouraged, and found myself going through a health problem of my own. When I told myself all the things I had told those others — and could not find strength in any words — I grew faint and weary. I wanted the power of the Holy Spirit to produce the result I wanted.

If God had left me there, I think I would have withered and died.

How grateful I am for the Spirit. He showed me how far off the path I had wandered. He opened my eyes and spoke clearly to me about the stubbornness of my will and the deception under which I was allowing that will to have its way.

I didn't want to see or to listen. I had become so full of what I was doing that I couldn't believe God wouldn't continue to bless my every effort. I couldn't believe He wanted me to stop doing all those good things I was doing.

I had forgotten that God is still in charge. I was so busy being wonderful, I forgot that even doing good in my way instead of God's can separate me from him.

God was telling me to turn loose, to let him do it his way. And when I refused to surrender my will to his, I became my own god and that is sin.

How often I am wrong and need forgiveness.

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But — oh, immeasurable grace — the Holy Spirit managed to break through my resistance. How terrible if he could not bring me to repentance.

Paul asks, shall sin abound so grace can abound even more? He answers; God forbid!

But God doesn't forbid. He allows it to happen. Knowing the cost to himself, he allows sin to abound. But not unnoticed. And not unpaid

Though we fail him, He does not fail us. Through this trial my Lord has strengthened my ability to trust that he does not allow one of his little ones to fall through their own foolishness. The blood of the Lamb was shed for him.

As always when I comprehend for a moment the magnitude of the Lord's love for me, I am overwhelmed with gratitude. It has been a long time since I have felt as small and dumb as I do right now.

Or as clean and free.



From Disaster To Triumph

The Lord is the one who makes everything work together for good, but we have a part to play in the process.

When the telephone rang about 8:05 last Saturday morning, I was sitting at the table finishing



my second cup of coffee and my first section of the newspaper.

The caller was the friend at whose house I was supposed to be. It was the day when a group of us meet each month.

Actually, I hadn't forgotten our meeting. I had thought about it earlier in the week and had mentally marked the NEXT Saturday as the one. Obviously mental markings are not as good as physical ones. Obviously I need to start marking things on a real calendar, not just one in my head.

Anyway, I promised to be there in 15 minutes and went into high gear. I made it, too. Fortunately I was already dressed and her apartment wasn't very far away.

During the brief drive to her apartment, I realized, with a very bad feeling in the pit of my stomach, that I wasn't prepared. I was supposed to be the leader of the group that day — and I didn't have anything ready.

The question was not how could I have been so dumb, but what was I going to do now?

I didn't want the time to be completely wasted. And I couldn't fake it — not only because I didn't think I could get away with it, but because that wouldn't be to anybody's advantage.

With no human solution available, I sought a divine one. I prayed.

I started by acknowledging my error, but resisted the temptation to spend the little time available in kicking myself.

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Instead, I asked the Lord what I could possibly do that would cooperate with him in turning my mess into his blessing. I asked him to make it possible for the time still to be good for us and to glorify him.

We had been talking about the ideas proposed by Charles Colson in his book, *Loving God*, and I was supposed to lead a discussion of the next couple of chapters. I couldn't do that. What else, I asked the Lord, could we possibly do?

Something very ordinary, but usually helpful. We could review.

We could go back over the material we had already covered, not as a time-filler. We could go back to see if the various propositions we were studying were actually being reflected in our lives.

There is such a great temptation to make learning about God an intellectual activity. At least on my part. I tend to think about what some author has to say about obedience, for example, while not checking to see if I am being obedient.

As I turned into the apartment drive and headed my car into a parking space, I asked the Lord to use our time this way, to show each of us how well we are doing at living what we profess to believe — and how we can do better.

I confessed to the group what they already knew — that having forgotten our date, I was unprepared. Then I shared with them the possibilities that had come to me while I was driving over.

Their response was wonderful. They forgave me freely and agreed to the special review with no complaining, but as if I had offered them a treat. Every teacher should have such students!



And as we shared, we were blessed.

As we compared the dramatic examples in Colson's book with our lives, we found the underlying principles held true, even if the details were different.

And as we rejoiced over the areas of success, we also found and mourned over those areas in which we were not being successful lovers of God.

But mourning, we still rejoiced. For now we knew what we had to deal with.

I felt pretty good as I left for home that morning. The Lord had heard my call for help and had turned a potential waste of time into a useful time.

There wasn't anything smug about the way I felt, however. It isn't better to be unprepared! And we won't ever know what the Lord would have done if I had done what I was supposed to do ahead of time.

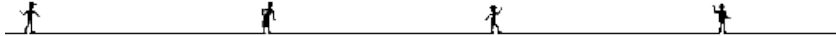
But there was real gratitude for what the Lord is both willing and able to do. And a sustaining sense of awe and wonder at the fact that his word is good, that he keeps his promises. Scripture says he will make all things work together for good for those who love him and are called according to his purpose. And he does.

Since then I have been thinking about what is involved in making everything work together for good, about what happens when a person who loves God makes a mess and God makes a blessing.

And it struck me that there is a third element in this equation that is often overlooked. Often other folks are involved and they have a part to play, too.

In this particular case, there were the other members of the class, the ones who had forgiven me

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truly and had entered willingly into the form of blessing held out to them.

But what if they hadn't? What if they felt cheated — as they had every right to feel — and had refused to take part? What if they had refused to forgive me?

Would that have prevented the Lord from making it work for good?

Not for me, but certainly for them. The Lord is serious about the place of forgiveness in the process of turning our messes into his blessings.

Obedience was easy for all of us that time. My mess was not mountainous and my regret was real. And the others thought I was sorry. Also they loved me, which made forgiving me easy.

But other lessons will come. In some of them I will be the one who offends. In others I will be the one offended. In some the offense will be much greater and much harder to forgive.

Will I remember this simple, easy lesson when the tough one comes?

I hope — with a hope that relies on the grace of God — that I will. I hope especially that I will remember to forgive as I have been forgiven.



THE Lord



A friend recently informed me that I call God "the Lord" most of the time.

I was delighted by the discovery. My friend seemed dismayed.

Our different reactions come from the same source: the meaning of the word.

I call him "Lord" because this word points to his sovereignty. Through this, I acknowledge his supreme power. And not just supreme power in general, but especially his supreme power over me.

My friend does not see it that way and he had not expected me to, either. He remembers when I did not think that way, but I have changed.

It delights me now to acknowledge God as my Lord. Nine years ago during my struggle to keep from surrendering to God, his sovereignty was the last thing I wanted to acknowledge. It was, in fact, what I was most afraid of.

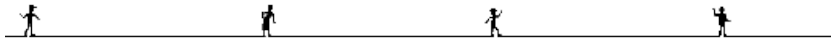
I didn't want to admit that anyone or anything had that kind of power, and especially not over me.

The serpent enticed Eve to do what God had forbidden by telling her she could be "like God." Our desire, no, more than desire, our intention to be god ourselves is still the basic sin of each of us.

As long as I could prevent myself from having to decide whether God was actually sovereign, I could go on ruling my life by myself. I was not happy with the results of self rule, but I was terrified of turning my life over to anyone else.

I mean, if God really is sovereign — really has all that power — then he can tell me to do anything, and I'd have to do it, wouldn't I? Even something I really

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didn't want to do. I'd either have to do it or become a rebel.

And when you're one little, insignificant rebel and the Lord is all-knowing and all powerful, the odds for a successful rebellion aren't good.

So it seemed much better just to refuse to deal with the problem, to keep it a matter of theoretical discussion. It seemed better to never quite make up my mind one way or the other.

I could talk about the possibilities — as long as I kept moving fast enough to stay ahead of the conclusions. But once I began to feel the hot breath of those conclusions panting on my heels as I ran, I finally had to deal with them. Eventually I could not run long enough or fast enough to get away from them.

I said to myself, if God isn't sovereign, then it doesn't matter what I think about him or what I do. I can continue to choose to think and do basically what pleases me.

But, I said, *if* — just *if* — he really has that kind of power, then I'd better decide whether I want to be on his side or on the other side. And quickly, too, while the time to choose is still open to me.

I did not want to make a decision. I did not at the time like the decision I made. In fact, if it is possible to walk forward with your heels dug in, well, that's the way I went to my time of surrender.

I was sure I wasn't going to like having a Lord. I was convinced it would lead to pain and trouble and possibly even death. Certainly the Bible indicates that this can happen.



What I did not know that day when I so grudgingly knelt to yield my life to the one who already had the power of decision over my eternal life in his hands was how wonderful it was going to be. How could I?

But now I do. I know that his power is equaled only by his love. And his love only by his wisdom.

I know that it is true, really true, that he loved the world so much that he gave his only begotten son so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but shall have eternal life.

Sometimes I forget what I know. That's when my habit of calling him "Lord" comes in handy. It can remind me of what I need to remember.



Healing Trust

We moved into our new church building recently. We lost a beautiful view of Julington Creek in the process, but gained a feeling of "home."

We had been meeting for the past two years in the auditorium at Wesley Manor, a retirement community on Florida 13 in northwest St. Johns County. That auditorium has been a temporary home for at least three congregations, representing three denominations.

While we were there, we enjoyed the lovely view of the water you can see from the auditorium, complete with occasional water-skiers and fishermen

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and several kinds of boats. We watched the flora and the fauna come and go in their seasons.

Sometimes I wondered if the view wasn't an extra challenge to our preachers to keep us more interested in what they were saying than in what was going on outside the window walls of the auditorium.

Now we have a home of our own. We don't have to pack everything back into a closet at the end of service each week. And that is very nice.

But the view outside our new building is, quite frankly, not much compared with Julington Creek. Some blooming crepe myrtles help, but mostly what you see when you look outside are barren ground and other scars of the building process.

Our guest preacher last Sunday included in his sermon a reference to the hurt we have inflicted on the land by bulldozing trees and cleaning away the site for our new church.

He missed the beauty of our former setting, he said.

But he assured us that the scarred land would heal in time. He said he was confident that we would work to improve the land, planting new trees and shrubs where they would add beauty to the setting.

In a few years, he said, people will come to the church and see only an attractive building in a lovely setting. They won't know anything of the hurt or the healing process.

The same thing is true of people, he said. Sometimes when they have been hurt, the scars seem as visible as the raw land around a new building. But



just as we can work on the land, the Lord can work on our lives.

Of course, we can't make grass grow. We can't make people grow, either. But we can plant the grass that God can make grow. And we can minister to the people whom the Lord can heal.

The minister said our part in the process is to have faith in the Lord, to live in unity with him and each other, and to maintain hope in the future.

I thought the message very timely — but that sort of message always is timely. Given the state of the human heart and the world in which we live, someone is always in need of a healing message.

The minister used passages from Hebrews 11 in his sermon. Later I reread this chapter on what it means to live by faith and thought about how it related to the healing processes he spoke about.

It struck me that time was a key factor in some of the descriptions of faith found in that chapter. There seemed to be lots of time between the giving of the promises of God and their fulfillment.

Think about how long it took Noah to build the ark. And it wasn't even raining. Think about how long Abraham had to wait for the son God promised him.

The healing of the scars our building project made on the land may take months or even years. The healing of personal scars can take a long time, too.

What are we to do in the meantime? If God does the work of healing, of growing, of remaking, what is left for us to do?

We can trust the Lord while we're waiting. Like Noah and Abraham did.

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And we can work at whatever the Lord gives us to do. Maybe it will be to build something. Maybe not an ark, like Noah. But maybe we can build a beautiful setting for a church. Maybe it will be to minister to each other. Maybe we can't tend sheep in the desert, like Abraham. But maybe we can tend those who belong to the Shepherd.

What it comes down to is living for the Lord day by day instead of just looking at scars and waiting for healing.

It isn't easy, this having faith. In fact, it can be the hardest work I know.

But the land does not cease to be God's because it has been torn. And we do not cease to be his, either, even if we're bruised and sore.

The promise of healing is wonderful, worth waiting for. The presence of the healer is even more wonderful, worth the effort of having faith.



Thick Skin. Soft Heart. Hard Head.

It is better to have a thick skin and a soft heart than to have a thin skin and a hard heart.

