

Living

by

Faith

by

Marilyn Ganskow

*Practical reflections
on the Scriptures*

New Life Ministries

P. O. Box 131564
Carlsbad, CA
92013-1564

For information call:

1-800-786-4913

or visit us on the Internet:

www.newlifemediaseries.com

Unless otherwise noted, Scriptures are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version, Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of International Bible Society.

Other Scripture references: RSV - Revised Standard Version; NEB - New English Bible; NKJV - New King James Version; ASV - American Standard Version; Phillips - The New Testament translated by J. B. Phillips.

Copyright 1998 by M. F. Ganskow. Second edition 2004. All rights reserved. Nothing may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission of the author.

Dear Reader:

These reflections on various subjects have been written to offer understanding into the Scriptures as well as help in applying them to everyday living. They can be used for private or group devotions and group discussion.

*The **Suggestions for Prayer-Listening** are intended to allow God to lead you in your times of prayer.¹ With each suggested prayer, wait for inspiration and then follow God's leading as to how to pray further. Some of the suggested prayers will not apply to your life at this time, and sometimes you will not receive any leading. This only means you are to pray about something else.*

The Holy Spirit will help you to comprehend God's leading, usually an impression on your mind or "inner sight." Some will receive inspiration in the form of a word or a Scripture reference. Others will see scenes with their inner imaginations that inspire them to pray. I have found it best to write down what God is leading me to pray so I have a record of it. I have left room for you to do so.

*The **Suggestions for Meditation** are offered to help you draw closer to God and enjoy a more intimate relationship with Him. Before your times of prayer or meditation it helps to do the following:*

- *sit in a quiet, comfortable place*
- *take two or three deep breaths and slowly exhale*
- *feel the tension leave your body as you relax*
- *invite God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) to be with you*
- *wait until you feel you are centered in His presence.*

¹ Suggested reference material: "Listening Prayer," Leanne Payne, MI

Two commonly used forms of meditation are suggested in this book:

***a) contemplative prayer (or centering prayer)** -- empty your mind of thoughts so that God can fill you with what you desire from Him or whatever He desires for you. Some people repeat a Christian word; such as “love” or “Jesus” to help them set aside their thoughts and become centered in silence.*

***b) meditation** -- contemplate a Scripture passage or some other inspired writing and pray about it. You may want to ask God if there is some way you need to change your thinking or behavior. There may also be a promise that God wants you to claim.*

May you discover closer fellowship with God and grow in wisdom and love as you contemplate His blessings granted to us through Jesus Christ.

Marilyn Ganskow

A Living Hope

“May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loves us and by his grace gives us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you.”

II Thessalonians 2:16

God wants His people to live with a unique and living hope, which He gives freely through Jesus Christ. It is something more than human hope, which is a vague, future expectation. Christian hope is the ***confident expectation*** of the future blessings of God.

Because God loves us, He does not want us to go through life frequently discouraged or depressed. We are warned not to place our hope in things that have only fleeting value:

“Do not put your hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but put your hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Those who hope in God will not be disappointed.” I Timothy 6:17 and Isaiah 49:23b

Many of us hope for things that soon have little meaning: possessions, status, power, pleasure or superficial relationships. These things may give us fleeting feelings of well being, but they do not provide us with the quality of living we long for. We gradually become discouraged and lose hope.

The Christians of the early church were known for their hope -- a hope that did not die because the One in whom they hoped had conquered death. For example, the apostle Peter’s hope was not just wishful thinking; it was based on the **evidence** of God’s power at work in the resurrection of Jesus.²

“God has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” I Peter 1:3

² Romans 8:11

We, too, can base our hope on what God did in Jesus Christ and what He has done in countless lives since then. If our circumstances are difficult, we can remember that we do not judge how faithful God is by how good or bad our circumstances are. We look at our circumstances through the knowledge that God is faithful and will see us through. We do not assume God has stopped caring for us when things go wrong. Rather, we assume that God is working to bring about our highest good because He loves us and we trust Him.

