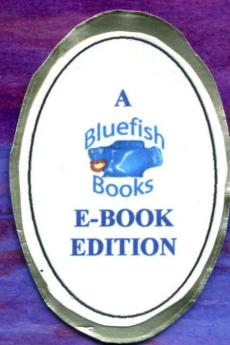


Rejoicing Along the Way

Book Four of the *Along the Way* Series

by Barbara White



Barbara White ©



REJOICING 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 fourth 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.

Along The Way

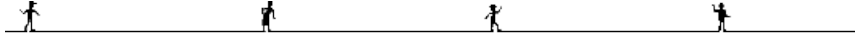


It wasn't exactly what you would expect to find in a secular newspaper. It wasn't exactly what I had expected to do. But it was what I did. It is, I suppose, a kind of diary of my journey along the process of becoming. It may speak to you on your own journey Along The Way.

Barbara White

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





REJOICING ALONG THE WAY



White Lines

I commented last week on how easy it is to ignore the lines on the highway.

That revelation came while I was waiting for a couple of boats to go under the Fuller Warren Bridge.

In the northbound lanes, just before the midge, people were ignoring the white lines, jockeying for the best position for getting ahead of everybody else when traffic began to move again.

And the thought occurred to me that the white lines that direct traffic are very like the guidelines God provides for our lives.

They're there, but they can be easily ignored.

Barbara White



You can drive right over the white lines, as if they didn't exist, and you can do things God has said you shouldn't, as if he had never spoken or as if it didn't matter whether you obeyed him or not.

I thought all that, but I didn't go into consequences of ignoring the lines or the blessings of heeding their soft instructions.

It didn't matter that day by the bridge. Traffic was at a standstill and no one was in any real danger of being hit.

Of course, with today's lawlessness on the highways, some driver could have taken exception to another's attempts to cut in and blasted away with a gun.

And I can't think of a better parable of the human heart and its problems than the rash of shootings that have happened here lately on the highways.

But nothing like that happened. Oh, a few tempers may have flared. Some angry words may have been uttered. And a couple of hearts may even have wished evil for others.

Everybody managed to emerge intact — although some did it with more grace and charity than others.

Of course, if you think it doesn't matter whether you say bad words and think evil thoughts, then you may believe I am exaggerating the necessity for paying attention to white lines.

Personally, I think words and thoughts are important anytime. I think they shape who we really are.

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But surely we can agree that out on the highway, when traffic is moving at greater speeds, ignoring those white lines can be a matter of life and death.

Well, life sometimes approaches us at speeds that exceed those of fast cars. And ignoring life's guidelines can produce disaster, too.

And if we don't know where the lines are, God provided us with a pattern for life.

The better acquainted we are with the pattern, the better our chances of following it when an emergency comes — like a sudden attraction to somebody else's wife or husband, or the unexpected opportunity to make a big profit for just a small lie.

I remember a night not too long ago when I was enormously grateful for the white lines on the road.

I had driven to a church outside of Lawtey to attend a dinner meeting. After it was over, I headed back over the blacktop county road toward U.S. 301.

And drove into a fog.

I was not familiar with the area. I had no idea where the curves in the road were or the intersections.

But I could see the white lines and I proceeded on — saying brief, but heartfelt prayers for the Lord to save me from faster cars behind or slower ones ahead.

Eventually I found myself out of the fog and the highway in plain view.

Thanksgiving was real. I believed the white lines had given me exactly the guidance I needed for my journey and I was grateful to those who had painted them along the roadway. Without them, I might have ended up anywhere.



Of course, anybody with even a modicum of sense would follow the white lines on a dark night in the fog.

But I can't help thinking that if we aren't already following the lines, we can get into spiritually dark and foggy places and not even know it.

If, however, we make a habit of looking for and obeying the guidelines, we can trust them to bring us home — even if there are some scary or painful moments along the way.



Disappointment

I was asked the other day how I handle disappointments.

Not very well, was my reply, but better now than I used to. The trick, I was told, is not to have unrealistic expectations.

My dictionary tells me that disappoint means to fail to meet expectations. So if you don't have any, you can't be disappointed.

That doesn't mean you shouldn't make plans, I was told.

You make plans. You just don't include expectations of things over which you have no control.

Like the weather.

Or other people.

Rejoicing Along The Way



For example, my friend said, you can plan a trip to Disney World, but if you expect good weather, you may be disappointed and that could ruin your whole day.

If, however, you plan a trip to Disney World, without expectations about the weather, you can still enjoy doing the indoor things even if it rains.

Or if I plan a trip with a friend to Disney World and expect my friend to want to do all the things I want to do, I may be in for a rude awakening, a lot of frustration and perhaps even a squabble or two.

The problem with unmet expectations is that you tend to be so busy reacting to the loss of something you wanted that you are prone to reject what you got instead.

But isn't it wonderful when expectations are met!

In the face of that sometimes overpowering pleasure, how can we possibly be expected not to have expectations?

It's a tradeoff. You have to decide how badly disappointment hurts and weigh that against how much pleasure fulfilled expectations produce and figure out where on the scale you can bear to stand.

If disappointment hurts too much, cut back on expectations.

Later, I spent some time thinking about our conversation.

I decided that a key to surviving disappointment is to have expectations, but to make them as realistic as possible and then hold them loosely.



Then if they are fulfilled, we have the joy. But if they aren't fulfilled, we aren't crushed.

And I thought of another word that goes with expectations.

Hope.

My dictionary defines hope as "desire accompanied by expectation of or belief in fulfillment."

Everything we said about expectations is also true of hope.

But when I think about hope, my whole perspective changes. Perhaps because belief is part of it.

Also I have so many positive connections with the word from reading Scripture.

Hope, Paul tells me, is not hope if it is seen. "Who hopes for what he already has?" he asks in Romans 8:24.

And while hope is not quite as great as charity or love, it will still be around when such things as prophecy, speaking in tongues and knowledge have ceased, been stilled and passed away.

But this is a particular hope, not just any expectation.

As it says in First Peter 1:3, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead."

It is a living hope, a hope proclaimed by Easter, that we will not have to die for our sins because Jesus did it for us, that he will come again and that we will live with him forever.

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I can hope this because he was indeed raised from the dead in a new and unique way, not merely reanimated or resuscitated to the same old life again.

My hope is based on the experiences of those who saw and touched and heard Jesus right after His resurrection — and on the experiences of all who have known him as living Lord ever since.

He is not here yet in the way he will be eventually.

But he is here.

I can know him now, just not as well as I expect to.

And I am confident I will not be disappointed.



Memorial Service

If your family and friends held a memorial service for you next week, would they remember you as a person who loved life — and helped other people love it, too?

I attended two memorial services this week.

Lots of good things were said about the men remembered in those services — including the fact that each had savored life and had helped those around him to do the same thing.



Both men had had the ability to laugh at life, too. And they laughed with people, not at them.

Also, both had had a way with words. One was known for telling wonderfully humorous anecdotes from real life. The other was known for writing delightful stories about real people and the things that happened to them and for making readers laugh or cry.

These memorial services were similar in another way, too. Neither was in any sense a religious service, although each ended with prayer.

Neither of the men remembered was considered a religious person. One had claimed he was an agnostic; the other that he was an atheist.

But I never talked with either about matters of faith and I do not know what they meant by those words.

I also do not know about their eternity. I've been asked what I thought, but I simply do not know. No one knows the truth about the encounter that takes place between another person and God. Each person does that alone.

However, C.S. Lewis came up with an answer I like. He told it in story form, a means he frequently employed to explain theology.

This particular story is found in *The Last Battle*, one of his Narnia books for children, which I first read when I was 30 and have reread several times since then.

In the particular event I'm talking about, Lewis describes what happens to a good man who did not know or choose to serve the Lord.

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The encounter takes place in a stable that looks like an ordinary stable from the outside, but which is as big as a whole world on the inside.

In the story, a great battle between the forces of good and evil is taking place outside the stable and people and talking animals (quite common in Narnia) are either being thrown inside the stable or are taking refuge there.

One is an enemy soldier, a person who has worshiped the god Tash all his life. However, while serving Tash, he has been as good a person as he could be.

As he enters the stable, he sees Aslan, the lion that represents Christ. And Aslan offers him the opportunity to enter into the new world because in serving good, even in the wrong name, he has served Aslan.

Good is always of God, Aslan says. Evil is never of God. So if you seek the good, you are seeking God whether you know it or not.

Is Lewis right? Is serving good enough?

Well, Lewis could have been going by the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25. Here Jesus tells how, when the Son of Man comes in his glory, He will separate people as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.

And the king will invite those on his right hand to enter into their inheritance. But some of them will say they never knew the king or served him in their lives.

And the king will say that they gave him something to eat when he was hungry, to drink when he was thirsty, they invited him in when he was a



stranger, clothed him when he was naked, looked after him when he was sick and visited him when he was in prison.

And he will say, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."



Vandals

I think it's true that what you do speaks louder than what you say you are.

What does Christian love look like in the face of persecution?

A lot of Christians are getting to find out.

They are members of the churches that have been destroyed or badly damaged by arsonists.

Or whose churches have been victimized by vandals.

I was talking recently with the pastor of one of those churches.

What he had to say has stayed with me.

I hope it has taken root and will grow and produce fruit in my life.

A couple of months ago Christ United Methodist Church at Neptune Beach was the victim of vandalism. Someone broke 100 windows at the church.

And that was not all.

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The Rev. Scott Baker, the church's pastor, said the church was hit by four or five more episodes of vandalism.

"We had to struggle with what is Christian love; you have to when victimized in this way," Baker said.

When I asked him to share some of what he and the congregation found out about the meaning of Christian love, he said he could really only share the process they went through.

"Right afterward, there's bewilderment, anger, victimization, hurt — all those things," he said.

"Your protective qualities come out.

"But in the midst of that, there's the struggle with what is love of neighbor — when this is very likely one of our neighbors."

Most of us tend to separate the good guys from the bad guys, he said, and only deal with the good guys.

"Suddenly we have to struggle with the fact that someone is hurting us. And what do we want for him? What is good for him?

"Would it do just to punish him or her? To apprehend them? Does that satisfy Christ's invitation to love.

"It seems pretty inadequate.

"And you think about who this person must be, the grievances they must have, the hurt and pain".

"When the congregation started doing that, then apprehending the vandals became even more important. Not just for punishment, but to offer them help.



The congregation realized they didn't want to have to deal with the symptoms of the person's pain, but they also wanted it to be resolved and healed.

"It was a working out of what love is as a process for us as a community and also for the person causing the disturbance," Baker said.

"Suddenly in the midst of the situation, it's not theory any more. You've got to put it into practice."

During the process, some church members said things they knew weren't right and they didn't feel good about it, he said.

"You could get real judgmental about that. But it was a necessary part of growth — to express the feelings and the discomfort with the feelings."

When First Baptist Church of Jacksonville Beach burned recently, the Methodist congregation took up a collection for them.

"It was a token of our love and concern. We feel with them," Baker said. He believes that, out of the process, he and the congregation have grown.

Only most of us don't really want to grow this way — by having something bad happen and struggling to find the good that can follow.

Romans 8:28 says, "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose."

This congregation is seeing the fulfillment of this promise. But the process has not been without cost. We can expect the fulfillment of that promise in our lives, too.

But only if we, like them, will accept our calling to be people who live according to God's will.

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Baker said they had to struggle with what is Christian love if you are vandalized.

No, they didn't "have to." They could have allowed bitterness and anger to take over. Instead, they have struggled and found out more about what it means to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself — and they have been blessed.



Tough Times

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 my 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 in 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.

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.

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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 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.



It's Not My Fault

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Just when I thought I had passed the post-graduate exam in spirituality and was ready for my sheepskin, I discovered I hadn't even completed kindergarten in one important spiritual area of my life.

Oh, probably not just one. Probably in all areas of my life. But thank goodness, the Lord knows we could not deal with all our faults at one time.

For a while there, I wasn't sure I could deal with this one all by itself.

The problem was this business of saying you're sorry and asking to be forgiven.

I've had quite a bit of practice doing this.

All of it well deserved.

I've done things I shouldn't have, and I haven't done things I should have.

And in both kinds of cases, I've learned to acknowledge my fault and ask for forgiveness from both God and the person or persons I've wronged.

I've learned it's worth doing.

There is this wonderful feeling that comes afterward — a sense of being set free from a heavy burden that was weighing me down.

I recommend it highly.

So why did I have such a hard time doing it one more time recently when someone told me I had caused her pain?

Why? Because I didn't think I had done anything wrong.

I was sure I was innocent and had been falsely accused.



And how could I possibly be expected to say I'm sorry for something I did not believe I had done?

I couldn't.

I absolutely could not.

Not only that, I positively would not.

At least, that was not my intention.

What I intended to do was explain what had happened and prove my innocence.

I would be vindicated.

My accuser would be shamed.

God would undoubtedly pat me on the head in approval.

As the saying goes today:

NOT.

I prepared six or seven versions of a speech I would give, explaining and proving how misjudged I had been.

Not one was quite right.

Oh, they all had the facts down properly.

And they all conveyed how hurt — deeply wounded — I was at being falsely accused.

But none of them would really alleviate my troubles. They would only cause more.

Did I really want to ease my pain at the cost of hurting someone else?

If I did, I would be guilty in the end of doing exactly what I said I had not done!

All right, I said to myself through mentally clenched teeth.

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If all she wants to hear is my "I'm sorry," I'll say it.

I don't even have to mean it. I can just say it.

It won't kill me.

And it didn't.

But it hurt.

It hurt a lot.

It turned out I was truly sorry. Sorry for my friend's tender feelings and sorry for my need to justify myself. Sorry for the bad things we do to each other, even when we're trying to do good things.

So I asked God to teach me what I needed to learn.

It took some time. Hurt feelings throw up a tough shield. And I'm not sure I've yet learned all I'm supposed to.

But he has managed to remind me of the reality of the cost of following him.

It's true that his yoke is easy and his burden light.

It's also true that the cost of discipleship is exceedingly high.

It involves not demanding my right to defend myself.

Jesus didn't.

It involves thinking of others before myself.

Jesus did.

It involves dying to self — in this case, hammering pride and self-justification to the cross.

Barbara White



The cross where Jesus died for me.

And for my friend.

I don't know — or need to know — what Jesus intends to do in my friend's life.

I'm learning a little about what he intends to do in mine.



Trust

I was talking with some folks in an adult Sunday school class last weekend about forgiveness.

We spent a lot of time on the joy that comes from truly repenting for the harm we have done others — including God — and on our need to forgive those who have hurt us.

Then someone in the group asked me what I do when it's God I can't forgive.

And I gave a very inadequate answer.

I remember saying something about it being a matter of trust. And then we ran out of time.

Since then, of course, I have thought of a lot to say.

I started Monday morning by wondering how I could possibly have overlooked such an important aspect of forgiveness — especially when I have asked

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myself that same question. In fact, I was asking it just a few weeks ago.

By the time I got around to preparing for that class, I had completely forgotten ever being angry with God.

How had this happened?

Looking back, the only thing I could recall was that I had made a couple of conscious decisions.

I had decided to trust God to be true to himself — to be merciful and not to leave me and to make all things work together for good, even if it took a long time.

And I had decided to work at controlling my thoughts. Every time I began to think about my problem, I would stop myself, shove those thoughts aside and begin to praise God and worship him.

Then, on Wednesday, my daily devotional guide called for me to read Psalm 3.

The attribution says this psalm was written by David when he was fleeing from his son, Absalom. It starts with David's cry to the Lord about the foes that have risen up against him and are saying God will not deliver him.

And continues, "But you are a shield around me, O Lord, my Glorious One, who lifts up my head.

"To the Lord I cry aloud, and he answers me from his holy hill.

"I lie down and sleep; I wake again, because the Lord sustains me."



The commentary said the psalmist was "enmeshed in traumatic family conflict" and I could identify with that.

"Yet in the midst of this family drama, David can sleep peacefully and wake refreshed and hopeful," it said.

How? Not by suppressing fears or pretending everything was all right or saying it didn't matter what happened to him.

"No, David's preventive for insomnia is to marshal *all* the facts and give them their true weight," the commentary said.

And all the fact include David's knowledge that God is his shield and does answer his cries for help.

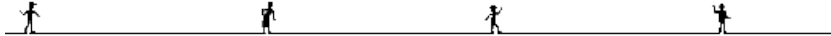
God is my shield, too. That does not mean no arrows ever reach me. They reached David and they have reached me, too. But they haven't killed me.

And God answers my cries, too, even though I do not always hear him or understand him clearly when I do.

I think the real key to dealing with anger at God in tough circumstances is to get to know him as well as possible during good times and during times that are only a little tough. If you haven't done that, it is much harder to trust him when the going is really rough.

"Our problems may be intractable: long term stress, emotional conflicts from the past, wearying family troubles," the commentary said. "Trust in God is no instant tranquilizer. But Jesus has promised us a deeper peace than any sleeping pill can give. The more

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we open our hearts to God, the more we will experience it.

I still have much to learn about trusting God.

It still takes a lot of anguish before I remember to set about trying. And then it takes effort to do it, effort to stop worrying and start praising and worshiping instead.

The commentary asked at the end: How do I need to open my heart to God right now? What has caused any lack of sleep I have experienced? When you consider the alternative, trust is definitely worth the effort.



Let's Buy The Methodists!

I love this item I found in the October 1991 issue of *Presbyterian Survey, The Magazine for Presbyterians*. Ken Little, writing the *Advocate* column, offered a sure-fire, guaranteed way to increase membership in the Presbyterian Church (USA).

Buy the Methodists.

In one fell swoop, he said, "we pick up a couple of million members, some of our old hymns, and some really neat churches."

He considered some other choices, but rejected them.

"The Episcopalians are too expensive and even snootier than we are."



"The Baptists' numbers can't be trusted.

"The Lutherans aren't any fun.

"The Methodists are clearly the best bargain, in addition to being the best fit. After all, if you dust off a Methodist, you'll find a Presbyterian looking for a meeting."

Little wasn't serious, of course.

He was simply trying to get our attention for a point he wanted to make — that numbers aren't as important as knowing what you are.

"If the concern over declining members and resources diverts us from being who we profess to be, then we have forsaken the spiritual church for the physical and fiscal church."

Society's values are not the church's — or shouldn't be, he said.

"There are legitimate concerns about the well-being of our church, concerns that are being addressed. We may discover important information that will help us better tell God's story.

"How the church responds to those concerns will tell us and the world a whole lot about who we say we are."

His point could well be taken by all churches, not just Presbyterians.

I found very much the same message on the back page of the August through September edition of the daily Bible reading guide, *Encounter with God*.

In an article there, Walt Mueller asked whether the church was leading the world, or vice versa.

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The world must look dark and lost from God's perspective, he said.

And he cited Romans 1:25, "They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator."

"That's an accurate description of our culture," Mueller said. Christians are supposed to represent God's order in the midst of this confusion, he said. They are to be "bearers of the life-giving light to those who are dying in the darkness."

But are we? he asked.

"From your observation, are Christians serving as influencers of culture or are they being influenced? *Who's leading who?*"

The problems of our culture are rooted in the heart, Mueller said.

"Our culture's collective heart worships and serves created things rather than the Creator."

So, what's the answer?

"We must recognize that it is God alone who can melt hearts and change minds. We are to be urgently concerned, but not frustrated. But first and foremost, we should be people whose dependence on a sovereign God leads them to prayer."

Both of these men were trying to awaken their readers to a danger, an old and familiar, but nonetheless real and present danger — our hearts are not to be trusted; they will love the world unless they are taught to love the Lord more.

And as Mueller said, we can't change our hearts. But we can pray. So, there is hope.



For as we pray, God can change our hearts and minds. We can be taught to live out our love for him in our love for each other.

Of course, I knew all that before I read either article.

But somehow I seem to forget what I know — or forget to act on it at any rate.

And it definitely is not a one-time thing. It's a process.

It takes time. Lots of time. Lots of prayer, too. But then, what do I have to do that's more important?



Mourning

Grief is what goes on inside a person who has suffered loss.

Mourning is the process of sharing with others what's going on inside.

And healing — for those of us who have suffered loss — involves both grieving and mourning.

I did not know that until I attended a workshop a while back.

The workshop, sponsored by several local funeral homes, was designed to help clergy learn how to be better care-givers to folks going through grief.

I was impressed and thought I might write a story on the subject. But another reporter had just written a story on grief. Sandy Strickland's article on

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what to say to people in times of pain or loss was published just a few days after the workshop.

So I stowed the material from the workshop in my files.

Last week, along with the rest of the city, I reacted to the slayings in different parts of the city over a two-day period. I also learned of a death within my church family, a natural but nonetheless sudden and painful loss.

And my heart went out to all those who suffered loss.

My heart also went out to those who were with them, trying to comfort and help them through the grief.

Then I remembered what that workshop leader had said about grief and mourning, the distinction he made between them.

I never really thought about the difference before, but now it seemed important.

I have suffered loss. And I grieved. I even mourned a little — but perhaps not as much as I needed to for deep healing.

From the questions and comments made by the ministers and their wives who attended the workshop, I am not alone. Some of them had not mourned enough either.

Workshop leader Alan Wolfelt, the director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition in Fort Collins, Colo., had said that unfinished grief stays with you for a long time. It can crop up in inappropriate ways when you least expect it.



And mourning is a necessary part of dealing with grief, Wolfelt said. It needs to be shared. The trouble is, he said, most people aren't encouraged to mourn. They aren't even encouraged to grieve.

Far too often, their friends want them to leave the pain of loss behind as quickly as possible and to get on with living.

This is not because they are uncaring, Wolfelt said.

It's because they care, but don't know what to do about it.

They can sympathize, identify or empathize, he said, but only one of these responses is truly helpful. Sympathy isn't wrong — it just isn't enough.

An "I'm sorry for you" response does not create a close, meaningful relationship. It does not lead to creative expression of grief, or encourage genuine mourning.

Identification can make things worse.

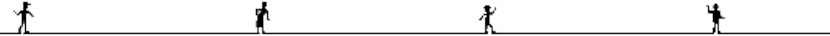
People who submerge themselves in another's grief, as if it were their own, tend to drive real grief underground. You can't really deal with your own grief if the people who are supposed to be comforting you spend all their time talking about their grief.

Shared grief is different. People who have suffered the same loss identify properly, Wolfelt said. It's the artificial grief taken on by someone not personally involved, or involved only in a peripheral way, that causes trouble.

Empathy offers the best chance of real comfort.

According to Wolfelt, empathy says, "Teach me about your unique journey into grief." And only a

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"teach me" attitude can keep us from passing judgments on the other person's experience.

Empathy means striving to understand the meaning of the mourner's experience rather than imposing meaning on it from the outside. It is more than just saying I understand. It means accepting on the emotional level what the mourner is feeling. This gives the mourner support to explore his or her memories.

Also, empathy is not trying to fix things. It means creating a relationship in which you can cooperate with the mourner in fixing; them. It means being personally involved.

That's asking a lot, Wolfelt admitted. But it pays off not only for the mourner, but for the comforter as well.



My Lady Giraffe

I have a wonderful picture of a giraffe on my refrigerator door.

I'm sure it's a lady giraffe.

She looks at me through eyes fringed by long lashes and smiles a little Mona Lisa smile.

The picture was painted by my granddaughter, Nicole, in her kindergarten class — and I am



enormously happy to have it. I wanted it the minute I saw it.

When I asked my daughter if I could have it, she said I would have to ask the artist herself, that no one else could give permission.

When I told Nicole how much I liked it and put my request, she replied, very softly, "You can have it."

But when I picked it up to take it with me when I left, I wasn't sure she was going to let it go.

I think it was her mother's promise that she would see it again at my house that saved the day for me.

I really enjoy being a grandmother. It's lots easier than being either a mother or a daughter. Both of those relationships carry lots of responsibilities. Being a grandmother is mostly about love — and mostly about an almost unconditional love.

And yet I remember reading somewhere that God has no grandchildren.

Of course, that expression refers to the fact that every person has to come to God by himself or herself, on the basis of his own faith. No one can come as a grandchild, brought into the family because of the faith of the parents.

And there are definite responsibilities involved in this parent-child relationship.

It is only by God's grace through Jesus' death and resurrection that we became his children at all. But by the new birth we accept the responsibility for walking with Jesus, we take on the yoke of his Way.

It is also true that while God fulfills his responsibilities perfectly, we do not.

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We fail over and over again.

It is also by God's grace that the constant prayers Jesus says for us hold us within the family.

I was reminded of this recently by my daily readings in Luke.

The reading for May 8 in my *Encounter with God* series said that Peter's faithlessness fell into the net of Christ's faithfulness.

The story, told in Luke 21, says that just before Jesus and the disciples went to the garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus was arrested, he told Peter that Satan had asked to sift him.

"But," Jesus said, "I have prayed for you Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen you brothers."

Satan was going to find out just what Pete was made of, just how strong his faith was. And it wasn't very strong, was it? It wasn't strong enough to keep Peter from failing just as Jesus knew he would.

But Jesus had already prayed for Peter and the failure was overcome by the prayer. And what he did for Peter he does for us.

We all get sifted. It's part of the process of getting rid of our impurities.

When they appear, we can release them to God's cleansing Spirit who is at work in our lives because Jesus prays for us constantly.

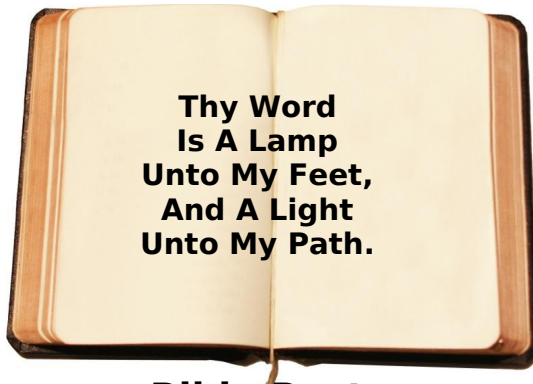
I loved my mother and I love my daughter. Our relationships — our struggles and our joys, our failures and successes — have shaped my life in more ways than I can even comprehend.

Barbara White



I love my grandchildren, but although I occasionally want to tell my daughter how to raise them, I'm really glad the responsibility is not mine.

I'm also very glad that God doesn't see me as a grandchild.



Bible Best

The New King James Version of the Bible has been out a little while now. But I've just gotten around to checking it out.

I did what most folks do with a new translation of the Bible — I checked some favorite passages to see how they read.

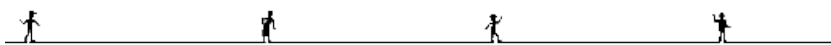
I haven't used the King James Bible in years. At different times I have used the Revised Standard Version, the Jerusalem Bible, the

New English Bible, the New American Standard Version and the New International Version — and one or two others that are paraphrases, rather than translations.

But I have not been successful in memorizing much Scripture from any of them. Most of what I can now say from memory comes from the King James.

I don't know whether that is because the beauty of the language in the King James Version makes it

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easier to memorize or because I was so much younger and better able to memorize back then.

Probably both are true.

I abandoned the King James because I found the newer versions easier to understand and I wanted understanding more than beauty. But I have missed the beauty.

The New King James is supposed to have retained the beauty, while changing the language to clarify the meanings.

Did they succeed?

The 23rd Psalm is almost the way I memorized it. I can live with "He makes me" rather than "He maketh me."

And John 1:1 and 3:16 are just fine.

But the passage in John 2 about Jesus cleaning out the Temple still carries a "with" that Bruce Metzger said was not in the original and that has been left out of the New Revised Standard Version.

The "with" makes it read as if Jesus used his whip of cords on the people as well as the cows and sheep, Metzger said. Without the "with," it says he drove out both the cows and sheep with the whip, he said, which is a bit different.

Which Bible will I use most in the future?

I don't know. I don't seem to have a lot of loyalty to one translation any more. I tend to use whichever one is used by the teacher I'm listening to.

But I think God manages to speak to me through all of them. And that's what counts — using it so he can speak through it.



Which reminds me of a warning I heard recently, a warning to those who delight to study the Bible.

A teacher said that the churches with the most emphasis on the Bible were often the ones with the least love.

That's because they have such high expectations for people, he said. They know what God expects and they tend to judge harshly those who don't come up to expectations.

Liberal churches can be full of love, he said. They have no idea what God expects, so they don't judge at all.

Should we ignore the Bible and simply love folks where they are? Even if where they are could get them in serious trouble in eternity?

Of course not.

We should know the Bible as well as we can *and* love folks where they are.

We are loved where we are — and too much to be left that way.

What he really challenged us to do is to find a way to teach Christians about God's design for our lives in such a way that they can hear it as good news, the way to freedom, rather than as harsh, impossible rules to obey.

I think this means we expect a lot of ourselves and very little of others.

It means we have an accurate estimate of people — that none is perfect — and love them anyway because Jesus, who certainly knows our weaknesses, loves us.

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It means we teach Scripture through our actions, trying to live out God's expectations in such a way that others will want to know how we do it.

Then we can tell them about God's word and what it says about his wishes and his power to enable.

And then they might welcome the word and begin to study and follow it.

As I look at my New Revised Standard and my New King James versions of the Bible, I am reminded that I am the "new version" of Barbara — with lots of the old left over.

And I want to meet that challenge. I want to know the Bible and live what I know — that the Lord has standards and he loves and forgives.



Waiting For Directions

Sometimes doing nothing is better than doing anything — even something "good."

A visiting minister, leading a teaching mission here recently, asked a series of questions that opened up the whole new area for consideration to me.



Why, he asked, when a promotion comes along — and it involves a move to another city, away from the roots you are putting down, from the body you are becoming part of — do you always take it?

Why is it always called God blessing you with prosperity?

Might it not be Satan trying to bring you down instead?

Even "good" things are not good unless God is the one directing them.