A friend told me that this week and the more I have thought about it, the more I agree with her.



The difference between the two positions lies, basically, with the issue of protection. Are you going to protect yourself or the other person.

If you have a thin skin, you react easily to the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune — as Shakespeare put it in *Hamlet*. A hard heart goes with a thin skin almost automatically. With so much feeling lying close to the surface, just under that thin skin, the heart gets hard because almost nothing ever reaches it.

A thick skin, on the other hand, does not react much to things that hit it. The bearer of such a skin does not spend time dealing with slights — real or imagined — and is able instead to deal with the person in front of him.

The naturally thick-skinned person does not have to work at being unconscious of self. He just is. And since he does not have to throw up a defensive mechanism, he is able to respond to the other person from his heart.

But if you were not born with a thick skin, can you develop one?

I sincerely hope so. For my skin is far more tender than I wish it were.

Unfortunately, the only way I know to toughen skin is to develop calluses on it. Calluses can take the punishment and allow the person to get on with the job, whatever it is.

Take playing the guitar, for example. I'm not a guitarist myself, but I understand from some folks who do play that if you want to be able to make beautiful music for any length of time, you have to develop calluses on your fingertips. Otherwise, the thin skin

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becomes too tender to take the punishing contact with the strings.

The same thing is true with ministering to others. If I want to be able to hear what the other person is saying underneath the words, from his heart instead of just from his mouth, I have to develop calluses all over my own feelings.

When someone hurts inside, he may say something that presses sharply on one of my sore spots. If it is an accident, I may just possibly be able to ignore it. But what if it is intentional? Will I be able to ignore it then? Must I always be defending myself or can I learn to love the other person anyway? Like the guitarist, can I learn to keep on playing even when it hurts?

One important thing to remember: It is not as if you could avoid pain altogether.

It hurts to develop calluses on your fingertips. It hurts to develop calluses on your sensibilities.

But if we are not blessed with naturally dense skin and we still want to be of use to each other — and I believe this is part of our calling — then we had better set out deliberately to develop those calluses.

Perhaps the guitarist can give us some tips on how to do this. He knows there is no magic to it. He develops his calluses by playing regularly, even when it hurts.

If the pain gets too intense, he may back off for a time, but he knows he has to get back to it as soon as the tenderness eases off even a little bit.

Is it possible to develop calluses that are too thick? Too tough?



Of course it is.

Fingertips that are impervious to all feeling will not be sensitive enough to pick out the right string to play. And the person who has no reaction to pain at all will not be of much use to somebody who is hurting.

The goal is not to become completely hardened. Just to become tough enough to be of use.

The guitarist is still conscious of his sore fingertips. He chooses to ignore them for the sake of the music. The thin-skinned person also has choices to make. He must choose whether to focus on the pain and draw away or to ignore the pain and stay in a relationship anyway.

I do not think this means pretending to ourselves the pain is not there. I believe it involves staying vulnerable to pain, but reaching past it, deep inside where the Lord of Love lives and letting him work through us.

I do not mean to give the impression I think this is easy. I think it is incredibly difficult. You know, like learning to turn the other cheek.

I just think it is necessary. After all, the Lord did not call us to him just so we could wallow in our own good fortune, but so we could become channels of his love to a hurting world.

And all it takes is a thick — though not unfeeling — skin and a tender heart.





Yielding To The Lord

A longtime friend took me to task recently for being too involved in religion.

She was visiting me for a few days and, as usual, we spent a lot of time talking — you know, about our lives, our children, our victories and our failures.

Our friendship goes so far back that we feel quite free to tell each other what we think. And since we care about each other, we think that what we believe will help the other person.

She thinks I limit my life by focusing so much on religion.

I couldn't take offense. She said it very gently and with good intent. And she may have a point.

But even if I was sure she had a good point — and I'll have to admit that sometimes I wonder — I don't think I could make it work any more.

Back in the days when it was just religion to me, I used to choose my level of involvement. Now it's not religion. It's a personal relationship with the Lord and I have made a total surrender to this relationship.

Not a perfect surrender. Just a total one.

There is a major difference. The imperfect nature of my surrender means there are all sorts of areas of my life that are not yet completely ruled by the Lord. But the totality of my surrender means I have given it all to him and no longer own myself.

Now his Spirit has every right to be at work in me. Now he chooses my path for me and my chief desire is to follow.



Sometimes the process is painful. Sometimes I grow tired.

I know about the verse that says those who wait upon the Lord will not grow tired. I guess I do not always wait upon the Lord. I know I wander.

But before long, he calls me back for I am his and he knows the desire of my heart.

I'm very glad my friend and I had that talk, however. Until then I had only thought I was feeling a little put-upon by life. I was complaining just a bit about some of the things that were happening to me. I was expressing dissatisfaction with the way this or that was going in my daily life.

My friend simply responded to what she heard. All she was trying to do was help me make peace with the world.

What she said helped me make peace with the Lord instead.

It cleared my vision. I could see something I had not looked at in a while. Peace with the world is not my goal. Peace with God is.

She was quite right, in fact. My relationship with the world was out of kilter.

But my problem was not actually my relationship with the world. It was my relationship with the One to whom I belong. Instead of being too involved with the Lord, I was not involved enough.

Like Ado Annie in the musical *Oklahoma!*, it's got to be all or nothing for me.

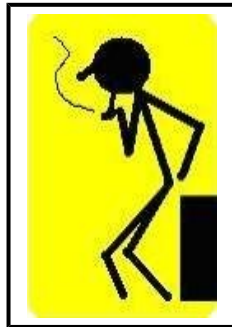
Since I can't belong to the Lord just a little bit and I don't want it to be nothing, I will stick with my choice of letting it be as much as possible.

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That doesn't mean I must have a miserable life, or even a sad one. Rather it can be one of great joy.

Scripture says the Kingdom of Heaven is not food and drink, but righteousness, peace and joy. Righteousness because Jesus died for my sins. Peace because he brought me into a right relationship with the Father. And joy because he lives in me through the Holy Spirit.



Under Construction

While driving along Phillips Highway recently, I noticed new construction under way on one side of the road and signs of destruction on the other.

In the block just south of Emerson Street, a commercial building of some kind is going up on the west side of the highway. On the east side can be seen what is left of an old motel. A semicircle of piles of rubble, which were once individual little cabins, await the bulldozer and the pickup truck.

I can't remember what the motel looked like, although I have driven up and down the highway frequently over the years.



Once it, like the large building opposite, was new. Now it isn't even a clear memory. Just a pile of rubble.

I wonder how long it had been there. I know the cabins had been sitting, empty and unused, for a while. I wonder if it fulfilled its builder's dreams.

The new commercial complex will be much larger. And it is made of metal rods and concrete blocks rather than wood and plaster.

But how long will it last? Will it fulfill someone's dreams?

And, sometime down the years, will another person drive by and see a derelict building or a large pile of rubble?

So much time, money and effort goes into construction of temporary things.

Jesus had something to say about builders.

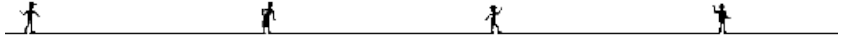
In the parable of the wise and foolish builders, he said if we want buildings that will withstand storms, we must build them on the right foundation.

Paul told the church in Corinth about that foundation. He said there was only one true foundation: Jesus Christ.

Paul saw his job as laying this foundation. But he knew that something would have to be built on top of the foundation.

He wrote, "If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is

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burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames."

I want with all my heart to build something that will last, that will survive the fire.

How do I do that?

Not every one builds a motel or a commercial complex. But everyone builds something. Everyone builds a life.

If I want to build the kind of life I would want to last forever. I must start with the foundation of a personal relationship with Jesus.

But then, how do I build on that foundation? How do I build with gold, silver and precious jewels instead of wood, hay and stubble?

Jesus has given the answer.

Before he started the story about the two builders he said, "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord' and not do what I say? I will show you what he is like who comes to me and hears my words and puts them into practice."

THEN he told the parable.

I've read that parable many times, of course. I've thought about the foundation of a relationship with Jesus Christ.

But I haven't thought much about what I am building on top of that foundation. I didn't look at what else Jesus said because it sounded so impossible.

But I want to build a building, a life, that will not only last, but will give glory to the Lord. And I think that is exactly what Jesus wants me to do.



Now it dawns on me — how slow I am to learn — that I WILL build something, whether I want to or not. I AM building something day by day, although I cannot see it.

Am I building with gold, silver and precious jewels? Or am I building with wood, hay and straw? Will my building survive the refiner's fire?

What constitutes gold, silver and precious jewels in this heavenly building project?

According to this passage, if I want to build something that will last, I must listen to what Jesus says and then choose to do it. What I erect on top of the rock foundation will be shaped by the choices I make.

The one thing God has given us that is truly all our own is our free will. But we have not only the freedom to use it in making choices, we have the necessity of using it.

This presupposes that we can know what Jesus has said and that we can put what he said into practice. If it were not possible to know and do this, I don't believe Jesus would have told us to. That would be unbelievably cruel.

How can I know? Where do I find these words to build by^o In the Bible.

How can I understand them? Who instructs me in their application to my life? Many teachers can help me understand, but I can only live by what I know when the Holy Spirit makes it real to me.

But what about my limitations? When the Holy Spirit has shown me how to relate what Jesus said to

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my life, will I always be able to succeed in doing it? What if I make choices I cannot bring to fulfillment?

God has made provision for that, too. And he forgives us over and over again.

But when I fall, I am to get up and begin again. The requirement for building remains.

Peter, who knew something about failure, wrote a letter that says I can do better than I think I can. He pointed out that God has given us "a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade."

And in his letter to the Romans, Paul said, "To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life."

And not as a pile of rubble, but as gold, silver and shining jewels that will last forever.



Seeking A Pastor

Several church bulletins that have crossed my desk recently have included items about the activities of pastor search committees. I read them with interest because the church I attend is going through that process.



The relationship between a pastor and a congregation — like that of the politician and the electorate — is often compared to a marriage.

But would anyone compare the way a person goes about finding a mate with the way a congregation finds a pastor?

How many people decide they need to get married within the next several months and then set about finding a person to marry? Probably not many. But that's what happens in the search for a new pastor.

The process we have been going through has been more than interesting. It has been instructive. It might actually be a very good thing for all single people to go through something similar.

You can imagine a young woman sitting down with a pad and pen to analyze her own personality and her life goals and to write down all her expectations for a spouse.

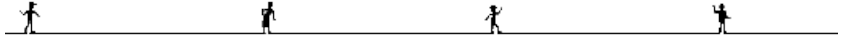
But can you imagine 25 young women trying to agree on a description of themselves and on a description of the one spouse they want to share?

Well, that's just what our congregation had to do.

First we had to agree upon some adjectives that describe us. That meant identifying both our strengths and our weaknesses. Then we had to set both short-term and long-range goals.

Next we had to agree on the areas of responsibility we want our new pastor to be expert in. That's based on the sad but true fact that very few people do a whole lot of things really well — and we

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 probably couldn't pay the salary of one of the really multitalented folks if we found him.

I approached the whole process with trepidation. I hate arguments and, frankly, I anticipated we would have our share. More than our share, actually, because we have a lot of strong-minded people in our little congregation. Hardly anyone is neutral on anything.

The only thing I dreaded as much as arguments was the lack of arguments — if that meant a false peace covering major differences of opinion. The problem with not talking things out — even when it leads to arguments — is that there is no other way to resolve them. And eventually this kind of not arguing leads to departures.

I was surprised and delighted, therefore, when I discovered we were in agreement on the essentials.

Now the bride-to-be is ready. All we need is the groom.

Somewhere out there a great number of prospective ministers are waiting for the chance to "marry" a church. Let's say that each of them has gone through a process similar to the one the congregation went through. Each has identified his strengths and weaknesses — as honestly as he can — and has listed his own goals and his expectations for what the congregation will bring to the union.

Theoretically, if all this information is properly processed, a perfect, or at least an acceptable, match will be made.

But we're using a very imprecise tool. We're using words — words that stand for complex concepts and for ideas that are not easy to define.



The opportunity seems great for the congregation to mean one thing by such words as "renewal" or "Bible teaching" and the minister to mean another.