“There is surely a future hope for you, and your hope will not be cut off.” “For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’ ” Proverbs 23:18, Jeremiah 29:11

Hopelessness often begins with complaining and self-pity. The dictionary defines a complaint as an accusation. By complaining, we are accusing God of mishandling our lives. Our self-pity indicates our lack of trust in Him.

Christian hope grows through trusting in God and experiencing His faithfulness to see us through difficult circumstances. Each time we face a new challenge, we can draw on our previous experiences of God’s loving care. These form the foundation of our hope. When I become discouraged, I find it helpful to recall the ways God has blessed me in past times of trouble. I also remind myself that my hope weakens if I am not faithful in reading the Scriptures, in prayer, in worship and in fellowship with other Christians.

As disciples of Jesus, our lives are to be marked by a sense of anticipation -- an expectant hope. Peter called it our “living hope.”³ It produces serenity in times of trouble, a sense of direction in times of confusion, a feeling of expectancy and triumph regarding life -- a quiet confidence that God is bringing His highest and best to our lives.

The author of the book of Hebrews does not want us to forget God’s gift of hope:

*“We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.”
Hebrews 6:19a, 10:23*

³ I Peter 1:3

As we face the pressures of life, we are to remember that God is faithful to care for us and fill us with hope. I join the apostle Paul in praying this prayer for you:

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” Romans 15:13

Practical Application

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. To be without hope is to be only half alive. What are the things that usually cause people to lose hope? _____

2. The strength of our hope will depend on how much we trust in the faithfulness of God. What will help us trust God to act on our behalf?

3. Why is it important to invite and encourage the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives? **Romans 8:11**

Suggestions for Prayer-Listening

a. Hopelessness (depression) may be caused by illness, a habit of negative thinking, a chemical imbalance, improper eating and sleeping habits or lack of spiritual disciplines.

*Heavenly Father, is there a change I need to make
so my heart will be a place where your hope will grow?*

b. From time to time, it is important to consider whether or not our hopes are pleasing to God.

*Heavenly Father, what are the things you want me to be hoping for: a)
myself*

b) my loved ones

Suggestions for Meditation

a) Recall some of the events in your life where you have experienced God's faithfulness to deliver you out of difficulty. Express your gratitude to Him.

With the certainty of God's faithfulness in your past, now project this certainty into your present circumstances, then into your future.

Our Heart, God's Home

In Biblical language, the heart is the center of personal life: our feeling, thinking and willing. It is where our motives, our decisions and our desires arise. We know what the Scriptures are referring to when they say that our hearts “pound,” “fail,” “yearn,” “faint,” “burn within,” “leap for joy,” “grieve” or “melt.” Our hearts can be “stubborn and rebellious,” “callous and unfeeling,” “malicious” or “filled with selfish ambition.” Jesus challenged the Pharisees, “*Why are you thinking these things in your hearts?*” And He warned them, “*God knows your hearts.*” Luke 5:22, 16:15

God created our hearts as a place for Him to dwell. He also created our hearts to respond to Him: to know Him,⁴ to trust Him and to love Him. In both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, we are urged to love God with all our hearts and love our neighbors as ourselves⁵

My heart is often cluttered with too many obligations and desires. And the more cluttered my heart becomes, the less I am devoted to God. I am reassured when I realize I am not alone with this problem. David prayed, “*Give me an undivided heart that I may fear your name.*” “*May every fiber of my being unite in reverence to your name.*”⁶ David wanted this so much that he asked God to search and test and purify his heart.⁷ We cannot correctly judge our hearts for we are masters at rationalizing our desires and behavior. Jeremiah rightly described our hearts as “deceitful.”⁸

The apostle Paul was aware of this same problem, “*My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me . . . He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts.*” I Corinthians 4:4, 5b

My heart becomes divided when I follow “*the ways of this world,*”⁹ the ways of competitiveness, material success, and popularity. It is a path that leads me away from God and toward despair because I am depending on my own power to succeed. I become preoccupied with myself and view my circumstances only by how they are affecting me. People or circumstances frequently disappoint me and, when I compare my life with others, there is always someone who has achieved more than I have.