When Satan tempted Jesus after His 40 days in the wilderness, he suggested that He turn stone into bread.

Now that is not a bad thing — making bread.

The hungry world needs bread.

And later Jesus would do just that, make bread and feed the hungry.

But He did it when God told Him to, not when Satan did.

Man shall not live by bread alone, Jesus said, quoting Scripture, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

Think about that.

No matter how good something seems to us, unless God tells us to, we are not to do it. That's the way Jesus did it.

Doing nothing is hard.

We are so conditioned to doing something, anything.

We try to do good works.

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We may know good works are not the basis of our salvation, but we think of them as our response to God's gift of salvation through grace by faith.

And they are, aren't they?

I mean, we're supposed to be feeding the poor, aren't we?

Yes, but first we are to surrender our wills to Him. Then, we are to wait upon the Lord, literally I think.

Learning to hear Him when He speaks follows surrender.

His Spirit speaks to us through circumstances, opening some doors, closing others; through other Christians when they confirm our conviction; through the Scriptures, when we are steeped in them, not when we dip occasionally into them; and through prayer, continual prayer that brings inner peace about the action.

So there may be times when we are to do nothing, but **be** His.

Then when He speaks, we are to respond.



Feeling Weary & Worthless



A reader, who was going through a period of feeling "weary and worthless" at the same time I was recently found an article I wrote about the experience disappointing.

"I read your article with eager interest," she wrote, "hoping for an answer — I was disappointed when it proved to be prayer."

This reader says she prays, but does not know why. She writes:

"I honestly believe God has no personal interest in an individual life. I believe He gave us all we need to work with — for that we must be grateful — and then left it up to us to make proper and wise use of those things. When we don't, we suffer."

She ends, "Still, I catch myself praying." I'm glad a God-given hunger for Him keeps her praying.

Because I believe He does have a personal interest in individual lives. I believe He has a personal interest in my life and I can't think of a single good reason He should be more interested in me than in her.

If Jesus is who He says He is, then God was interested enough in individual lives to come and be an individual with us and to suffer and die for us.

He is the one who has "all we need to work with." He is the revelation of God's interest in us and His plan for us.

And not only that, He did not leave us to do any of it by ourselves! He sent His Spirit to be in us, to guide us in the proper and wise use of His gifts to us and to strengthen us in serving Him.

Now, we may suffer, of course.

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But He did, too. And if we suffer while doing His will, He calls us blessed.

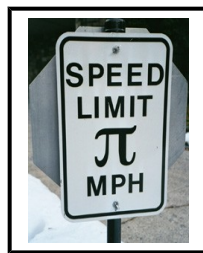
Actually, the answer to feeling weary and worthless is not really prayer. The answer is to give your life to Him — then prayer becomes part of living that life with Him and in Him.

And that can only be done by being part of His body. So I'm back where I found myself at the end of that other article, grateful for the intercessory prayer of the body for me.

My correspondent noted that Jesus says no one comes to Him unless it is granted by the Father. She says, "He does seem to play favorites."

I wonder if that is not an excuse to keep from having to come to grips with that call He makes when He draws her into prayer. It is granted by the Father, not forced by Him.

Okay, new friend, the next move is yours. It sounds to me as if you are one of His favorites — and He's waiting.



Glossolalia

I talked with a clinical psychologist/minister last week about the gift of tongues, or glossolalia. He was in charge of studies at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, Calif, into whether people who speak in



tongues are having a valid religious experience or are showing symptoms of illness.

He finds it is a valid experience.

During the conversation he described the charismatic movement, the setting for most glossolalia in main line churches, as one of the pietistic revivals which have occurred throughout the history of the church. He said that pietism, in the best sense, involves "all those in any age who have to have closer contact with God than that provided by the regular practices of the church."

That says something about pietism, but doesn't it say something about the "regular practices of the church," as well?

Is it that a few persons are fanatics or that most of the church is nominal?

The fact that there is a name which can be applied to persons wanting a closer relationship to the Lord really says something about commitment. Even within the body of believers there are those who are committed only to the church (individual congregation, denomination or what have you) and not to the Lord and the church that is His body.

How committed is one supposed to be? One rich young man was told that closeness meant selling all he had and following Jesus.

No one can judge the depths of another's commitment, the closeness of anyone's relationship. I can't even judge my own. How close do I want to be and how willing am I to pay the cost of that closeness?

I want to be so close I am at one with Him. I hope I will be willing to pay whatever it costs, because if I am willing, I will be able, through Him, to do so.

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I think the cost is losing my own life, so I can find His in me. That may or may not mean actually dying, but it certainly must mean losing control over my life — to Him. That may or may not lead to speaking in tongues, but a willingness to *let* it mean that seems inevitable, if I am to let Him control.

At one time I was among the comfortable, regular church-going crowd. And it certainly seemed that the practices of the church were not only proper but conducive to a close relationship.

But then I grew hungry. And that hunger called for a deeper commitment than the one I had made.



Peace

Peace!

What is it?

Can you define it?

Where does it come from?

When it pertains to pacts between nations, it is spelled out in great detail, with clauses and qualifications. In peace treaties, its major characteristic is a certain non-aggression, an absence of active hostilities.

But when Jesus said He would give us His peace, that is not what He meant. At least, my own experience says otherwise.

Barbara White



My son will be operated on soon — a long, delicate operation involving new surgical techniques. The doctors hope finally to close the wound he received in a motorcycle accident more than a year ago.

The surgical procedures will take somewhere between six and 12 hours. At least that is what we have been told to expect.

While I was making arrangements with a neighbor to feed my cats while I'm away, she commented on how calm I was, how peaceful.

And I realized I wasn't *being calm*; I was calm. I hadn't decided to remain peaceful during this critical time; I was simply filled with peace.

What I mean is, I was not doing it. It was just in me.

That kind of peace is a fruit of the Spirit. I hadn't even been aware that I was not anxious until my friend pointed it out. Now that's peace.

I hope this does not sound like boasting. I had nothing to do with it. Only He who gives the Spirit could have brought it about. Those who know how anxious I have been of old can appreciate that I am not bragging.

In the accounts in John's Gospel of Jesus' first resurrection appearances to the disciples, He greeted them with, 'Peace be with you.' That is the peace I'm talking about, a peace that is more than knowledge, more than reason, more than hope, even. A peace that simply IS.

There is, some might say, a great risk in sharing this experience. There are those who may watch to

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see if I can "maintain the act," to see if my peace is unbroken.

Well, I will run that risk so that I may witness to His love. If my peace is broken, it will only mean that my humanity has gotten in the way. I'm not saying I can "hold on to" or control this peace. It is not my act to maintain. But if I am a branch of the vine, the fruit will continue to grow.



Crisis

About a month ago I wrote about the peace I had been given about my son's operation.

I recognized that that peace was a gift, not something I had created for myself. And I admitted that if I spoke about it and then "lost" it, it might be embarrassing or could perhaps discredit my witness.

Well, I lost it, temporarily, but I found another "gift" to hang on to.

For the first three weeks of my son's hospital stay — and two trips to the operating room — I did very well, sleeping quietly at night, carrying on with my daily work — and trusting that the Lord was with him and me.

Then, after an unexpectedly extensive third operation, I blew it. I called the airline and made a reservation, I called friends and cried. In general, I



acted like someone who does not know that the Lord is in the situation and that no matter what, He will stay there.

I also called my minister.

Part of my problem was that I *knew* I was not trusting the Lord, though I wanted to. So I felt guilty about that, too.

When I shared all this with my minister, he made a practical suggestion — and reminded me of another gift.

He suggested that I call my son and see if he really wanted me to come. In all probability he would not need an upset mother to add to his other problems. (I called and he didn't.)

Then to my remorseful admission that I felt "out of trust" with the Lord and did not want to be, he reminded me that one is not a Christian alone. As a Christian I was part of the body of Christ, the church.

"The body will trust for you right now," he said.

And they did.

The Lord forgave my lack of trust when I brought it to Him. He knows my weaknesses better than I do, but He wants me to tell Him about them anyway. That is the beginning of change.

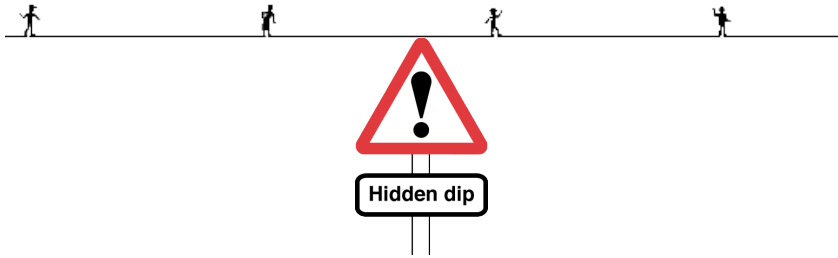
So, with a little help from my friends, who know and love Him, I'm making it.

In fact, I think I relearned a lesson I expect to relearn a few times more before I have it all locked in:

I can't do it myself, only He can do it for me.

And He calls us into community so we can be instruments of His love for each other.

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Forward This E-Mail At Once Or ... God Will Kill Your Puppy!

According to a chain letter sent me by a reader, I am in for some bad luck. I did not mail a flock of copies of the letter on to other people.

In fact, I have lost the letter, but I can remember enough of its message to know that I would not have sent copies on in any case.

The letter claimed to be designed for the good of the people who receive it, but the writer used intimidation to get his message across.

At the top was a prayer, but the emphasis was not on praying, but in getting material rewards by mailing copies of the prayer — and letter — on to a certain number of other people. According to the letter writer, those who have passed it on received raises, won prizes or in other ways found themselves richer and happier. Those who did not pass it on lost their jobs, became sick or had something else unpleasant happen to them.

There are so many things that seem wrong to me about this letter that I find it hard to believe anyone will be taken in by it. But there is something primitive hidden deep within man that sometimes finds it hard to withstand this kind of pressure.

The fact that prayer is not a magic tool in the hands of believers — much less in the hands of non-



believers — is ignored by the letter writer. For the person who believes in God, prayer is turning to God and being open to Him. Its only magic if I may use that word, comes from the workings of His Spirit in our lives when we are open to Him.

We are told to ask, to seek, and to knock. Prayer is a way to do these things, but it is His will for us that we are seeking, His will that we ask be done and His will that we would have opened to us when we knock.

The person who believes he is subject to the kind of luck, good or ill, described in the letter gives his life into the hands of anyone who cares to manipulate him through his desires or his fears.

Freedom from that slavery comes with surrender to God.

And life abundant comes not from mailing on a prayer letter which becomes a burden on someone else, but from serving the Lord.



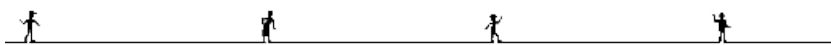
Love And Let Go

I'm going to lose some neighbors. Typical of this mobile society, they are moving to a better job in another city.

Not only are they good neighbors, they are fellow churchmen and close friends.

I read something recently about loving people with Christ's love. I can't remember exactly how the

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writer put it, but he said it is as hard to "love" someone you are genuinely fond of, have deep affection for, as it is someone you don't like at all. In fact it may be harder.

People say, "I may not like him, but I'll love him anyway."

And, you know, it is true. It is possible to do good to those who are our enemies. We can give a drink of water to the someone we don't like, we can feed, cloth and nurture him. More important, we can pray for the Lord's will to be done in his life.

But people we have a genuine affection for can be harder to love with Christ's love.

Most of those people we care about also care about us; we receive affection back from them. And sometimes we take that for our own instead of recognizing it as God's love for us through His people.

Of course we can do all those same good things for the people we really care about. But sometimes it really is hard to want what He wants for them.

I mean, in this specific case, there was a moment when I realized my prayers for their good could mean my loss. And it was hard to pray a heartfelt prayer for the Lord to act in their lives in a way that might not seem to benefit me.

When Jesus said a man must lose his life to really find it, I think He included just this sort of thing. My "life" is not bounded by the affection of these friends. But, oh, how easy it would be to think so.

And how hard it is to see our children's lives and their affection as a gift from God that is not ours to keep — only to be thankful for and turn loose.



But only by "losing" that part of my life that is tied up in affection for my friends can I fill that place with the Lord. Only if I accept that friendship and affection as mine only if I share it, can I have it.

That does not mean I must hope all my friends move away so I can "lose" them. It means recognizing their affection for me and mine for them as gifts, not possessions, gifts to be passed on to others, not held in private.



Feelings Blur Reality

There is a world of difference between knowing and feeling — and this is true in matters of faith as well as worldly ones. It is especially important to know the difference when feelings have the upper hand.

Take the weather for example. The thermometer may tell you it is cold outside, but you have been running and you feel warm. On the other hand, the weatherman may say it is a mild day, but you are tired and depressed, so you feel cold.

Today I am tired and somewhat depressed. Not only am I cold, I feel as if there is no God — or if there is one, He has nothing to do with me. I feel alone, isolated, out of touch with anything that matters.

But I know this is not true.

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There is a God, I know something about Him and He knows everything about me.

Feelings may reinforce knowledge; they may also try to block knowing. Sometimes I feel His presence, feel full of His love.

But not always.

The fact that right now I cannot feel His presence or evoke any sort of positive emotional response to the knowledge that He not only *is*, but He cares, does not mean it is not true.

My feelings will try to convince me otherwise. If it is true that He loves me and cares for me, my feelings say, how can I possibly feel so abandoned?

The answer, of course, is that it's easy, being human.

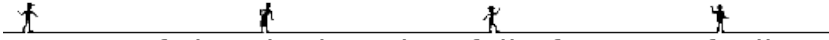
More to the point is the question: how can I possibly know that God is and that He cares? That, too, is easy. Jesus says it is true.

Which brings me to the question: Who does Jesus think He is — to be saying such things?

Well, emotions and feelings aside, He told us who He thought He was, the son of God, the savior, the Messiah. So the question, from the midst of my low feelings, is: did He know what He was talking about?

There are only three options: He was deluded, He was a fraud or He was who He said He was. Lunatic, liar or Lord: these are the possibilities.

There is a truth to be known, even if not fully understood by a finite mind, a truth to be seen, even if though through a glass darkly.



Out of the shadow that falls from my feelings, I can still see the light. If I ignore the pain of a seeming separation, I know that He is Lord.



A Child Shall Lead

Watching children can sometimes be the beginning of understanding ourselves. We do what they do, only we disguise it better. Watching a child recently brought me to a better understanding of trust and obedience.

The 6-year-old boy perched on top of the pew in front of him while everyone was standing. When the rest of the congregation sat down, he stayed where he was, eyes warily on his parents.

"Sit down now," whispered one parent. He didn't stir for a moment, then he moved one hip so a foot reached the kneeler. Slowly, oh, so slowly, he slid from his perch.

With exquisite timing, he waiting until the last possible moment before parental retribution would fall upon him and then slipped into the place between his mother and father, a look of angelic submission on his face.

Why do you suppose he does that? Does he enjoy teasing his parents? Is it an assertion of independence? A dare-devil tempting fate?

What bothers us about doing what we're told? Is it that desire to run our own lives What do you suppose he's thinking? That it's risky, being obedient?

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How can you be obedient and learn to think for yourself? You just become an automaton, a robot.

And you don't know what you might be asked to do — something horrible, against your very nature. Can parents be trustworthy enough to be given total submission?

I find an interesting similarity between that child's actions and a one of my reactions to the parable of the workers hired at different hours of the day — and all paid the same thing.

I wanted to be among the ones hired at the last minute, the ones who really “made out” by getting a full day's wage for just a little effort. I wanted to go right on “doing my own thing” as long as possible.

I don't think I'm alone in this. I think many of us keep a wary eye on what we know of God and try to figure out just how little of our autonomy we can give up and still be “safe.”

Giving in to God is a scary thing. We wonder what He will make us do, if we are His. What if He asks us to do something we don't really want to do? Can we really trust Him?

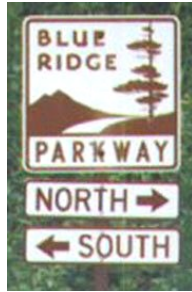
So, like the young man in church with one eye cocked, we go on running our own lives as long as we think it is safe to do so.

But, what the little boy does not yet know and I am just learning, surrender is not the end; it is the beginning. Obedience to God is not confining; it is liberating.

And He is trustworthy — all the way to death. What He wants for me is better than I can even dream of for myself.



There is something else about this trust and obedience; nothing can "prove" it works. Only the faith to try it can show it does.



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

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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.

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?

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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.

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.

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."



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.

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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 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.



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.

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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.

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.



Two Kinds Of People

People seem to come in two kinds: those who think well of themselves and those who, no matter how hard they try to, don't.

I was among this latter group. For years I lived in real fear of having someone look beyond the surface of my life. I just knew if they did, they would discover that I was hollow, with nothing either awful or great inside.

Last year during Lent, I came to grips with that hollow place. With His help, I swallowed my pride (the cause of my fear) and admitted that there *was* nothing wonderful or terrible there.

I think I would have been better satisfied to find something awful, rather than just plain mediocrity.

No, I am not exceptional — only human.

Since then a new understanding has grown. What I have been told, and my heart acknowledges, is that the Lord of Creation also made me — not just "mankind," but specifically me — just as He wanted me to be.

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The Rev. Terry Fullam of St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Darien, Conn., talking about how much we were loved by God, reminded his audience that the only thing their parents could really want was a baby. They couldn't want YOU, he said, they had no way of knowing what you would be like. But God wanted YOU. He planned YOU.

Psalm 139 says it this way in the Jerusalem Bible:

"It was you who created my inmost self, and put me together in my mother's womb; for all these mysteries I thank you: for the wonder of myself, for the wonder of your works. You know me through and through, from having watched my bones take shape when I was being formed in secret, knitted together in the limbo of the womb".

The Lord made **me**, not just my body, but my "inmost self" as well.

Now He does not want we as I am **now**, but as I would be if I were perfectly in His will — if I were as He designed me to be.

So we are working on that. I am working on letting go; He is doing all the rest.

But in the meantime, although my motto could be the one that goes, "Be gentle with me, the Lord's not finished with me yet", I think well of myself now. I am special enough to suit my Lord — and how much more special can you be.





Busy Beauty

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.

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 of 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.

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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.



Re-Creation

How does knowing Jesus as Savior and Lord make a difference in a life? What is it that changes a sinner into a saint?

It is more than the forgiveness of sins — though that is certainly involved. It is a remaking of the person from the inside out.

In the 51st Psalm I read:

"Be gracious to me, O God, in thy true love; in the fullness of thy mercy blot out my misdeeds.

"Wash away my guilt and cleanse me from my sin. For well I know my misdeeds, and my sins confront me all the day long." (New English Bible)

There are persons who do not accept this measure of their lives.

They do not see the sins in their lives.

In an age of do-your-own-thing and fulfill yourself, what is "really" wrong, they say. "I have not

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hurt anyone else. My life is my own to do with," is their defense.

"Against thee only have I sinned," continues the psalmist in his song to the Lord, "and done what displeases thee."

We are accountable for our lives to our Creator. We are measured against the image of ourselves that He sees, ourselves perfected.

The psalmist knows this. "Create a pure heart in me, O God, and give me a new and steadfast spirit; do not drive me from thy presence or take thy holy spirit from me; revive in me the joy of thy deliverance and grant me a willing spirit to uphold me."

It is here that Jesus makes the difference.

Only when He rules in your heart can that heart be pure.

Only when you surrender to His will are you given that new and steadfast spirit.

Only when His Spirit is within you can true joy be revived and upheld in your life.

"My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a wounded heart, O God, thou wilt not despise."

My spirit is broken, my heart wounded when I see my sin and the payment made for my redemption.

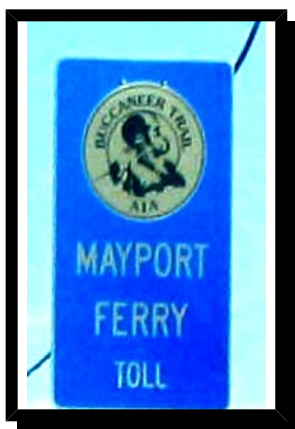
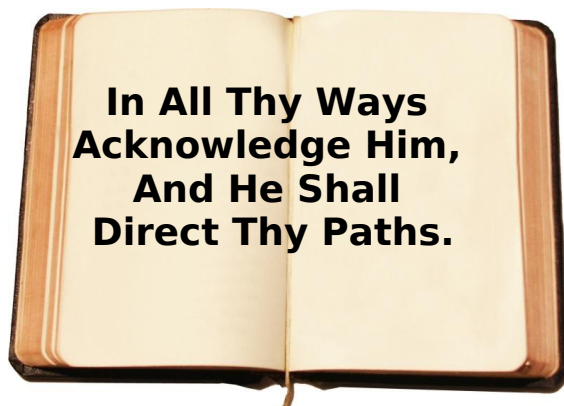
His heart was wounded for me, so that mine might be healed.

And it is from the healed heart in which He rules that the fruits of the Spirit come, those evidences of the changed life.

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And for that change, begun and continuing, although far from complete, I give Him thanks and praise.



A Funeral

In a world full of stress and strife, pain and suffering, it is easy to forget that the victory has already been won.

I was reminded — powerfully — of that victory at a church service I attended Tuesday.

The service was the funeral of a 26-year-old man who died of cancer.

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The words of victory included two passages from the Gospel of John, chosen by the young man during the last days of his illness.

The first passage, John 5:24-27, says:

"Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my words and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life.

"Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.

"For just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself; and He has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man."

The second passage, John 11:21-27, says:

"Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.'

"Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.'

"Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.'

"Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?'

"She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'"

The young man liked to have these words of victory read to him often, the minister said. He often

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asked visitors to read Scripture aloud to him — and he especially liked to hear these and other passages about the resurrection.

He found them comforting, strengthening. In listening to them he found peace.

Do they do the same for us?

I'm sure they will when we approach the same moment he approached.

But unless we know death is at hand, we usually won't take the time to let them penetrate our hearts and minds.

These words of victory were especially precious to this young man because he knew he had not lived all his life in the light of Christ. He had only returned to Him near the end.

But the victory was as true for him as it is for anyone.

Which one of us has lived always in the light? Who does not have a dark side that turns us away?

No one.

Jesus spoke about people who turn to him at the last minute. In a parable he said that some workers worked all day and some only an hour, but all received the same pay.

The gift of salvation is given to all who come to him, even if they come at the 11th hour.

This young man knew that gift was his.

And we rejoiced. We did not grumble because we have worked longer and will receive only as much as he received.

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And, oh, how I hope I always remember to rejoice in the hours I serve the Lord rather than to condemn others for the time they do not! They are the losers, not me.

Besides, we all come to God at the very last moment. Each of us will find things in our lives we need to turn away from even at the very end.

And the victory will be ours, too.

We also sang of the victory. We sang *Amazing Grace*, which includes the line, "Twas grace that taught my heart to fear and grace my fears relieved".

This young man knew the fear — and victory over the fear

All through grace. Grace let him see his need for repentance and the availability of God's forgiveness; Grace led him from defeat into victory.

And, the preacher said, from the moment that he turned again to God, he kept his eyes on the victory.

Then he asked, "What about you?"

"Is your dark side in need of repentance, so you can turn and live?

"Are your eyes fixed on the prize?"

He said, The victory is already won.

And if we turn our hearts to the Lord and keep our eyes on this prize, we will find not God of judgment.

But a God of grace, mercy, and love.



Life After Death

Do you ever wonder if there really is life after death?

That's a question most of us think about at one time or another.

Some people think of it as the question. But, according to an article in the September issue of *Salt* magazine, it isn't.

The greatest spiritual question, according to the article, is: Is there life before death?

Or: Is what you're doing living?

My initial reaction was to ask: Compared to what?

Compared, the author says, to life as depicted in the Psalms.

The author says the Psalms "sing of praise, fear, faith and final victory. They sing all the human emotions to God. They talk to God. They scour the

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world for answers to the unanswerable. They ring across time with the human memory of the fidelity of God, with the soul-searching of humanity, with the highest aspirations and the deepest pain of the human soul."

We can all learn a lot about life before death from the Psalms.

The author said Jesus did. She said he learned about the poor and about the fact that God is the God of all people and about how to take anger to the Lord and leave it there and about how to trust God.

From Psalm 34 — "When the poor cry out to me, I will hear them" — he learned to hear the poor.

From Psalm 145 — "All creatures look to you with hope and you sustain them in their need. You are generous to all creation, nourishing all who live." — he learned that God cares about all people. And he gave his life for all.

From the "cursing psalms," Jesus learned that vengeance belongs to God because God is just. "Christians have perhaps forgotten the energy that comes from knowing holy anger and leaving the results to God," she wrote.

And from Psalm 26 — "Uphold my cause, O God, for I walk in integrity. I trust in you. I shall stand firm" — he learned to trust God enough to go to the cross.

I have always loved the Psalms.

They have never failed to offer me words to express what is in my heart.

But have they shaped my life?

Life, the author said, is not shaped by merely reading the Psalms. Life is shaped by praying them.



"Prayer, of course, is not meant to be a magic act that cajoles and coaxes God to turn life into a Disneyland of religion. Prayer is not meant to change the world; prayer is meant to change us so that we will then change the world.

"Jesus had clearly learned how to pray," she said. "The question for our time is, have we?"

We know how to worry, to beg and to fantasize in prayer, she said. We even know how to make prayer an escape.

But real praying does not come until we have become immersed in the mind and presence of God and until we see God everywhere and in everyone.

Real praying won't come until we listen to the poor, work as God would work in this world, give our wrath over to the wrath of God and "trust and trust and trust that somehow, someday, what must happen will happen because we have added our part to it."

That's a tall order. Can we fill it?

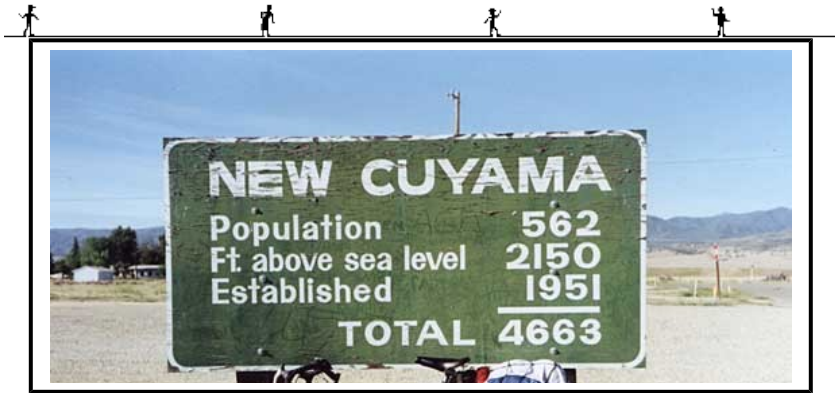
I don't know.

We can at least try.

And as long as we don't make too many laws out of our efforts, I think we might even find them a pretty good introduction to living before we die.

Shall we begin to pray the Psalms and see?

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Something Has To Go

Much of the following advice was directed at pastors and leaders of Christian ministries at a recent seminar. But it's for you and me, too. The ideas I'm writing about pinched me. And I don't think you're all that different.

Recently, I wrote about a problem that affects a lot of us — pastors, ministry leaders and you and me.

The problem of lawlessness — which can be defined as taking the bit in your teeth and going your own way.

This week I want to talk about the cure.

A speaker at the seminar said the cure is the Father's sentence of death.

Now, not all lawlessness involves such obvious sins as adultery and stealing and stuff like that. It may be doing things — even good things — God has not told you to do, or not doing things — tough things — He did tell you to do.

Specifically, many pastors think that once God has created something — especially their ministry — it should live forever.



So if they hear a voice saying to shut the ministry down, they are apt to rebuke Satan rather than consider it might be God speaking.

It's the deception of unbroken success, the speaker said. If God started it and it's doing well, then it's got to be a success forever.

Most of us have never been taught how to hear God's sentence of death on anything, the speaker said.

But Abraham knew it was God telling him to sacrifice Isaac, and Jesus knew it was the Father telling him the cross was the answer to his prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane.

And their obedience led to life.

You know what disobedience leads to. Any time we are not willing to see our ministry — or our anything — put to death at God's command, degeneration begins.

Today, the speaker said, the quantity of ministry is increasing, but the quality is decreasing.

And God wants people who do ministry to be able to speak to and identify with a society that is rapidly degenerating.

Instead, too many ministers love their ministries more than they love God.

They are not aware that they no longer yield themselves to God. Ministry has become their God.

If mouthing the words of God could save, the world would be saved, he said.

But if the Word is not incarnate, its seed shrivels and will not produce good fruit.

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You have to "buy the whole field," and it costs.

Abraham "bought the field" when he set out with Isaac for the mountain to make the sacrifice commanded by God.

At the last moment God said that now he knew Abraham loved him because he did not withhold his son. And God provided another sacrifice.

Jesus wrestled with the Father before he yielded. But he went to his death willingly. And it lead to resurrection.

Everything has a life span. God knows what it is and we do not. If we try to keep something alive that God wants dead, it may look alive for a time, but it will rot anyway.

Many things contribute to our difficulty in hearing the Father's sentence of death, the speaker said.

We have made a Golden Calf of our ministry. We fear the unknown. We want to preserve our reputation. We want to preserve a comfort level. We don't want to lose control. We fear people's opinions. We see it as a failure syndrome. We are confused and uncertain about whose voice it is. We fear repeating past, painful lessons. And we want to bargain instead of obey.

But God makes no deals, he said. You just have to kiss the cross.

Sometimes, like Abraham, if we yield, we don't actually have to use the knife. But sometimes we do. The ministry has to die.

Many of us will hear the Father's sentence of death over something in our lives in the coming year, the speaker said.



There is another way of looking at ministry that can help us hear the Father when he speaks.

I'll write about that next week.