I suspect many a husband and wife have discovered the likelihood of this happening even before the honeymoon was over.

So in the long run, while the process has been good for our relationship with one another in the body, I choose to rely on something besides the process to bring the right minister to our congregation.

I choose to rely on the Holy Spirit. And that means prayer.



Complacency And Conscience

A good conscience does more than sound an alarm. It pinches. I recently asked the Lord to restore my conscience and make it sensitive again to his word.

My prayers are being answered in more ways than I expected — and possibly more than I actually intended — but by now I should know better than to think I can program the Lord.

In any case, I am now becoming aware not only of things around me that aren't right, but of things *within* me that aren't right either.

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This week I became aware of something I was doing wrong. I saw it with sudden clarity. I had allowed myself to become so accustomed to this occasional action that I no longer even thought about it.

One step at a time, like one little drop of acid after another, I had toughened my conscience where this was concerned.

But I could no longer ignore it. My restored conscience jangled too loudly and pinched too hard.

As I thought about the path that had brought me to this place, I was amazed at how easily I had taken the first step and then followed it with more. At no time did I make a conscious decision. I just did what was easy to do.

But with the restoration of sight — and a sensitized conscience — I now saw my actions for what they were and I was appalled.

My immediate response was dismay and gratitude. Dismay at the state of my heart and gratitude that my Lord loved me too much to leave me the way I was.

These led to a sincere repentance. Through the grace of Jesus Christ, forgiveness is available to every repentant sinner.

But God wanted more than repentance from me this time. I knew I had to confess my fault to the people involved, receive their forgiveness and seek to make restitution.

Repentance before God was painful — shame can hurt — but I have known the wonder of his forgiveness before and I was sure he would cleanse me again from sin.



Repentance before my fellow man was much scarier. I had no idea what response I would receive or what the outcome would be. But I had no choice.

The Lord knew that for me to put this behind me, I needed to complete the act of repentance in this way.

It's over now. It's done. And I feel like a new person.

I have also learned a couple of very valuable lessons.

First, it is terribly easy to take those first steps onto the wrong path, and each one taken makes it even easier to take the next.

And eventually the conscience will become so toughened by neglect of its warnings that it will become silent and warn no longer.

This must be what happens when any Christian falls.

In his letter to Timothy, Paul warns this young disciple to follow his instructions for keeping a pure heart, a good conscience and a sincere faith. He goes on to speak of two who rejected such advice and were shipwrecked in their faith.

People don't fall all at once. They fall over a period of time. And remember, falling can be pleasant. It is the sudden stop that hurts.

And second, it is possible to regain a good conscience. Even if you have allowed yours to become grimy and dull, God can clean it, restore it and make it as good as new and as sensitive as he knows you can bear.

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Now mine has been restored, but what happens to it next is up to me. Will I listen when my good conscience sounds a warning?

You know I will where this particular action is concerned.

But I have other weaknesses, other areas of my life that have not yet been tested.

Will I respond to my conscience on those areas, as well?

Or will I listen to the song of self, that lazy, easy, cozy song whose refrain is "It doesn't matter" and "No one cares?"

A squeaky clean conscience — so clean it pinches — will help.

And the Holy Spirit promises to keep it clean if I will let him.



Light And Darkness

Have you ever watched a shadow retreat before the sun? There's a kind of slow procession of light into the darkness.



That's what the Lord has been doing for me. Slowly but surely he has been shining his light on my understanding of how to follow him.

It's been a sort of a creeping enlightenment.

The process has been going something like this: God brings something to light for me in a passage of Scripture and lets me get a pretty good hold on its meaning. When I am comfortable with that part, he allows a situation into my life that calls for more light, and then he lets the light move out until it covers the next verse or two.

The most recent verse to light up for me was Philippians 3:16: "Only let us live up to what we have already attained."

But let me give you a quick review of how the process has worked in this particular letter.

The first really bright light appeared on Philippians 3:12 several years ago when a teacher I was listening to cited that verse as the theme for one of his talks. He focused our attention on the word "that" in the verse that goes, "Not that I have obtained all this, or have been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of *that* for which Christ Jesus took hold of me."

Christ had something in mind when He took hold of each of us, the teacher said. And we, like Paul, can press on to take hold of whatever it is.

Of course, he didn't limit the lesson to the one verse. We had to find out what "all of this" was. We had to look back to earlier verses to find out what Paul had not yet obtained.

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What I found were verses that have become some of the most significant in Scripture for shaping my life.

Verses 10 and 11 say, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead."

God has brought his light to bear on every phrase of that passage, slowly but truly changing the way I see everything that happens to me.

We also included verses 13 and 14, too. "Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press or toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."

I saw that at first as simply an extension, a restating of the theme of verse 12.

Later, God enlightened my understanding of the first part of that verse as I did a study on time, specifically how we relate to the time God has given us. He helped me understand how to use the past and the future to my advantage in the present.

And with that I was content and I looked for nothing else.

Then, just the other day I came to Philippians during my regular daily Bible reading and decided to read the entire letter straight through. I almost stopped at verse 16 but kept on reading. When I finished the short letter, I looked back at the light that was slowly beginning to appear on that verse. "Only let us live up to what we have already attained."



What God seemed to be saying to me was, "Don't use what you don't know as an excuse for not living out the truth that you do know."

And I admitted to myself that I do tend to want to have it all before I commit myself. I want to understand it all, see the whole road clearly, before I act.

But as I mused, the light crept again, back to verse 15: "All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you." Then, in that context, I read, "Only let us live up to what we have already attained."

And I realized suddenly that I was having difficulty with some people who are dear to me, but with whom I don't always agree. And I had been vacillating between taking a stand on interpretation that might cause division and taking a stand on acceptance that might seem to deny the importance of the truth.

I realized I had been pondering how Christians are to work together when they don't have the same understandings of what God is saying. I was wondering how God expects us to get anything done when even those who love him and are trying to follow him can't agree.

Now, as the Spirit brought his light to these verses, God seemed to be saying, "Don't be afraid to trust me to enlighten your friends — after all, I am enlightening you, aren't I? Your task is to do all you can to live up to what I have already shown you and to leave the rest to me."

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It was something of a jolt, but a helpful one. I felt kind of like the guy in the television commercial for aftershave lotion who gets smacked in the face and says, "Thanks, I needed that".



Contentment

I took part in a discussion about contentment last weekend. I felt much better afterward.

Obviously, I needed the message.

A funny thing about contentment: When you have it, you are hardly aware of its existence; when you don't have it, the desire for it may make it foremost in your mind.

For most of us, gaining and maintaining contentment isn't easy.

So the group I was with talked about some ways we can try to safeguard the contentment we have, and to help it grow, or to find it if we have really let it slip away or discover it if we have never known its blessing.

Someone noted that contentment is what Paul had when he said he could handle being rich or poor and being hungry or well-fed.

The first suggestion for building contentment into your life was the basic one of putting your life daily into the hand of God, committing each day to him completely.



One member of our group pointed out that this kind of commitment is best done at the beginning of the day, before you let all sorts of other things get in the way.

Somebody else said she could really tell the difference when she forgot to read the Bible in the morning.

And a third person said the verse from the Sermon on the Mount about seeking the kingdom of God *first* also speaks to the search for contentment.

Another member of the group suggested that making a willful and conscious effort to give God thanks and praise will help build contentment. When we praise him for who and what he is and thank him for what he has done for us, we're bound to be more content, she said.

We decided that willful in this case means using your free will to do something your emotions don't necessarily want to do.

It's also recognizing when something has driven your contentment away and making a conscious effort to avoid that thing until it doesn't bother you anymore, another woman said.

She said she had realized this one day when she was strolling through the mall at Regency Square and a hungry desire for things had chased away her contentment and replaced it with discontent.

Sometimes it really is necessary to "pluck out your eye," she said, and not go look.

Of course, it's better to be able to look with pleasure and no desire for ownership. But Jesus knew

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we wouldn't always be able to do that, which is why he sounded the warning.

Another facet of contentment, somebody said, is the ability to trust God.

Anxiety, fretting and worry drive away contentment.

Trust in God is the only thing that can drive out anxiety and deal with fretting and worry.

In fact, we agreed, contentment is not merely being happy with whatever you have, whatever you are and whatever comes your way.

It's better than that.

It's being given your heart's desire and finding out it truly is exactly what you want.

Then, of course, we went our separate ways, determined to make this discussion a part of our lives, to commit our lives daily — and early — to the Lord, to seek first the kingdom, to make that willful and conscious effort to praise and thank the Lord, to avoid those things we know can disturb our contentment, and to remember that we really can trust the Lord to be the Lord who loves and saves and sanctifies.

I don't know how the others are doing.

I've had to remind myself several times of what we said.

But every time I have, it's worked.

In fact, I am so content, I don't really have anything to write about this week.



I Was Angry

Last week I was angry.

Anxious.

And ashamed.

In that order.

On a couple of different occasions, I felt as if the world was using me as a punching bag.

I was angry at what I felt was injustice, resentful of the judgments of others.

I was anxious about the possible consequences, eager to protect myself.

And I was ashamed of being angry and anxious!

I wanted to punch somebody out for punching me but I knew I should turn the other cheek. I couldn't figure out how to do both, so I did neither. I developed a knot in my stomach and a very sore spirit.

It was not one of my better weeks.

Or was it?

Through it the Lord has drawn me closer to him.

First, he showed me how concerned I am with the opinions of others.

I saw how strong my desire was in those situation: to prove my worth to everyone's satisfaction, how strong my need to justify myself and

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how weak my ability to trust him and to love others as much as myself.

I know the Lord calls me to do what I cannot do and not to do what I do. I know he tells me to love those who persecute me and to be defenseless except for love.

Why was it so hard for me to do?

The Lord showed me it was because deep down inside I have this powerful desire to be approved by men — all men and all women everywhere — at all times.

Now I know that compared to the approval of God that doesn't amount to a hill of beans, but I have desired it none the less. I know it is a treasure that does not last, but I have wanted it anyway.

When I asked wise counselors for help in dealing with this struggle, one of them read me a couple of lines from First Corinthians.

"But to me it is a very small thing that I should be examined by you, or by any human court; in fact I do not even examine myself.

"I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord."

Anger and fear come when I care more for the opinion of men than for the judgment of the Lord. Condemnation comes when I accept the world's judgment rather than his.

Certainly there are things the Lord does not want me to do.

And I do them.



Certainly there are things he does want me to do that I don't.

And he will show them to me because he loves me and he wants me to know the joy of being free of those things.

While it hurts when he shows me I have failed — for I know it is a failure to love — I am not angry or afraid. When he gives me eyes to see myself, there is conviction of sin, but I do not live in condemnation.

When someone challenges my character or actions, my response must be to check with the one who judges rightly, to see if he sees it the way they do.

If he does, I must confess and repent. But if not, then I can set aside those judgments and know peace and joy of the Lord.

My Lord wants me to learn to seek his approval and his only. I am not even to examine myself — to the point of condemnation. He will show me where I am in error and how to correct my ways.

I was not guilty of what people said about me, but I was guilty of what the Lord showed me. I was guilty of being angry, anxious and ashamed.

And I did not call upon him for help.

But he was there with me anyway. And he finally helped me see something else.

Even though he wants me to grow and mature, even though he has told me to be perfect as he is perfect, even with all that, he will answer when I cry out to him like a hurt child.

Yes, he will correct my step. He will test me and let me see my failure.

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But he will also lift me up and carry me when I fall.

And he will still love me and be with me. And that — a loving relationship with Jesus — is what I want most of all.



Resting In A Safe Place

During a time recently when my life seemed more unsettled than usual, details of a particular childhood memory kept popping into my mind at odd moments. Finally I put aside other thoughts and recalled the sights, sounds and feelings of this past time.

When I was a little girl, my mother and I would share a lower berth on the train when we traveled from Jacksonville to Atlanta to visit relatives.

My father worked for the railroad and we were able to make this train trip often enough for it to take on an almost ritual quality for me. I'm sure I have blurred all the different occasions into one precious memory now.

The journey started with a short ride in a day coach from St. Augustine to Jacksonville. There, after a



short wait in the terminal, we boarded a Pullman car for the remainder of the trip.