⁴ Jeremiah 24:7

⁵ Deuteronomy 6:5, Leviticus 19:18 and Matthew 22:37

⁶ Psalm 86: 11b, New International Version and Living Bible

⁷ Psalm 51:10, 139:23-24

⁸ Jeremiah 17:9

⁹ I Corinthians 3:19, Romans 12:2, Ephesians 2:1-2

God spoke through Ezekiel to give understanding into this self-defeating nature of our hearts and to give hope to those who seek Him. *“But I swore to them in the wilderness that I would not bring them into the land I had given them, a land full of milk and honey, the choicest spot on earth, because they laughed at my laws, ignored my wishes, and violated my Sabbaths -- their hearts were with their idols.”* (Ezekiel 20:15-16 LB) *“Yet I looked on them with pity . . . I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.”* Ezekiel 20:17a, 36:25-27

It was the coming of Jesus Christ that made all of this possible. Following His sacrificial death for our sins, *“God sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts.”*¹⁰ With His Spirit in our hearts, God’s prophecy is fulfilled, *“I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the Lord. They will be my people, and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their heart.”* Jeremiah 24:7

When I return to God with yearning and searching in my heart, I discover the deepest riches of life -- faith, hope and love. I grow in an interior life where I make a deep connection with God. From time to time, I must recognize that my heart has become cluttered and I have turned toward the ways of the world. As I confess this to God, He forgives me and invites me to be enfolded in His love.

Many of us resist surrendering our hearts to God. We don’t want to give up the control we think we have over our lives. We need to listen to these words of Jesus: *“For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.”*¹¹ There may be some hurt or fear within us that keeps us closed to God and needs to be healed. We can ask the Lord in prayer to heal whatever is keeping our heart from trusting and loving Him more deeply.

It is when I am trusting my circumstances and relationships to God that my heart is uncluttered and I can have that undivided heart that David prayed for -- a heart

¹⁰ Galatians 4:6

¹¹ Matthew 13:15

surrendered so that the Son of God may dwell there and lovingly lead me to the abundant life of peace and fulfillment He promises.¹²

Paul prayed for us:

“I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.”

Ephesians 3:17a

Practical Application

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

The prophet Jeremiah declared that our heart is “*deceitful above all things*”. He made this statement after describing two kinds of people. What is the difference between them? Jeremiah 17:5-8 _____

How do our hearts deceive us regarding trusting in ourselves and trusting in God? _____

¹² John 10:10, 14:27

Living by Faith

2. If your heart has become cluttered with many pre-occupations, what can you do about it?

3. What causes some hearts to become like stone?

Ezekiel 36:26 and Matthew 13:15

Suggestions for Prayer-Listening

Heavenly Father, is there something keeping me from surrendering my heart more fully to you?

What area of my life do you want me to entrust more fully to you?

Lord Jesus, is there some part of my heart that has become like stone (from some negative feeling or unconfessed sin)?

Suggestions for Meditation

Draw a simple picture of a heart with at least four sections in it. Label each section with some part of your life (for example: family, employment or creative work, health, recreation). In quiet meditation, slowly surrender what God brings to your mind as you offer each area to Him.

A Grateful Heart

The media often depicts individuals and families living idyllic lives. When things are not going well for us, we see our lives in dark contrast to the happiness others seem to be enjoying. Our pain is real and, rather than turn outward to offer praise to God, we turn inward in self-pity or depression.

If we are struggling with negative feelings, we can find help in the book of Hebrews, *“Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross.” Hebrews 12:1b-2a*

What are the things that hinder and entangle us? The greatest burden we carry in life is self: our doubt and depression about ourselves, our fear and anger about our circumstances, our lack of control and lack of love in our relationships. So much depends on the way we handle our thinking, for it determines our feelings and behavior. Do we feed negative thoughts to ourselves, allowing them to affect who we are, or do we face our negative thoughts and seek the truth regarding them? Our goal should be to replace our negative thinking with positive thinking.