The Bit In Our Teeth

My mother said it was bad manners to ask for gifts.

That may be true in the realm of human affairs, but not in the spiritual realm.

God expects us to ask him for gifts. He also does not hesitate to ask us to give some of them back.

We like getting gifts, but most of us don't want to turn them loose.

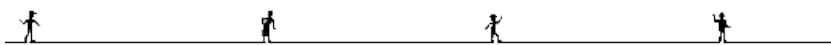
That's true of ministers, too, according to one of the speakers I heard at a recent conference for pastors and ministry leaders.

Like the rest of us, pastors sometimes get the bit in their teeth and do things their way instead of listening daily for God's directions.

They especially don't want to hear God pronounce a sentence of death on a ministry they love. But he does not want even ministry to stand closer to our hearts than he does.

Now I suspect most ministers try to evaluate how well they are following Jesus. We all try to figure

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 out how to do it "better," so our lives will produce more fruit.

But while we can do some weeding, God reserves pruning for himself.

Personally, I have never known ahead of time that something needed to be cut away from my life.

I have only seen it looking back, after the pruning.

Pastors don't know, either, even when they think they do.

But we are still surprised — sometimes stunned — when the solution to our habit of taking the bit in our teeth turns out to be God's sentence of death over something in our lives.

Jesus told us following Him would be costly. We're called to be living sacrifices.

Of course, Jesus made the only perfect sacrifice. While still a young man, he willingly offered to die in payment for all of our sins.

What are we willing to offer up?

And how do we translate all this theology into our lives?

Jesus spoke of some people who expected his approval because they had prophesied in his name, driven our demons and healed in his name. Instead, he rejected them with the words, "I never knew you."

People do those same signs and wonders today because they believe God has told them to.

But sometimes, when he chooses, God tells them to stop and they don't listen. They say, Lord, you don't understand. So many people need this ministry.



But Jesus stepped over a lot of other ailing people to reach one particular man beside the pool at Bethesda. He healed this one, doing only what the Father told him to do.

If we reject God's direction, even his sentence of death on our ministry, ministry may continue for a time, but it will not produce good fruit. Without God's approval and blessing, degeneration sets in and the whole thing begins to smell.

In the passage in John that tells of the healing of the man at the pool, the conference speaker found seven guidelines for ministry that pleases God:

- Anticipate the unusual from God and disregard custom when it stands in the way of his will.
- Remember, God is your Father, not your boss.
- Do not initiate. Imitate. Get to know the Father's heart so well that you know what he would do.
- Remember, the Father loves the Son and shows him what to do. And the Son loves us and sends the Spirit to show us.
- Be firmly fixed on the truth that our judgments are just only when we do not seek our will, but the will of our Father.
- Walk in these ways and expect God to witness to your obedience.
- And do not receive glory from each other.

He concluded with five brief prayers, which I have adopted as my own:

Lord, cleanse me from diversion and clutter. Forgive me for getting the bit in my teeth and going my own way. Release me from the idolatry of my own

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ministry as I offer my "Isaac" willingly to you while it is fresh and whole. Remove deafness, blindness, fatness of heart so I can hear your voice again. And draw me once again and let me run after you.



Words

In the musical, *My Fair Lady*, Eliza Doolittle sings a song about words.

Specifically, she sings about how tired she is of words.

"Words, words, words, first from them, now from you!" she storms musically at Freddie whatshisname. "Is that all you blighters can do?"

I know just how she feels.

Some days it seems all I do is listen to people using words, words, words. And the more they use, the less they seem to say.

They come at me from everywhere and they use the same words — but to mean different things. Just when I think I have understood what one group means by a word, I come face to face with another group that uses the same word to mean something else entirely.

And I feel myself caught in the confusion that destroyed Babel. What is worse is that, over and over again, I hear myself doing the same thing! I talk, talk, talk — and what do I say? What do my words convey to those who listen?

I write, write, write — and what message will those who read find in the reading?



And yet ... Words are what God used in creation.

"And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light." (Genesis 1:3)

To create the heavens and the earth, the sun and the moon, the dry land and the seas, and the birds, animals and fish, God spoke the word and it was so.

And yet.

"Word" is a name for Jesus Christ.

"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." (John 1:14)

And when we hear Jesus, we hear the Father. We hear the same force that was at work in creation.

I can say those words, but I can't really understand them.

How can I?

They are beyond my powers of comprehending.

But the One who speaks wants me to understand. So he has given me his Spirit to be with me always and to interpret for me.

With his help, I occasionally decipher a sound. And a ray of understanding springs to life in my darkness and lights my way.

"Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path." (Psalm 119:105)

Or it pierces my heart and changes my life.

"For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to divide soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." (Hebrews 4:12) That's what words can do when God speaks them.

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It's quite different when we speak to each other.

God can communicate with me — even though not without difficulty — because he speaks my language. But then, he speaks everybody's language!

One problem when we try to speak with each other is that we *don't* often speak the same language, even when we use the same words. I guess that's why it is so wonderful to find someone who does speak your language. It's like meeting someone from home. If you have ever been lost in a foreign country and run across someone who speaks English, you will know what I mean.

Another problem is that God uses words to convey truth and we often use words to deceive those who listen or to hide from them or disguise what we really mean.

In any case, we do experience difficulty when we try to use words as our only bridge for communication.

Perhaps that's why Jesus' summary of the Commandments calls for more action than talk.

Perhaps that's why Eliza's song includes the lines, "Don't talk at all. Show me!"



A Grandmother's Death

Everybody's life is touched by many different events every day.



Some fade away, leaving hardly a trace. Others make impressions that may last a lifetime.

Their grandmother's funeral made a deep impression on sisters Catherine Moore and Ann Johnson and their cousin Richard Hunt.

"All of us wanted to do things just right for MaMa's funeral," Catherine told me. "She lived for God and for us. She prayed for us daily. In fact, she always did everything for us."

At least she did until she came down with Alzheimer's disease. She spent her last seven years in nursing homes.

After their grandmother's death, when it came time to plan the funeral, it just seemed right that they should do it themselves, Catherine said.

She and Ann, who had sung together for their grandmother often as young girls — but not since — sang at the funeral. And Richard, who had once thought of entering the ministry but has been an engineer with the city for the last 20 years, led the service.

"God took us through it," Catherine said. "We couldn't have done it without him."

She said she had always thought that when her grandmother died, she would fall apart.

"I was very selfish," she said. "I didn't want to give MaMa up. I prayed for her physical healing for six years. Then, I finally said, 'If it's not your will for her to know physical healing here, then heal me so I can cope and give her peace and rest.' "

Ann said she was very nervous about singing. "I wanted everything to be perfect, and I thought, 'What

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if I open my mouth and nothing comes out?' But I took a deep breath, and the words just rolled out," she said. "And I kept hearing MaMa say, 'You can do it.'"

Richard said a teenage interest in preaching had stayed with him through a tour in the Navy, but it had ebbed away when he began to earn a living.

"I didn't pursue the educational background you need for it today," he said.

When there was no pastor available to do the funeral who knew their grandmother, his cousins asked Richard if he would.

"I didn't know whether I could do the service, but when my mother asked, 'Can you do it for me?' I knew I had to try," he said.

"Preparing for it meant I had to find quality time to myself. I had to do it right — for my family — in honor of my grandmother."

All three say their lives have been touched by what they did — and touched in ways that should make a difference for a long time to come.

Catherine said she had not been in church for a while, but she had visited one a few times before her grandmother's death.

"The new pastor came to the funeral, and I've been asked to sing at church," she said. "I've been in church more since the funeral than I had in years."

And the peace she felt at the funeral has lingered.

Ann believes she has been given a new outlook on life.



"I have a new strength to fight my problems now. I'm able to go on one day at a time," she said.

Richard said the funeral brought the whole family closer together.

"MaMa would have had us be close," he said. "Her life will have meaning if we become more closely knit and loving."

In addition, Richard said, he has learned that life is a fragile thing and not to be taken for granted.

"I've not been serving the Lord as I should, but he's not given up on me," he said.

I found food for thought in talking to all three of them. But then I find food for thought in most of the conversations I have with people who are dealing with the presence of God in their lives.

Catherine, Ann and Richard believe they have learned lessons that will stay with them: for the rest of their lives. I hope so, but I still wonder, a year from now, exactly what they will remember about this most significant time.

I have known significant events in my own life, events from which I thought I had learned eternal lessons.

Lord, help them and help me make what we have learned part of our daily lives so we will not forget.

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When The Big One Hits

A friend of mine was recently hit by one of the bigger waves the world has to offer. He is still struggling to regain his footing.

And as he does, I stand by, a hand outstretched, watching for the right time and way to offer it.

It's a very helpless feeling.

You want to do something to correct all problems. You want to say something that will make it all OK, or will at least explain what has happened in some rational way.

You know from personal experience that people can put up with a lot if they can just understand why it is happening.

Makes me think of Job's friends.

I'm pretty sure that this conviction that explanation helps recovery is what motivated Job's friends. But they weren't in the end of much comfort to Job.

So I am relatively silent, standing by, but not talking much.



For once I have little to say.

I wonder if any of Job's friends offered to help rebuild the house?

I wonder if any of them offered to anoint and bind up his sores?

I wonder if Job was so miserable that he rejected offers of help?

It doesn't say.

For many years I thought of the Book of Job as the Bible's statement about why a loving God allows evil to happen.

We want so much to have a place we can go for answers.

The problem is, of course, that the Book of Job does not answer the question. If you read it for answers to why God allows evil to exist, you are disappointed. The book sidesteps the question at best.

We reject the only answer it offers, that we couldn't understand it if God told us.

Habakkuk asks the same sort of questions.

The prophet says, "How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, 'Violence!' but you do not save?"

He asks specifically how God, whose eyes are too pure to look on evil, can tolerate the treacherous and remain silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves.

God tells him to wait and watch what he will do.

It's not what we want to hear.

We want the kind of answer we want and we want it now, not later.

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But both Job and Habakkuk offer something positive.

They offer a different focus for the questioner.

Both men are told to look at God, not at the problem.

Job responds, "Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know".

And "My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you."

Habakkuk reports, "The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea."

And, "The Lord is in his Holy Temple; let all the earth be silent before him."

Does any of this ease my friend's pain?

I'm not sure it does right now.

Pain hurts. That's all there is to it.

Does this mean my friend can make it through the valley of the shadow and into the green pasture beyond?

I think it does.

God is with us. He has given us his Holy Spirit and individually and corporately we are now the temple in which he dwells.

And he is a God of restoration.

Habakkuk says he will continue to stand his watch, he will do what God has given him to do, while looking to hear what the Lord has to say to him.



Standing our watch may not satisfy our intellects, but I believe that in the mystery of God it is the very doing of it that comforts and encourages us.



Dried Out?

I almost fried my oatmeal the other morning.

When you use the quick kind, a one-minute cooking time can pass too fast if you aren't watching.

When you are watching, of course, a minute lasts much longer.

This particular morning, when the water began to steam, I poured the measured amount of dry oatmeal into it, turned the heat down and went about the business of doing something else.

I remembered the oatmeal just in time to prevent total ruin.

The mess looked gummy and totally unappetizing, but it had not yet bonded to the bottom of the pot.

I didn't have time to scrape it out into the garbage can and start over, so I poured a little very hot water in and stirred it in.

As I did, the mess turned back into moist, plump oatmeal.

It looked like proper oatmeal and it tasted like proper oatmeal, too!

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The difference between dangerously dry and dead dry is narrow, but real.

Thank goodness.

Lately I have felt as if I've been left on the stove too long and I've dried out.

I feel like my oatmeal looked gummy and not very appealing. Almost burned to a crisp, in fact.

I was afraid for a time that the damage might be too great and future use impossible. But I believe now that, again like my oatmeal, I'm still salvageable.

Almost, but not quite dead dry.

A little water stirred in will still do the trick.

But it was a little scary, getting that dry.

My problem was not lack of food. In fact, sometimes those of us who talk or write about living the Gospel have more food than we can handle, more meat to chew.

We know more than we are doing.

When that happens, I think our mouths get so dry we can't swallow.

That is when we need a little living water.

Jesus talked about that living water once to a woman who was pretty nearly all burned up. The story is recorded in the Gospel of John.

This woman had gone to a well to draw water.

Jesus was waiting there and he asked her for a drink.

When she expressed amazement that he would speak to her — a Samaritan and a woman — he told her he had a gift of God to give people like her.



He said it was living water, water that would keep people from ever being thirsty again.

But when she asked for some, so she would never have to draw water again from the well, he told her to go get her husband.

She said she didn't have one.

And Jesus told her a truth about herself that he could not have known. He said, you have had five husbands and the one you now have is not your husband.

She had married many men trying to find her one. true husband. She had become so disillusioned she had decided just to live with the next guy, not marry him.

She was all dried up.

Then Jesus came along.

And she was restored.

I don't know right now exactly how I managed to let myself get so dried up. After all, I have already had that encounter with Jesus. I know who he is.

But he is still the source of living water. So if my spring is low on water, it's not because he has changed.

I guess I have been so busy talking, and talking so loudly, that I have missed something important he has been saying to me.

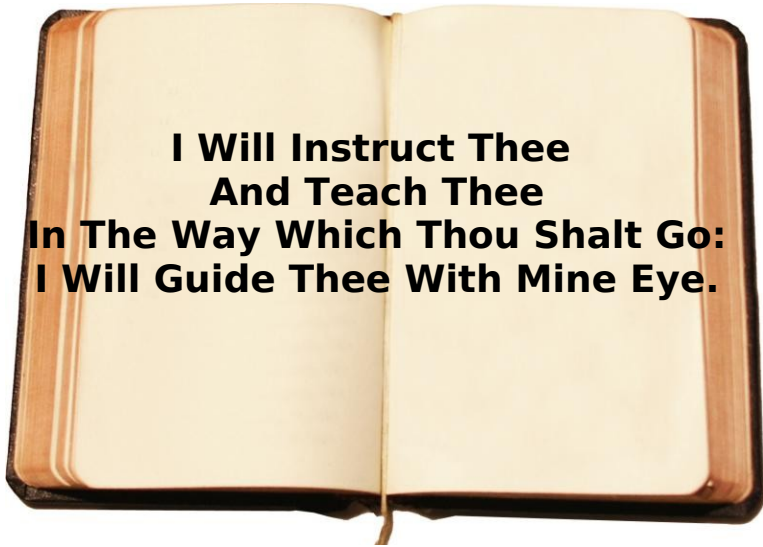
I believe he has continued to pour out his living water for me, but in a new direction. And I have insisted on forging ahead in the old one — which has led me into a hot, dry place.

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But all is not lost. I may be pretty badly singed,
but I'm not yet charred.

And the source of the spring is at hand.



**I Will Instruct Thee
And Teach Thee
In The Way Which Thou Shalt Go:
I Will Guide Thee With Mine Eye.**

On Loving Enemies

Perhaps the hardest lesson Jesus taught was the one about loving your enemy. He taught it by saying, in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:43-45), "You have heard it said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven."

He demonstrated that this was not mere philosophy when he said, from the cross (Luke 23:34), "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."



We have his words and his example, but sometimes, when we've been hurt, it's hard not to want to hurt back.

It's hard not to want to explain to God why, just this time, under these circumstances, it is OK to hate.

A couple of weeks ago, I wrote a column about one of Jesus' parables of the kingdom and said we have to "buy the whole field" when we accept the gift of salvation, redemption and restoration. We have to take the good with the bad, the trash with the treasure.

I received a letter this week from a woman who took that thought prayerfully to heart and heard the Lord talking to her about His will for her life.

And not only hers.

I believe this is His will for our lives, too.

She wrote, in part: "We are all done grievous wrongs here on Earth; we all fall victim to each other in large ways and small; we bear and receive yet another fruit of sin.

"But our Lord has taught us, by his words, actions and Holy Spirit that love is the greatest gift we have — and must share — with all.

"That is why we pray for our enemies. It is too hard sometimes, as a human, to feel anything akin to love towards one who has harmed us grievously — and that twists our attitude and turns our focus from God. But his gift of prayer nullifies those things and helps deepen our eternal perspective. To hold someone up to God in prayer is the greatest act of love we can perform; it also returns our focus to God, who will, somehow, restore our attitude.

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"Paul, in Philippians 4:8, charged us to fill our minds only with those things which are praise worthy — an impossible task sometimes. And yet, if we hold our enemies up to God, he will provide us with praise words and help us drag our minds back to him and persevere to keep them there.

"And what of our enemy? Who else but one of God's children, from whom he expects so much (because he gave so much), can pray for the 'trash in the field?' Who else is there? Who else was charged with the obligation and the responsibility? Who else knows how to pray but God's children?

"The Lord, in his infinite love, has taught me to feel urgent about praying for my enemies. He taught me that this life is short — here on Earth — but that what I do with it and how I respond to it matters to him eternally and will only matter to me while I am here.

"He taught me that originally he created all of us only to live with him in harmony — I need not dwell on what went wrong, but on what he set right. He is still teaching me about the eternal perspective and a truly forgiving attitude.

"All of this from a few moments of your sharing. His eyes see differently from mine, but, slowly, he is blinding my sight and replacing it, tiny bit by tiny bit, with his."

And with her help, he is doing the same to me.



Prayer Words

Prayer is a many-splendored thing.

That's a fancy way of saying prayer is not just one thing, it is many things, and each of them is wonderful because it is a contact point with God.

Among the many splendors of prayer is one sort that I find particularly satisfying. I call it heart-to-heart prayer.

This sort of prayer is special because it is done with one or two others, making it contact with God and with our brothers or sisters.

It is also special because it brings God into the prayer group as a participant.

As he said in Matthew 18:20, "For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."

Now this does not mean sticking "in Jesus name" or "in the name of Jesus" on every prayer, either. It means getting your hearts and minds together in a way pleasing to the Lord.

How do we do that?

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I think it happens when we yield control of the prayer time to the Holy Spirit and let him lead, while we follow.

It happens when we say, "Lend me your heart for my prayer and I will lend you my heart for your prayer." Thus heart-to-heart prayer.

In Matthew 18:19, Jesus said, "Again, I say that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven."

Now, it is possible for two people to agree on something hurtful and destructive. I don't think that's what the Lord had in mind.

The question becomes, how do we agree with each other — and with God?

I think it involves agreement in the heart. It means hearts in agreement with each other and with the Lord.

The process is very simple. The problem is that it is very difficult for us to be simple.

OK, if the key is lending each other our hearts, the trick to doing that is for each person to take control of her own tongue so the Holy Spirit can take control of the whole prayer time.

Let me give an example.

Suppose three of us meet for heart-to-heart prayer. Suppose one begins to pray and prays for the health of Friend A and the job of Friend B and the financial status of Friend C, and half a dozen other things, then stops.

Suppose I am still thinking about the health of Friend A when she stops. I have not listened to the



other things she said. Our hearts are not really united in prayer.

Now suppose instead that one of us begins to pray for the health of Friend A, saying whatever is on her heart but not worrying about trying to cover the whole subject, just saying what comes to mind on the subject and then stopping.

And suppose I then add what is in my heart about Friend A, not trying to outdo the first prayer but adding what comes to mind, and then I stop.

And then the other member of our group does the same thing.

And maybe by that time, the first person thinks of something else she wants to say to the Lord about Friend A, so she brings that up. And maybe that makes me think of something else I want to add, too, and we go around the group two or three times before we have said everything we want to say in prayer for this particular friend.

Who do you think brings all those things to mind? Who do you think keeps us on this one subject until everything that needs to be said is said?

I'll tell you who I think it is. I think it is God, who loves Friend A even more than we do and who is not silent in our midst, but speaks through us. Isn't it the Holy Spirit who instructs us in what we need to know?

Then, we can go on to the job problems of Friend B and do the same thing, praying one after the other about this particular subject until a quiet, peaceful silence indicates nothing else needs to be said.

And on to the problems of Friend C.

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But what happens when the first one to pray is a dynamic, outgoing person and the second one is shy and lacks self-confidence? And what if No. 1 says so much that No. 2 hesitates to say anything at all?

That's where self-control comes in. No. 1 has to learn to curb her enthusiasm — and her tongue — and let the others have a share in the prayer.

If the Spirit is in control, nothing that needs to be said will be left unspoken.

No. 1 will have another chance before the prayer is over, if nobody else says it. And it just may be that No. 2 will gather her courage and do it herself. Then, not only will the thing get said, but the people praying will be as one!

And every now and then, if the shy, quiet person is obedient, the group may well hear something its member had not thought of before. And their own hearts and lives will be enriched.

Does this kind of prayer take huge amounts of time?

It always seems to take just the right amount of time, whatever that is. The Spirit seems to know just how to make it fit when I relax and quit trying to lead.



Close To The Vest



I had the great good fortune recently of hearing some men talk about their relationships with God and about how those relationships were being deepened and expanded.

My faith was strengthened by their remarks.

Some of them admitted that they had been pretty comfortable sitting in their pews on Sundays and being basically "nice guys" the rest of the week.

But, they said, they were no longer content with that.

Now they understood that God loved them personally and that he wanted them to love others on his behalf.

What had been a private faith was no longer private. They were ready to be involved in serving God and in testifying to their faith in him.

Belief, action and words — these things do not always go together, even among folks who go to church.

It is possible to go to church, but not to be sure what you believe about God or how to act on it in your life.

A recent study of members of mainline churches called this an immature, undeveloped faith.

It is possible to believe something about God, but not to transfer that belief into daily life.

The study said this was a one-dimensional faith.

It is possible to believe something about God, to act on it openly and to tell others how your belief has directed your actions.

Rejoicing Along The Way



This, the study said, is a mature, integrated faith.

Most of the men in that group had been in the middle somewhere. They had had a relationship with God, but had not been doing much about translating that relationship into their everyday lives.

What had caused the change? What had expanded their faith from a private matter of a Sunday relationship with God to a public matter of witnessing and service?

One minister who took part in that study said people seem to need revelations, inspirations, nudges and experiences to develop a mature, integrated faith.

Well, in one way or another, that's what had happened to these fellows. The Holy Spirit had touched their hearts and minds in one or more of those ways during a three-day conference they had all attended.

This was a well-designed conference. It included meaningful, thought-provoking lectures. It employed activities that build relationships.

And they had had to take a day or a day and a half off from their regular work week to attend. They had paid their money and gone — even if some had done so with more enthusiasm than others. They had sat through the lectures and taken part in the activities.

They had invested something in the weekend.

So had the people who put it on. They had invested lots of their time and energy in preparation and prayer.



This is true, of course, of many different kinds of weekend conferences.

But not all produce the same results.

This particular weekend is called a Cursillo, which is a Spanish word for a little school.

It originated in the Roman Catholic Church, but has since spread to other denominations. Versions are now used by Episcopalians and Lutherans, for example.

Cursillo is only one renewal tool being used by denominations who have discovered that an undeveloped faith or even a private faith between the person and God will not keep churches alive.

And it seems to be working.

The men I listened to were not only able to talk about their faith now, they were making plans to put that faith into action at home and at work as well as at church.

They had had been given a lot of information and had been shown examples of God's love in action.

Was that what made the difference?

Well, it certainly helped.

Also, through all the activity and all the words, through all the giving and receiving, they had been offered comfort for their afflictions and, where they might have been too comfortable, some afflictions — well, let's say they were challenged to sit up and face reality, anyway.

That makes a difference, too.

But something had nudged, inspired and revealed truth to those men.

Rejoicing Along The Way



Something had changed their hearts as well as their minds.

And while no conference by itself can do that, I believe the Spirit had chosen to use this one.

That's really what I was listening to.



Checkbook Theology

Want to know yourself better? I know a couple of ways you can do that.

One comes from the sermon I heard Sunday. The other comes from current stuff in my life.

I greeted a friend after church by asking how he was.

"Well," he responded, "I thought I was fine until I heard that sermon. Now I have to go home and read my checkbook to find out for sure."

The preacher had said that our checkbooks could tell us pretty clearly where our hearts really were.

Jesus said that where a person's treasure was, there his heart would be, also.

So, if we ignored the checks written for necessities — rent and basic food and clothing — we should be able to see what we cherish by looking at what we did with the rest of our money.

A word of warning here. Watch out for rampant self-justification.



In this exercise, a habit of evaluating your behavior before you identify it can really get in the way.

I wonder how my friend feels about himself after reading his checkbook?

I haven't looked at my own yet. I've been too busy getting to know myself another way.

I've been looking at what I think about when I lie awake at night.

I've done quite a lot of lying awake throughout the years — a good bit of it lately.

What thoughts arise in your mind when you lie awake in bed at night? Do you think about your job? Your security? Your health? Your children?

I've devoted my share of wakeful nights to each of those areas — some more than others. And not all of my thinking has been productive.

Night hours tend to make some things look worse than they will in the light of day.

Darkness is conducive to negative thinking for those of us who are prone to fret and worry.

And when things in life aren't going all that well, it becomes far too easy to dwell on woes instead of blessings.

But just lately I have observed a change.

I am spending more of my wakeful night hours talking to the Lord about my problems than I am just bemoaning them.

Psalms 119:148 says, "My eyes stay open through the watches of the night, that I may meditate on your promises."

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And I've actually been doing some of that!

Instead of piling one problem on another until I have a mountain of them that threatens to crush me, I have been putting them one by one into the hands of the Lord who reigns over my life.

And little by little, the weight on my heart and mind has grown lighter, rather than heavier.

What has made the difference?

Perhaps the change is a fruit of the difference in the way I am praying now in the daylight. I have been talking things over with the Lord more, and then doing more listening and more letting go.

I have been making it a practice — in hopes it will become a habit — to consider the problems I face, the needs I see, the pains I experience, all in light of the fact that God is God, not someone or something else.

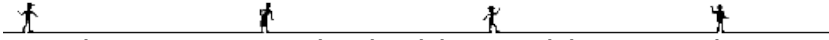
After all, he is ruler of the universe — and that includes me.

Scripture says God made me and holds me in being. It also says he is wise, good and powerful. He knows. He loves. And he is able. Therefore, why should I be afraid?

Oh.

There may just possibly be another reason for the difference.

The problems I've been considering lately have been so totally beyond my ability to solve that I've had no recourse but to turn them over to the Lord.



That's not a bad thing, either. God proves trustworthy — even when his solution is not the one you thought you wanted.

An examination of my night watches reveals that I may just be learning a little bit more about what it means to trust in the Lord.

Shall I risk seeing if my checkbook says the same thing? At this point, I guess I'll have to.



God's Plans For Us

I heard a wonderful story about a cheeseburger recently.

Actually, there was a cheeseburger in the story, but the story was really about the blessings of obedience.

The woman who told the story, the wife of a local minister, said all of this had happened a few years ago when she had decided to learn Hebrew.

She had gone to the first session of the class and had been very attracted to the teacher.

She said she didn't speak to the woman at all. Just listened to her, admired her and decided to pray for her.

Rejoicing Along The Way



And at the end of the class, along with everyone else, she turned in her check to cover the cost of the course.

Then she headed home.

And that's where the cheeseburger came in. She had passed a McDonald's on her way to the class and had decided then that she would stop and get a cheeseburger on her way home.

So she headed back toward the McDonald's expectantly.

Only to believe she heard God telling her to pray and fast for her teacher.

Prayer she had already decided to give. But fasting, too! That had not been part of her plan at all.

Had she really heard God? she wondered. Perhaps it wasn't him. Perhaps she had misunderstood.

With every thought, she was coming closer to the McDonald's.

At the last moment she made her choice — to fast.

If she was going to make a mistake, she was going to make it on the side of obedience rather than disobedience, she decided.

So she passed the McDonald's by and went home.

And prayed.

But in between the prayers, she thought about cheeseburgers and how hungry she was.

This can't be doing any good, she told God. All she could think about was how hungry she was.



When her children came home from school — and began to eat their after-school snack — she went outside to sweep the patio so she wouldn't have to watch. She was still complaining — and praying.

The telephone rang.

It was the teacher.

The teacher said she had been going through the checks and had seen from the names printed on my friend's check — drawn on a joint checking account — that she was a minister's wife.

And she wanted to know if she could talk to her about the Lord!

Would the teacher have called if my friend had eaten the cheeseburger?

We'll never know. But my friend is glad she did not refuse to do what she felt God was telling her to do.

God always blesses our obedience in measures far beyond what we have done, she said. And obedience in small things leads to bigger opportunities. Sometimes, of course, the results are not as clear and as quick as that. But obedience is given for love's sake, not for what we get out of it.

And one real benefit is that we learn obedience by doing it.

We also learn trust as we recognize the blessings that follow.

Trust is vital, for there is always a risk factor in obedience.

God seldom, if ever, gives the whole scenario to us at the beginning. He gives just one part of it — one

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piece of the jigsaw puzzle, as it were. And when we do the right thing with that piece, he gives us another.

But in the beginning, we can't be sure, absolutely certain, of anything but him. We cannot know what will be involved, what the cost may be, what we might be asked to do or say or where we might be required to go.

We can only be sure that it will bring joy — not necessarily happiness, but definitely joy.

But what if you don't think God ever speaks to you? How can you hear God's orders?

My friend says you can try saying: "God, speak to me — and I will do what you say."

Sure, it's risky. But joy is worth the risk.



Sometimes I Want A Fairy Godmother

Fairy godmothers.

I'd love to have one.

They get you to the ball.

They do it at little or no cost to you.



And they aren't any bother the rest of the time.

God is not like that.

He is apt to get you to Calvary instead of the ball.

It will cost you everything you have to get you there.

And he expects you to do things his way the rest of the time.

I sometimes wonder if it wouldn't be better to forget about God and look for a fairy godmother instead.

Oh, I know the fairy godmother made Cinderella suffer a little before she showed up. Sitting in the ashes can't have been much fun.

But once she appeared, why, everything was just peachy keen.