I always slept next to the window.

And although we arrived in Atlanta quite early, I always awoke before we were called by the porter.

I would raise the window curtain a few inches and, propped on my pillow, would watch the passing scene.

As the sky lightened, I would see trees and telephone poles and buildings. I would catch brief glimpses of lighted windows in houses here and there, of cars moving along roads that ran in tandem with the tracks for a while before swerving away as the train hurtled suddenly between red clay banks.

And I would think about the people in those houses and cars. I would wonder what they were doing, what their lives were like, whether they were happy or sad.

As the world slipped quickly past the tiny opening in my window, I would be aware of the vastness of creation and the impossibility of grasping it and understanding it.

And I would, for a brief, scary moment, feel as if I were outside the world — not really part of it at all — looking on at life.

Then, of course, the time would come for us to dress quickly, a learned skill in that tiny space, and to get ready to leave the train.

What was it about that experience that made it so significant?

And why had its memory demanded attention all these years later?

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I know that I longed to feel connected to that wider world and was at the same time a bit afraid of its very existence.

It challenged me. It stretched the boundaries of my small safe world.

But it did so without threatening its safety. After all, close beside me lay my mother, the person who made me feel most secure. And we were safe within the strong, the surely indestructible, cocoon of the moving train.

Perhaps I have been remembering that long-ago time because I miss that sense of resting in a safe place on the very edge of the unknown. The boundaries of my life are being stretched to the breaking point almost every day.

The world rushes by at break-neck speed and I catch glimpses of multitudes whose lives I know nothing about, except that pains, passions and problems face them all every day.

And now I know that no human being and certainly no created thing can offer the kind of assurance I thought I had as a child.

Perhaps memory's return was to help me focus on the One who can.

Jesus knew what it was to live in the world. And when he was about to leave it, he prayed to the Father for those he would leave behind.

Today as I turn to John chapter 17, verse after verse speaks to me of his love and his desire for me.

"Now this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

Barbara White



"Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name — the name you gave me — so that they may be one as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me.

"My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one.

"I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them."

My childhood experience touched that place in me that longed for something beyond myself. Something mystical. Something a little frightening, but exciting, too.

Now I know the delight I found in it was only a prelude to the far greater, but no less inexplicable, joy I find in Jesus Christ.

My mother was close beside me in that speeding train. But she was only beside me. And the train in which we lay was far more fragile than I could imagine.

My Lord and Savior, my Master and my Friend, is closer than that. Through the promise of Jesus that was fulfilled at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit poured out then and today, my Lord is beside me and within me. In him I rest not in anything made by men, but in the very hand of God.



Family Relations

Have you ever noticed that when Jesus answered a question, he usually raised more questions?

His answers do that for me.

Take his answer to the question, "Who is my neighbor?" He told a story about two respectable and noteworthy people who ignored a man in need and one man from a less-respected nationality who helped him.

That sounds clear enough. But does the story of the Good Samaritan really satisfy all *your* questions?

Maybe I am just dense, but while I'm pretty sure I understand what he is saying in theory, I still find myself working out in practice who it is I am to love the way I love myself.

And look at what Jesus had to say about family relations.

Remember the time he was upsetting people with his answer to their request for a miraculous sign and somebody told him his mother and brothers were looking for him?

He pointed to his disciples and said they were his mother and brothers. He said his mother, brother and sister were those who did the will of his Father in heaven.



At other times he also came down pretty hard on loving the members of one's family. He said that unless we loved him more than any or all of them, we were not worthy to be his disciples.

But Scripture tells us we should put our families high on our list of priorities.

And Jesus also roundly criticized the Pharisees for allowing people to use a legal loophole to avoid supporting their parents.

Do you know how all this is worked out in daily life?

I was talking about family relations with several young couples just this week.

We were examining the question of stewardship of our time and checking to see if we had our priorities in the proper order.

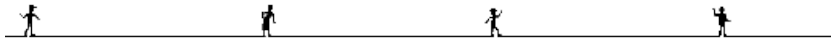
One of the things to be listed in our priorities is our family. And that led to the question of who our family really is.

We shared some thoughts on the difficulty of getting our parents to acknowledge our maturity and separation from them as adults. All of us have struggled with this, trying to discover how to honor and respect our parents according to God's word while loving Jesus more than them.

We have also tried to understand how to balance our natural families with that wider family of faith.

The morning after our discussion I reflected on the possibility that we are not given specific instructions because we would only follow — or find a

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 way around — them and we are supposed to follow the Lord.

God gives us the law as a description of his will.

But Jesus tells us to take his yoke and walk with him and he will show us how to live out the law on a daily basis.

So we come back to the question behind the question. If we want to do the will of the Father in heaven — if we want to know how to love our neighbor and how to have a proper understanding of loving our families — how do we find out what he wants us to do?

Most of us start with finding out what he says his will is in Scripture and trying to do it.

But, as I have indicated, that still leaves a lot of ground for confusion.

The final answer is kind of a Catch 22.

It's not enough to find a law and obey it to the letter.

You have to get to know the heart of the Lord so well that you automatically do that which pleases him.

And to get to know his heart that well, you have to obey what you already know of his will so you can learn more.

You do what you believe is pleasing to him and then you check to see if he is pleased.

This takes time and attention. It also involves a lot of missed opportunities and failed attempts and a lot of admission of error and trying again.

But I believe Jesus gave his open-ended answers exactly for this reason. He does not want us merely to

follow a law. He wants us to follow him, to focus our eyes on him and keep our attention on him.

For if we love someone, we think nothing of spending time and effort to learn his preferences and do them. In fact, we find joy in the very process.

Arid he wants us to love him and to know the joy that brings.



Morning Walk

My morning walk and the rising of the sun have coincided. At least, the sun comes into sight beyond the roof tops of houses along my route at this time of year.

One morning last week I was struck by the way it affected a flock of small clouds piled along the horizon — or along the lower edge of what I see.

These were not the white fluffy sort of cloud. They looked as though they held a lot of water that might later in the day, become a shower or two. But while I was looking at them, the rising sun painted their edges with a most beautiful color, a combination of peach and pink and gold and a hint of crimson thrown in for good measure.

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I thought of the cliché about clouds having silver linings and decided the gorgeous lining around these dingy clouds was prettier than silver ever thought of being. And it struck me that the light of the Lord's love frequently looks most warm and welcoming in our dark hours.

This may not be true for everyone. But I can think of many truly incredible times when God has turned the edges of my desperations into gleaming reflections of his presence in my life.

I remember, for example, the night, shortly after I committed my life to him, when I lay in bed reading the Bible because I could not sleep.

I feared for the future of one of my children. I was afraid something terrible was going to happen. And this was not an idle fear. The danger was real. I had prayed over and over to God to spare my child. But I had no confidence that she would be spared.

As I read in the Gospel of John, I came to the passage where Jesus talked about the Bread of Life and told the people that they must eat his flesh and drink his blood to have any part in him. And since the Last Supper hadn't even happened yet and they had no idea what he meant, most of them turned away and stopped following him.

And I felt the Lord asking me if I would stop following him if this terrible, offensive thing that I feared actually happened. Would I turn away and reject him as those others did so long ago?

For an agonizing heart beat of time I did not know the answer.



Then I read on. Jesus asked the disciples the same question and Peter replied, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

I slipped from the bed, knelt beside it and repeated those words. And I became aware of the bright light of love surrounding me. I knew that I knew that God was God and I must not put any other god before him.

I knew that he wanted all my adoration — with no conditions, no promises of rescue from the troubles of the world, no certainties at all in fact, except for the certainty of who he is and of his love.

The danger to my child did not pass easily away. She walked a terrible, painful walk for a time — But not forever.

And during her dark days, he became the light around the edges of her clouds, too.



God Uses Whoever Is At Hand

A feeling of self worth is a wonderful thing to have. But when it comes to being useful to God, it isn't always the most important thing.

Willingness can count for even more.

A friend and I were talking this week about a particular healing ministry. She has experienced the joy of being set free from bondage to old pains and old problems that had afflicted her.

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Now, knowing the wonder of this freedom herself, she longed to help others find this same release.

Well, I asked, why don't you offer to work with someone who is active in this ministry?

Oh, she said, I don't feel worthy to be God's instrument.

She said she thought a person ought to have his own life completely in order before he could be of any use to God in this way.

And since she has never felt she had it all together, she has not dared step out in service.

I tried to change her mind.

No, I did *not* tell her she was worthy because God loved her enough to die for her.

It's true, and she *knows* it is true.

But she hasn't been able to get what she knows to be true in her feeling and her actions as well.

And I thought she might just possibly be hiding behind feelings of unworthiness. So instead of arguing with her about it, I asked if she thought she was as worthy as Balaam's ass.

This donkey saved Balaam's life by doing what she had to do. She could see the angel of the Lord blocking Balaam's way and she stopped so he could not continue along the wrong path.

Eventually, she spoke to Balaam and his eyes were opened so he, too, could see the angel.

God needed to communicate with Balaam and the instrument he had was an ass. So God used the ass.

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I hope you won't take it for either false modesty or pride if I tell you I think I am as worthy to be used by God as the donkey.

I really think I am.

I think my friend is, too. And I told her so.

The point to remember, I said, is that when God wants ministry done, he uses what is at hand.

Especially if it is willing to be used.

I think my friend shares my fear of failure. I have often chosen not to try something rather than risk public failure.

But the Lord is teaching me the meaning of Paul's statement that in our weakness God is strong. I have experienced the success that comes from willingness blessed by grace.

I shared with my friend the fact that there are a couple of holes in the road we should be on the lookout for.

First, it has to be real weakness.

That is, you have to use all the skill and ability you have been given. And you have to try continually to bring that skill up to a higher level of competency.

Otherwise it isn't real willingness to try in the face of weakness. It's laziness hiding behind fake humility.

On the other hand, becoming better at doing something raises the risk of thinking you are succeeding in your own strength.

The way around this pitfall is to remember always to submit the skill to the Lord who gave it to you in the first place.

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And, of course, you don't want to rush in where God is not sending you. It isn't wisdom to expect him to rescue you from a weakness he didn't tell you to expose to danger.

That's not willingness. That's foolhardiness and quite possibly misguided pride.

I felt a bit smug by the time I finished lecturing my friend. After all, I have learned so much about all this.

Then I took a look at myself.

And found a spot or two where I have been hanging back. I found laziness and false modesty mingling with left over fears.

I realized suddenly that I have not been making myself available. I have not even been listening to the Lord to see if he wanted to use me anywhere.

So all my words were for me, too.

It *IS* scary to step out into the darkness, to trust the Lord to make something happen that you know won't happen unless he does it.

And I really *DON'T* want to cause more pain while trying to bring about healing.

But when the Lord urges, I want to be ready and willing to try.



Thoughts About My Granddaughter



My granddaughter, Nicole, who will be 4 in January, is a source of much delight. She provokes much thought, too.

While talking with my daughter, Mary, on the phone last week, I overheard Nicole in the background. "Now where *did* I put my dust rag," she asked in that exaggerated imitation of the adult which children do so well

She was helping her mother clean the house — whether her mother wanted her to or not.

The incident gave me a good starting point for some further remarks on obedience.

Nicole wants to be like her mother, just as we want to be like Jesus. She wants to do the things she sees her mother do. She wants to talk the way she hears her mother and father talk.

She wants to be like them.

But she doesn't necessarily want to be obedient.

She prefers to do it her way.

She will do what her mother says — some of the time. Sometimes she does it happily, sometimes very grudgingly. And open rebellion, in the form of "No!" answers, is a definite part of her vocabulary.

Her understanding of what it means to be obedient is heavily overlaid by a fierce desire for independence.

Even when she says yes, the execution is far from perfect.

Having decided to help with the dusting, she does her version of the project, which leaves streaks of polish marks on dusty surfaces. She does not often

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stop to ask her mother for instructions on how to do the job. She just grabs the rag and starts right in. After all, she has seen how dusting is done and she is sure she can handle the job.

Like Nicole, I choose my areas of obedience by what attracts me at the time. She felt like dusting. I feel like tackling a certain service project. I approach the task the way she does, too. I examine the project and decided how to tackle it. I have seen other people do it and I'm pretty sure I can handle the job.