We are not to ignore the thoughts and feelings that trouble us. We are to acknowledge them and give them to God. Faith is believing God has sovereign control over our circumstances. When we trust our weaknesses and difficult situations to Him, we are believing in His faithfulness to redeem them (bring good out of them).

Most of us stubbornly try to control our circumstances rather than surrender them to God. We are afraid to trust ourselves into His care. God wants us to seek His guidance for every important challenge and relationship. We are to do this with a childlike trust in His promise: *“I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you.” Psalm 32:8*

I urge you to read an account of the faith and trust of King Jehoshaphat in II Chronicles 20:1-30. Jehoshaphat had been warned that several armies were approaching to attack him. At first the king was fearful, but he kept his eyes on God and persevered.

Living by Faith

From this story of King Jehoshaphat, we can learn several things to help us overcome our negative feelings and gain victory over the challenges we face: we can practice a life of prayer and learn the benefits of fasting (verses 3-6); we can recall what God has done to help us in the past (verses 7-9); we can acknowledge our need and keep our eyes on God for the answers (verse 12); we can believe that the battle becomes God's when we give our difficulties to Him (verses 15, 17). Finally, we can proclaim our faith by praising God ahead of time (verses 21-22). Even when there is no evidence that God is at work, we continue to believe in His victory.

We are to live by faith, not by sight.¹³ One of the best ways we can live by faith is to claim the promises of God. It helps to underline them in our Bibles and thank God for them in our prayers. Thanking God for His faithfulness helps us to maintain our trust. Perhaps the reason we are often anxious and depressed is that we are not continually praising God and giving thanks to Him. We are not told to be thankful *for* everything, but to be thankful and praise God *in* everything because we know that He is at work on our behalf.¹⁴

Several years ago, at a time when everything seemed to be going wrong in my life, I asked the Lord in prayer why I was not living in the peace He promised. I believe His response to me was, "It is because you do not have a grateful heart, Marilyn." Even in difficult times, there are things for which we can be grateful. Our gratitude is an indication of our trust in God. How many of God's blessings have we been unable to receive because we have not been trusting Him with a grateful heart? Instead, we have felt sorry for ourselves. Our focus was on our problems instead of on God and His answers.

When we are fearful and focus on what is wrong in our lives, we are affirming the negative. Part of the nature of faith is that we help to bring about what we have faith in. If we believe in what we fear, we help to bring it about. Job discovered this and wrote, "*What I feared has come upon me; what I dreaded has happened to me. I have no peace, no quietness; I have no rest, but only turmoil.*"¹⁵ To counteract our negative feelings, we need an "attitude of gratitude." It grows only with practice. Each day, as we drive our cars or shower or walk, we can tell God all the things for which we are grateful.

¹³ II Corinthians 5:7

¹⁴ I Thessalonians 5:18

¹⁵ Job 3:25-26

God has a perfect plan for us, but often He does not move us to the next step of our lives until we peacefully accept that He is in control of our present situation and will use it as part of His plan. Nothing happens without God's consent. When He allows negative things to occur, it is for a good reason. The promise of God to all believers is that He makes all things -- even our mistakes and our suffering -- work out for our highest good when we love Him and trust our lives to His purpose.¹⁶

*“You are my God, and I will give you thanks; you are my God, and I will exalt you.
Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever.”
Psalm 119:28-29*

Practical Application

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Read **II Chronicles 20:1-30**. What message does God have for you in this story?

2. In difficult times, why is it important to thank God, even when we have no evidence that He is working on our behalf?

¹⁶ Romans 8:28

Living by Faith

3. What negative thoughts do you sometimes accept about yourself? _____

Do these thoughts reflect how Jesus feels about you? What is the best way to change your negative thoughts to positive thoughts?

Suggestions for Prayer-Listening

Lord Jesus, is there some circumstance in my life that I am dwelling on in a negative way?