Cinderella got to the ball — a little late perhaps.

But I'm told that just makes for a better entrance.

And all she had to do was round up a few mice and a pumpkin.

And she got to dance with the prince.

True, she did have to leave the ball before she wanted to.

Right in the middle of another dance with the prince, in fact.

Also, she may have thought for a time that that moment of happiness was all she was going to get.

But then, she had a glass slipper to give her hope.

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And in the end, the fairy godmother came through for her.

After just a little more uncertainty, a little yearning and wondering — well, young love won out.

Cinderella and her prince were reunited.

And they lived happily ever after.

The story says so.

Of course, the Bible says God's story turns out happily, too.

And God's "ever after" lasts a whole lot longer than the fairy godmother's.

But ...

Somehow a fairy godmother still seems attractive.

I suspect it's because the fairy godmother gives you what you want.

You are the important person — the heroine of the story.

And she is your very unusual, magical servant.

God, on the other hand, gives you what he wants you to have — which is often quite different from what you thought you wanted.

He turns out to be the important person.

And he expects you not only to serve him, but everybody else besides.

Sure, sure. I understand that once you really get to know God, you want to serve him and your neighbor.

Barbara White



And I understand that in the end you are something better than the heroine of a fairy tale.

You become a child of God.

Loved by him with a love greater than the prince's for Cinderella.

His love takes us out of more than ashes, too. He takes us out of a lot worse than that.

And he makes us more like Christ.

A fairy godmother can't accomplish that.

I don't really want a fairy godmother.

Which is a good thing, because fairy godmothers don't exist.

And God does.

It's just that sometimes I forget what life is all about and think God is supposed to be doing what I want instead of the other way, around.

If I had written the story, I probably would have made God more like a fairy godmother.

But the story is not a fairy tale.

And God is "I AM."

He is the way he is, not the way I wish he were.

And he is not just in the story. He's the author.

Also, while the fairy tale is over, his story is still ongoing.

John closes his gospel with these words: "Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written." (John 21:25)

Jesus is still doing things.

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And among the books that could be written about what he is doing today are your story and mine.

They are real stories, too — not fairy tales.



I'm A Survivor

The American Cancer Society considers me a survivor. They're right — perhaps in more ways than they know.

The society has put my name on a list of people who have had cancer and are still around to tell about it. Four years ago — almost 4 and a half — I had surgery for colon cancer and I'm doing fine right now, thank you.

April is cancer awareness month. Darleen Unger, local crusade chairman, called me a couple of weeks ago to talk about getting a plug for the month in my column. She told me Mayor Tommy Hazouri is signing a proclamation Tuesday about cancer awareness and that his wife, Carol, a cancer survivor, is honorary chairman for Celebration of Life, honoring cancer survivors.

By the end of our conversation, my name had been added to that list.

I find it somewhat funny — obviously a perverse sense of humor — to be listed as a survivor by the



American Cancer Society. Before I knew they had such a list, I already knew I was a survivor. Before my operation even began, I knew that whether I lived or died, I belonged to the Lord.

It is nice to be here still. I have known a lot of joy I would have missed if I had died at that time.

I wouldn't even have known my granddaughter, who was born a couple of weeks after my operation. And I wouldn't have watched my grandson grow from little boy to big boy.

I wouldn't have learned to love a new church family and grown with them through shared struggles.

I would have missed some pains, of course — the deaths of some people who were dear to me, the dissolutions of a couple of marriages, the loss of a few friends to moves and changes.

I would have missed finding out at a much deeper level that I have sisters and brothers in Christ scattered throughout the religious community, not just within my denomination. That came after I became the religion writer, producing more than this column for the religion section, all of which came after my surgery.

Of course, I haven't really missed being with my Lord. We have been together here, although not in the way I expect us to be later.

Actually, I guess I have no complaints — no real ones that is. Just no serious ones.

Oh, I wish there were no pain, no problems, no misery, no want, no one hungry, no one hurting, no one without the love of God in his heart.

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I wish all that. And I'm learning to enjoy doing what I can, personally, about little bits of it. I'm learning to turn it all over to the Lord and then to follow his instructions.

Most of all, I guess, I'm learning to pray about it a lot.

The American Cancer Society must have known that. They sent me a prayer, just in case I ran out of something to say on my own.

It's a prayer for the conquest of cancer and it goes like this:

Our Lord, in whose hands are the issues of life and death, we thank thee that thou art a God of love.

From the gift of our lives to the moment we return to thee, we are in thy loving care. We turn to thee in times of joy and times of pain.

We are concerned for those in pain, those who suffer from cancer, and for those who care for them.

Bless, we pray, those who minister to the victims of this dread disease. Give them skill and knowledge that cures may be wrought.

Heal, we pray, those who suffer that their pain may be replaced by joy.

Give, we pray, a discovery of the cure for cancer and knowledge of how to prevent it

Increase, we pray, thy ministry of healing through all who labor in research and the healing professions...

That one day we may rejoice in a world free from the scourge of cancer in which all may live out

Barbara White

their span of life in useful service to thee and thy children.

To thee we shall give the praise!

Amen.

I say, Amen, to that, too.



Two Groups, Same Speech

I was asked to speak to two groups about my observations of the most recent United Methodist and Southern Baptist conventions, which I attended.

One request came from Methodists. The other from Baptists.

I told both groups pretty much the same thing, just putting the emphasis on different places.

I started off by citing the most obvious differences between the two conventions. Methodists have delegates, elected to represent numbers of members. Baptists have messengers who go to vote their own consciences, with no need to account for their votes to anyone.

Also the Methodists had 1,000 of those delegates and each one had to sit in the same seat at every session. The Baptists, on the other hand, had 30,000 messengers and they could sit anywhere they

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wanted to — if somebody else wasn't already sitting there.

That brought a laugh both times. Each group thought their way was best and enjoyed a gentle chuckle at the other's oddities.

But after that opening gambit, I wasn't sure what to say. At the distance of a couple of months from the conventions, what stood out, unfortunately, was the squabbling. And I hated to spend more time promoting the squabbles.

So I tried to share with each group what I had found positive about their conventions.

I told the Baptists about the depth of commitment to evangelism I had felt among them and how impressed I was with the new missionaries who had stepped forward to profess their willingness to serve the Lord in this calling. I said I thought if they could keep their eyes on this aspect of their communal life, they could probably survive the present confusion.

I told the Methodists they had approved a good, strong theological statement. If they actually studied it at the congregational level, I thought it could add depth to their relationships with Jesus.

I told both groups that Methodists, being methodical, do more homework for their conventions. They need to, of course. They take more binding actions.

Baptists, on the other hand, do not allow anyone to make their decisions for them. So they argue everything out right there in public, and they do it every year instead of every four years.



I reminded the Methodists that they must not think too harshly about the Baptists because they preached such hot sermons at each other. Baptist *get* hot when they preach. I also suggested they guard against losing their own heat.

And I told the Baptists they should remember the world is listening when they call each other names.

That was as close as I came to chiding each group gently for its shortcomings. And I tried to end on an upbeat note.

But afterward, I found myself burdened with a sense of heaviness.

I am not much enamored of any institutional church right now. Covering religion as news can be an occupational hazard for a believer. And it has seemed to me that every denomination is fighting about something these days — and not always about anything that matters.

And I wondered: Is the church really worse off today than in the past? Has it always been such a mix of a little bit good, a lot bad, and the rest indifferent?

Or does it just look that way to me right now because of other things I'm dealing with? And if it's been like this through the years, why does God continue to put up with it?

I wasn't really asking, I was just wondering, but he answered me anyway.

In my daily Bible reading, I came to the parable of the wheat and the tares, or weeds.

It goes like this: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while

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everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared. The owner's servants came to him and said, 'Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where did the weeds come from?'

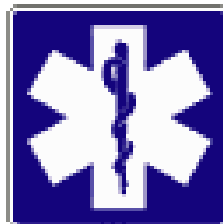
" 'An enemy did this,' he replied. The servants asked him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?' 'No,' he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned, then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.' "

God loves us too much to risk losing one of us by making early judgments.

And I must not try to do what he is not willing to do.

So I guess I'm stuck with a far from perfect church — everywhere.

That's only fair, I guess. The church is stuck with a far from perfect me.



Not A Sparrow Falls But...



God works in mysterious ways. Nobody who has paid the slightest attention to the history of his relationship with his creation could doubt that.

Recently I talked with a man who believes that he and his wife took part in one of God's healing miracles. William and Lucille Johnson believe God answered their prayers and healed their pet parakeet.

"Something like this can build your faith," Johnson said.

The couple took the bird to their veterinarian, Robert Fellows, at San Juan Animal Hospital.

"The bird had what appeared to be tumors all down its wing, a lot of tumors," Fellows said when I called to ask him about the incident.

Fellows said he told the couple he was not sure the bird would survive surgery on the tumors and that the operation was very expensive.

"I told them to think about it and bring the bird back if they wanted to try the operation," he said.

Instead they tried prayer.

Johnson explained, "I said to my wife, I'm not going to let them cut its little wing off. The Bible says if two agree on anything, it will be done. So we stood at the cage and prayed together three times."

They both prayed for the bird by themselves later, he said.

"The next day we lifted the bird's wings and her tumors were gone!" Johnson said in a firm, no-nonsense tone of voice.

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They did not take the bird back to the vet right away, but waited several weeks when its bill needed trimming.

Fellows confirmed that the tumors were gone.

"There wasn't a trace," he said. "And there had been a lot of them."

Tumors are common among parakeets, Fellows said. Their disappearance is not common.

"I told Mrs. Johnson I'd never seen anything like it. I don't know why it happened."

Johnson believes he knows. He believes God answered their prayers.

When I asked him what the healing meant to him, he said it showed Jesus does answer prayer.

"When I was a kid back in West Virginia, I had pneumonia and measles and they gave me up for dead," Johnson said. "But my mother sent up the creek to the preacher and he came and prayed for me and I got out of bed. And I haven't been sick a day since."

I asked him what he thought it meant when someone prayed for physical healing and was not healed. He did not offer a direct reply.

"God said, 'Ask and you shall receive.' And he told his disciples to lay hands of other and they would be healed," he said.

"I don't think I'm a disciple. But I do tell people about Jesus. And if you have enough faith — as much as a mustard seed — you can move mountains."

Was it a miracle? I don't know. But I do know the Johnson's think so.



I didn't tell Johnson that I was diagnosed nearly five years ago as having cancer. At that time, I asked for and received prayer for healing, but my tumor did not go away until the surgeon cut it out.

Did those who prayed for me lack faith? Did I?

Perhaps. But although I did not receive an instant healing, I did receive a wonderful sense of peace and the assurance of God's loving presence with me before and after the operation. And that was a miracle of another kind.

However, I am sure we are not to focus on miracles. We are to focus on the Lord. Whether or not we ask for miracles and whether or not they are granted in a form we can recognize must never become the thing we seek first.

While Johnson was citing those passages of Scripture about prayer, I was reminded of another, about worry. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said we should not worry.

"But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

I'm glad the bird is well, although, like Lazarus, it will still die. I'm glad both the Johnsons and I have been called by the Lord to seek Him first of all.





Keep a journal.

That's what the speaker at that conference I wrote about last week said we should do.

You were hoping for something different? Ah, but he had a suggestion for making keeping a journal different.

I've kept a journal before, writing down the best thoughts I could come up with, trying to distill the meaning of life into telling truths that would set me free.

And I've gotten discouraged, because my thoughts are not often wonderful, and I've grown bored with the effort and quit.

But as I listened to these speakers, I became convinced that if I am to listen to God, to have fellowship with him, I *need* more.

And more is available.

This teacher's idea was that we should write our conversations with God in our journals.

We should write down what we want to say to God, what we want to ask, and then write the thoughts that come into our heads.

They need to be written because we forget so easily. "The faintest ink is stronger than the strongest memory," he said.

The problem is, most Christians already are so sure we know what God will say that we don't really listen. And if we should hear something unexpected, we ignore it.

As another speaker pointed out, God spends a lot more time telling us he loves us than he does



telling us what to do. But we are so busy listening for "Do this" or "Don't do-that" that we don't hear his words of love.

Ask God what he thinks of you, he said. You may be surprised at his answer.

Writing really helps here. Somehow, the task of writing down our thoughts frees at least a piece of our minds to think freely. And as we try to keep up with our thoughts, they can shape themselves.

And remember, this is not some ethereal, theoretical conversation. This is a real conversation. And like real conversation, will have its moments.

Take for example my entry for Nov. 29, 1990:

What do I want to ask this morning? I know that you love me. I know that you love my children. I know that our lives are in your hands.

I also know that does not mean we will be given a trouble-free path to walk.

I guess what I would like is some assurance about this: Is there something I'm supposed to be doing that I'm not?

I have to admit, however, that I flinch when I ask that. I am sure you will give me things to do that will be hard and dangerous and maybe even painful.

Ah, but they won't really, if you just take them one step at a time.

First rest in me. Let go of "need" and remember what I have done for you already.

Trust is next. Work at trusting. When doubt arises, look at it for what it is and return to trust. Work at remembering.

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And rejoice in my might and power and in my love and compassion for you. My Son died for you, while you were yet a sinner. Will I not care for so precious a treasure?

And watch to see what I will do.

Did I hear God? I think I did. I might have come up with "rest" and "trust" on my own. I'm very familiar with passages of Scripture that tell us to do both.

But I don't believe I thought of "rejoice." I don't do a lot of rejoicing. I'm more into obedience and repentance and things like that. So I believe God told me to rejoice more, while resting and trusting.

And I believe he told me to watch, to be alert to see, what he will do in my life and the lives of those I pray for.

Did God speak those words to me because I'm special? Yes, but not because I'm more special than anyone else. I am just as special as all his children are.

Does he say something wonderful like that everyday? If he does, then I'm not hearing all of it yet. Sometimes I won't stop talking long enough to listen. But even a little speech from God is worth the effort. For ultimately, it is fellowship with God I want.



Time With God

God is either alive or he isn't. He is real or he isn't.



If he is real, if he is alive, then people ought to be able to experience him — and not just as goose bumps and feelings.

This was part of the message I heard at a conference last month.

The speaker said that encountering God takes waiting and listening — two skills not fully developed in many people today.

Waiting is like whiling away time with a friend, he explained.

Listening is almost a lost skill in America where Christians sing, read and study but find it hard to be still and listen.

But, he said, in the absence of an encounter with God, the divorce rate is the same inside the church as outside, and other aspects of the world are also as prevalent within as without.

I've heard talks like that before. They make me hungry for such an encounter, but leave me feeling inadequate and unsure of what to do next.

Not this time. This time, I got some practical "how to" information.

If we don't seek such encounters, our spirits run dry, the teacher said. "And when you stop burning oil, you start burning wick."

But if we learn how to wait and if we learn how to listen, we will have an encounter, because God has always been seeking us.

There are at least nine different words for prayer in the Bible and waiting is one of them.

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It requires three things: being comfortable in the presence of God, paying loving attention to God as person and father, and being willing to while away time with God.

"We're so sin-conscious that we can't be God-conscious," he said. "And if you're not comfortable in God's presence, you won't want to be there."

The solution is to accept the forgiveness for our sins made possible by the cross of Christ and then to focus on God and not ourselves. But how do we pay attention and while away time with God?

The teacher took a chair and sat in it, both feet on the floor. He opened his hands and laid them on his knees, palms up. And he closed his eyes and sat quite still for a very brief moment.

"I sit and wait because I *need* God," he said.

And the Lord waits for us to wait upon him, the teacher said, citing Isaiah 30:18: "Yet the Lord longs to be gracious to you; he rises to show you compassion. For the Lord is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for him!"

He said he sits because sitting seems to be best for waiting.

Different positions lend themselves to different activities, he said. Kneeling is best for humility and repentance, standing for making requests and walking for intercession.

Three things get in the way of encounters with God, he said — the absence of God's presence, a wandering mind and distractions.

God is always present everywhere, he said, but an encounter involves more than that. So he starts his



waiting period by remembering God's omnipresence — his presence everywhere — and by asking for his manifest presence, his presence right there, right then.

He deals with a wandering mind by using a Bible verse as a reminder. When his mind begins to wander, he recalls the verse and that usually drives the other thoughts away. If they persist, he writes them down on a piece of paper to be dealt with later.

It is possible to tune out distractions, he said. People who live near highways learn to turn out traffic noises. But it takes time.

Time is what I'm trying to give this exercise. My early efforts indicate I have a lot to learn about waiting and listening. But I will persevere. I believe it's worth the effort.



Faith In This War Zone

Somebody asked me the other day how I maintain my faith in the face of life's vicissitudes.

Actually, the person didn't say vicissitudes — I just like the way the word looks when I write it. I don't remember exactly how she asked her question, but I know what she meant.

She meant: How come my faith hasn't been shot down by all the troubles, ills, difficulties, dangers,

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hardships and problems of life over which I have no control?

It's my world view, I told her.

I explained that she sees the world as basically a nice place, inhabited by nice people to whom nothing bad is ever supposed to happen. And then she is surprised and disheartened when anything bad comes along.

I, on the other hand, see the world as a war zone — in a war that is not yet over.

Consequently, I am not surprised when bad things happen. I might not like them and I have been known to complain about them some. But I am not surprised.

After all, that's what a war zone is like.

Why, I asked in return, aren't we more surprised by all the wonderful things that happen?

Like the sun coming up when I'm already awake and can see it. Or a breeze blowing on me when I'm particularly hot and sweaty. Or meeting people I find interesting and discovering that they find me interesting, too.

Or lots and lots of other things. Things I used to take for granted — if I thought of them at all.

When I first mentioned my world view, the person I was talking to grimaced. She must have felt that a world view as dismal sounding as mine would surely lead to depression.

And if you only see the casualties and the fighting, it can. I've known enough of depression to know how real it can be.



But since I began to understand all of my world view, things can only get me down for a time. Then they begin to have the opposite effect

As I think about God's gift of himself to me in the middle of this war — a not-yet-completed battle designed to place all Jesus' enemies under his feet. Well, when I think about that, I find myself becoming happier.

Instead of blaming God for every little thing that goes wrong in my day, I find myself thanking him for the goodness and blessings he has given me in it.

Instead of being crushed by the big things that hurt and hurt again, I remember that I know the source of joy today and that joy is forever.

Such blessings aren't as rare pearls in fields or coins in dusty houses, either. They are all around out there.

Because God is there.

And not just out there. In here.

Where I am, he is.

It's enough to make you able to laugh at the pain.

I'm reading a little book called *He Who Laughs Lasts and Lasts and Lasts*. The author, Roy Hicks, believes that happiness, joy and laughter can be present in all Christians in all circumstances.

Hicks recommends trying to learn to laugh in the middle of trials and tribulations. It shrinks their ability to do you harm, he says.

Sometimes I can do that, but not often enough.

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I still forget at times that the mess I'm in isn't going to last forever. I concentrate on the suffering and begin to doubt God.

But I am learning to delight in the blessing of God's presence with me and of his gifts of love to me.

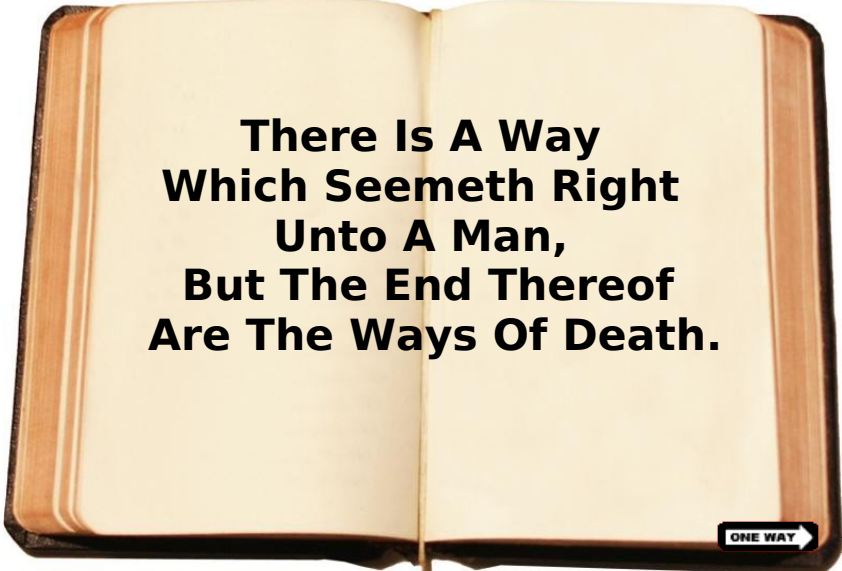
Especially in the middle of a world marked by strife and confusions, to say nothing of violence and death, these gifts bring joy.

I feel pretty good about having recognized my world view. Do you know yours?

I recommend figuring it out. Once you know how you view the world, you can understand better why so many things hit you the way they do.

Of course, it takes work in the beginning to remember this world view. We are so conditioned to the other approach — the "everything ought always to be wonderful here and now so why is anything bad happening" — approach.

But the work is well worth the effort.



**There Is A Way
Which Seemeth Right
Unto A Man,
But The End Thereof
Are The Ways Of Death.**



No Voice, No Light From Heaven

Exciting testimonies are, well, exciting.

Like the stories of people who encountered Christ while still using drugs or being prostitutes or bank robbers and had their whole lives changed in an instant.

But most of us lead lives that are far less dramatic.

And sometimes we may feel like second-class Christians because we did not have the kind of Road to Damascus experience Paul had.

Paul, who was still known as Saul of Tarsus at that time, met Jesus when he was on his way to Damascus to look for Christians to persecute.

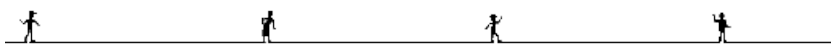
The story, in Acts 9, goes that "suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice".

Jesus not only called Saul by name, he identified himself by name, too. He told Saul specifically what to do — go into the city and wait.

The encounter left Saul unable to see. Then after three days, during which Saul ate and drank nothing, Jesus sent Ananias to him to lay hands on him to restore his sight.

"Immediately something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and

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was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength."

You could hardly mistake that kind of encounter, could you?

The speaker at our most recent Christians in the Media luncheon told us that he had wanted one of those, a Road to Damascus experience.

Instead, he said, he took a detour to Damascus. He saw no bright lights and heard no voices.

But, although he calls himself a plain vanilla Christian, he is definitely following Jesus.

As a child, he had gone to church with his parents, but had never felt any need for God. He hadn't needed God to accomplish any of the successes he piled up: college, career, marriage, children, good jobs and then better jobs.

But somewhere between 30 and 35, he began to feel a God-shaped vacuum in his life. And he met some Christian businessmen — successful Christian businessmen — who seemed to be more "together" than he; was.

So he started attending a Bible study class and going to church. He even started reading the Bible his wife had given him as a birthday present — a present he had not really appreciated at the time.

He started to pray.

His four male friends — those successful Christian businessmen — and his wife were praying, too, he said.

And he waited for something to happen.

But nothing did.



Then one day, all alone in his church, he talked it over with God. To the best of his recollection, this is the prayer he said that day:

"Dear Lord, please let me know you in a personal way. I know that I'm an undeserving louse sometimes, but I want to try to be more like Jesus. I want to be a Christian.

"If it's OK with you, Lord, starting today I'm going to say I'm a Christian. I'll study your Word and try to live the life of a Christian, walking the walk.

"If somewhere along the way you decide to confirm your acceptance of me and of our relationship in some kind of Damascus Road Experience — that would be great, Lord.

But if you don't, won't you please let me sense that we do know each other before the end of [the year]. You're in complete control. I ask this in your Son's name."

As he said, no light, no voices. Just lots of testing. Only he handled the tests in a different way than he would have in the past.

He said he cannot point to an hour, a day or even a month in which it happened, but by the end of the year, he knew he was a Christian. A Christian husband, a Christian father, a Christian worker in the work place.

He said he tries to do what is right, tries to let Jesus direct his life, "especially my tongue, which gets me in trouble."

"God is in charge and I know it," he said.

Plain vanilla tastes pretty good, don't you think?

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He Answers On His Own Terms

The question is, does God answer prayer or not?

The answer is yes, he answers prayer — or not.

Once Jesus prayed all night before choosing 12 disciples — and he still chose one who betrayed him.

Also he prayed hard that he might not have to drink the cup placed before him — but he had to drink it anyway.

I find that very comforting.

Since everything Jesus did was perfect, prayer must not be an exact science.

When I pray before I make a decision and something "goes wrong" with what I finally decide to do, it does not necessarily mean I blew it. It may be, as it was with Jesus' prayer and choice of disciples, that God had something more in mind than I knew about.

Jesus may have known when he chose Judas that he would eventually betray him.

But I don't have to give myself a hard time if it turns out that I did not understand everything I thought I understood about my prayer.

It may be that I did just what God intended me to do— and the results only look like disaster. They may really be part of the journey to new life.



I know that, but still find it hard to remember.

Especially in troubled times I find that I want to pray exactly the right prayer so I can be assured that God will answer it just the way I want.

No surprises, please, God.

But I am not given that assurance.

God always leaves himself an escape hatch where my expectations are concerned.

That's what teacher/author Bob Mumford calls the "2 percent doctrine."

Ninety-eight percent of the time, God will do exactly what you expect from your reading of Scripture, he said.

But 2 percent of the time he will do whatever he wants to.

And make no apologies about it, either.

For example, Mumford said, God told Hosea to marry a harlot. But that does not mean he expects all men to follow Hosea's example.

It's when we take the exception and make a rule out of it that we run into trouble.

But that's what I tend to do. I want three steps I can follow and make it work — whatever it is.

But especially prayer.

However, I am learning that I can't box God in — even with his own words.

He retains the right to be sovereign, to do what he wants, when he wants and the way he wants to do it.

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Prayer would be a real gamble if it were not for the one thing I can count on: whatever God will do will glorify his name. It will produce eventual good even if I do not live to see it.

That may not seem much like consolation at the moment, but it really is.

Anyway, it is better to pray amiss than not to pray at all.

God, can correct me if I'm praying the wrong way. He can open my eyes to see things differently as I grapple with an issue in prayer. He can lead my thoughts into new paths and expand my understanding.

He can't use me at all if I'm not trying to pray according to his will.

So right now, I'm praying about the war and I'm trusting God to respond — as he chooses.

I'm asking for victory for our side, swift, decisive victory. And I'm asking for his protection for those engaged in the fighting and for those who stand on the sidelines in danger's way.

I'm asking for wisdom for leaders — ours and theirs — and for compassion and mercy for all of us. We need it so we can give it to each other.

I'm asking God to show us all how to follow him through this dark, tense time, to trust him and to know his will and do it.

I'm asking for peace to reign, peace that is more than the lack of war.

Basically, I'm asking for God to give us new hearts and renewed minds and to usher in his kingdom.



Yes, Jesus Loves Me

It has been said that a children's song holds the very best statement of the good news.

You know it. It goes like this: "Jesus loves me. This I know, for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to him belong. They are weak but he is strong."

I often overlook the depth of meaning in that simple statement — because it is so simple.

My mind says nothing that simple can really be important. To be significant, it has to be much more complex, more sophisticated.

But my mind is wrong. All that complexity, that sophistication, just gets in the way of what really matters.

Recently the Lord removed another thin film from my eyes and let me see again that bedrock truth of my life.

He loves me.

Why do I have such a hard time remembering that? Perhaps because I have stored it mostly in my mind and only a little bit in my heart.

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Right now, however, that is not true. Today I know it on a different level.

Not because I suddenly discovered this truth. It was revealed to me.

I can't even tell you how. The man whose sight Jesus restored said he didn't know how it happened. He just knew that before he was blind and now he could see. Well, now I know.

But that's normal. I didn't discover God in the first place. I only "found" him because he revealed himself to me.

And this is still true. I don't discover things about him now. He continues to reveal himself to me. If he does not show me his truth, I will never know it.

But he did and now I know.

He loves me.

And because he does, he invites me into a relationship with him.

Me. Undeserving, unworthy me.

I guess if you feel you're something special just as you are, that won't be such great news. But I have never thought about myself that way.

Yet who I am is good enough for God.

Who I am is far from who I wish I were, and far from who God will see that I become. But it's good enough for God right now.

And knowing this, I see everything else differently. Everything else in life has a new appearance.

Even the scary things.



So much talk goes on about how to do this or that and about what is right and what is wrong and about who knows and who doesn't.

And that's *all* very interesting, but it doesn't matter.

Not really.

Not in the dark of the night when you are alone — except for God.

Then the only thing that matters is that he loves you.

And in the wonder of that truth, I begin to understand the cross.

For it is by way of the cross that I am able to come into God's presence. That's what God did so I could know his love.

Scripture says it over and over:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son. that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16)

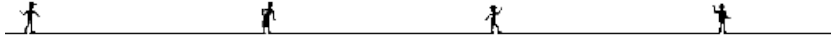
"How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!" (1 John 4:9)

"But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions." (Ephesians 2:4,5)

"This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers." (1 John 3:16)

While I remember this — and, O Lord, don't let me forget again — everything else in my life will be

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shaped by this truth: what I say, where I go, what I do.
All will be the fruit of this knowledge.

For God did not reveal this truth to me just so I could feel good.

And that's fine, too. God does not love me any the less just because he wants me to go into the world. I do not leave his presence when I go. He goes with me.



Forgiving

If being a Christian is following Jesus, then living out forgiveness — giving and receiving it — is one of the primary requirements.

Estrangement is an integral part of life. I believe everyone experiences it. And forgiveness given and accepted is the way around the barriers.

That's what this season is all about. Jesus' journey to the cross is the way of forgiveness, of restoration. His prayer from the cross is the model for those who want to follow him.

Forgiveness is not a mental activity. It is not an intellectual event. It is part of daily life. It is often a death.

It is intended to lead to a new relationship between the forgiver and the forgiven.