Then, I may remember to ask the Lord to bless my plan.

As her mother, Mary has responsibilities toward Nicole in the matter of helping her learn how to respond to life's various duties and opportunities. She can give her plenty of opportunities to practice the right kind of behavior until it becomes a habit. She can tell her the importance of obedience and explain the consequences of disobedience. She can punish her when she disobeys.

It's a learning process, a process of growth.

We expect the child to take some time to reach a level of mature performance.

How well Nicole grasps the lessons depends on how well her mother — and other adults — teach her.

And on how willing she is to accept their direction.

And on how much she wants to please.

I see many similarities between all this and my own lessons in obedience to God. Of course, the Lord is the perfect teacher, better than any earthly parent.



But the present outcome still depends greatly on how willing I am to learn and how much I want to please.

And there are definite differences between obedience to one's parents and to God.

A child is expected to outgrow the need to rely on his parents. We never outgrow our need for direction from our Heavenly Father. But then, the human parent is perhaps no wiser than his adult child. God is always wiser than his children.

I do not expect Nicole always to ask her mother how to live out her life. I pray that she will learn how to listen.

I do not expect to ask God for specific guidance for every action I take. This could become as absurd as the woman Hannah Whitall Smith talks about in her book, *The Christian's Secret of a Happy Life*, who did not get up in the morning until she heard the Spirit tell her to, or put on her clothes until instructed. This process resulted occasionally. Mrs. Smith said, in her wearing only one sock.

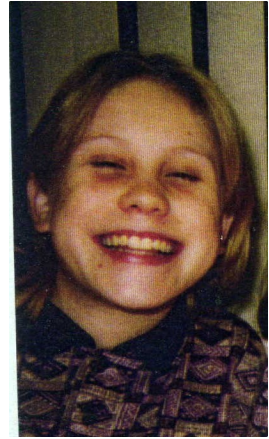
God has already laid down the specifics for my daily life: Worship him only, honor my parents, do not steal, kill or commit adultery, do not swear false witness or desire anything that is not mine. And Jesus has already taught me the principle on which to base my decisions: Love God with all my heart and my neighbor as myself.

But like Nicole, I frequently disguise my rebellion by looking like I'm being obedient, while actually I'm doing everything else but. Obedience to God is not legalism. It is what you do in the moment of choice.

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It is doing what God has told you to do and trusting him with the outcome. And then doing the next thing in its turn. It is hearing him, knowing his voice, and then loving him enough to surrender your will to his.



Only when I realize the extent of the obedience called for do I begin to see the extent of my disobedience. And only then can I begin to ask for the kind of help I need to turn my life in the direction he is going, so I can follow.

Editor's Note: Nicole died of cystic fibrosis in 2005.



Decisions And Ideals

I was two-thirds of the way through a book when I realized that, with his usual perfect timing, God has done it again.

If I hadn't started the book when I did, I wouldn't have reached that point just when I needed to. -

There in a chapter near the end of the book was precisely the message I needed to read. It went with the particular lesson God was teaching me at the time.

The book is *His Word, Letting It Take Root — and Bear Fruit — in Our Lives* by David Knight, a Catholic



priest. The chapter is on "The Seed that Doesn't Bear Fruit."

All of the book is very interesting. But the part I particularly had to read is about the need for practical, concrete responses and decisions in growing spiritually.

I'm so good at making everything theoretical rather than practical and ethereal rather than ordinary. And most real spiritual growth takes places in the practical ordinariness of life.

Knight wrote that he had often asked people on retreats to write down an ideal and a decision. The ideal was to be a goal, something to work toward. The decision was to be something concrete and practical — doable — and should move you closer to the goal.

He said teens were better at this than adults, that adults tended to write two ideals and no decisions.

That is exactly what I do.

In my response to God's revelation of my self-centeredness, I might set as my goal to "care more about people." That sounds nice, but days, weeks and months can go by without it ever becoming real in my life than that.

And my decision would be something like saying I will "try to meet the needs of people I meet," which is not a decision. It, too, is an ideal.

By a decision, Knight means I am to say what one specific thing I am going to do about it first and exactly when I am going to do it.

For example, I could decide that I will offer to serve at St. Mary's Church in Springfield during my

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lunch hour one day a week. And that I will call Sue Carmichael at St. Mary's this week to work out the details.

That means that by the end of the week I will either have done it or I won't.

But I will know which. And then I can make another decision about that.

Frankly, it scares me to death.

I can't explain why.

It just does.

It leaves no loopholes for escape.

I think it's a terrific idea, even if it does scare me, however. I will find out whether I will or I won't try to be obedient to what I believe the Lord is teaching me.

So it's bound to produce good fruit. Even if I find I have failed to follow through, I will have something very real to confess to my Lord and ask his help with. And then I can try again.

This way my goal isn't going to just fade away. It's going to stay right there at my elbow until I make a decision — and do it.

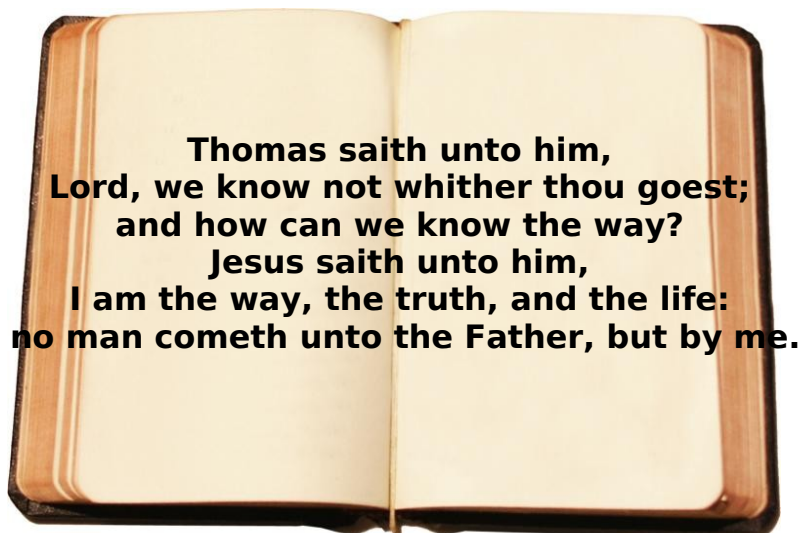
And once I do, I know from experience that it will produce blessings in my life. I have never been obedient that it hasn't produced blessings.

Oh, sometimes it produces all sorts of human complications and messes, but that doesn't prevent the blessings from being present, too.

I am already blessed that my Lord is teaching me a new kind of gift giving — the giving of myself — at this time of year. The time draws closer when we

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remember the most precious gift of all, God's gift of himself in his Son.



A Trouble Free Life

Do you know anybody whose life is really trouble free?

Lately it seems everyone I know is in the midst of a crisis — including people I care about.

It is hard to see your loved ones going through rough times. I always want to rush in and solve all their problems for them. I forget that God has a design in mind for them that is being worked out through the pain and tears. I forget it because I cannot see the plan myself and in the midst of pain it is hard to remember that He is in control.

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After a couple of weeks of rushing around offering a shoulder to cry on here and a (not very) strong right arm of assistance there, I found myself absolutely wiped out. In fact, it began to look as though the more I tried to help, the worse the situations became.

Reading Psalms is a terrific thing to do at times like that. The psalmist has "been there" as the saying goes. He knows what it is like to be down and out, to feel deserted, to beg for God's action in his life.

The psalmist was sometimes wiped out, too.

And that is the best position from which a Christian may approach his Lord.

The ways of a God with His creation are, of course, beyond my understanding. But in this current time of troubles, He has given me the grace to see that He **is** having His way and the faith to trust that it will be for good.

Whoever said that coming to know the Lord was the beginning of a "happily ever after" existence has not read his Bible much. Look at how long it took God to make Abraham into the person He wanted him to be. Consider the changes He had to make in Jacob before he could become Israel.

God not only want us to belong to Him, He wants us to be in His image, like Jesus. That takes work; it also seems to take troubles.

So these trials and tribulations must have a purpose in training me for some plan of His or for developing some trait of character He knows I lack. And the fact is that we turn to Him most completely in difficult times. We are most open to being taught when



our self-satisfaction is shattered, our confidence gone, our dependence on Him demonstrated.

I confess I wish I knew what He is after in me right now. I don't know and I may never know.

But He does and that's what matters.

So I will try to see His will in everything that comes my way.

Maybe that's my lesson for this time.



Miracle In Action

People have different ideas about miracles. Some people believe that they happened during the time of Jesus and the Apostles but don't happen anymore.

Some believe there aren't really any miracles; that even those of the Bible can be explained rationally.

Some believe miracles happened in biblical times and still happen today.

A member of a local Roman Catholic Church believes that a miracle like the multiplication of the loaves happened in a very special way at her church just a couple of weeks ago.

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Kathy Trifiletti called me recently to tell me about the Sunday when St. Joseph Church in Mandarin smelled like a bakery.

That wasn't the miracle. The place smelled like a bakery because the rear of the church was full of fresh bread.

Members of the social concerns committee had adapted the story of the multiplication of the loaves into a modern way to raise funds for world hunger.

Mrs. Trifiletti is a member of the committee. The other two lay members are Elizabeth Shepherd and Jackie Upton.

They had secured the donation of one thousand loaves of fresh bread from a local bakery.

That wasn't the miracle, either. She said this particular bakery donates a lot of bread to charitable causes.

Then they sold the loaves for \$1 each.

Mrs. Trifiletti said the congregation at each of the four Masses celebrated on Sunday at St. Joseph's was given a brief inspirational message about world hunger during the service.

"The whole church was smelling like a bakery," she said. "Everybody got all excited about it."

As a result, they sold 1,000 loaves, raising \$1,000 for hunger.

Half of the money will go to a local project, Mrs. Trifiletti said. The other \$500 will go to Catholic Relief Services for a world hunger project.



The committee will pick a local project soon, Mrs. Trifiletti said, and talk to Bishop John Snyder about the world project.

"And we want to know where we're sending it," she said. "We don't want it to go to waste. Bishop Snyder is a member of the board of Catholic Charities, and we'd rather put the money in his hands than just send it off to an agency."

Mrs. Trifiletti said the idea of selling bread to raise money for hunger projects was not original with the committee. They heard about Christ Church in Ponte Vedra Beach selling 200 loaves and decided to try their own, larger project.

"And it was a wonderful success," she said.

"We had picked up about 150 extra loaves and we donated those to New Life Inn, which serves meals to the hungry downtown. So they helped fight hunger, too."

When it was all over, Mrs. Trifiletti said she felt that, in some inexplicable — but real — way she had taken part in a miracle.

Not a miracle of five loaves turning into enough to feed thousands. But a miracle of people doing more than they knew they could do.

"Some people say the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves was really that Jesus got all the people to re-evaluate their resources," she said, thoughtfully, at the end of her call.

"It's possible that that is as great a miracle as any."

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On Baptism

The death of a Christian friend shook Wayne Lewis from his complacency about life. It led him to examine his relationship with Jesus.

The examination convinced him he needed to commit his life to the Lord.

His conviction brought him to a public profession of faith and to immersion in the water of baptism.

I attended the service at which Lewis was baptized. I was gathering information for a story on the fact that Southern Baptist churches are not baptizing as many people as they used to.

I wanted to know why Southern Baptists care so much about getting people baptized.

Baptism is an important fact in Christian life, of course. It is something Jesus specifically commanded his followers to do.

Matthew 28:19 records these words of Jesus: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

In Mark 16 he says: "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whosoever



believes and is baptized will be saved, but whosoever does not believe will be condemned."

And in John 3:5, Jesus tells Nicodemus that "unless a man is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God."

So Christians practice baptism.

But they perform the act in different ways. Some practices call for the person being baptized to be completely immersed in the water. Others involve pouring water over the head of the one to be baptized or just sprinkling water on him or her.

And they have different understandings of what baptism means. They may use some of the same words in talking about it — words like salvation and washing away of sins — but the meaning under the words may be different.

In Romans 6, Paul says, "Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?"

In Galatians, he says those who have been baptized into Christ have "clothed yourselves with Christ."

And in his first Epistle, Peter wrote, "this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also — not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ."

But what does it mean to be baptized into Jesus' death? Or to be clothed with Christ? What does it mean to be saved by the resurrection of Jesus Christ?

Each heart has its own definition and explanation.

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And no matter how hard we try, mystery remains. Well, that's OK. God *is* a mystery. So for baptism to be more than we can define or explain is only appropriate.

After that Sunday service, Lewis and the others told me why they had asked to be baptized.

Lewis said he had been talking with this friend, one of the ministers at Westside Baptist Church, after a Wednesday evening service. The two men had made a tentative date to go look at some property together one day soon.

Two days later Lewis had received a call. His friend had died suddenly, the night before, of a heart attack.

"It was all I had on my mind Friday," Lewis said. "I could see Frank jumping from one mountaintop to another in heaven, kicking up gold dust as he went.

"That night I tried to go to sleep, but as I sat on the side of the bed, I knew I was lost. I was just scared to go to sleep. I knew that if I died, I'd break Hell wide open. I had told people I was a Christian, and I hadn't really given my life to Christ."

Lewis talked to another minister at the church, told him he wanted to be saved and made a profession of faith in Jesus.

He was one of five adults baptized during the Sunday evening service the day I visited his church.

Each of the others told a story that was different in detail, but similar in motive. Each saw baptism as an individual, personal response to accepting Jesus as Lord and Savior. Each expressed intense conviction that baptism had to be a central part of that response.



Sharing Love

I am writing this column a week in advance. By the time it is published, I will have been attending the General Conference of the United Methodist Church for a week in St. Louis.

But I didn't want you readers to become accustomed to my absence from this page, so I thought I would put something together ahead of time.

One thing about attending a Baptist conference, you can count on hearing lots of sermons.

Last week I attended the second of three annual seminars on the Bible sponsored by the six Southern Baptist seminary presidents and I heard several excellent sermons.

Preaching that focuses on opening up the Scripture and bringing it to life for the hearer is one of the blessings the Lord has provided for his church. When preaching does not do this, it does not feed believers with the food they most need.

In the two and a half-day conference, I heard five sermons, by pastors Ken Hemphill of Norfolk, Va.; Richard Jackson of Phoenix, Ariz.; Jon Stubblefield of Shreveport, La.; Daniel Vestal of Midland, Texas; and Jerry Vines of Jacksonville.

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All of their sermons were both enjoyable and enriching. They were good, solid food for mind and heart and gave me much to think about and use.

But I was particularly caught by something in two of them.

The names of Jackson and Vines have surfaced as probable nominees for the presidency of the Southern Baptist Convention in the election to be held next month in San Antonio, Texas. If the ability to preach meaningfully the word of God is a criterion, they both qualify.

Their Scripture references even had the same chapter and verse, but different books.

Using 1 Timothy 3:16, Jackson spoke of the mystery of God in Jesus Christ and of the Christian's need to guard that sense of wonder of it all.

He spoke of the mystery of God present in human flesh in Jesus; the mystery of the vindication of Jesus by the Holy Spirit in his resurrection from the dead; the mystery of exultation of Jesus by the angels who watched it all; the mystery that message of Jesus was being preached to all the world; the mystery of the belief in the message by the world; and the mystery of Jesus' glorification as he is taken into heaven.

He said Christians must not lose sight of the wonders and they must not be distracted from the proclamation of them to the world.

Vines spoke of John 3:16, saying that this one verse has the power to proclaim the whole of the Gospel in a nutshell.

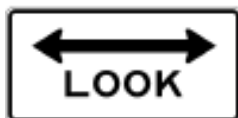


He said it contained the mind, emotions and will of God in its presentation of the love of God. He described this love as incredible in that it is deep enough, wide enough and high enough to encompass the world, the church and the individual believer. He said God's love is also indisputable and unique, for it involved the gift of the one and only son. And, he said, it is indispensable, because nothing else could do the job.

Since this love is the only power that can react the world and rescue it from hell, those who know of it must reach out to those who do not with the saving message, Vines said.

Many of their listeners were pastors and I'm definitely not, but I took the point of both of these sermons to heart. I believe both men said, If you know the wonder and the power of God's love for mankind in Jesus Christ, share it.

So I did.



The Basis Of Choice

The basic issue facing people today concerns authority.

That's according to one of the theologians I interviewed for this week's cover story on biblical interpretation.

Walter Kaiser, dean of Trinity Evangelical Seminary in Deerfield, IL., identified authority as the issue that determines where people stand, how they think and what they do.

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I had asked him, during my interview for the other story, what he thought was the key to the struggle going on in many denominations today. And he said the key was found in the answer to the question, "What is the basis for your choices?"

"And this is true not just in religion, but in life," Kaiser said. "The question is who or what is the arbiter of your decisions? Who or what helps you decide? Among the wide variety of voices, choices and interpretations offered today, who or what do you listen to and heed?"

There was a time, Kaiser said, when people had a yes-or-no, true-or-false, right-or-wrong approach to life.

Then, he said, people began to ask whether that were really true. And they said, no, it's not that simple. Everything is not black or white. There is a wide area of gray.

"And instead of thesis and antithesis, they tried for synthesis," he said.

"In every area of life and literature, it was the same. There was no yes or no anymore. It was all grays and everyone's opinion was a good another's."

It's called pluralism, he said. And most people have no problem with it when it affects moral and ethical — or even doctrinal — choices in general.

"But when we get cheated in business, then we know there is a difference between right and wrong, between yes and no," he said.

Ultimately, Kaiser said, the real problem is, how can I have my freedom, my Western individualism? But



individualism uncontrolled leads to anarchy and then there are no freedoms.

Which brings us back to the question: On what authority do you make your choices? On what feels good now? On what the latest study of social science says works? On what your next-door neighbor has done?

Or on the Word of God?

Behind this, Kaiser said, is another question. To what extent is the Bible the work of God? How far did his revealing activity go? As far as the very words themselves? Or only as far as the glimmer of an idea in the human author's mind?

"I believe God didn't stop at the idea, but worked through the man and his mind to inspire the words," Kaiser said.

"And we must make a living accommodation to the words, the real, actual words of the Author."

I have thought about what he said every now and then since that interview.

Do I approach the Bible as if it were the dynamic, living truth of God? Or only as if it held propositions to be considered, weighed, measured and controlled by me?

Kaiser said evangelicals take the stand that God has spoken and that his word is dependable — when properly understood.

Which is not an insignificant "when." I can hear the arguments now. How do you know when you have properly understood it?

I guess you bet your life on it. That's what it amounts to. You place your eternal life on the line.

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I take great comfort, however, in the fact that although the evangelical theologians at that conference did not always agree on the exact proper interpretation of the Scriptures studied, they did agree on the power of God to get it written the way he wanted it. That supposes also his ability to get it understood the way he intended it to be.

And since he says clearly in his Word that this is so, I believe that if we seek his truth, for the purpose of basing our decisions on it, he will see that we find it.



Stipulations

I was asked recently why God doesn't heal every time somebody prays for healing. "Scripture says we are to ask, seek and knock," my questioner said. "But I know people who have done that, and it hasn't always worked."

Well, I said, if you read further in that same passage, Jesus tells us that, it is the Holy Spirit the Father is pleased to give us when we ask. And he will *always* do that.

Healing is a different matter. Sometimes God heals and sometimes he doesn't. And I cannot tell you which he will do at any given time. He decides, based on criteria I do not often understand.

It is important to remember that healing — physical, earthly healing — was not the primary



purpose Jesus had in mind when he taught us about prayer. Nor was this kind of healing the reason God sent his Son to us in the first place.

It's perfectly all right to ask for healing. It is far more productive to ask the Lord to help me yield my health and my life to him.

The question is not why doesn't God heal, but what does God want in my life?

Prayer isn't a method of getting what we want from God. It's a process of opening ourselves up to God, of making it possible for us to yield more of ourselves to him.

The thing is, what did God promise when he said for us to ask, seek and knock? Did he promise to give us anything we want — even if it wouldn't be good for us? Not at all! Not any more than a parent would give something harmful to a child just because the child asked for it.

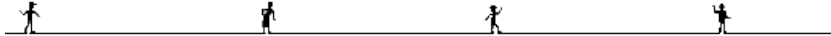
But, we say, I know this would be good for me! I know physical healing would be better for me than being sick. Or I know that having a better job, one I like better, would be good for me. Or I know that having a different boss, or a different family or a different something would be better for me.

That's what we say, isn't it?

But that isn't what God says when he promises us his blessings.

There is a book by Bob Mumford that talks about God's promises and how we receive them. Mumford says that all God's promises are conditional. Between the promises and God's provision there is always a

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principle we must follow and a problem we must go through. For easy remembering, there are four P:

The Promise,
The Principle,
The Problem
The Provision.

Mumford uses as an example God's promise to the Hebrew people that they would be taken from Egypt and given a land of their own. a land running with milk and honey.

But between Egypt and the Promised Land lay the principles under which they were to operate, the Ten Commandments given at Mount Sinai, and the problem, the desert they had to cross and the enemies they had to face when they got to the land.

Time after time, God offered them a situation in which they could rely on him and learn to do it his way. And time after time, they refused, complaining at the lack of "fulfilled" promises.

And almost all of them never received the provision. But Joshua and Caleb did. They relied on God, trusted in his word and saw the fulfillment of it.

We need to ask ourselves what God has really promised us.

Did he promise physical healing in this world? Did he promise success in worldly pursuits? Did he promise a rose garden?

You know he didn't.

He promised salvation to everyone who would receive it. He promised peace in our hearts. He promised to make us able to live above the sins that once chained us.



He seems to promise plain old physical healing to some people — probably to far more than we realize, Mumford says — but he usually has a principle for them to learn and a problem for them to come through before they receive it.



Grief

Nobody prepared me for grief. I'm having to learn how to deal with it as I go. But, then, I suspect that is true for all of us. Experience may be the only real teacher in this area.

There are, however, people who can help us understand what we are going through.

I received some of that help recently from Walter Wangerin Jr., a pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

The help didn't come from him personally. He writes a regular column, called *Between Us*, in the denomination's monthly magazine, *The Lutheran*. His column in the Oct. 12, 1988, issue, carried an excerpt from his new book, *Miz Lil and the Chronicles of Grace*. It spoke about grief.

Miz Lil's insight into grief came when her husband died. After a year of living with it, she shared her thoughts with her pastor. What she had learned was that grief is a stone in the womb that hurts

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terribly, that will not go away and that will be with you forever. But, it is also something that is right and good. It is part of life.

And, Wangerin wrote, "The sorrow that had started as an enemy — it ended as a friend."

The sorrow that would be the widow's painful, constant companion was also that which kept her close to the one she loved.

I didn't know I would grieve for the loss of my mother as much as I have. I thought, as a Christian, I would be comforted by the knowledge that we would be together again one day in Christ. And that is comfort. Comfort that accompanies sorrow, but does not replace it.

But grief of another kind was already present in my life before her death. This was sorrow combined with anger and a sense of helplessness.

I grieved for a dear friend who was the victim of violence this year and for all whose lives are touched by violence. And I grieve for the Body of Christ that tears and wounds itself through institutional struggles, and for all whose light is in danger of going out or who are in danger of losing their saltiness.

For a time I seemed about to drown in all my grief. But our God is faithful. Scripture says, "A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out." I know I will be raised above the wave.

And although this grief hurts, like the widow's stone it is right and good within me. My Lord is using it.

He is inside, blowing my own smoldering wick into new life and burning away that which needs



burning. He is inside, straightening that which is bent and strengthening that which is weak.

I won't be the same when he's through.

I don't know what the difference will look like, but that's OK. He knows.



The RIGHT Way To Serve Jesus

I'd like to report on two letters and a magazine article I read last week.

The letters came from a couple of readers of the *Religion Forum*. The writers, people who drive BMWs, wrote to protest the question about whether a Christian could drive such an example of conspicuous consumption.

I'm sorry the letters weren't signed. I enjoyed them and believe you would have, too. But we don't publish unsigned letters, so you won't have a chance.