This new relationship is what we have as tangible evidence of the truth that God forgives.



Without this evidence, they may doubt that God forgives, too.

It is true that forgiveness involves risk. You might get hurt — again. You might cause hurt — again.

In fact, you probably will, even though it may not be the same hurt.

Forgiveness is a spiritual truth — with a definite earthly side. And while the spiritual reality of forgiveness and restoration is instantaneous, the human reality frequently takes longer.

God forgives and forgets, really forgets, every time we repent. His forgiveness, bought at the cost of Jesus' death on the cross, is complete and waiting for us the moment we turn around to receive it — and every time we turn.

Our forgiveness is not so complete or so quick. We say we forgive and we mean to live in the restored relationship, but we frequently find that forgetting takes both time and effort.

Not always, of course. Sometimes it happens in the wink of an eye.

Corrie Ten Boom, in talking about her captivity in a World War II concentration camp, said she was able later to forgive a guard from that camp the instant he asked for forgiveness.

God, she said, poured out his forgiveness for the man through her. She had asked God for that gift and he answered her prayer.

In her heart of hearts, she said she knew she must forgive this man who hurt both her and her beloved sister, who died in the camp.

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Ms. Ten Boom knew it, she could understand intellectually the need to forgive, but she could not find the strength within herself to do it. So she asked God to do what she could not.

God is in the business of doing what we can't, and he answered her prayer.

She said that as she told the man that she did, indeed, forgive him, she found genuine forgiveness for him alive within her.

She was able — right that minute — to care about him as a person loved by the Lord she loved.

It doesn't always seem to happen that way with me.

Perhaps if I walked as close to the Lord as Corrie Ten Boom walked, and if I asked for what she asked for, I might experience the gift of a new heart more often.

But I have to deal with myself where I am, not where I ought to be.

Thank goodness, that's what God does.

He just doesn't leave me — or you — where he finds us.

So for most of us, rebuilding a broken relationship is a process that follows forgiveness, but not necessarily in an instant.

We need to guard against the tendency to set today's circumstances in concrete and refuse to believe change is possible.

For the goal of the process is a real change of heart and the establishment of a genuine relationship.



We find it hard to trust other people's actions because we cannot control our own. We find it hard to trust their motives because we know ours are so far from pure.

But forgiveness and restoration really are possible.

God can do what we can't. And we can be changed.

You will note, however, that I never said it wouldn't hurt.



More On Forgiveness

A reader asked me last week to say something about forgiveness.

That's what I was trying to do in last week's column, I told her.

But, she said, you didn't say anything about the area I want covered.

If somebody who says they have forgiven won't talk to you, have they really forgiven you? she asked.

It doesn't *feel* like forgiveness, she said. As the person being ignored, it feels like unforgiveness.

According to this reader, the injured party insists that all is forgiven. But the injured party still won't have anything to do with her.

And, she said, if you are the one who caused the pain in the first place, you can't really force yourself on

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the other person. You just make things worse if you do that.

You can't keep apologizing again and again for something the other person insists is already forgiven.

And you definitely can't keep apologizing if you can't even get the other person to talk to you to acknowledge your presence.

Does it sound like forgiveness to you?

But, hey. How about the way the other person sees it? The other person has said she forgives. She's trying, isn't she? But the area involved is still sore. Should we really expect her to be able to reach out and embrace the one who hurt her?

God does, of course. He reaches right out immediately, while the pain of our sin is still fresh and strong, and he receives us in his loving embrace.

But that's God, that's not people. Surely he doesn't expect us to do what he does.

Or does he?

Maybe the question is, can something really be forgiveness if its fruit is not reconciliation?

Isn't getting us back together what forgiveness is all about?

How would we feel if God "forgave" us our sins this same way? What if he claimed he had forgiven us, but he still didn't want to spend any time with us, or even talk to us? Would we rejoice over a forgiveness like that?

No more than my reader rejoices over the forgiveness she has been allotted.



I can really empathize with my reader. I've been in the same position. I hurt someone, and for quite a while she would not let me anywhere near her.

And I felt bound by her unforgiveness. Truly, I was bound by it. I was constrained in my relationship with her and burdened with sorrow.

This binding process was one of the first things Jesus talked to the disciples about after his resurrection. John 20:22-23 says, "And he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.' "

This is true not just for the apostles, but for all of us.

If our forgiveness does not lead to restoration of relationship, it has left chains behind that bind both the one who caused the hurt and the one who was hurt.

And, as in the case of God and us, the injured party is the only one who can break the bonds. Just as we could never be restored to relationship with God if he were not willing to give us his forgiveness, we cannot regain a relationship with those we have hurt unless they make the first move.

When God speaks, his words are always complete and true. When God speaks forgiveness, then freedom and reconciliation happen instantly.

Not so when we speak. Our hearts are not that pure. We can say we have forgiven, and not have forgiven at all. Or, perhaps, only have made a start.

Forgiveness is complete only when it comes from the heart. And I believe that is only possible when we

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allow God to show us the depth of our own need for forgiveness, not only from him but from our brothers and sisters as well.

We have not loved God with our whole heart and we have not loved our neighbor as ourselves.

And true repentance bears the seed that produces the fruit of reconciliation.

If we don't have that kind of knowledge of our own sins — a clear enough knowledge to make us able to see how shallow that other person's hurt of us really was — then we need to ask for it. It is a prayer I believe God delights to answer.

In the meantime, all my reader can do is pray for the one who will not be reconciled to her — and for God to work in both their lives.



Razor Blades



I hate to tell you how long it has taken me to see something quite obvious. I like to think of myself as sharper than that.

But truth is truth and it has taken me months — perhaps years — to arrive at something I could have seen long ago: God does not merely want to take from us those things that can harm us.

He wants to replace what he has taken with something wonderful.

But in the beginning, the process is something like trying to take a razor blade away from a baby.

Like the baby, we have to be talked into releasing the blade — you can imagine the consequences otherwise — because we don't want to let go. *The* blade looks better to us than some promised toy that we can't see or don't understand or generally don't think we will like.

That is the way it was explained to me by Peter Lord, pastor of a Baptist church somewhere in Florida.

Lord was one of the teachers at a conference I attended last fall in North Carolina.

He gave a teaching on trading with God.

The title of the talk was:

**If You Don't Know Your Furniture,
Know Your Furniture Dealer.**

Think about it. You'll get it.

Anyway, he said that God frequently asks us to give him something so he can give us something better, and we say, "No, thanks just the same. I'll keep what I have because it looks better right now than what you are offering."

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Most of us don't say that, of course. What we really say is, "You can't possibly mean I have to give up ——— [you fill it in]! I need it! It is part of me! I can't live without it!"

We frequently add, under our breath at least, "Besides, you're wrong. It won't hurt me at all."

The question is, Peter Lord said, do we trust God when he tells that we will be better off afterward than we are before we trade with him?

At the end of the teaching he had us close our eyes and ask God if there was a trade he wanted to make with us. I did. It seemed to me I was being asked to give up my fears of tomorrow in exchange for God's blessings for today.

And I cried.

I have so many fears of tomorrow, some reasonable and some probably quite unreasonable. The mere thought of not having them any more seemed a blessed state I could not quite imagine.

But I told God I would gladly trade with him, that it was the desire of my heart to make that trade. For a time, everything was fine. I dealt with the needs of today and did not think about tomorrow. I thanked the Lord for his loving kindnesses and rejoiced in my moment by moment walk with Him.

Then tomorrow intruded. And fear reappeared.

I told myself it wasn't really there. I reminded myself of the trade I had made with God. But fear grabbed on and would not let go. And I felt a little afraid, a little confused — and a lot guilty for feeling either.



I clutched the whole thing tightly. It bit into my fingers. Any tighter and it would have drawn blood.

Then one morning last week I talked with a friend who was having a problem keeping a promise she had made to God. She had promised to stop doing something she felt he wanted her to give up. But, she said, she kept slipping back and doing it anyway. And she felt like such a failure that it hardly seemed worth the effort to keep trying.

And I said, "If you really told God that you would give it up, then it's done. It's gone. It's accomplished. Because your part is to will and God's part is to accomplish.

"What you have left is simply the process of working it out now in your life. It may take having a friend to help. It may take asking for prayer. But what you're doing is working out what God has now put in your life."

And I heard my own advice. I had my answer.

I have given that fear to God. It is no longer my master. Its presence now gives me opportunities to practice trusting God.

For the goal is not merely that I stop being afraid. The goal is for me to learn to look forward to tomorrow, to await its coming with joy, to trust God in whatever comes my way.

The goal may even be for me to learn to relish the changes tomorrow brings.

Wait! Stop! Not that!

That's going too far. Surely God can't expect me to stop wanting things to stay the same.

Or can He.



Hearing God

Evangelist James Robison told a group of area pastors last week that some people say they can hear God better when they're out on the lake than they can when they're in church.

And everybody laughed.

They laughed again when he said that is sometimes true, although the laughter was somewhat rueful.

"I agree with you," Robison told the pastors. "They *should* be in church. But they just may hear God



better on the lake. There are so many things in church that get in the way."

Lately I have talked to quite a few people who have been having trouble with that portion of the body of Christ we most often mean when we say "church." They are having problems with the official, institutional entity or they are having trouble with that gathering of the people for worship, both of which we regularly call "church."

The institution does or says things that upsets them. The worship service doesn't please. And they can't hear God talking to them.

And they think, "Who needs this?"

And sometimes they walk away. They go looking for a purer institution — according to their understanding — and a more comfortable gathering of people, according to what pleases them.

But I'm not sure they can't hear because of what is going on around them or because of all the noise going on inside their heads.

Unfortunately, for some people the search becomes a serial journey, a constant testing of other people and places for a place and a people they fit. But they are disappointed time after time.

Partly that's because the institutions are so imperfect, because the gatherings of people are so uncomfortable.

I have heard them say that life is like that in a lot of places. They say they may have to put up with discomfort at work or even at home, but they don't see why they should put up with that much imperfection at church.

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Of course, there aren't any perfect institutions or gatherings of people. Some are just more imperfect and uncomfortable than others.

And I would be stepping out of line to tell anyone else what to do. But for myself, the still, small voice of the Lord has said some very important things to me in the middle of my own thoughts about such matters.

My Lord has talked with me about my priorities, about what I put first. He has talked about my ability to love others who are different, or my lack of ability. He has let me see how much I desire to shape things the way I want them, which is merely another way of saying my desire to be God.

I hope I am learning these lessons. I don't want to have to go through them again!

I am learning to evaluate my reactions in the light of these truths of God. Sometimes my evaluation changes. Sometimes it is made stronger.

I am learning, when that is true, to speak up about my perceptions of things. Through that process I have learned more about myself than I always wanted to know, which, while painful is usually helpful. I have also learned more about others, which can also be rewarding.

Most important of all to me right now, I am learning to hear the Lord in church even when church isn't what I wish it were. And that is a truly wonderful thing. Learning to hear God is *good* wherever it happens.

Sometimes, though not often, I do go to some equivalent of the lake and listen without all the distractions.



But I know I will go back. I understand that the Lord wants it that way. It's such a good place for reshaping me.



Manners

The headline above a Miss Manners column in the Times-Union this week caught my attention. It said: It is rude to try correcting another person's manners.

The item, when I read it, was about a woman who wanted to correct her friend's bad manners. It seems that when the two traveled together to France, the friend did not bother to try to figure out the menu. She just looked at what other people were eating. When she saw something she thought looked good, she asked what it was called and ordered the same thing.

Miss Manners agreed this was not very nice behavior. She acknowledged that most people do not really welcome strangers examining their meals and asking questions about them. But, she said, they usually are too polite to let their annoyance show.

"Unfortunately," she concluded. "You must also be too polite to correct this lady's manners."

Ah, I thought, just as some people use bad manners when they try to correct somebody else's rude behavior, so many of us are behaving in a very unloving manner to each other in trying to correct somebody else's lack of charity.

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We are so sure the other person is in error that we are using wrong methods in trying to change them.

We may well be right in our evaluation of their position. They probably *are* wrong. But isn't it equally a lack of love to try to change somebody by behaving as if we hate them?

It seems to me that all this summer long — and a good bit of the winter and spring before — I have watched Christians trying very hard — and with some heat and force — to correct the way their friends — no, their brothers and sisters — behaved.

I have heard brothers calling each other names. I have heard them speak with persuasive force of the dangers of the others' wrong, unloving path.

And one sees the unloving path as rigid conservatism and the other sees it as loose liberalism. One sees it as having too rigid a standard; the other sees it as having no standard at all. One says it leads to the rejection of those who differ in understanding; others say it leads to the equal acceptance of all understandings.

And each one claims to be acting out of love. They say, I love you too much to leave you in error. I love you so much I will force you to walk my way.

But it hasn't produced very good fruit.

In Miss Manners' eyes, you are polite when you allow someone else to exercise whatever kind of manners they have, without changing your own polite acceptance of them.

But while this works in the field of manners, does it work in the field of godly love? Do I love you if I allow you to love in what I consider to be not an



inappropriate, but a detrimental, way — a way that could lead to your everlasting ruin?

In God's eyes, are we loving if we lack charity. when we speak his truth?

And practically speaking, have you ever known anyone whose mind was really changed by force? Or anyone who learned to love by being abused?

There is such a thing as good manners. And politeness may be taught, but it is better caught. You know immediately when you have been treated politely. You recognize your own bad manners when you have been treated well.

And there is such a thing as Christian love. You know it when you receive it. But I cannot show you perfect love of my own. I can only show you the love of Christ in me.

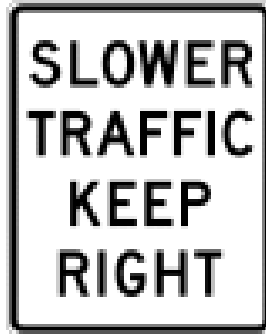
It is through our seeing the love of Christ in another's behavior that the Holy Spirit will begin to show us the lack of love in our own.

Matters of faith are more important than manners. Eternity may be at stake.

But many of us act as if God will lose the battle if we don't wrestle each other to the ground and force compliance with the truth as we have been given it.

I wonder whether eternity wouldn't be better served if we remembered first to wrestle with God to find the truth of our own hearts.

I wonder if when we tried to live out the truth he shows us in our lives, it wouldn't produce better fruit if we could give each other at least the same courtesy we would give a stranger.



Church Stuff

The two-part series I wrote recently — about what some people are doing to try to redirect their denominations — was a trial and a blessing to me.

The series examined the presence of conservative groups in three mainline Protestant denominations and their efforts to push or pull those denominations away from what they see as their current liberal bent.

In the process of gathering information for the series, I interviewed some of the national leaders of several such groups in three of the mainline Protestant denominations, the Presbyterian Church (USA), the United Methodist Church and the Episcopal Church.

I also interviewed leaders for these denominations at the local level.

While doing so, I had to come to terms with some of my own feelings and frustrations with my denomination and the current struggles within it.

My enthusiasm for the institutional church has not been enormously high lately.

In fact, sometimes it has dragged the ground. And it was not pleasant to find out more than I already



knew about the differences within the institutions involved in the series and the difficulties facing them.

But at the same time, I received a lift from some of the things I heard — especially the news that at least some of the people on each side are listening to some of the folks on the other side.

I had begun to wonder if anybody was listening to anyone who wasn't saying what he already thought. People can talk to each other forever and get nowhere if no one is listening.

Also, I was impressed with the sincerity of those I talked to. I know sincerity is not necessarily a wonderful thing. It is, of course, possible to hold destructive ideas in a sincere way.

But sincere people are easier to deal with than hypocrites. At least you know where they stand. If you think everyone on the other side is a hypocrite, there is no point to talking or listening.

But all that aside, what remains with me after the interviews and the comparing and evaluating is a sense of hope. Not merely because I found some folks out there who are dedicated to preserving the church — and found them on both sides — but because I gained a sense of God's hand holding and shaping, molding and remaking that which is his.

I have not *really* thought that God's church would disappear from the Earth.

I have only wondered now and then if it might not crumble into a pile of rubble from the grinding of conflicting ideologies — or explode from the force of the contention within.

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But if that happened, I have firmly believed that the church would rise again in another form. I have just wondered if I would survive the falling down or the blowing up and live to enjoy the new birth.

Somehow that no longer seems to matter.

I think what pleased me most was finding that there are people out there standing where they believe God has called them to stand.

Mind you, this is not a quarrel between social action and evangelism or between serving others and developing yourself. Most of the people I talked to were well aware that every church should be engaged in all of those activities.

But it is a question of how you look at both social action and evangelism, at service and spiritual development and on what authority you base them. It is the old but still current question of what is your authority. It is a real question, a vital one.

You might think I would be discouraged by the fact that some of these organizations have been plugging away at the issues for more than 20 years and that new ones are still being formed and so little seems to have been accomplished.

Oddly, it had the opposite effect. I am simply more aware of the long-term basis of God's own approach to the situation. He will work out his plan in his time. He will have a church. What remains to be seen is who will be his at the end.

In the meantime, it is worth trying to stand where God wants us to stand.

Bishop Robert Varley, assistant to Bishop Frank Cervený of the Episcopal Diocese of Florida, said



something to that point that I wasn't able to include in the series.

He said that the actions of the Episcopal Synod of America will "force us to make some decisions. What we've been doing is straddling the fence and all you get when you straddle a fence is a hernia."

Standing really is better.



In An Interfaith Group

A worship service I attended recently left me feeling odd.

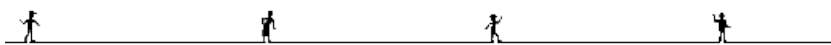
The members of an interfaith group had conducted an all-day meeting to get to know each other better — many of the members were new — and to hammer out possible goals and priorities.

I attended only the final portion of the meeting, but as far as I could tell, they did a good job of sticking to their intentions. It seemed to me that almost everybody had contributed and that the group had reached a pretty successful level of communication and cooperation by the end of the day.

They certainly produced enough lists.

The members had been divided into small groups and each group addressed the same set of questions and wrote a summary of their responses. Their findings revealed a striking similarity of thought. They agreed that they wanted to work together to

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 make things better in some specific areas of community need.

But one event — the one with which they ended the day — left me feeling strange. It has taken some time to identify the cause of my discomfort.

They had an interfaith worship service.

Careful attention had been paid to the need to recognize all of the faiths represented now in the council. Readings were taken from everybody's holy book. In fact, they had a couple of readings from religions not yet represented.

The prayers were carefully crafted to avoid emphasis on any one faith. And all references to God were left quite vague — vague enough to include the object of everyone's worship.

That actually was what caused my discomfort. I could not recognize who was being worshiped.

I told myself I was just being difficult. After all, since not everyone in the interfaith group worshiped the same God, how else could the leaders make it possible for them to worship together?

Their allegiances to different faiths did not matter when they were learning about each other. Neither would it matter when they work together for a purpose they all agreed upon. Those things can be done quite well by people who do not have faith in exactly the same being, set of values, or whatever they have faith in.

But I discovered that the differences do matter — at least to me — when it comes time to worship.

At the time I didn't know why. I only knew I was uncomfortable.



Then, a little later, I attended another interfaith gathering, the "Just Say No" anti-drug prayer breakfast.

Prayers were led by two Christians — a Catholic and a Protestant — and a Jew. The prayers were definitely interfaith.

But while none of the men who led the prayers pushed his own particular faith, each was quite clear about whom he was praying to.

And I realized how different that is from trying to produce a hybrid god for all to worship.

I believe the planners of the earlier interfaith worship service were trying to create something that would not give offense to any of the different faith groups present at that meeting. They wanted to make it possible for them all to share a worship experience.

But I wonder if trying to create a unified, corporate interfaith worship isn't trying to make the "interfaith" umbrella cover something it is not equipped to cover.

I wonder if it wouldn't be more constructive to help people of different faiths learn they can worship side by side, at the same time, but with each person focusing on the One to whom he or she normally offers worship.

Christians, Jews, Moslems, Buddhists — peoples of many faiths — could come together in the same place and each could pray to the object of his or her veneration.

To me that would be better than trying to worship something that is essentially the least common denominator of all the faiths present.

Rejoicing Along The Way



Of course, I would *like* the others to join me in my worship of my God. I would not, however, expect them to.

But I have chosen to worship a particular God — and none other.

That's the way He has said He wants it.



Tired Of Churches

Last week I shared some of my frustration with the institutional church — all institutional churches.

I shared how tired I am of all the internal squabbling going on almost everywhere I look within the religious scene.



And I shared how God had reminded me that he will not risk losing any who are his just to keep the field free of weeds at this stage of his plan.

This week I must add to my recognition that, with all the church's faults, God is willing to put his treasure in this earthen vessel.

I heard a great story told by a minister at a conference last weekend. It was part of his personal story, part of his struggle to acknowledge the place of God in his life.

His story went something like this:

The young — that's a relative term, I know, but he's considerably younger than I — man was a "good ol' boy" and, as such, was not particularly interested in God.

But God was interested in him.

When he found God pressing on his heart, asking entrance, he held him off.

He could not let God into his life, he said, because he wasn't ready yet. He wasn't clean enough. His life was full of bad behavior.

But God insisted he wanted to love him anyway. And he wanted to love him right now, dirt and bad behavior and all.

He said he lashed out at God, "What's the matter? Ain't you got no standards?"

And God said, "No. I don't have any standards."

God will love anybody, the young minister said. He has no standards when it comes to love. We don't earn it by our perfection or even by our attempts to be good.

Rejoicing Along The Way



Good behavior may flow from our acceptance of God's love, but it does not earn it, he said.

He explained that Christianity is not the story of man's search for God. It is not the story of man's attempts to be good, to behave well. It is the story of God's attempts to get man to let him love him.

Some Christians find this very hard to believe, he said. They find it impossible to share it with others, who need so much to hear it.

"I look at the way people put dove bumper stickers on their cars," he said.

"Some people put the tag on with the dove ascending and some put them on with the dove descending, "But God always descends to us. We never climb up to him."

It's basic stuff. Nothing fancy.

But, oh, how good it was to hear it.

And to acknowledge it as truth.

So, the church, with all its warts, still manages sometimes to speak the truth, to proclaim the Good News.

And people's lives are still changed by this Gospel. The lame can be made to walk. The dumb to speak. The blind to see.

The prisoners can be set free. And all of us are prisoners.



More Church Stuff!

My recent criticism of organized religion brought some responses from readers.

A couple of people invited me to their churches, which they said were not of the kind I was so frustrated about.

I appreciate the invitations and will try to go see for myself. But although I am often filled with anxieties about churches, I am a member of one and I attend services regularly. And that is where I believe I am supposed to stay.

What I have to do, of course, is start praying and stop complaining.

A couple of other people complained about my complaining. They said they liked it better when I was encouraging.

I do, too.

Encouraging believers is something I like to do. So let me take this opportunity to say some encouraging words.

Rejoicing Along The Way



Trust, Trust. Trust.

Our God is able.

Of course, there is more to it than that. Our God is able, but he isn't willing until we are willing to let him do it his way.

Or, as it says in Scripture, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight" (Proverbs 3:5-6).

I learned how to sing that little passage once and it comes to mind often — especially when I fall to complaining.

Complaining is telling God he has made a mistake. It is saying you don't trust that he knows what he is doing and that he is making a mess bigger than he can fix.

Which is not true.

The truth may be that I don't like the situation as I find it. But who do you suppose knows what the situation should be, me or God?

Why do you suppose it is so hard for us to lean on the Lord instead of ourselves?

Speaking personally, I am not that great at solving life's problems. But I keep trying to do the best I can by myself. I keep forgetting how much better it is if I trust the Lord with the situation *before* all my own efforts have failed instead of afterward.

I found a reference to the dilemma of trust in and reliance on the Lord instead of ourselves in a release sent me last week by Baptist Press. They were reporting on a Sept. 18 sermon preached by the Rev.



Jerry Vines to the Southern Baptist Convention's executive committee in Nashville.

Vines, who is president of the SBC this year, as well as co-pastor of First Baptist Church of Jacksonville, urged the committee to make a "clear-cut, uncomplicated" decision about the denomination's relationship with the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs.

The issue has been a very sore subject at several recent conventions. All sorts of proposals have been put forward and then either tabled or taken back.

In fact, Vines himself had asked the convention not to deal with the issue at their meeting in Las Vegas in June.

But now he was suggesting that they get busy, get the facts and come to a conclusion.

And then, he said, they should trust the outcome of their decision to the Lord.

He didn't put it that way. What he said was, "Whatever the outcome, let the majority not gloat, the minority not gripe, and let us move on."

Do the best, you can, then trust God and keep going.

I like the sound of that.

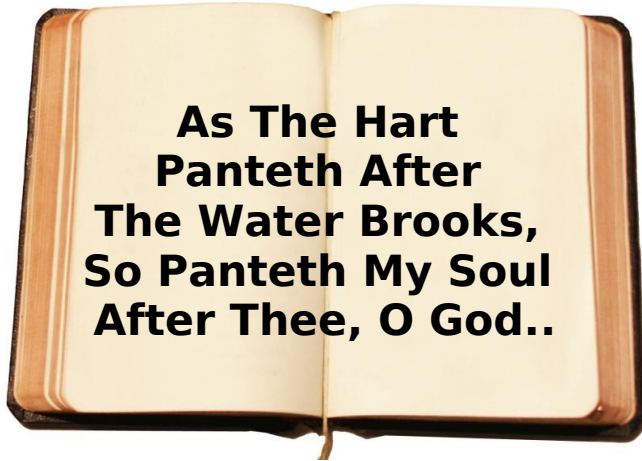
As my minister says, God isn't so much concerned with whether we make right decisions or wrong decisions. What counts is whether or not we make faithful decisions.

I have no idea whether Southern Baptists will manage to do as Vines suggested. Probably not, humankind being what it is.

Rejoicing Along The Way



But If they could, they would certainly be an example of hope and trust to rest of us — including me.



The God I Follow

A reader has asked me to identify the God I follow.

My first reaction to the question, which came in a letter, was to wonder why he wanted to know.

My second reaction was to wonder why it wasn't already clear. After all, the column this reader clipped and mailed in with his question spoke of the God of Job and of Daniel and his friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.



Then, with what may be just a touch of paranoia, I wondered what the questioner intended to do with whatever answer I gave. I really dislike it when people ask a question just to set you up for something they want to say that they are sure will stop you in your tracks.

But, finally, I was caught by the question itself.

Forget the questioner.

What about the question?

How would I answer it?

How would you? Why don't you stop a moment and decide what your own answer would be before you read on.

I thought about using — or at least paraphrasing — the historic creeds of Christendom, the Apostles or the Nicene, to define the God whom I attempt to follow. Something like: I follow a God who is Father, almighty, creator, maker of heaven and earth; who is Son, savior, redeemer and lord; and who is Holy Spirit, sustainer, comforter, teacher and guide.

I thought about saying: I follow the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, of Moses, David and Isaiah, and of Peter, John and Paul.

All of that was true, but somehow didn't seem to serve the purpose. The words sounded somehow both too familiar or too strange to carry the message I wanted them to carry.

What does it mean to me to say those things?

How do I really identify the God whom I follow?

Rejoicing Along The Way



Well, I believe in a God who has chosen to reveal himself. What I know about him is what I have understood of what he has spoken about himself.

And I believe he has spoken — and still speaks — of himself in two specific ways: through the Bible, interpreted by the Spirit, and through the person of Jesus Christ.

I believe he spoke of himself in his encounters with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David and Paul, as well as his encounters with Pharaoh, Saul, Ahab, Jezebel and Ananias and Saphira.

On top of that, I believe he spoke of himself through what Jesus said and through what Jesus did — especially through his death and resurrection.

And I believe the basic message of all this revelation is that God made me and loves me, that he made it possible for me to be at one with him, when I had lost that forever, and that he is changing me into the person he intended me to be and that he will keep me with him for ever.

That's the God I follow — imperfectly, it is true, but to the best of my understanding and ability.

God has revealed a lot about himself to mankind. I know only some of it now. I hope to know him better — and follow him more closely — with every passing day.

For I believe learning how to please him is more important than compiling facts about Him.



In The Middle Of The Night

I was awake in the middle of the night recently, thinking about the very real, very terrible things that happen to people.

And not just those people out there, but to you and me, to us.

I was thinking about the fact that belonging to God does not automatically protect us from them. We are not necessarily saved out of our troubles, but in them.

And, lying there in my darkened bedroom, I became aware of what it means to be conformed to the image of Christ.

It means trusting in the *goodness* of God when all hell is happening to you or to those you love — and at the same time, not hating those who are causing it.

Someone told me once that the goal of the Christian life is that we become like Jesus. Well, that's what I think that means.

And I know this is not a theory.

I know it will be tested.

And I tremble.

Rejoicing Along The Way



I don't think anyone learns to do this easily. Corrie ten Boom learned it from her sister, who died when the two were prisoners in a German concentration camp. Lawrence Jenco has learned it, too. He loved his fellow hostages in Lebanon, but he loved the guards who kept them captive, too.

I have not been in a concentration camp. I have not been a hostage. But I must learn it, too, in the pains and sorrows of my own life.

What makes it possible for a man or woman to do this? I believe it is the fruit of living with a two-fold truth: that I am a sinner and that God loves me anyway.

First I have to accept the truth that I am not different from or better than those others who cause hurt. I am like them, except possibly in degree. But I am capable of doing the same things or different, equally terrible things, under the right circumstances.

I must recognize myself as sinner. But these are "churchy" words. What they mean is that I have been given a glimpse of what I would look like if I really reflected the God in whose image I was made. They mean I have seen how my heart does look instead and know a killer lurks there. An adulterer, a thief, a liar and, most of all, an idolater lurks there.

But I also know that God loves me the way I am, although he desires to change me.

In fact, it is his intention that I become a lover, not a hater..