The writers said it was possible to be a Christian and drive a BMW because *they* are Christians and drive BMWs!

One pointed out that Jesus rode on the back of a donkey when he entered Jerusalem and "a jackass in those days was equal to a BMW today."

He also asked us to check into what Billy Graham and Pope John Paul II — and the *Forum* responders — drove.

But the main point both wanted to make was that they considered themselves good stewards of

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their money, in their car purchases and other ways as well.

We didn't mean to step on anyone's toes. We ask *Forum* questions with the hope they will make people think. We try to offer a variety of opinions in the answers against which our readers can test their own.

This particular question was submitted by a reader who was grappling with what it meant to make a radical response to the call of Jesus on the lives of those who say they believe in him. And these writers insist good stewardship is a good answer.

Is there only one way to respond to Jesus? Paul says the man who eats meat and the man who does not should both do their thing to the glory of God. We should do whatever we do to please God and bring credit to his name.

But is one way of doing this "more right" than the other? I do so want to be right! And while I don't drive a BMW, do I drive a more expensive car than a radically committed Christian should?

Well, according to an article I read in the Jan. 13 issue of *Christianity Today*, one man's radicalism is another man's stewardship.

That issue of the evangelical Christian magazine carries an excerpt from Tim Stafford's recently published book, *The Sexual Christian*, in which Stafford introduces the idea that radicalism and stewardship are two great patterns of response to Jesus' call to discipleship.

Stafford uses the two patterns in his examination of the Christian view of sex. But to make the patterns



clear before he uses them, he compares the approach of each to other segments of life.

"If you give a steward a million dollars, he will invest it wisely and honestly, and use the profit for God's kingdom. The radical will immediately give it all to the poor. The steward, if he is an accountant, will try to witness to God by being an honest and hard-working accountant. The radical may be an accountant, but his heart will be in what he does after work. The steward will serve on the city council; the radical will demonstrate outside the doors. The steward works with the conditions of life as he finds them; the radical seeks fundamental change. The steward sees the necessity of compromise; the radical sees the necessity of purity."

One or the other of these patterns has dominated Christian thinking during history, Stafford said, and the other has been looked down upon. A better result would be achieved, he said, if Christians could learn to value both.

I believe Stafford's conclusion is true for the individual Christian, too.

Some people are clearly more comfortable in one role than the other. Some people feel called by God to live out one role or the other for a time. Some appear caught by circumstances to do the same.

My life pattern appears to be in the steward pattern. But my heart yearns to live a radical response to Jesus.

Perhaps I can acknowledge both as true and acceptable patterns of discipleship in my life and seek ways in which they can complement each other.

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Is there a radical stewardship pattern? Or a stewardship of radicalism?

I don't know. But I am willing to listen to what my Lord is saying to me, individually, so perhaps I will find out.



Hair Care — Soul Care

The members of a small Bible study group were discussing soul care recently. They were trying to decide what a good soul care program would look like.

The discussion grew out of a teaching we had heard by Peter Lord, a Baptist pastor from Titusville. He said that everybody who wants good-looking hair has a hair care program, and if you can have a hair care program, you can certainly have a soul care program!

All of us agreed that we had a hair care program. In general we all said we washed it regularly with a shampoo purchased for that purpose. Some of us said we fussed with it in some way as it dried, either curling or blowing or doing something to it. And most of us said we went regularly to a professional for such special treatment as permanents and styling.



So we knew what it took to have a successful hair care program. But what, we wondered, are the ingredients of a successful soul care program?

We thought of all sorts of traditional things — prayer, Bible reading, self-examination, forgiving those who have hurt us, asking forgiveness of those we have hurt, attending regular retreats and things like that. Surely a good soul care program includes all of those, we decided.

True, one person said, but the first thing you need is the knowledge that you need such a program.

If you don't think you need something, you certainly aren't going to be willing to spend time and money on it, she said. And all those things we had listed required time, if not money.

Well, I said, let's review what Peter Lord said. Why does anyone need a soul care program? Simply put, the answer is so we can have a clean and healthy soul.

Lord pointed out that if we spilled gravy on the front of our clothes just before we were going out in public, we would most likely change our clothes.

But, he said, people have arguments with their spouses and go off to church with dirty souls and think nothing about it.

And while others can't see the dirt on our souls, God can. And do we really want to come into God's presence with a dirty soul.

Cleansing is different from salvation, Lord said, but lots of Christians don't know the difference. Salvation is achieved by asking for it, he said; cleansing, by walking in the light.

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So the question becomes, how do we go about walking in the light? Primarily it means keeping a clean, unhampered relationship going with the Lord.

We decided our list of helpful things was pretty good. Prayer, Bible reading, self-examination, forgiveness given and received, all these things are recommended to us by the Epistle writers.

And all of them take time, that precious commodity.

Each of us is dealt the same amount of time each day — 24 precious hours. And none of us has time left over we weren't using.

As we looked at the way we spend our time now, we acknowledged that to spend more of it on soul care was going to mean spending less of it on the other things.

And since we couldn't do anything about the hours we spent on jobs, it was going to mean less of something, like time devoted to special interests — or to sleep!

Honesty forced us to admit it wasn't going to be easy.



To Be Christlike

Oh, how I wish I could be just like Jesus!

Instantaneously — At no cost — And with no effort.

That is the way most of us want to do it. But while the goal is fine, the expectation that we can achieve the goal instantaneously, at no cost and with no effort is not.

That isn't original. Bob Mumford taught me that at a conference last year. Me and a couple of thousand other people.

As is the case with all such lessons, the words do not become real to me until I try to use them in my life. And that is usually when I need them.

The other morning I found myself telling God how tired I was of trying to be perfect — and of failing to do so. I decided it was time to re-read my notes from Mumford's lecture.

There I found the reminder that becoming like Jesus is a process.

The process is called maturing.

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It involves eating meat, Mumford said, not just drinking milk.

And 2 Peter 1:2-4 assures us we can do it.

"His [God's] divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires."

The promise is that we will be like Jesus eventually.

God sees it now, but only God can speak of a thing as if it were complete before it is, Mumford said.

"God sees us perfect in Christ and God also sees us where we are."

So escaping the corruption does not mean passing go, collecting \$200 and ending up just like God.

It means eventually ending up fully human — as God intended humans to be — born again so God can conform us to the image of his Son.

And the most we can hope to do is be better each day than we were the day before.

"And God has designed the whole universe to make you grow up," Mumford said.

That means, we will have lots of opportunities to try. To try to do what God has already promised we will do, believing that as we try that God will fulfill what he has promised.



And then trying again and again, joyfully, not impatiently or regretfully, but with a happy expectation of final victory.

In that same chapter of that same epistle, Peter gives us an outline of how to set about the trying.

We start with virtue, which is moral strength. We add knowledge, of the Bible, of God's plan for our lives, which is quite practical and not a bit mystical.

By discipline of our appetites and emotions, we gain self-control. By perseverance, we keep on keeping on.

Eventually the attitude of godliness takes root and we find it easier to exercise brotherliness kindness and — wonder of wonders — Christian love.

Mumford describes Christian love as the ability to kiss the frog even if you aren't sure it will turn into a prince. What he means is, the ability to love the unlovable, but the frog is easier to understand.

We are to put all these jewels of "Peter's Golden Chain" (2 Peter 1:5-7) together and practice them, practice them, practice them.

And when we fail, we simply start practicing them some more.

And, Mumford says, we do **not** have to worry about finding a frog to kiss. God puts some in every church for us to practice on.

It's quite normal for people to behave like devils when they drive, he said.

"Anxiety is being the fourth in the left turn lane when the light only lets three cars through."

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So it is not natural to be self-controlled. It is supernatural.

Which is being just like Jesus.



What Are We Willing To Get Used To?

I walked out into the parking lot at the office right after lunch my first day back from a week in Las Vegas at the Southern Baptist Convention.

I relished the heat.

I thought to myself, this isn't half bad! The temperature is in the 90s and the humidity is high, but it doesn't bother me at all!

And that day it really didn't bother me. It probably will before the summer is over — before the week is over? But that day I was still recovering from a week in the desert in Nevada.

People had told me before I left, that I would not mind the heat in Las Vegas because the humidity would be so low. And they were right about the humidity. It was very low.

They were not correct in saying the heat wouldn't bother me, however. It bothered me greatly.



Standing around or even walking around on sidewalks and streets in temperatures that must have been much higher than the official 110 degrees was not my idea of comfort. And the temperature dropped only into the 90s by mid-evening.

To make matters worse, the Santa Ana wind, a really hot wind from California, began to blow. It was like standing in front of a commercial clothes dryer with the door open, hot air pouring out.

Not good!

But they say you can get used to anything and I understand that is true even of the Santa Ana wind.

I talked to several former Southerners who were now residents of Las Vegas, and they insisted they had become acclimated.

Which just proves to me that a person can get used to anything if he just lives with it long enough.

This means a person should make decisions about what he is going to get used to and should not just let it happen.

On the negative side, I understand that if people watch a lot of violence on television, they can become so accustomed to it that they cease to be horrified by it.

On the positive side, I have found that daily Bible reading can make me hungry for more — for a time.

Eventually, if I starve the hunger by not reading the Bible for a considerable time, I grow used to doing without. And that's not good for my spiritual health.

The trick is to be an actor, not a reactor — to make decisions, not just deal with what comes along.

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I could not choose whether or not to go to Las Vegas, since I was sent there on business. At this point, I can choose whether or not to live there.

But none of us is totally in control of our lives, so we face many situations where our choices are not really ours to make — where our options are limited.

If I were required to live in Las Vegas, although I did not choose to, then I would still have the choice of deciding how to respond to that requirement.

But for now, I'm really grateful to be back where the breezes are usually cooling and the hot temperatures usually bring thunderstorms.

It's all in what you're used to.



On Suffering

I know God is trying to say something to me, because he brought so much material on the same subject to my attention at one time.

I haven't much wanted to hear what he was saying, however. Some of what I have heard has hurt — and I haven't felt up to dealing with it at the moment.

But that's just what I think. God obviously thinks otherwise. That must be why I found the May/June issue of *Weavings* on my desk last week.



Weavings is a magazine that describes itself as "A Journal of the Christian Spiritual Life." Each issue of *Weavings* focuses on one subject. The subject for that issue is "The Wound of Our Mortality." It has to do with how we respond to death, the possibility of our own and the reality of other people's.

In it I found this line: "God's passion is not to remove every hardship life brings our way but to remove every obstacle to our living a life in grade."

It is from a letter written by Stephen Bryant, director of spiritual formation at The Upper Room, to a friend whose mother had died.

Bryant continues: "Not that God wills hardship and suffering! But given the way life is, God working through our faith wants to turn those very hardships (and even wrongs) on their head. Instead of chambers of death in which we quietly suffer life's assaults on us and die, those experiences become the crucible of new life through which we mature spiritually and grow in grace (Romans 5:1)."

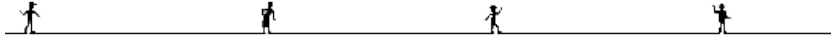
Well, I don't want to mature spiritually and grow in grace — at least not today. But I assume I will want those things later. Past history indicates I will come to that point.

So I keep on reading.

"Yes, creation is a mess," Bryant writes. "Evil is always there in the Bible, unaccounted for; there is no explanation of the origin of the serpent in Genesis 3."

And a little further on, "What saves me from the despair of feeling that life is a cosmic misfortune is focusing my attention on God's goals and call to us to lay aside our complaints about the way life is and

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 become co-workers in God's task of recreating and redeeming."

My complaints stick to me like glue — or flypaper. The more I try to lay them down, the tighter they stick.

What is the nature of this complaint, this pain, that strikes us all at one time or another?

Another *Weavings* article has some suggestions. "When Prayer Encounters Pain," by Flora Slosson Wuellner, a United Church of Christ minister who teaches at Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, Calif., looks at some major causes of suffering and offers some possible cures.

What frightens us most about our suffering is what it says about the nature of God, she writes. "Has God intended, planned or consented to our pain? If so, how can we trust God for any healing?"

For without trust, we have nothing, I think to myself. I do trust God — but I may need to trust him more.