I didn't know when I gave my life to the Lord that it would mean something this hard. I didn't understand. I thought it would mean being safe and cozy with a Good Shepherd who would prepare a table



before me in the presence of my enemies — you know, like in the 23rd Psalm — and would never let anything bad happen to me.

Now I see that God's plan for my re-creation involves some pain and suffering for me.

Also this is a fallen world and a war zone in which terrible things happen. People get hurt and maimed and killed. But my enemy is not those other fellows. Their enemy is not me.

Scripture says, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." (Ephesians 6:12)

Jesus knew this. And knowing it, he did not act like he loved the soldiers who nailed him to the cross. He really did love them.

He still does when he loves me, when he loves you.

And when I am really close to him, close enough for his Spirit to fill my heart, I can do the same. Not because I *ought* to love, but simply because I do.

I confess that I can only manage this for little bits of time right now. And I tremble right now at the thought of more lessons.

But I know the Lord is not finished with his efforts to change me. And I don't really want him to stop and leave me where I am.

Do I really believe in your goodness, Lord?

I do!

Help me trust you more.



Two Years Since Father Died

It has been two years since my father died — I still miss him very much.

One day recently, I found myself missing him in an unexpected way.

Having lived away from home since I left for college, I have thought of myself as an independent person, capable of handling my own problems and not leaning on others.

That's not completely true, of course. In the middle of a time of decision-making recently, I wished Dad were here to make the decisions for me.

It isn't that I expected my father to solve my problems; he really didn't do much decision-making for me. But just by being there, somehow, he gave me a sense of security, gave me the courage to walk through whatever problem was facing me. I knew that if things got too bad, I could always call on him for help.

But no earthly father can be always with you, making the right decisions, giving you courage, peace and love.



Those of us who have had good fathers are so terribly fortunate. Our earthly fathers provide our first understanding of what our heavenly Father is like, so we fortunate ones have been blessed with good first impressions.

My father was not perfect, of course. But everything about him that was gentle and loving, that was accepting and giving, that was firm, directive and supportive — all those things and more were reflections of the Father.

Today courses are being offered on "fathering" (and evidence of the need for such learning is everywhere). But there is only One who can teach this truly.

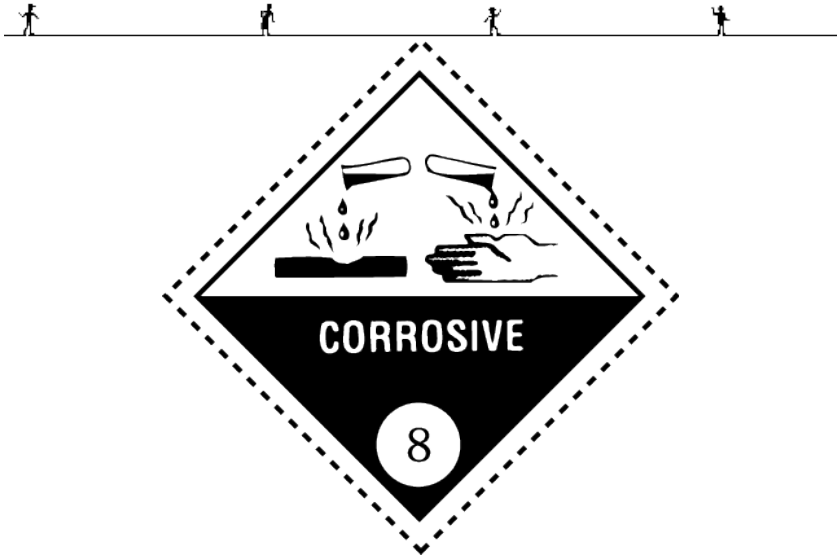
Jesus can teach us what the Father is like; seeing Jesus is the only way to see the Father clearly.

The loss of my earthly father is a human sorrow. It will have an end.

I miss his gentle laughter, his tender tears, his strength — bought at great cost, for he hated to hurt anyone.

But when he was here, I knew that his strength was only human, that the real strength we both needed came from Another.

That One is with me always.



Out Of The Heart

I had a good look last week at what comes naturally from my heart. It was a shock.

Jesus had something to say about men's hearts. He described quite vividly what man is really like in his natural state in the seventh chapter of Mark: "For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, foolishness."

That's the heart of everyone of the family of Adam. That is what man is really like — generic man, meaning men and women.

That is what Jesus said. We can accept his word or reject it, but that's what he said.

I thought I had accepted it as true. It turned out that I had only accepted it in theory. I had not really accepted the fact that all that rottenness could come from *my* heart, too.



After all, when we are born into the family of Jesus, our heart of stone is taken out and a heart of flesh put in.

I thought my heart was different.

I thought it had been changed, and I didn't have to worry about it any more.

It has been changed, but more change is needed. Last week the Lord let me see just how much more.

For some time, there had been an edge to my voice, and I was short-tempered and critical of everyone around me. Then I let that spirit of anger and criticism pour out all over someone — who told me just now she felt about it.

She did what I suggested that those friends who were hurting each other's feelings should do a couple weeks ago. And I didn't like it a bit.

I apologized — and meant it, I was more than sorry. I was horrified to realize how I had been acting.

I repented of the way I had behaved, asked forgiveness, and knew I was forgiven, only to find I was busy trying to justify myself: "After all, she . . ." and "Yes, but..."

Out of the heart comes what we really are. Out of my heart were coming all sorts of things I didn't want to see.

But I had to. The Lord intended me to see. He showed me.

The only way I can know what man is really like is by seeing what I am like. The only way I can stop judging others is to judge myself.

Rejoicing Along The Way



I could bear to do that because the Lord loves me. At the very moment he showed me what I am, he also held out to me the power to change.

When I was tempted by the desire for my own will, or became tired of the effort to choose to follow him, I walked after the flesh and produced what I found.

In Galatians Chapter 5, Paul told me to "walk by the Spirit and do not gratify the desires of the flesh."

When I walk in the Spirit, my heart reflects the character of Jesus.

If I am led by the Spirit, Paul said I will produce love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.



Cancer Surgery

The operation is over.

The doctor says the results were the best they could be.

I woke up early my second day out of the hospital and, as I lay in bed watching the dawn slowly brighten the sky, I thought of a game I used to play as a child.



It is called "Mother, may I?" and is played this way: One child who is "It" stands facing the other children who are lined up along a base line. "It" calls on each child in turn, telling him to take a certain number of a certain kind of step — like one giant step, or six baby steps, or three scissors steps.

If the player takes his steps without asking, "Mother, may I?" and receiving a "Yes you may" in reply, he must go all the way back to the starting line.

Before I entered the hospital to have a cancerous growth taken off my colon, the Lord had given me a great gift of peace to carry me through the days ahead. It had done so — with only a couple of tiny wobbles — and was still with me that early morning when I was wondering why God had been so very good to me and when I remembered the children's game.

It was two days before I understood what the memory of the game meant. The Lord had said to me, "Barbara, take one really big, giant step in trust."

And I had asked, "Oh, Lord, may I please grow in the knowledge of and trust in you?"

And He had replied, "Yes, my child, you may."

Many things contributed to how well everything went for me.

Many people, both friends and strangers, prayed for me.

I had a wonderful doctor and all sorts of good nursing care.

My doctor said I had made it easy on myself by coming in for an examination as soon as I noticed one of those warning signs the cancer society is always talking about.

Rejoicing Along The Way



When I thanked one of my nurses for taking such good care of me, she said she thought it was mostly a matter of my attitude.

"I give the same care to other patients and they don't always think it is so wonderful," she said with a smile.

Now I know that another reason it all went so well was because after I said, "May I?" I said, "Lord, show me how."

I didn't hear him offer an opportunity to take a giant step and then — as I often do — rush off to see how big a step I could possibly take all by myself.

Instead, I asked and then he told me to let go of everything I was holding on to, to relax and rest in his will for me. And I did.

I don't know exactly where I will be when the Lord sets me down on my own feet again. Closer to Him than before, but still somewhere between the starting line and "home."

Still on the way, with many steps to take, but refreshed and filled with thanksgiving and praise to the Lord.

To Him belongs the glory.

Now I know the question is not, "Why, Lord, were you so good to me?" any more than it would have been, "Why are You so hard on me?" if things had not gone well.

The Lord doesn't often answer "Why?" questions.

What I must ask instead is, "What, Lord, do you want me to do from this new standing place?"



Dry Spell

Lawns in Jacksonville do not take well to neglect this time of year.

Neither do people's spiritual lives.

Last week, as I was walking briskly around the track I have measured out through my neighborhood for my morning constitutional, I saw a yard full of dry, brown St. Augustine grass interspersed with barren patches and clumps of weeds.

And the thought struck me: Too much of my life looks just like that. lawn.

Since I tend to use the morning walk as a time to catch God up on the state of my life — just in case he hasn't been paying attention — I immediately quit talking to him. I didn't want him to notice.

Actually, of course, I talk to the Lord so he can bring things to my attention, not the other way around. But sometimes I forget that is true.

This time, I was simply amazed at my sudden clear-sightedness in being able to see what my life was like.

But even though I know that God is in charge of my life, I did not want him to think I was complaining about the barrenness of what he had provided for me.

Rejoicing Along The Way



"Don't complain!" I ordered myself. "You do too much of that! Dig deep and find the ability to accept what God has given. Remember all the blessings he has poured on you and don't complain!"

So I didn't complain. I concentrated on thanking God for his many blessings to me — all the while taking a certain numbness of spirit that had come with the revelation and stuffing it down out of sight.

A couple of days later I went to see a friend, who turned my view of the scene upside down.

I parked on my friend's front yard. Everybody does because she and her husband always have so many vehicles of various sorts in the driveway there is no other place to park. And I noticed that her grass was green and springy, even with cars parking on it.

I think I noticed because of my own revelation. But I was really surprised. The last time I had looked at her yard — really looked — it had looked pretty bad, too.

During the course of my visit, I shared my insight from my morning walk. If I had expected her sympathy for my plight, I did not get it. She saw my vision through a totally different lens.

She asked if I had noticed their grass, how green and lush it was. When I said I had, she explained what had happened.

"A couple of years ago we realized we had to do something," she said. "We dug up — rooted out — the worst of the weeds. And since then we've used a weed and feed fertilizer every time it was appropriate. We have watered some, of course, but we haven't made a production out of that."



The result is grass that can stand being parked on without wilting.

My friend said I hadn't created that mental image of my own life, God had. He had shown me what was happening to the life he had given me. And that was quite a different matter.

"I don't know what you need to root out and what you need to use for weed and feed fertilizer. But God does, and since he showed you the picture of your life as a dry and drying lawn, I believe he will also show you these other things if you ask him to," she said.

A quickening in my heart told me my friend was on the right track.

Life abundant does not look like what I saw. Life abundant looks like grass you can drive cars on without harming it. And while God alone causes life, and causes grass seed to grow and flourish, he expects a little cooperation.

So I am to have a part in that process.

Taking my friend's idea and going on from there, I see that my life does not need to be completely plowed under. There is still grass there, just grass in very poor condition. So while some things need to be dug out — by the roots — the rest just needs some food and some water in the right proportions.

As a non-gardener, I know the value of asking an expert for advice. I don't want to dig up grass while uprooting weeds. Nor do I want to burn the grass while trying to kill off the other stuff.

Rejoicing Along The Way



Not to worry. I already know the expert. And I just love the image of the Holy Spirit as the dispenser of weed and feed fertilizer!

How patient and gentle the Lord is in his leading. How like a foolish sheep I am.

But his promise is greater than my foolishness. And if I'm not mistaken, I already see tiny *green* blades poking up here and there.



Witness

I think many conservative Christians have a problem with trying to talk to the very people they most want to communicate with — those who have what they sincerely believe to be misunderstandings of very serious issues.

The root of the problem might lie in the very high esteem in which these conservatives hold the Bible. They believe that Scripture is the living word of God, that it can pierce the heart of the hearer and that it alone can impart truth. Therefore they tend to believe that the best possible thing to say is the actual words of Scripture.

And they quote it — verse after verse of it — in their efforts to win over the hearts and minds of those they believe have been led astray, or have never heard the saving word.



The trouble with this approach is that the minute people start quoting the Bible, many of those other folks just stop listening. They don't hear the quote and they don't hear any possible commentary, either.

That's a shame — but it's true.

I know it is very hard for a staunch conservative not to believe that, if those wrong-headed folk would just listen to what God had to say on the subject, they would have to understand the truth and be won over.

What they forget is that it takes spiritual ears to hear spiritual truths. And many of these people do not yet have ears to hear.

They can't understand Scripture the way the conservatives understands it. It really isn't just that they refuse to understand it that way, they really can't.

And all that quoting only turns them off. Frequently they simply stop listening to anything the conservative has to say.


Jesus had the same problem, trying to communicate with people who couldn't hear. He solved it in a different way, however.

Oh, not that he didn't quote Scriptures — he did. But what he did more often than he quoted Scriptures was to tell stories. And through the telling of stories, he slipped in the meaning of the quotations.

Until a person's spiritual ears are opened, stories are the very best method of communication. Everyone can understand some level of a story.

Even after you get spiritual ears, stories are a wonderful way of communicating truth, because through a story a truth can speak to many people

Rejoicing Along The Way

 exactly where they are. People with deeper relationships with God may hear more than others, but so can the person who has just begun his walk.

And that's as it should be. God communicates with us at whatever level we are.

What the conservatives seem to need are more storytellers, more people who believe in the truths of the Bible, but who are able to tell those truths in stories that speak to the minds and hearts of today's listeners.

I am reminded of a minister who visited a young woman in jail and told her about a very mixed-up young man who had taken all the money and support he could get from his family and had spent them on drugs and rock concerts and things like that. And he said the young man ended up in a very bad place, a place as bad to him as prison was to her.

But, the minister said, the boy's father still loved him. And when he decided to get in touch with his father, the father had reached out in love and welcomed him home.

And the minister told her she could read all about it in a certain place in the battered copy of the *Good News Bible* he saw on the shelf in the visitors lounge of the jail.

He never mentioned the words, "prodigal son." His listener would not have understood.

But after he had gone, she took the book down and read the story. She understood it, too.

And not immediately, but a little while later, she asked her Heavenly Father if she could come home. And He said yes.



I don't know exactly what story would convince someone of the reality of His presence when the person does not believe Satan is busy in today's world. I don't know what story would change the mind of the person who believes it is a woman's right to choose whether or not to continue a pregnancy.

However, I believe the Holy Spirit is a great storyteller. I believe He can teach us the stories we need to tell.

Sometimes He just has us tell the stories of our lives. These are frequently the most telling stories of all. And people will usually listen to them.



My Rose Bush

My Don Juan presented me a bouquet of roses recently. It's been some time since I was so honored.

What made the difference? Why has this rosebush that I bought a dozen years ago — and then basically forgot — suddenly begun producing an abundance of roses again, after some years of very sparse showings?

Could it have been the pruning I had done? Not of the rose bush. The trees. I never even thought of the rose bush.

But I did decide earlier this year that the trees growing along one side of the back yard needed pruning. They had grown so tall and so thick that hardly any sunshine penetrated the gloom.

Rejoicing Along The Way



Once that job was done, sunlight played all over the back yard again. The grass perked up and began to grow. And suddenly — unexpectedly — came this abundance of roses.

They weren't all beautiful specimens. Some of them looked a little peculiar, as a matter of fact. But there they were, on the ends of long shoots sticking way out into the yard from the main stem.

The spots of red caught my attention through the kitchen window. I took the clippers and cut a few of the better-looking blooms and put them in a little vase on the window sill over the sink.

Then I got the loppers — I don't know what they're called, but I call them loppers because you lop off small branches with them — and returned the plant to a shape that looked a little more like a rose bush and a little less like an octopus with thorns.

And I dragged the hose from the other side of the yard and gave the bush a drink. (This was before water rationing went into effect.)

I even put some fertilizer on it. Old rose fertilizer, so old I can't even remember when I bought it.

And the leaves began getting greener and the roses prettier.

In fact, my old Don Juan is beginning to look almost like a kid again.

When you think about it, it's kind of like a parable:

"The kingdom of heaven is like a rosebush that produced beautiful roses until the gardener allowed



the trees to block out the rays of the sun from it and forgot to feed it.

"Then one day the gardener cut back the trees around it and let the sunshine in. She fed the plant and watered it. And it began to produce roses again.

"And if a human gardener can do this for a rosebush, how much more can the One who created you and loved you enough to redeem you — and who never forgets you — do for your life."

The working out of the parable might look like this:

"The rosebush is a Christian who has known the Lord and has bloomed according to the design of God for her life. But while she wasn't looking, the world had overshadowed her. And those charged with feeding her did not do so.

"But the Lord had not forgotten her.

"He caused some of the stuff that had reached out and shadowed her to be cut back. He caused the light of his truth to shine again in her life. He poured out his Spirit on her, and she was nurtured with the knowledge of what Christ has done for her and of the presence of the Holy Spirit within.

"And she began to praise and worship the Lord and to desire again to show forth his glory in her life."

This is not really a parable, of course. It's just an observation.

In another sense, however, all of life is a parable in that everything speaks to us of God.

This is not really a story about roses, either. Or even about Christians.

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The important thing here is not what happens in our lives, except as it demonstrates the real point.

This is a story about the love that is able to quicken life where it is barely present, the love that chooses to take what appears worthless and cherish it.

That's what — that's who — the story is about.



The Girl In The Shower

I had an opportunity to talk to a good friend about the Lord recently. I don't think what I said made any difference in his life.

I had prayed ahead of time that the seed I scattered would really be the word of God and that I would speak the truth in a way that my friend could hear.

Well, maybe so. Nothing seemed to happen. But seed does not always spring up in an instant. I will continue to pray that others will add their efforts to producing a harvest in this life.

But what seemed to my longing heart like failure reminded me of something a friend of mine, John Cowart, said about witnessing in a series of articles he has written.

I will pick up John's story, as he wrote it, where he is recounting an incident that happened the evening before his daughter's wedding:



"Earlier in the evening I drove down into Springfield to pick up the boys who volunteered to serve as ushers at the wedding. They planned to stay near the church with our head-usher's son overnight so I would not have to pick them up in the morning. They were supposed to meet me at a corner near Main Street.

"I pulled up to the dark corner, saw the boys down the street and honked the horn.

"Out of nowhere a skimpily-dressed young lady appeared at my window.

" 'Looking for company?' she asked.

"Flustered, I said, 'No, thank you, miss. I was honking for those boys down there.'

" 'Well,' she said, planting her fists on her hips. 'If you're the sort who prefers boys ...'

"And she flounced away.

"I sat there with my mouth agape; I never had a chance to explain that I'm a nice, innocent Christian type.

"Rats! We fundamentalist Christians seldom have a chance to explain.

"Back when Roman emperors Nero, Marcus Aurelius and Diocletian were feeding us to the lions, few people had a chance to explain the faith which had brought them to the arena. The Christians — with a few notable exceptions, like the 86-year-old Polycarp — were sacrificed in droves, not one at a time.

"Picture a thousand scared Christians milling around on the stadium's 50-yard line — no dramatic speeches there. Too late to explain anything by that time.

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"The fourth century church historian Eusebius said that when they hauled one believer away for burning, his astonished neighbor cried, 'But he was such a good man, I would have never guessed he was a Christian!'

"Movies such as *Ben Hur*, *Quo Vadis?* and *The Robe* give the impression that everybody got to make a dramatic speech giving a glowing testimony before the lions' cages were opened.

"That ain't the way it was then; that ain't the way it is now.

"Chances to testify take us by surprise. We always have to be ready ... like with the girl in my shower.

"Here's what happened:

"Years ago I drove an over-the-road truck hauling bedbugs (that's what we called your household goods) for a company headquartered in Indianapolis, Indiana.

"About 3 a.m. one night, I was in the terminal bunkhouse taking a shower — big, green tile room with a dozen shower heads — to scrub off road grime. I thought I was the only person in the place until a young woman stepped into the shower with me.

"I'll soap your back if you'll soap mine,' she said.

"With the lightning quick wit for which I am famous, I said, 'Huh?'

"She repeated her offer in more explicit terms.

"Personal Evangelism 101 in Bible college had not prepared me for this. Christian witnessing in a shower is a dirty job, but somebody's got to do it.

" 'How much,' I asked.



"She named a price and I said, 'That's an intriguing offer. There's only one thing wrong; you don't charge enough.'

"This time, she was the one to say, 'Huh?' She backed away obviously thinking that she had a really kinky one on her hands.

"We fundamentalists do occasionally appear a trifle out of step with the rest of the world. Is that because our values are different?

" 'What do you mean not enough,' she asked cautiously.

"I explained that she was worth more than the few dollars she had asked. She was much more valuable, more precious. Jesus treasured this young woman in the truck terminal shower so much that he shed his own blood, gave up his own life for the likes of her — the likes of me — the likes of you.

"She started crying.

"Apparently most folks she'd met — even good solid church folks — had always told her she was not worth much.

"What a crying shame.

"Well, I turned off the water, towed off and got dressed. My new friend and I went out for coffee and talked till dawn. She wanted to hear the Good News over and over.

"I suppose, when we fundamentalists do have a chance to explain, the most important thing we ever have to tell anyone is this:

"Don't sell yourself short. God regards you as a person of immense, exquisite value. To him you are worth something more precious than IBM stock in a

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steel safe. He'd die for you. In fact, we believe he already has."

Thanks, John. I believe that, too, and maybe I can do a better job of sharing that truth next time.



No Decision Yet

Last year, I gave myself permission not to make a major decision.

I decided to give myself a year in which to assess the options. Frankly, I hoped I would find myself already leaning strongly one way or the other before the end of the year.

That hasn't happened.

I realized this week that my grace period is almost up and I am no closer to a solution than I was a year ago.

No, that's not true. I am much *closer* to a solution. I'm good at deadlines and I *will* have made a decision by the deadline.

I just don't know yet what it will be.

This is not one of those right and wrong choices. You know, it isn't a matter of whether I should continue to work for a living or take up stealing or anything like that. My choice is between one right thing and another — or at least one neutral thing and another.



Now that's an interesting thought. Are there any neutrals in the world today?

I think there are.

But I get very uncertain about what they are.

I don't find much consensus on the subject.

And my problem is that I keep thinking there must be a really correct right answer somewhere, as opposed to an acceptable neutral one, if I could just find it.

So, I keep trying to force one option to grow a halo or the other to grow horns.

That desire to have everything be absolutely one way or the other must be a very human trait. I see lots of it going on around me.

Even in the church? Especially in the church.

It seems to me that hardly anything is neutral in religion anymore — except for those folks to whom it's all neutral.

The space on which Christians can stand in agreement is being whittled away by the disagreements within denominations, as well as between them.

More and more we allow less and less room for different choices to be made.

Like me, everybody wants to be right.

Unlike me, many people seem to have no doubts that they have found the completely right choice. If I will just accept their decision, they tell me, all will be well.

Sometimes I wish I could. And I fully recognize the danger of not making any decisions.

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But whose "right answer" do I choose?

A friend who knows my tendency to agonize over decisions told me about a book she was reading. Its title is something like *Do What You Love and the Money Will Follow*.

That's supposed to work in careers, my friend said. In a sense, I believe that, with a slight change in wording, it is what works in matters of faith, too.

If I do what I love, then that which I value will follow. That is, if I truly love the Lord and do what pleases him, then peace and joy will follow.

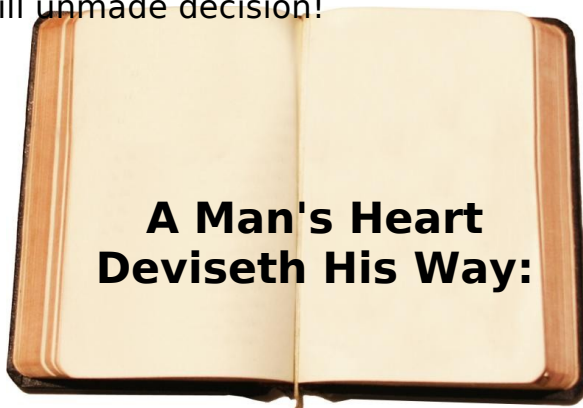
And that is really why I want to make right decisions!

Even if I only do what I understand now to be what Jesus intends me to do, I don't think I have to worry — well, not too much anyway.

If my understandings are faulty but I try to live by them in love rather than in power, then I will eventually see the error of my ways. I can count on the Holy Spirit for that.

This may lead to the need for repentance and reconciliation — even to making amends or restitution to others — but it won't lead to the loss of his peace and joy.

That's such good news. Now, if I can just apply it to my still unmade decision!





But The LORD Directeth His Steps.



Plain Language

I asked my editor last week what he thought I could do to make the Forum better.

"Get plain answers to plain questions," he replied instantly.

He put his finger on a problem that afflicts people who deal constantly with any particular topic: They tend to quit using plain English and to begin to use jargon, words understood only by those on the "inside" the particular field.

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It saves time. They all know what they mean. But if a person continues too long in this practice, he can lose his ability to speak to people outside the field.

And some of us who work primarily in the field of religion do this. We toss around words like "sanctification" and "salvation" and we do not pause to explain them to the uninitiated.

This affliction may be related to the tendency to use long words that pops up among the educated every now and then. Some long words may be needed, but we tend to use more of them than we need. In fact, we use too many words of all kinds.

Given a choice, most of us choose fancy over plain. Maybe it feeds our egos.

There is another side to this issue. Some of us choose fancy rather than plain language because we can hide more in the frills.

We may be so busy not offending anybody that we never take a plain stand on anything. We hide our own opinions in the middle of lots of words.

We may say we do it because we do not want to be unkind. And, truly, it isn't easy to say something tough in a kind way. But is it kind to try to be loving by telling people anything less than the truth as we see it? Especially if you believe that they are enslaved by lies and only the truth can really set them free.

Yes, I thought, what we need now is a little plain truth.

And I began to run quickly over the list of people who have responded at one time or another to Forum questions, deciding which ones have come the closest



to plain answers and which ones have danced all around plainness.

I was enjoying myself — judging them — when suddenly I thought, What about me?

How many times have I phrased the question in a way that would produce a plain answer?

And, much worse, how often have I given a plain answer when someone asked me a question?

The plain truth is: I have not done either often enough.

Well, I will try to do better in the future. I will try to ask plainer questions. I will try to find responders who will try to give plainer answers.

That's a lot of trying. But that's all I can promise to do about the Forum.

But that is not all I will do. I will also try to deal with my life.

I need to try to grow in plainness, in my writing, speaking and thinking.

Why? Because the basic requirement for plainness is honesty with oneself and I need more of that.

Being plain depends on believing there is such a thing as plain truth, as a right answer.

And I do believe that. I forget it sometimes, but that is exactly what I believe.

The right answer is always the one that matches God's plainly revealed will.

So before I can speak or write anything plainly, I must know what I believe to be the truth. If I know that, then I will know the basis for my life.

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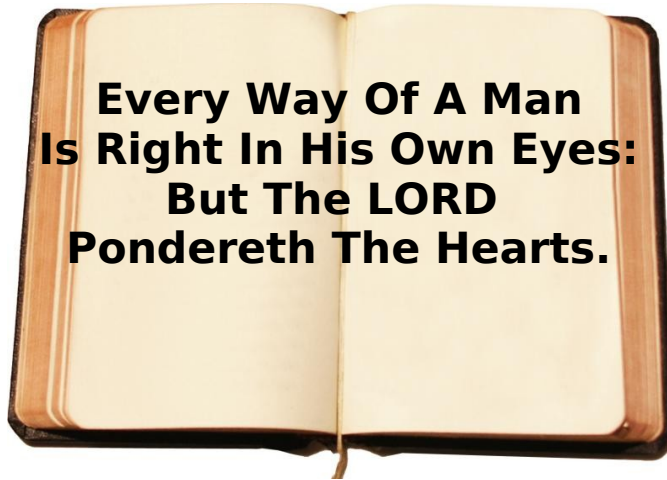
Then thought, word and action can come together in such a way that I will speak plainly by what I say, write and do.

Do I always know God's plain word and how to apply it to my life?

No.

But I already know more of it than I am using.

And if I want to, I can learn more.



My Athletic Focus



I am not basically an athletic person. I have one of those soft, round bodies — whatever that type is called — and I'm more comfortable watching from the sidelines.

But I have taken up a sport, and I am such an enthusiast that I do it every day.

I'm not sure what to call it. I'm not even 100 percent sure what the rules are, but it doesn't matter if I miss a rule or two here or there. The referee is a great friend of mine and he keeps me in the action anyway.

While he was doing it, the apostle Paul called it running a race or fighting a fight.

Well, I can walk, but as for running, forget it. And you know I'm not a boxer or wrestler. So, at first, I thought I couldn't take part at all, if it really had to be like a race or a fight.

But fortunately, the game is tailored to the person playing.

If I have to give it a name, however, I guess I will call it "keeping under the blood."

It's related vaguely to dodge ball only it's different. Instead of trying to miss a ball, I try to put myself in the correct spot to be "hit" by the poured-out grace of God.

I discovered I was engaged in this sport — whether I knew it or not — when I was asked, by the guide to daily Bible reading I am using, to define the contract I have with God. The reading that day included a passage on the covenant between God and the Hebrew people.

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Exodus 24:8 tells how the covenant was affirmed: "Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, 'This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words' " (Exodus 24:8).

Why blood? Because blood is life.

Why is life the payment for sin? Because it is the most precious thing we have. It is ourselves.

God set the price, the only one able to be effective. Then, of course, he paid it himself.

He asks that we accept this as truth and keep on accepting it.

My version of the contract between God and me reads like this: God says, "If you will accept the blood of Jesus Christ as the payment for your sin, I will be your God and you shall be my friend."

And I say, "Thank you. I accept the condition. I will abide by it all the days of my life."

Abiding is the focus of my new activity.

The task is not abiding by all the rules of the Bible, but abiding by the truth that Jesus Christ paid for my sins by his death and that his blood alone is the basis for my being able to come into God's presence.

I have a lot to learn about abiding, however. I forget even to try a lot of the time.

But God prepared for that in the contract. He said, "Even when you turn away from me, I will remain your God; and when you turn your face again to me, I will receive you into my presence."

And what is the nature of this abiding that has become the focus of my daily life?



It is trying to live according to the character of Jesus. It is learning how to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit and to be obedient to what He says.

It is learning to affirm without approving, refusing to judge what others do, while asking the Holy Spirit to judge me. It is being willing to kiss the frog, even though I know it will not turn into a prince.

And it is more than that. I don't know all it means yet. But I know the referee, and he calls me friend.

He doesn't change the rules of the game for me. When I twist my ankle and fall, it hurts and I am left with bruises.

But I heal. And I am not thrown out of the game.

When I bang into someone else and hurt them, they feel the pain — and so do I. And I am sorry. And forgiven.

And the game goes on.



A Letter From Prison

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

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

It reminded me of the parable of the prodigal son.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

When all these human efforts fail, we finally come to the point reached by my friend's son, surrender to God.

Is this self serving? Sure it is. And it serves us well if we mean it.

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

The prodigal son, the letter writer in prison and I share the knowledge that the world we live in does not hold the answers for us. This is the beginning, the first step in the journey that will take the rest of our lives. I pray for a good journey for my friend's son. And for you and yours, and me and mine.





FAITH COMES . . .

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

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

But another scan some months later showed it had returned - outside the lungs. There was one small spot in a lymph node near her left collar bone. More radiation and chemo. And plans for even more chemo after a break of three weeks for the radiation area to heal.

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

Doctor's visits, scans and MRIs later, she is in the hospital, being made ready for surgery in the morning. The surgeon is very positive. We soak that up like dry sponges.

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

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

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



Practice, Practice, Practice

I took piano lessons for four years, but I never learned to play. Unfortunately what I did was take first year piano lessons 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

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knows what my right hand is doing – especially when they need to be doing it together.

The problem is 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 more 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 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 decisions 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 counter 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, I have surrendered my will to Him 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 is worth the full-time, life-long effort, for that’s how I became a child who glorifies my Father’s name and His good and faithful servant.



Messenger in Blue

If I hadn’t promised myself and my Lord to be honest in these columns, I sure wouldn’t be writing this one now. But this is about being honest with myself and Him, so I might as well get on with it.

I committed a moving violation (in my car) last week – and was caught – instantly.

I’m fairly sure the polite man in blue who wrote my citation was not aware he was acting as an instrument of the Holy Spirit, but I’m more than fairly sure he was.

Three years ago the Lord taught me about obedience by teaching me to obey the civil law, such as driving within the speed limit. Since then I have tried to be faithful to Him, not just obeying the law, but being obedient to the leadings of His Spirit.

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This week I broke the law, lied to myself, disobeyed Him – and He still loves me.

When I found myself at the end of a long line of traffic waiting to go straight through an intersection – and I wanted to turn right – I broke the law. I created a “right turn lane” that wasn’t there by driving through the parking lot of a business firm.

That’s a legal no-no.

In this instance, it was worse than that. It was an occasion for spiritual disobedience.

The spiritual fault lay in deceiving myself, in telling myself it wasn’t really wrong since the parking lot was large, almost like a road, and I wasn’t getting in any one’s way.

I lied to myself. I knew it wasn’t right, but I ignored the small voice that said to wait patiently in line.

That is why, after a moment of shock, I recognized the policeman as the grace of God in action.

How wonderful my Lord is to point out my fault so quickly.

Jesus did not allow me to turn away from Him, to stay with my self-deception. I was called quickly to repentance, confession and reconciliation.

I cannot lie to myself and stay with Him. I can be – and was – forgiven. That is His promise, His gift to me.

The moving violation cost me \$25.

But it was a small price to pay, wasn’t it, for a reminder that my Lord is with me and wants me to be perfect. Think of the price Jesus paid when He reconciled me to God, when He made that forgiveness possible.

Twenty-seven years and I’m still thankful for my angelic messenger in blue – and my Lord.



Silence in the Exam

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 my 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 the exam!

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

And that means that God is in the process of seeing – or 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.

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

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

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 give clues to the answer. Oh, I might give instructions or say something like, "You have 20 minutes to complete this section," but nothing more.

I wasn't being hard on them or mean. I knew I had covered in class the material included in 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 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 textbooks are 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 us when we fail a test.

I've known that ever since I knew anything 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 re-test 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 silences. I have felt alternately afraid and angry, as if He had betrayed me or abandoned me, leaving me to face the pain, loneliness, shame or sorrow all by myself.

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Now I will try to remember that the teacher does not 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.



Who Gets the Glory?

Yesterday morning I didn't put the basket with the filter and coffee grounds back in the coffee pot correctly. So the water did not drip through as it should. Instead it stayed in the basket until it ran over the top!

After cleaning that up - I drank some of the coffee after straining it - I tried to make toast. I had cleaned the crumbs off the bottom of my toaster-oven, thinking that would make it work better, only to find it now only toasts on the back half of the rack. Flipped the bread over - and burned it. Ate it anyway.

Then I opened the newspaper and read where another minister has fallen prey to temptation.

I don't know which part left the worst taste in my mouth, but I think it must have been that last bit.

And it didn't stop there. His church has fired him and his superiors have taken away his license.

Sure, that makes sense. He sinned, sinners are not allowed to serve in that position. Right?

Well, not that kind of sinner. But are they thrown out with the trash?

Barbara White



I know who is rejoicing, who is jeering, who is mocking. And it's not his brothers and sisters in Christ. Although someone said - I read it or heard it years ago - that Christians often kill their wounded.

Maybe that's not what happening. All I know is what I read in the newspaper.

I remember vague details of an incident some years ago of a leader of a large, noted congregation who strayed and was removed from his office. But they - he and his wife and the leadership -- worked together and walked together in the midst of the body. After a while I don't remember how long -- he was reinstated, maybe not in the position he had held, but as a fully restored brother.

It may be that a plan is in place in this instance, too, a plan for restoration and reconciliation. For healing and new life. For God to get the glory for what finally happens, even though the enemy is in the limelight for what has happened.

And isn't that what we believe is supposed to happen?

I'm not excusing this week's fallen minister. I'm not blaming the people saddled with the task of cleaning up the mess.

My heart goes out to all of them.

I guess I'm really just praying we will all remember that there is an enemy and remember Whose we are and how He works.

Rejoicing Along The Way



Second Thoughts

For a couple of decades I was accustomed to publishing on a weekly basis. Either that set a pattern or I just don't think as fast as I used to.

In either case, I realized this morning that I assumed readers would see a connection I did not spell out in my response to the fallen minister.

I started off with a malfunction of my coffee pot and toaster and went right into the account of the minister who was fired and whose license was taken away.

The connecting link that I saw was that things malfunction, either because we use them incorrectly or they break, and we see if we can jerry-rig them (it usually costs too much to have them repaired) or we throw them away and get new ones.

Is the same thing true when people malfunction or break? If WE can't fix them do we throw them away? Should we? Is there any alternative?

That's what I meant to say. I believe there is an alternative. It costs more than having a repair man do the job, but the price has been paid by Someone else.

And He can fix not only the one man, He can fix the woman and the wife and the leaders and the congregation. It's what He does. If we let Him.

Joseph was so full of himself that his brothers sold him into slavery in Egypt to get him out of their hair. His Egyptian master's wife got him thrown into prison. But God saw to it that he was changed in slavery and prison and He saw to it that he was raised to a high



place, a place of power and authority. And from that place, he was able to save his people.

Joseph told his brothers that what Satan had meant for evil, God had meant for good.

This was true then. It is true now.

We can see what Satan has accomplished in our time. I do not yet know what the good that God intends to come from that particular fallen situation will look like.

I have not been sold into slavery or in prison. I have not been caught in wrong-doing and publicly accused. But I malfunction, too. And God lets me see it.

I believe God exposes my malfunctions to me so I can choose. I can stay where I am and rot – corruption grows – or I can see the rescue and restoration that He offers and I can grasp it or receive it or whatever the right words are. Maybe surrender to it.

And if I am made even a little bit new, (although that's like being a little bit pregnant) then the glory belongs to God.




Hello, Cute Kitty

There was a half-grown kitten in the middle of a pot of impatiens outside my sliding glass windows the other morning.

I didn't notice him right away. The large black cat pacing majestically by the window caught my attention first. This full grown male was surveying the territory as

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the lord of the manor might. He stopped and looked over his shoulder briefly and then strode on, out of my sight.

And at that moment I saw the kitten, sitting tall and compact, like an Egyptian god, looking down from his meager height and thinking “I’m invisible.”

The retirement community where I live has a lot of feral cats making their homes here. They like it here because they are well fed and mostly left alone.

Some residents complain about them, especially those who accuse them of cutting down on the bird population.

But there are a lot more old women – and maybe an old man or two – who feed them and give them pet names.

But mostly they don’t ever get to pet them, to scratch behind their ears or under their chins, or hold them their furry little bodies on their laps and listen to them purr.

I don’t feed this really cute little kitten.

My next door neighbor does. She has since the momma cat appeared at her window with two quite small balls of yellow/orange fur. These two are on their own now. But they know where food is to be found.

The darker one likes my potted plants. I’ve seen him often in another pot that has taller plants in it – I forget the name, dusty miller, I think. Anyway, he sits looking out through the stems.

The impatiens, however, are in a pot on top of another, large Chinese pot turned upside down. It is a more exposed, but higher perch.

I don’t even know if he is a him, but I think he is. His sibling, I think, is a girl. She’s more dainty, less adventuresome. But just as pretty.



I miss my Murphy. She moved in here with me four and a half years ago. We were both old and not too spry. But she must have been older in cat years because she died almost two years ago. She was a rescue cat and I never knew how old she was. It didn't matter. She didn't know how old I was, either.

We just found each other.

I wooed her with food and quiet conversation from a distance. She had not grown up feral and eventually she approached me.

I remember the day she let me touch her, the day she decided to jump into my lap, the night it was going to freeze and I asked her if she wanted to come in and she did.

She slept on top of me after that – until I got too hot and made her get off. Then she slept next to me.

But I had two rooms then and my bathroom was large enough for a litter box. I have one room now and a smaller bathroom. And I can't bend down to clean a litter box if I had room for one.

So I admire and enjoy watching our untouchable felines.

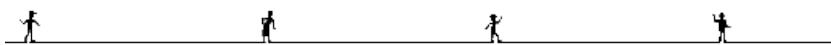
And occasionally I sigh.



Brain cancer tops a stubbed toe

I was visiting my daughter and son-in-law recently. He mentioned he had taken the dog – a boxer named Hootch – to the dog park that morning, which explained

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why Hootch was sleeping instead of bumping me around.

I stumped my toe on a root at the dog park, Dan said.

I had brain surgery, Mary responded.

I'm never going to be able to top that, am I, he asked.

No, she said.

And they laughed.

I don't even know the words to tell you how I felt. I guess "joy" is the closest I can come.

Mary was diagnosed with small cell lung in October 2005. She had chemo and radiation together.

Her hair fell out. When it began coming out in handfuls, she had me cut it short, so it did not look so bad on the shower floor.

She bought a wig in expectation of going bald, but never wore it. Wisps remained around her face and I guess as long as she could see some hair, she didn't much care what everybody else saw.

Anyway, scans showed the lung cancer was gone, kaput, not there any more.

But another scan six months later found it outside the lung, in a lymph node by her collarbone. More radiation and more chemo.

And plans for a different chemo to try to "get it" everywhere, to start in three weeks.

Only she had a headache before then. And a slowness to respond. And another spot in her brain.

Thus the brain surgery, which she went through with flying colors - and no apparent loss of anything.



But all her doctors said she needed to radiate her brain. So that's what's going on now. The third time for chemo must wait til this is over – the body can take only so much poison at one time.

In the meantime, they laugh with each other. A lot. I think Dan works at finding things to laugh about, including stubbed toes.

I don't mean they never worry, or cry. I suspect they do. They are real people after all.

But they do laugh and they do it a lot. And they take each day as it comes. And I feel joy when I am with them.



A Morning Song

There is a song called, "Morning Has Broken," that was taken from a poem in the book *Children's Bells*, published by Oxford University Press. It is a favorite song of mine.

It starts, "Morning has broken, like the first morning. Blackbird has spoken, like the first bird."

All this week a very noisy bird that appears to live in a nearby tree has been "speaking" – and waking me up – at the first faint promise of dawn.

His song is sometimes sweet and sometimes raucous. It is his strident notes that penetrate my sleep.

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One morning, early, I wondered briefly why I was awake – then I identified the extravagant frills and swirls of the nearby song.

I stretched lazily and turned over on my other side – with my back to the window.

And I thought about how this particular bird reminds me of the newly converted.

People who are newly born-again or Spirit-filled tend to be so thrilled with the least little touch of light in their lives that they make a nuisance of themselves. In fact, sometimes, like my bird, they make so much noise that they disturb those of us who don't want to get up for anything less than the blaze of midday.

That thought shook the rest of sleep from my mind.

I wondered, Am I so accustomed to the day that, without the persistent, even pesky chattering and twittering of my morning singer, I would sleep through the fresh newness of the day my Lord has given me?

The newly converted have lived so long with drab darkness that they carry on extravagantly over every little tinge of color they can see. Have I lost that sense of awe at the glory to come? Am I so jaded that I no longer see any need to rejoice daily at the announcement of its imminent arrival?

My bird has been charged by God with the daily task of celebrating His creation.

Unlike the bird, I may forget to praise at all.

Tomorrow – if I am awake to see it – the first blush of color in the sky, the fruit of the coming dawn, will remind me of the unforgettable.

Lord, don't let me forget, not THAT morning.

The Light that came into the world through the Incarnation has risen from the darkness of death.



My eyes have sometimes seen its appearing. My heart has been pierced by its brightness. Even the faint brightness of dawn can pierce a heart.

Tomorrow the dawn – whether I see the sun rise or not – will reveal again the day of Resurrection.

My noisy bird has reminded me that every morning echoes this truth as night fades before the coming light.

The first verse of that song I mentioned ends, “Praise for the morning. Praise for the singing. Praise for them springing fresh from the Word.”

The last verse says, “Mine is the sunlight. Mine is the morning. Born of the one light Eden saw play. Praise with elation. Praise every morning. God’s re-creation of the new day.”



Why Do You Love Me, Lord?

“Why Me, O Lord! Why did this happen to me?”

I could ask myself these questions every day. But if I’m really thinking about it, I wouldn’t actually 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 also ask why He blessed me so – but most often I don’t.

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I don't always even think about it. I blithely accept the gift of life from God's hand with barely a hint of thanks. A rainbow may make me appreciate His creation for a moment; the scent of a rose may remind me of His blessings.

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

If I compared what I do and what I am with the perfect goodness of God, I would not be surprised at the tragedies and troubles that come my way. If strict justice were meted out by God, I'd be in a heap of trouble all the time!

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 the Lord with all my heart and all my strength and all my mind. And I'm trying to love my neighbor as myself.

But I'm doing a rotten job of it.

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

It isn't trying. It's doing.

It isn't emotions. It's actions.

I don't know anyone who does this all the time.

Fortunately, we are not judged strictly by either the Law or Jesus' commands. He provided for that by His death and resurrection. And we don't have to do it by ourselves. He also provided us with a Comforter to strengthen us and guide us.

So I try to do His commands not for fear of the just retribution for my law-breaking, but because I bloom in the wellspring of His love and I desire to please Him.



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

I can't imagine. But I thank You that You do.

And when those tragedies and troubles come?

Then the question becomes, "What do You want me to do now, Lord? Will You help me use it for Your glory?"

I don't think I will ever get this right. I read John Cowart's blog and know I will never be able to do that.

So I wrote for a living for almost 25 years. That doesn't mean I'm a writer. It just means I knew how to keep the editors from finding out!

I thought of myself more as a messenger than a writer. If someone gave me something to say, I could do that. I could even do that fairly well. I could communicate their thoughts so others could understand them.

For example, and I am very proud of this, I interviewed a social science type person one time about a program he headed that was supposed to do good to a certain group of people. He spoke jargon - that is he used the vocabulary he and others of his trade used to speak to each other. And it was totally incomprehensible to me.

So I asked him to give me an example. And a little way into the example, I asked him to put what he was saying into simpler words. And so on and so on for about two hours.

In the end I wrote an article and it was published. The next day, he called me. I waited for him to tell me what I had gotten wrong. Instead he thanked me for clarifying his message so the non-professional could understand it. I was amazed and grateful.

Rejoicing Along The Way



Occasionally I have a thought or two of my own. Often these are about an inch long, or maybe two and a half inches long. But they don't go far or say much.

While I was writing a weekly column, I relied HEAVILY on the Lord to give me something to write about. AND HE DID! That was how I knew I was to write a column.

The day came when He no longer did. I struggled on for a while, meeting deadlines. And then, fortunately, retired.

Since then my writing has been short and, well, I don't know. Unsatisfactory to me.

I have reused a few of the earlier columns. I have 15 years worth to draw upon. But it doesn't seem right somehow. They had their 15 minutes of exposure.

Today, I have a little thought to share, so I will. On Wednesday, after her second session of in this round of chemo, Mary, my daughter, was able to make the bed and prepare the coffee pot. She was able to say a few words together without gasping for breath or coughing. These are things she had not been able to do for several weeks.

This is actually her third round of chemo, the first one was back in the fall of 2005. Three rounds of radiation and one brain surgery have come in between.

But I'm happy today with today's progress. And I don't mind her bristly hair. I think she's beautiful almost bald.



Dinner with Friends

I ate my evening meal in the dining room of our Health Center – read nursing home unit – last night. I do this fairly often. I sit with two friends whose spouses live there.

I used to live next door to Julia in one of the independent living halls. Then I downsized apartments and ended up in another independent living hall where Dick lives. Got that straight?

Anyway, the five of us sit around one table and Julia and Dick eat their dinners and feed their spouses. I feed myself.

One of the CNAs offered me a clothing protector – read large bib – one evening when I dropped spaghetti sauce on my white shirt front. I do that every now and then, not regularly, so I declined the offer.

One day, maybe.

But we won't go there right now. Or ever, I hope,

You can't live in a continuing care facility – the kind that offers independent living, assisted living and a skilled care unit, read nursing home – without wondering sometimes what the future holds.

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But mostly I don't think about it. As Doris Day sang, "Que sera, sera," or "Whatever will be, will be."

I'm just glad I have more than that to hang on to. The Psalmist says: I trust in you, O Lord; I say, You are my God. My times are in Your hands ...

Scripture also says I will never be alone. Wherever I am, He is with me.

I find those thought very comforting.

In the meantime - which is also in His hands - I do what I can to make life more pleasant for others. At least that's what I think I am doing. Maybe I should rethink the possibility that my company helps.

Nah. It helps. Having a friend there helps.



How Glorious

Sometimes it's a good thing that somebody else is in charge. Even if it's only the Bible reading guide I use.

I read Zechariah recently and I'll have to confess that I can't remember the last time I read this book of the Old Testament. I know I have read it in the past because I have read through the Bible several times. But not lately - which could mean the last 10 to 15 years - and had no inclination to do so on my own.

In any case, I read it. And I found something there that delighted me.



This minor prophet was writing/speaking to the people who had come back to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon with the intention of rebuilding the temple. But things got in the way.

So they became discouraged and distracted from their first intention.

So God told Zechariah to remind them.

And they listened and set to work.

It turned out they had started on the foundation when they first came back from captivity. But it didn't match the grandeur of the former temple. Nothing they could build was going to be able to match the temple Solomon built. That may have contributed to their wandering away from the job.

It would have discouraged me. For most of my life I have operated on the premise that it was better not to try if I didn't think I could do something really well, well enough to garner some praise and maybe even a little glory.

Of course, some things you have to do anyway. Most things. And I did the things before me to do, but I was seldom really proud of my work. I wanted it to be better. Better, obviously, than I could do.

Zechariah had some good news for those temple builders. And for me.

He said it didn't matter if their temple wasn't going to be the ultimate in temples. It only mattered if they were obedient and did the best they could.

Because that would please God. And then He would come and be there. And His glory would be seen in and through it!

Of course. The glory always comes from God. And when He asks me to do something, what He is looking for is obedience, not perfection.

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Not a new thing, just new to me at a time when I must have needed it.

Maybe I have believed a lie. Like Eve. Maybe I will believe other lies in days to come. But I won't have to continue forever believing them. He has ways of providing opportunities to discover Truth.

And for now, I know this one thing better than I did before.



Babe Ruth sparks memories

I bought a Babe Ruth candy bar yesterday. I can't remember the last time I did that.

But I can remember when I used to do it regularly. It was when I was in high school.

My friend and I would go to the drug store after seeing a movie and we would each buy a candy bar. Mine would always be a Babe Ruth. I can't remember right now what hers was. I'll have to ask her next time we talk, which we do, not regularly but pretty often.

I bought it yesterday because Mary bought a Payday and I couldn't find anything in dark chocolate except a Mounds and I don't like coconut and chocolate a whole lot.

We bought candy and a small bag of chips to share while she received her chemo treatment. They were running late because all the Monday -a holiday, remember - people had to be inserted into the schedules on Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday.



Anyway, her 11 a.m. appointment to see the doctor was delayed until 12 and he suggested we go get lunch before coming back to the procedure room. We did and bought stuff on our way back in.

It was 2:15 before they had her all hooked up, and I ate my candy bar.

I told her I couldn't remember what was in it or whether I would still like it after all these years. She assured me I would.

And I did. In fact, I ate the whole thing.

Then I sat with an open book in my lap and watched her work her cross word and word search puzzle book.

And thought about how much and how little I know about her, my daughter.

And about the fact that I know next to nothing about any of the other patients in their recliners except that they have some kind of medical problem and are receiving some kind of chemotherapy.

I was reminded of trips by train from Jacksonville to Atlanta when I was a girl and shared a lower berth with my mother. I would wake early and let the window curtain up just enough to watch the countryside go by. And I would wonder about who lived in the houses where lights were on and whether they wondered about who was on the train speeding by.

Not deep thoughts. Not new thoughts. But I thought again about the staggering wonder that God can know all this about us and about everyone everywhere.

I understand it's called omnipresence - being everywhere at one time. Or omniscience - knowing everything. Or both, I guess.

But the long words don't matter really. They are just short hand for something much bigger than they are.

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Jesus knew all about the woman at the well. He knew all about the hearts and thought of all the people He met while on earth. And He still does. He knows all about me and all about you.

And He loves us anyway. In spite of ourselves. And anywhere. Everywhere.

Including my friends David and Deborah who are right now in South Sudan living with a native family of a tribe that had seen no white people until about two months ago. Them, too.

And all the rest. All at one time. All at every time.

Beyond my comprehension. But not beyond my desire -- sitting there, full of too much sugar -- to give Him thanks and praise.

So I sang a little love song to Him, quietly in my head.

NOTE: I started this Thursday and finished it today. In between, the computer decided not to work. I don't know why. Along with a lot of other things I don't know.



Murmur, Murmur, Grumble or Not

While driving over to have breakfast with John Cowart, I suddenly realized the name of my malady. It is Discontent!

I've had a bad case of this for several weeks now, if not longer. But in the last few days it has really begun to take me over. All I can think about is how this is not right and that is wrong.



But with my attention diverted by paying attention to my driving, a thought arose from my subconscious – or somewhere -- that my problem has a name and it is Discontent.

I don't think I discovered that. I think it was revealed to me.

Meaning , I was being given the change to deal with it and not just keep on grumbling things like:

“My memory is shot. I spend too much time going back for things I've forgotten!”

“I don't know what to say. If I say anything, it comes out wrong. I just make a mess of it.”

“All these people have problems and want to tell me about them and I'm tired of listening.”

And on and on and on. And these are only the “nice” ones.

So I took a look at what Discontent was hiding:

“God, You really haven't been doing a good job for me lately.”

Wow. That's what I've really been saying. And that really isn't what I want to say.

Let's try again.

“I sure do forget a lot, but I remember more than I forget. And I am physically able to go back for the stuff I've forgotten. And when I see it, I know what it is and what it's for. Not so bad after all.”

“I don't know what to say. Maybe silence is the right thing here. Maybe if I think a bit before I talk, I won't say so many foolish things. Thank goodness I already know I can be wrong!”

“When people tell me their problems, I don't have to have the answer. As a friend reminded me one day,

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the name of the Savior is Jesus, not Barbara. Listening can be all that is required. Really listening, not waiting for the other person to stop so I can start.”

When I think about it, I do trust God to be doing very well by me. Of course, God’s definition of good may not match mine sometimes. I can’t see far enough ahead to realize it. But, well, He’s God and I’m not. And He has proved faithful in the past.

And I really like my second set of thoughts better. I like me better in them.

I suspect I will fall back into discontent again, because it’s an old enemy. But for the moment, I see it for what it is and I choose to turn it around and show it the door.

It’s not just playing Pollyanna. It’s letting the Lord have His way instead of insisting on my own.



**The Steps Of A Good Man
Are Ordered
By The Lord:
And He Delightreth
In His Way.**

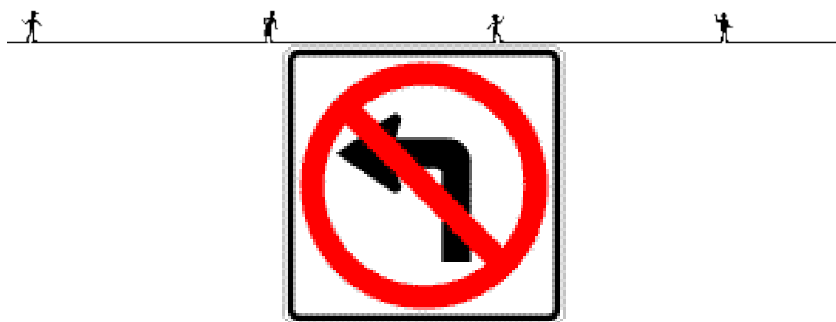
Barbara White



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



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What's humorous?

Do you know what you get when you cross a termite and a mantis? A bug that prays before it eats your house.

One of the retired ministers in residence here told that joke before saying grace over our meal yesterday.

As jokes go, it's not bad. It's not good either, but it's not bad.

His contention is that we need humor, that laughter is good for us. And I certainly agree with that.

And I laugh - or groan with faint humor - at most of his jokes. But I'm also just a little uncomfortable.

I never know what he is going to say. Sometimes when he can't find a G rated joke, he strays over into whatever the rating would be for sexually suggestive language.

I know God laughs. He must or we wouldn't know how to. I don't know what He laughs at or about. I wonder if He doesn't often find us laughable in gentle, loving ways, as a father or mother might with a loved child.

And He surely knows all about sex. He may understand our infatuation with it and our use of sexually suggestive language to produce laughter. But not when it demeans anyone.



Besides, I can't help feeling the timing is a bit off. To me "saying grace" is praying; it's offering thanks to the Giver of all we have and that's serious business.

Prayer does not have to be prim and proper. Honest and real are much better than that. But sexually suggestive?

And when grace is being said over a public meal, the "audience" is kind of trapped into listening.

I did ask him to draw a line he wouldn't cross in telling jokes before saying the blessing. He didn't answer. Just walked away.

Most people don't seem to mind.

I think I will suggest we set aside time for a "humor hour," a time for jokes and laughter. And everyone who wants to tell jokes can come and do so. And if anyone cracks a joke someone else doesn't like, well, that person can just get up and go home.

I haven't done that yet in the dining room. I stay and finish eating.

And come here to complain.

Dear Lord, help me not to take offense - even if it is intended, and I don't think it is. My sense of humor may be rusty. Help me, instead, to say a blessing over him.



Miles of Thanksgiving

It rained all day yesterday. And I drove through a lot of it.

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I picked Mary up at her work place and drove to Baptist South for her chemo.

On the way there, she called a doctor's office downtown and asked if they had any samples they could give her of a very expensive medicine she is using. They said they did. We would have to pick them up today, because they wouldn't be open tomorrow.

Getting out of the car under the overhang at the front entrance of the medical building next to the hospital, she realized she had left her purse at work – too many other things in her hands to notice.

So after they started her treatment and I brought lunch up from the hospital snack shop, I left to pick up purse and medicine.

A co-worker came out in the drizzle to bring the purse and, smiling, wished us a good Fourth.

I left my car in valet parking at the downtown hospital and told them I was just picking up something and would be right back, in hopes they wouldn't actually take it off to the fifth floor of the parking garage, which would mean a 15 minute wait when I got back.

The medicine was waiting for me at the sign-in window and the car was waiting for me at valet parking, which is under a roof. So far I was dry and speedy.

Back to Baptist South, where the rain dropped again to a drizzle as I found a parking space near the back door.

Upstairs, Mary's various IV bags had run dry and she was ready to leave.

On our way to the back door, she stopped outside her radiologist's office and asked if I had time for her to try to move her Monday appointment up so she could



get the results of the MRI of her brain and not have to wonder all weekend. (Her cancer had appeared in her brain months ago leading to surgery and radiation and this was her first test after treatment)

They moved it up to right then! The doctor was just finishing a conference and had time to see her. The news was good. Nothing new at all!

So out to the car and off to her home. The rain started again as she got out to go in, but she made it to the porch without getting very wet. And I headed home, but stopped at the library on the way because they had a book in I had requested.

It stopped raining as I parked at the library and started again to drizzle as I came out with my book.

Home at last, I don't know how many miles, but seven hours later.

Today, my body is tired, but my spirit is content.