"Before we can grow in trust of God and accept God's healing, we need to look with more clarity and honesty at the major roots and meaning of our pain," the article says.

Ms. Wuellner identifies five categories of human suffering: the thorn in the flesh, which is part of our natural human condition; hunger, which is the suffering that arises from all forms of deprivation; the catapult, which is the symbol for traumatic encounters with evil and injustice; the cross, which is the voluntary sharing of God's work of lifting the burden of suffering from others; and the birth, which is "suffering



caused by the awakening, stretching and rebirth within our deepest selves."

The first three fall upon us, whether we want them to or not, she writes. God invites us to the last two and "the suffering to which God invites us always includes joy."

I have known this to be true in the past. I will cling to the memory and believe it will happen again.

I will meditate on the passages of Scripture she points to in her article: Isaiah 43:1,2 for dealing with the thorn, the hunger and the catapult; 2 Corinthians 1:3-5 for understanding the cross; and Romans 8:14-18 and Ephesians 5:14 for dealing with inner rebirth.

I have no idea how long all this will take. Maybe someday I will be able to tell you what I have learned.



Testing Held Daily

If you had to say "Good morning" to a lot of people each day, and many of them either ignored you or answered grumpily, how would you feel?

More to the point, how long would you go on saying "Good morning," and doing it a smile?

I'd like to think I would do it indefinitely, but observation of my character suggests I probably would fall silent after a short time.

This is not a hypothetical situation. A woman I know faces this problem every day at work.

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She greets people as they enter her place of business. Some respond with a smile and return her greeting, she reports. Some growl a reply. Others pay no attention to her at all.

She is tempted — strongly tempted — to stop offering her smiling welcome after having been growled at or ignored.

"But then I remember to pray for them," she said. "They really need prayer."

And that makes her able to continue to meet each person with a smile and a word of greeting.

Why would I write about such an insignificant event?

Because it is in these small daily tests that we find out whether our faith is real or not, whether our commitment is something we live or only something we talk about.

This woman has committed herself to be God's person in her workplace. So for her, that involves greeting people sweetly, no matter what their responses. She is to let go of resentment and hurt pride. She is to offer the love of Christ in spite of these very human reactions.

In other words, she is to die to self and live for Christ. And if we have committed ourselves to follow Christ, this is what we are all called to do.

Sometimes we think that dying to self always involves some great moment, some incredibly difficult yielding of our own interests and desires to God.

I believe it is much more often a small moment, barely noted, with nothing of great significance about it. That way there is nothing in it that can replace the



yielding with a sense of achievement in having yielded. It is only what it is intended to be.

Another way to say this is that it is the surrender of our will to God's revealed will. It is not doing what we want to do and the doing of what God wants us to.

This woman knows what God wants her to do. He wants her to forgive every slight, every hurt. He wants her to love with no expectation of love in return.

And if you think that is easy, try it.

Every day, this woman tries it. She practices it. Practice won't make perfect in this lifetime, but it does strengthen faith.

Scripture says that since she is being faithful in many little things, she will be given greater responsibilities. So when a greater death to self is required of her, she will have some faith muscle ready to help.



Driving In Sin

Have you ever had trouble translating all the theological language about sin into something that relates with everyday life? I have. But I think I have found a way to do it.

As I approached the intersection of University Boulevard West and Powers Avenue one morning this week, I realized the traffic light was not working

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properly. It was blinking yellow on University and red on Powers.

Cars on University were going through it at what appeared to be speeds exceeding the posted limit of 40 mph. Cars on Powers were poised to leap across the six lanes at the first slim opportunity.

It looked like an accident waiting to happen — although none did while I was in the vicinity.

It also looked like a clear example of the problem of sin in the lives of ordinary men and women.

I successfully made a right turn from Powers onto University and drove away, saying a prayer for the safety of everyone who had to enter that space.

And I thought, as I have often before, of how clear it is to me when I am behind the wheel of a car that I am a sinner.

I want mine and I want it first. Just like the drivers of all those cars speeding through the intersection, I want to go where I want to go and I do not want to pause and let someone else have a chance.

Now, I learned about taking turns when I was a child. But my basic nature is take turns happily only when my turn is first.

And that desire is the root cause of sin. It is wanting to be God.

Oh, I don't usually admit I want to be God. But if I pay any attention at all to the state of my heart when I drive, I have to admit that I want to be first. And that really is the same thing.

Some days I am able to drive without succumbing to the overpowering desire to get in front



of everybody else. Sadly, most of the time I find my heart to be the source of a pride that says I am above the law, not under it, and I am more important than anyone else.

I believe the Lord has allowed me to see myself this way for my own good. Before I can understand the wonder of my redemption, I need to know the depth of my need for redeeming. If I do not think I am a sinner, I do not believe I need to be saved from judgment.

We all need to know this. I do and you do, too.

Have you ever thought of yourself as a sinner? A real, honest-to-goodness sinner?

No? Well, I'll tell you how to find out whether it is true or not. Try driving by both the civil traffic laws and by the law of love for your fellow human beings and you'll find out.

Try keeping within the speed limit, for example. Can't do that because they are too dumb? Well, try to stay at least within 5 mph of them. See if you can let other cars whiz past you without putting your foot down harder on the accelerator.

Try stopping on yellow lights. If you are driving the speed limit, you will have plenty of time to do so. Try leaving intersections open when you're in a slow line of traffic moving along a major road.

And see how all this makes you feel. See if you are murmuring under your breath — or shouting out loud. See whether you are gritting your teeth or holding in anger or even feeling restlessness or impatience.

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And if you find any of this hard, then join the ranks of those who needed a Savior and who can be grateful for the cross.

Oh, and can you imagine what the streets of Jacksonville would be like if all the believers tried to drive by the tenets of their faith?

Wow!



On Beginning Of Time With The Lord

I sat about midway down the packed chapel at Norman Doomar's funeral last month. As I watched people greet members of his family, I thought about the briefness of life and its inevitable end.

I looked at the flower-draped casket and wondered what the people around me were thinking about. I wondered if they were thinking — as I was — about their own lives and their own deaths.

It seems to me most of us manage never to think about death at all, at least not our own death. But even in a world where people work very hard at ignoring God, it seemed to me that we should find that impossible to do at a funeral.

Surely, I thought, no one present in this place at this time can avoid the subject. Surely, all of us will give at least a passing thought to the Author of life and to his provision for our death.



Episcopal ministers Barnum McCarty and Jay Haug, who shared duties in the service, certainly spoke to the issue through the Scriptures they read and the prayers they said. But I know from experience that it is easy to ignore such readings.

Then my friend Pat Mierse walked up front to give her father's eulogy. She honored both her human father and her heavenly Father with her words.

And when she was finished, no one present could ever say again that he or she had not heard of the great difference God makes in life and death. In a gentle, but unmistakable way, she told them what they needed to know.

Later I asked Pat for permission to use her talk as the basis for a column and she gave me her handwritten copy to go by.

I would like to quote it all — it was beautifully done — but will limit coverage here to the concluding portion of her remarks.

"I believe that my father pretty much lived out his life the way he wanted to, and I am grateful that he was also able to die as he wanted to — at home and in familiar surroundings. Through Northeast Hospice we were blessed to have many people minister to him these last two and a half weeks — and for that I will always be grateful.

"My father accepted his illness and approached death more calmly than any of us expected. Perhaps he sensed the better life waiting on the other side."

Then Pat read a brief passage from Gayle Roper's book *A Mother's World*, in which Ms. Roper talked about her first real insight into death. It came,

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she wrote, from Joe Bayly's *A View from the Hearse: A Christian View of Death*.

Ms. Roper wrote: "I knew Mr. Bayly had lost three sons: one an infant, one a child, the third a young man. I felt he could deal with authority on the issue that bothered me. One illustration he used opened vistas to my blinded eyes.

"A baby being born fights, not to be born but to remain where he is. It's nice and safe there. It's familiar. But there's so much more awaiting him. There's sound, color and feeling, more than he could ever imagine in his limited prenatal world. So it is with us. We Christians are going to pass into an existence as far beyond our imaginations as the living world is beyond the baby's. But it's unknown, and so we fight, in fear.

"With this illustration I grasped the thought that death isn't the Interrupter I had imagined but rather the Promoter to a far better life.

"My Aunt Mary Agnes has a summer place on a lake. Once a young teenager drowned there.

"A lady from the church rushed over.

" 'If we pray, the Lord will raise him up again,' she said. 'I know he will.'

" 'Maybe, said Aunt Mary Agnes, 'but that boy would never forgive us.'

"What an affirmation of the positive side of death! Absent from the body is present with the Lord, really, literally.

"Of course, this death without sting is only for the Christian. The person outside Christ is separated not only from family and friends, but also from God

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throughout eternity. 'He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the son hath not life' (1st John 5:12).

"Promoted or separated? It's up to you."

With a brief pause to let that sink in, Pat resumed her own remarks.

"Recently someone said to me, 'I wish I had what you have.'

"I wish I had what you have! At the time I said nothing back to him, thereby missing the opportunity to witness to him. But I won't miss that opportunity today — for the truth is that 'what I have' any of you can have, because 'what I have' is the grace of God through the Lord Jesus poured out on me in answer to the prayers and petitions of so many of you. For days and weeks now I have been able to feel the uplifting prayers that have given me the strength to carry on. It is that grace that gives strength to make the most of a very difficult situation."

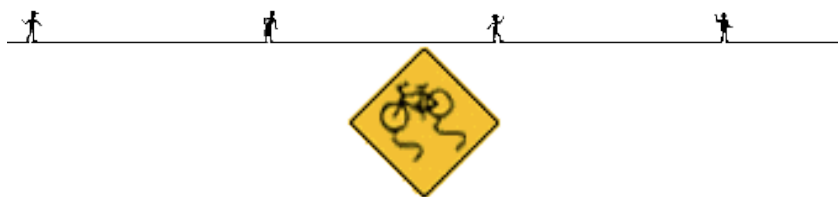
As we left the funeral home, I thought about her words.

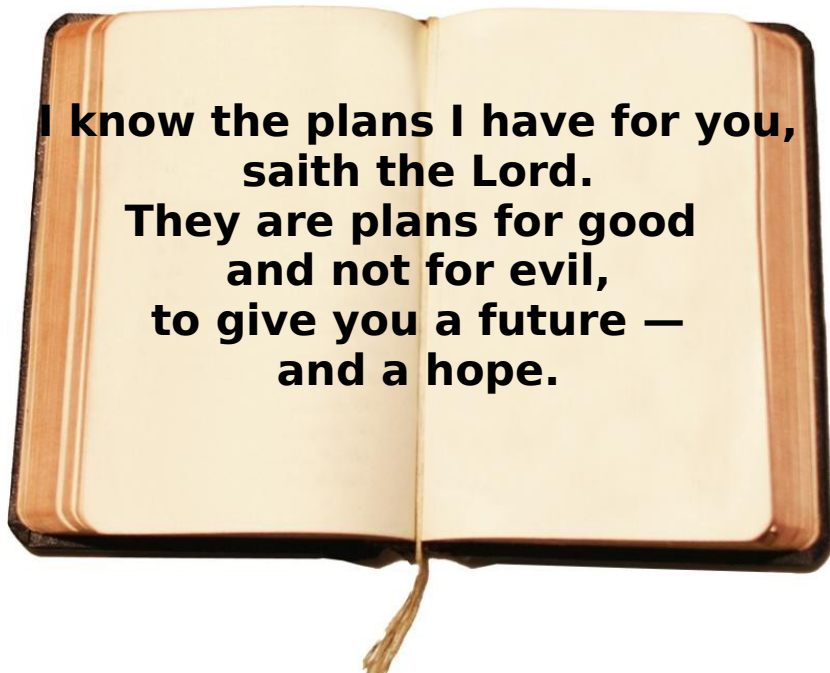
Promoted or separated. Lifted by grace, the gift of Jesus Christ, into the presence of the Father or left in darkness by our own choice.

Death is real. But so is the difference between being promoted and being separated.

Barbara White

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**I know the plans I have for you,
saith the Lord.
They are plans for good
and not for evil,
to give you a future —
and a hope.**

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