Thank You, Lord, for the safe miles driven, the good report on the MRI, the fact that the nurse found a vein on the first stick for Mary's chemo, that her co-worker was willing and happy to help, that the car park people were kind, the doctor's office helpful, the library filled my request for the book so promptly and the check-out lady didn't mind going to find in on the bottom shelf of the Will Call place (I can't read the bottom shelf and can't get down there to find my name on the wrapper).

Thank You for this land and all it offers.

Thank You for raining on the just and the unjust. Thank You for loving us all and making it possible for us to love You, too.

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Nighttime serenade

I ate grilled tuna for the first time today. I have eaten canned tuna for years – when did they start canning tuna anyway? – but raw tuna looked so unappetizing I avoided it. Until today.

I went out to lunch after church with a few friends. I'm such an in-a-rut person that I almost always order a particular thing at each restaurant I go to. Tuna was not on that list. But somehow, I felt out of ordinary today and ordered a salad with grilled tuna on top. Asked how I wanted it cooked, I told the waitress I had no idea, never having eaten grilled tuna before. She suggest medium rare and that's what I got.

Delicious! Who would have thought it!

Other than that things are very much the same as they have been for the past 22 months. My primary focus has been on my 47-year-old daughter's fight against small cell lung cancer. She is such a fighter. She has done everything they ask her to do – except get a port. As long as they can find a vein, she will go that route. I drive her to appointments, sit with her while she has a treatment and occasionally cook a meal.

I took her Christmas shopping a couple of weeks ago. She used one of the carts with a scooter attached and went aisle by aisle amassing items for everyone on her list. This is not a result of her cancer, but her usual



practice. She hates Christmas shopping in December. Too many people in the store.

My secondary focus has been on my son's off and on struggle to get to the other side of an injury from a motorcycle accident that happened when he was 20. He was 50 last month. This was at one time a primary focus, but it has gone on so long I am often numb about it. There have been so many starts that petered out, so many chances for change that never happened. But I hang in. Positive things are happening now. Maybe this will be the time when that continues.

Any time left over from all this has been occupied by writing minutes of meetings. I don't know why I can't stop being secretary of the Residents' Council here. It's a volunteer job. All I have to do is say I resign. I just haven't done it. I'm numb about this too.

Oh, yes. Once a week I spend a morning in an art class, along with half a dozen old folks who live where I live and an old teacher who also lives here and who really knows her stuff. Just lately I have been going back to the arts and crafts room by myself to paint. When I tried a hobby art class 40 years ago I had expectations of really doing good work. Now I have no expectation except enjoying myself. And I am.

It helps with the thoughts that leap into my brain if I wake in the middle of the night. All negative. Maybe just realistic, but not welcome in any case. My son-in-law says there will be no negative speaking around here. And I told the Lord I really didn't want to give room to the thoughts I was fighting off. I told Him if He didn't take my load it would squash me flat. I remembered that all I really had to do was give it to Him and leave it there. It. The outcome. The solution. The rescue and restoration. I can do nothing about any of that. But He can.

Rejoicing Along The Way



So I sing to Him – out loud in the middle of the night. The noise interrupts my other thoughts and I believe somehow that it sounds beautiful to the One who listens. And loves and works and accomplishes – whatever it will be. Who better?



Click Scrunch

I took my brace to Hanger Orthotics and Prosthesis on Tuesday because it was going click clack.

Now it goes click scrunch.

Not an improvement.

Today I will take it back and see if they can repair it by tomorrow. In the meantime I get to wear the old black boot with Velcro closings that they gave me when I first tore the tendon that held up my arch. And now doesn't.

Getting old really is rough on the body.

There is a lady here who celebrated her 103rd birthday last month. She still rides a three-wheeled bicycle (if that isn't a contradiction in terms) and writes poetry and volunteers here and there. She must have drawn on a very good gene pool and been much more careful and active and all that stuff.

Ah, well.

There are, of course, others in my shape or worse. When we greet each other and say, How are you? we usually just say, Fine. Meaning fine for the shape I'm in.



However, I am in better shape now than I was when I moved here five years ago. Isn't that interesting. Compliments to my doctors and thanksgivings to my Lord.

I think it's a combination of the right medications - heart condition - and prayer and praise. As I increase the latter I may be able to decrease the former. If you can follow all that.

If not. I enjoy life more because of the prayer and praise. And that's worth a lot.

Art class this morning! Joy, joy.

Hanger after.



Roses: Fragrance and Thorns

After several weeks of talking about thorns, I'd like to say a word about roses.

A true appreciation for colors, shapes and fragrances of roses can be lost in the press of attention to the thorns.

If you are standing far enough back from the flowers, you can enjoy their beauty without paying any attention to the danger. But you can miss the perfumes they hold for those who come up close.

If you're standing in the middle of the rosebushes while a windstorm is swirling them all around, it's hard to do anything but stay out of harms way.

Rejoicing Along The Way



The trick seems to be to get close enough to smell the roses while staying far enough back to avoid the thorns.

I think a lot of Christians try to do that. They try to get as close to Jesus as they can for the warmth and comfort his presence brings, while staying far enough back to safeguard whatever it is they are afraid he is going to take away from them.

I do that.

And I do it very well. I disguise my true motives, saying I am concerned with this or that aspect of the matter. I even find Scripture to back up my stance. But all the while, the truth is that I want something to be different from the way the Lord wants it to be. I want it my way.

Only sometimes you don't get to choose where you stand. You can only agree to stand there or walk away.

Before I walk away, I'd better make sure the ground I'm leaving isn't the one on top of the rock. I might be headed for sand instead.

If I'm sure of my ground, I can risk standing around among the roses even in the whirlwind.

The words of a song I've heard recently speak to this issue. The song goes, "Oh, let the Son of God enfold you in his Spirit and his love. Let him fill your heart and satisfy your soul. Let him have the things that hold you and his Spirit like a dove will descend upon your life and make you whole."

Let him have the things that hold you - everything that holds you back from touching and smelling and living among the roses of delight in his will, delight that quickens the senses, that fills rising in the morning with joy and going to bed at night with peace.

Sometimes I even ask the Lord if I couldn't have just a little recess from admiring the rose, a break from dodging thorns.

All those thorns have been taken by Jesus.

And when I look back from the other side of that place called “letting go,” I can mean it when I say that his yoke is easy and his burden light. Then I can renew my strength and soar on wings like eagles. I can run and not grow weary. I can walk and not be faint.

For I have smelled the roses of the Lord now and no other fragrance will ever satisfy.



What Can I Say?

Rejoicing Along The Way



My friend John Cowart says it's more important right now for me to paint book covers than to retype columns.

Boy, am I relieved!

I wrote those things years ago and I can't even read the small type now, especially on yellowing newsprint.

John says he thinks that, put together, the columns will amount to a spiritual classic.

If so, it's true that God can use anything or anyone He wants anyway He wants to. Singly, which is the way I wrote them, they were reflections on my spiritual journey, the rocks I tripped over, the ditches I fell in and the oases that turned out to be just more sand – and the occasional moments of peace and joy and fulfillment given to those who try to follow.

I sat with John as he scanned in just one column. I was overwhelmed by the process, the amount of detailed – DETAILED – steps involved. And he has done all these steps hundreds of times

When I retired, I stopped writing. It felt all burned up inside of me. I had nothing left to say.

Or so I thought. And I may have been right.

But John has put my fingers back on the keys and I press them down one at a time, prayerfully, waiting to see if the Lord has anything He wants me to say.

Like thank you.

Not, thank you, John, for all the work you are doing to make books of my columns. There is no way to do that. Besides, I don't actually think somehow that he is doing it for me.

But Thank You, Dear Lord, for reminding me of all the trials and all the joys and all the in-between



moments of the life which You have given me and in which You have been with me.

Bless those who labor in Your vineyard, Lord. I ask for a special blessing on those who are working on this book because they believe it will bring glory to Your name.

Their labors already do that.

So I'm off to the other labor, painting pictures for book covers. I am as skilled at this as I am at doing all those other things You have ask me to do, Dear Lord.

So go with me, please. And thank You.



One Of My Oddest Friends

I went to lunch with John Cowart and his daughter-in-law, Helen, last week to talk about "the books."

The books are collections of the columns I wrote to run on the *Religion* page of the *Florida Times Union* back when I was employed there.

But I don't want to talk about the books, at least not right now. There is something else on my mind.

While John and I were driving to the restaurant to meet Helen, he commented that after reading my columns, he had decided we were very different kinds of Christians. Very different.

And he is quite right. We are different.

Rejoicing Along The Way



I'm older. He's younger.

I talk and he acts.

I like music. He doesn't.

I write sporadically. He writes daily.

We both believe in the Gospel as revealed by God in the Scriptures.

But I think the difference he was referring to is that I talk about feeling God's presence and he says he doesn't.

I talk about having faith and he wonders if he has any.

I think he's just a much more humble Christian than I am.

I have experienced some dark nights of the soul, one that lasted several years. He has lived most of his life in a darkness that relies on knowledge that God is, but not on experience of Him.

I have led a few retreats, spoken to a few women's groups and taught a few Bible studies. He has done all that and served meals at places that feed the hungry and delivered clothes to places that clothe the not quite naked and responded to requests for all kinds of help. He has stood on street corners and taught about the Lord with stick drawings. He has also taught a blind man how to do the same thing by making a board with nails on which colored string can be strung to make pictures.

All based on a firm conviction that God is and that the Bible tells us so.

I think John finds my emotional relationship with God quite "other."

Years ago I worried about his lack of a warm and fuzzy relationship with God. According to my haphazard journal keeping, I even spoke to Ginny about this.



Fortunately I can't remember the conversation now. I just noted at the time that she said quite nicely that I shouldn't worry.

My relationship with my Lord is not just warm and fuzzy. It is painful and joyful, life-giving and death over-riding. Most of what I have learned about being a follower has come through painful encounters with the truth of who I am and Who he is.

I don't know how to describe John's except as I did above - you know Him by what John does.

John serves Him continually. It why he does whatever he does.

It's why he has put in hours turning my thoughts about trying to actually BE a child of God into a book. He thinks there are a lot more Christians like me out there in the world and that they could benefit from reading about my efforts, failures and successes, my failing and getting up to try again.

I hope he is right.

It would never have happened if it depended on me. I told him I couldn't deal with the articles any more. That time was past for me.

So he told me to bring it all to him and I did.

He has put an enormous amount of himself into getting the books made. I would never have done it. And I really would like his efforts to be rewarded. Especially if he is right and the columns can still minister to people.

I actually pray that the books will be successful, that people will want to read them and in doing so will find ways to draw nearer to the source of all joy.

I also pray that people will read John's blog, Rabid Fun, (at www.cowart.info/blog) and learn some other ways of doing the same thing.



Life-Changing Moments

Over the years I have interviewed quite a few people who have reported life-changing moments. They all said they became different people as a result of whatever it was that happened during these moments.

The most recent such interview was with Edwin Baxley, a logger who was paralyzed when a huge log fell from his truck and broke his spine. In telling the story of his life-changing moment, Baxley said he "made things right" with Jesus one afternoon while he was in the hospital for treatment of burns on his paralyzed legs.

And certainly a lot of things changed with that moment. Baxley stopped abusing drugs and alcohol. He returned to church and began testifying to the power of God to give him peace and joy even in his wheelchair.

While I was listening to Baxley tell his story, I was reminded of the parable of the Prodigal Son. He had a life-changing moment, too. Scripture says that



while he was feeding the swine, the son came to his senses and decided to go back to his father.

That phrase, "came to his senses," could easily be used of Baxley's moment in the hospital. A cousin had come to see him that day and had talked to him about the Lord. It was after he left that Baxley set things right.

But other members of his family had talked to him about the need for change and nothing had happened. Why was this moment different? Why did something happen just when it did? Why did the Prodigal Son come to his senses that particular day in that particular place? Why does anyone "come to his senses" and decide to turn to God?

I believe it is because the Holy Spirit opens their ears to hear the Word. But having said that, I cannot explain it.

I had a life-changing moment and I cannot tell you why it happened when it did and the way it did. I cannot explain why I was finally able to hear the saving message of God.

The answer is buried in the mystery of God's sovereignty in calling and of man's responsibility in responding.

Perhaps so many people are fascinated by such stories because of the mystery. Sometimes an account of somebody else's encounter with God and the details of the change that resulted can encourage someone else to want such an encounter. And that is part of the process.

A lot of people reject the reality of such change, seeing it as temporary at best or as wishful thinking. They watch to see if the person will fall back into

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former ways. Any sign of continued frailty is greeted with cries of, "I knew it! That sort of thing isn't real!"

It's true that it doesn't always last. Not all of the seed scattered by the sower send down deep roots and produce a good harvest.

But some of it does.

At least one person believed in the potential of Baxley's change. His former brother-in-law was convinced enough to invest in an expensive piece of equipment so that Baxley could return to work. He believed Baxley would be there to use the machine.

The real test of anyone's changed life is time. The life changing moment was, after all, only a beginning. We must then continue to allow God to complete the work he started in us. We must cooperate with him day by day.

There will be times when we fail to do that. We will fall flat on our faces while trying to live out what God is putting within. That doesn't mean the life-changing moment was not real. It simply means following Jesus is like that.

What we are doing with our changed lives is growing in likeness to Jesus. That is the purpose and goal of the change.

We need each other's help in the process. God has set it up that way. That's why I remember Baxley and the others I have interviewed in my prayers. And why I am so glad there are people out there praying for me to stay the course.



PHOTO
ENFORCED

Barbara White, Film Star

It was a jolt at a conference last weekend to open my eyes and find myself looking into a video camera lens.

The conference was being taped for later use as teaching sessions and the cameraman was panning the audience during the singing of some songs of praise and worship before the speaker was to begin.

I had been recorded!

A thousand thoughts — none of them spiritual — went through my mind in a flash. The thought that lingered as the camera turned slowly away was not one I am proud of.

Had I looked silly — eyes closed, hands clasped, body swaying very slightly to the music and lips moving in song?

I was conscious of feeling very awkward.

Worse, I felt artificial. Although there had been nothing unreal about my desire to worship, I felt as if I had only been going through the motions of worship to entertain or amuse an audience.

Suddenly I was aware — as I had not been before — of the other people around me, of their movements and their expressions. And I was aware of how strange the postures of worship must appear to those not taking part in them.

It was very disconcerting.

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I was reminded of one time when my grandfather had gone on and on with his prayer before Sunday dinner. When he had finally stopped, I had told him my cousin had not been paying attention.

His response had been to ask me how I knew.

His point, of course, was that I wouldn't have known what my cousin was doing if I had been paying attention to my own business.

And I wouldn't have known how funny we all looked while praising the Lord if I had kept on with my own worshipping.

But once conscious of it, I had to admit that we did look a little funny. I mean, there we were, many of us, with our faces raised, as if we were looking through closed eyelids at something or someone. But there was nothing there to see.

But then, worship is not a spectator sport.

It's nothing if not participatory. That is, you take part in it or you have no part in it.

Later, however, I did wonder why it had bothered me so much that my private moment of worship been recorded for others to see.

I recognized vanity as one answer.

I found another this week when I read a passage in John 12.

The passage starts talking about people who refused to accept the works that Jesus did as proof of who he was.

Then it says, "Yet at the same time many even among the leaders believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they would not confess their faith for fear

they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved praise from men more than praise from God."

And I recognized my desire for praise from men, my desire not to be thought foolish — or worse — by those who do not stand as I stand, move as I move, speak as I speak when I worship, some of whom are my Christian brothers and sisters.

I recognized that desire, and I rejected it.

I also recognized that sometimes I praise men rather than God, that I make the same kind of judgments of others. And I repented of it.

I am grateful to that chance encounter with that video camera. It gave me the opportunity to question my heart about what it really desires: to be a people pleaser or a Father pleaser.



Relaxing Along The Way

I saw the sun rise almost every morning while I was in the mountains on vacation a week ago.

No two of the sunrises were exactly the same, although certain elements were present in all of them.

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Each had some dark and some light, some sky and some land.

Most had some clouds.

And some of the clouds — each in its own way — reflected the glory of God.

Clouds do not project any light of their own, they only reflect the light of the rising sun while the sun is still low enough to shine on their bottoms and sides.

The parts of the clouds touched by the sun were brilliant, a color that is orange, peach and pink all combined into a melting, luminous gold that is like nothing else I know.

The rest of the clouds, the tops and the sides away from sun, were some sort of gray.

People are like that.

We can only reflect the glory of God on the part of us that is turned toward him. Somewhere in the best of us is some gray, some part that is still turned away.

The wonder is not that the cloud has dark areas. After all, clouds are formed of the dust and mist of the earth. The wonder is that it is able to reflect the indescribable glory of its Creator at all.

For no matter how dark and threatening a cloud may look, if there is the least little opening in it which the sun can penetrate, we will be able to see there the momentary splendor of its light.

The same miracle is true for us, as well. No matter how unlikely we seem as sources of the glory of God, we can reflect him into the world. He can use the dingiest of us if he chooses to.

Barbara White



It's a comforting thought. You know. Like Balaam's ass. A person does not have to be wonderful or perfect or even acceptable to anyone else but God.

After all, it isn't the cloud's glory. It is God's.

It isn't my honor, praise or distinction that shines like that — ever. It is always God's.

And it is always there, in one way or another, for us to see, to remind us of who he is and who we are.

Scripture tells us that clouds have already revealed the glory of God in various ways.

Exodus 40:43 says, "Then the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle."

And First Kings 8:11 tells us that the priests could not perform their service before the Lord because of the cloud "for the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified."

The magnificence I saw on those morning clouds did not terrify me, but then I was not in the midst of them.

It did fill me with awe and wonder.

As does a favorite passage of Scripture, from Psalm 19.

"The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands;

"Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge.

"There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard.

"Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world."

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It's worth getting up early to hear this silent, but powerful message.

It is also good to remember, to meditate upon the fact that even though we have our dark and dingy sides, God may choose sometimes to reflect the light of his Son from us into his world.

Some people may have scoured away enough gray from their personalities — actually, God scoured it away — so that they reflect more light than others, but the source of the glory that we see is always the same. It is the Son.

So if we sometimes catch a glimpse of that glory in another person, we must not then be dismayed if we see the gray as well. It was never just that other person. It was always the presence of the Lord.



A Paper Stuck In My Bible

Tucked inside my Bible, marking the place where I will open it in the morning, is a small plastic-covered piece of paper.

It contains words that have challenged my faith to grow and deepen.

On the paper, which was given to me by a friend, are the words of a prayer of daily commitment.

Since it was given to me, I have tried to say it daily. And each time, I have tried to understand the meaning of the words in the depths of my heart and to translate them into the moments of my day.



The prayer begins easily enough. It's opening verse contains words I am very familiar with. They feel like old friends.

*O Lord, Jesus Christ,
I give myself anew to you this day
All that I am,
All that I have;
To be totally and unconditionally
yours
For your using.*

I guess I have said that phrase "all that I am and all that I have" many, many times in the past. I have learned that I know only a little of their true meaning.

It is easy to promise everything when you have no concept of what "everything" means. The words sound good, but they do not lay any difficult specifics on you.

When I say that all of me belongs to God, I intend that to be true. But I don't manage to make it happen that way, even in the simple area of money.

As soon as something comes along that calls to me and says, "Make me your own, pay the price and own me," I don't check it out with the Lord. I check with my checkbook and if the figures are right, I make up my own mind and do what I want.

It is, however, fairly easy to say this part of the prayer because it leaves so much unsaid.

But the second part of the prayer shows that we are talking about more than financial accountability.

It says:

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*Take me away from myself
And use me up as you will,
When you will,
Where you will,
With whom you will.*

That's a good deal more specific. It is so specific, in fact, that it's a little daunting.

When I say these words, I am telling God that I am available to him and may be used by him in any way he wishes.

And I know that he may take me up on this offer at the very-moment when I am on my way to do something I consider important — or something I very much want to do, although it isn't important at all.

He may want me to do something with somebody I don't know or — even worse — with somebody I do know and don't like.

He not only *may*, he probably *will*. After all, he wants me to grow in my ability to love and serve.

So I would rather be used when it isn't convenient than never be used at all.

I weigh the difference between offering myself to Him and holding myself from Him, then I choose the former. I say the words with all the conviction I can, knowing the best I can do is not really good enough.

Then I come to the third and final verse.

*O Lord, Jesus Christ,
Take from me by loving force
All that I withhold from you,
All that I will not give you,
That you may be always,
Completely Lord of my life.*



As I say these words, I stand naked before the one who knows my heart.

It is uncomfortable at first, that nakedness. What I have tried to keep hidden is exposed.

But I am only telling myself what God already knows — that I hold out on him — and I find I really do not want to do that.

So there is a sense of freedom and release in the speaking.

Making me into the person he wants me to be is, after all, God's task. The prayer merely acknowledges that I give him my permission to do it.

I am truly grateful to the friend who gave me this prayer. It has blessed me. Perhaps it will prove a blessing to you as well.



Love.

Everybody talks about it.

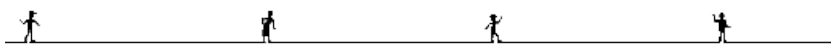
But doing it is a lot harder than talking.

What follows are some random thoughts on the difficult task of loving.

I spotted some little lines around my lips the other day. Obviously they have been there for a while, but I just saw them.

I'm not sure whether they are genetic — Mother had them — or have to do with my penchant for

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compressing my lips in disapproval of something or other.

I suspect the latter.

In far too many instances, I express disapproval. And I try to hard not to do that! I work at not making value judgments about other people and the things they do. I try. I just don't succeed. The lines around my lips convict me. At some point, the idea must have been planted firmly in my head that things should be a certain way. And not only should be, they could be — if people would just do the right thing. The "right thing" always being the things I was accustomed to, of course.

But things frequently aren't that way, and I have pressed my lips together in criticism — conscious and unconscious — often enough to cause little lines to form.

And to deepen.

The lines aren't as noticeable when my mouth is relaxed. And they disappear when I smile.

Well, they almost disappear. Faint traces of a couple of the deeper ones remain even then.

But you have to be looking for them to see them. I doubt if many people are all that conscious of them.

But they are very plain to the Lord and me.

In fact, I suspect he called my attention to them. I firmly believe he helped me identify something that is different about the times when I purse my lips and those when I smile.

The difference is love.



I'm hardly ever critical when I'm busy loving someone. Even if they do something wrong, I don't have the negative reaction that causes compressed lips.

If I don't want to have lines around my mouth, the solution seems simple: Learn to love more often.

The question is, how? How do I become a person who loves more than she judges? Not surprisingly, Scripture has answers.

For example, look at what Jesus has to say about the woman who washed his feet with her tears.

The story, recorded in Luke 7:36-50, goes that one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to dinner, and while he was there a women came in, wet his feet with her tears, wiped them with her hair, kissed them, then poured expensive perfumed over them.

Now she wasn't the right sort of woman to be welcomed in that house. And the Pharisee thought poorly of Jesus for letting her touch him at all. And Jesus, knowing his thoughts, told him the story of two men who owed money to a moneylender. One owed a lot and one a little, but neither could repay the loan. And the moneylender canceled both debts.

And Jesus asked, "Now which of them will love him more?"

And the Pharisee answered, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt canceled."

And Jesus said, "You have judged correctly."

And Jesus pointed out that the Pharisee had not offered him any water in which to wash his feet and had not offered him a kiss, but the women had done both.

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And he said, "Therefore, I tell you, her many sins are forgiven — for she has loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little."

What do I need to become a better lover?

Well, first I need to become a more clear-sighted person. It's very hard to judge others when you can really see yourself as you are.

Then I need to become more aware of the overwhelming, undeserved love of God for me in Jesus Christ. God does not purse his lips at my failings.

I know, I know. God is spirit and doesn't have lips. But he doesn't reject me, which is what I do to others when I purse my lips at them.

Then, with a deep, abiding sense of how I am forgiven, I can love with no thought of either disapproval or approval.



The devil Did It?

The electricity went off just as the washing machine was about to begin the spin cycle. The plumber was standing by a hole in the front yard, watching to see whether the water would go through the main drain.

Only, with no power, there was no motion from the washer and no water in the pipe.

The woman at the power company didn't know why the power was off — she hadn't even known it



was off until I called — and she had no idea how long it would be before power was restored.

And I was paying the plumber by the minute!

All this was before I left home for work. And things didn't get better later.

Have you ever had a day like that?

I'll bet you have. Maybe more than one.

Well, as I said, the day continued in the same vein.

The traffic jam happened almost immediately after I turned onto San Jose Boulevard on my way to work.

I had been inching forward for about 10 minutes when I began to wonder if this was going to be what my 6-year-old granddaughter calls "the worst day of my life."

Only remembering how Nicole says it — just dripping with emotion — made me laugh. And it's very hard to get a persecution complex while laughing.

Laughter also helped me realize I was undoubtedly not the only person in the traffic jam who had already had other problems that morning.

Anyway, I decided all this probably was not Satan out to get me.

As my friend John Cowart has said, "This whatever — you fill in the blank— is not a problem to be solved. It is life to be lived."

Think about that.

What happens isn't the most important thing.

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What happens is life and while we can make some things in it worse or better, some things we can't do anything about.

After all, the Bible says God "causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:45).

The most important thing is how you respond to what happens.

Your response reveals who you are and where you are in the process of being made over into the image of Jesus Christ.

And deciding who you are responding to is a major part of knowing how to respond.

A conference leader told me recently that there is a major problem with deciding Satan is behind all your troubles and rebuking them. Some of the harassment is satanic in origin, he said. Some of it may have been planted in your path by God.

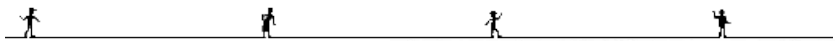
And then again, some problems are caused by our own stupidity and the proper response is to try thinking about things before we act.

But what if it is God who is putting things in my path that look and feel like stumbling blocks? If that's the case, rebuke is definitely not the proper response.

It's better to ask if there is something in my life that God wants me to deal with, but which I have been avoiding. And then it's better, when the Holy Spirit tells me what it is, to deal with it.

Unfortunately, sometimes it takes stopped-up plumbing and power outages and even traffic jams to make me ask.

Barbara White



Barbara White



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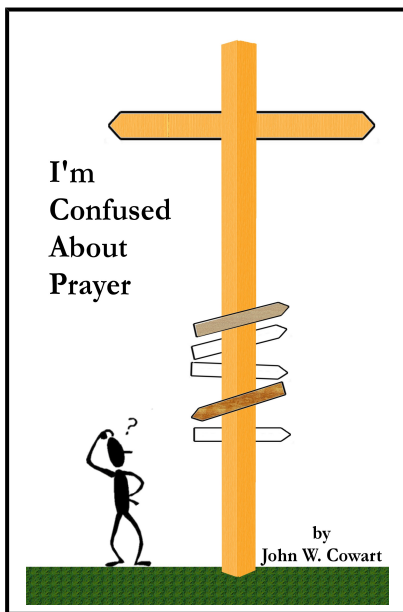
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**If you enjoy Barbara White's *Along The Way* Series,
You may also enjoy her friend John Cowart's book:**



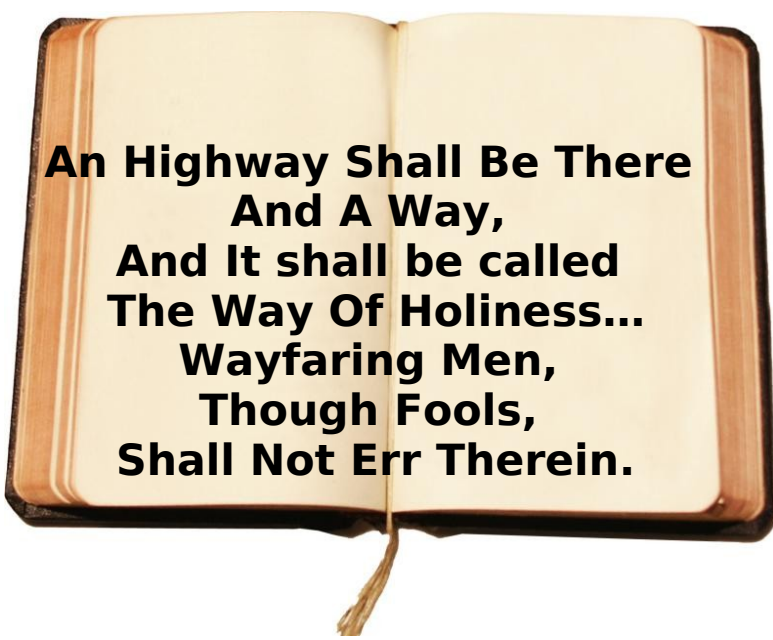
John Cowart, who claims to be World's Foremost Authority On Unanswered Prayer, says, "I've prayed for more things and didn't get them than anyone else I know."

But many other people also wonder why their prayers seem to get nowhere. So John's amusing book addresses such issues as: Is Anybody out there to answer prayers? If God is able to answer, then why doesn't He? Is God as mean as a snake? Is there something wrong with my faith, my sins, my breath? If God did speak to me during prayer, would I hear Him? If I don't have a whole lot of faith, will God answer me anyhow? Am I praying, or just wishing?

And as John worries such questions, he presents his famous Skunk Proof for the existence of a loving God.

John dedicates the book to his wife, Ginny, with the words, "I prayed 35 years ago to get over loving you. I'm so glad that God did not answer my prayer".....

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An open book with a dark brown cover and a light brown tassel hanging from the center. The pages are cream-colored and feature a bold, black, sans-serif text centered across both pages. The text is a biblical verse, likely from Isaiah 40:3.

**An Highway Shall Be There
And A Way,
And It shall be called
The Way Of Holiness...
Wayfaring Men,
Though Fools,
Shall Not Err Therein.**

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