Help me now to entrust this into your care and teach me how to replace my anxious thoughts with grateful thoughts.

Suggestions for Meditation

a) Make a list of all the things that occurred in the past year for which you are grateful. Recall each incident and give thanks to God.

b) Using the following quotation at the end of this chapter, allow your heart to fill with gratitude. Meditate on this verse a few words at a time.

“You are my God, and I will give you thanks; you are my God, and I will exalt you. Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever.” Psalm 119:28-29

New Beginnings

When a new year begins, many well-intentioned people make resolutions they find difficult to keep. Instead of resolutions, would it not be better if we developed a deeper trust in God? This would mean trusting Him with a childlike dependence - counting on Him to help us live better lives.

“Because you answer prayer, all mankind will come to you with their requests. Though sins fill our hearts, you forgive them all. How greatly to be envied are those you have chosen to come and live with you within the holy tabernacle courts! What joys await us among all the good things there!”
Psalms 65:1-4 LB

Perhaps you are thinking that you are too insignificant, or you have made too many mistakes for God to care enough about you to give you a fresh start in life. But think of Moses and how mightily God used him, despite the fact that he had murdered an Egyptian before he escaped to the desert. Or David, who reigned long and well as king of Judah, even after he had disposed of Bathsheba's husband by sending him to the front lines in war.¹⁷ Or the apostle Paul, who before his conversion plotted to imprison and kill Christians.¹⁸ Only by God's forgiving love did these men overcome their feelings of unworthiness to find a new life.

Many of us feel guilty because we have not overcome some weakness. We may think that God sees us coming with the same old failures and sin and saying, “Oh no, here he/she comes again.” But God offers unending forgiveness through Jesus Christ. There is nothing that God will not forgive because Christ has already paid the penalty on the cross.

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” I John 1:9 RSV

“I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins. I have swept away your transgressions like a cloud, and your sins like the morning mist; return to me, for I have redeemed you.”
Isaiah 43:25, 44:22 RSV

Some of us accept God's forgiveness on an intellectual level only. It does not enter our hearts so we can believe it and forgive ourselves. Others of us may have

¹⁷ Exodus 2:11-15, II Samuel 11:14-15

¹⁸ I Corinthians 15:9

been unfairly blamed or shamed by someone else and, even though innocent, we carry unnecessary guilty feelings that drag us down and cripple our potential for living. As we begin a new year or even a new day, we can have the slate of our lives wiped clean. If we are suffering from false guilt (placed upon us by others and not confirmed by God), it needs to be released to Him. We can ask the Lord to show us what lies about ourselves we believe and offer them to Him for healing. If it is true guilt (placed upon us by God), we need to confess it. We can ask the Lord to heal the root of our weakness so we will be strong against further temptation.

Repentance is an important part of our confession. Repentance means to turn about, a radical change of focus from self back to God. Early in His ministry, Jesus proclaimed, *“Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand.”*¹⁹ When we repent and seek God’s forgiveness, we are drawing nearer to Him as cleansed vessels and He can pour the blessings of His kingdom into our lives.

“When the kindness and love of God our Savior appears, he saves us, not because of righteous things we have done, but because of his mercy. He saves us through the washing and rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he pours out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior.” Titus 3:5 (present-tense mine)

When we ask God to cleanse us and make us new, we are inviting His kingdom to dwell in greater reality within us. Jesus said, *“Seek the kingdom of God . . . for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”*²⁰ The kingdom of God is where God reigns -- where He shares Himself with us -- His very nature of love, joy, peace, wisdom, goodness, gentleness and self-control -- empowering us to live anew.²¹ And He promises that He will never cease His work of transformation in us.²²

So let us begin a new chapter of our lives by drawing nearer to God so we will receive His cleansing, refreshing and empowering. How do we draw nearer to God? It is through God’s Son, and Jesus tells us how to do it:

“If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit . . . If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you . . . As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love.”
John 15:5,7,9

¹⁹ Matthew 4:17

²⁰ Luke 12:31a-32b NKJV

²¹ Galatians 5:22

²² Philipians 1:6

In prayer, in worship, in private meditation and in reading the Scriptures, we draw nearer to God. Our trust in Him grows and we learn that He is faithful.

“Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord and has made the Lord his hope and confidence. He is like a tree planted along a riverbank, with its roots reaching deep into the water -- a tree not bothered by the heat nor worried by long months of drought. Its leaves stay green and it goes right on producing all its luscious fruit.”
Jeremiah 17:7-8 LB

God has been called the “Hound of Heaven.” He is seeking us out and wooing us with His love. *“I have loved you with an everlasting love, I have drawn you with loving kindness. I will build you up again.”*²³ This sweet call from heaven sounds throughout our lifetime, if we will only hear it.

God has also been called the “God of New Beginnings.” Trust in His promise: *“I am making every- thing new! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life.”*²⁴

Practical Application

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Jesus warned Peter that, in spite of good intentions, Peter would betray His Master (Matthew 26:31-34). What new beginning did Jesus give to His disciple?
John 21:15-17 _____

What should this passage mean to us when we think we have failed or have little to offer? _____

²³ Jeremiah 3:3-4a

²⁴ Revelation 21:5a-6b

Living by Faith

2. Peter must have received Christ's forgiveness and forgiven himself to have become such a powerful leader in the early church. Why is it sometimes difficult

a) to _____ receive _____ God's forgiveness _____

b) to forgive ourselves? _____

3. How do feelings of guilt and unworthiness cripple our relationships? _____

Suggestions for Prayer-Listening

Lord Jesus, is there some part of my life where you would like me to make a fresh start -- with different desires and/or disciplines?

a) desires

b) disciplines

Suggestions for Meditation

Before beginning this meditation, confess to God your failure in any area He brings to your mind. Then receive God's forgiveness and forgive yourself for your weakness. With humility and gratitude, meditate upon the following verse (taking a few words at a time).

*"I have loved you with an everlasting love,
I have drawn you with loving-kindness.
I will build you up again."
Jeremiah 3:3-4a*

Living by the Truth

“These are the things you are to do: Speak the truth to each other, and render true and sound judgment in your courts; do not plot evil against your neighbor, and do not love to swear falsely. I hate all this,’ declares the Lord.” Zechariah 8:16-17

The dictionary defines truth as conformity to fact. It is reality. The Bible teaches that God is truth -- ultimate reality -- and that, *“grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”*²⁵ Jesus came to earth to reveal the truth about God and about life. Truth is to be learned *and* lived.

Lying is deceiving through false statements or withholding the truth through silence. It is acting contrary to the moral nature of God and His universe. *“God is light, and no shadow of darkness can exist in him.”*²⁶ When we lie, we are not choosing the path of God’s light but the path of darkness. *“Whoever lives by the truth comes into the light.”*²⁷

At one time or another all of us have become careless about the truth or have used the ‘lie’ of silence to promote or protect ourselves. We may think that our deceit can be “put in a box” (compartmentalized) and forgotten and it will not harm anyone. However, if we continue in our deceit, our consciences become dull and no longer signal us to do right. The Scriptures are clear that our behavior becomes progressively destructive.²⁸

A person who enjoys a close relationship with God will be less tempted to promote or protect himself through falsehood. It is the person who does not know how God values him who needs to promote himself and will use falsehood to protect his image. If we believe God loves us and wants to bless us, we are confident we have value and we no longer have to promote ourselves.

Life is held together and nurtured by truth. David, king of Judah, knew this and believed that the surest guide in life is God’s truth. He wrote,

“Teach me your way, O Lord, and I will walk in your truth.” “Turn my heart toward your statutes and not toward selfish gain. Turn my eyes away from worthless things; preserve my life according to your word.” Psalm 86:11a, Psalm 119:36-37

²⁵ John 1:17

²⁶ I John 1:5

²⁷ John 3:21

²⁸ Ephesians 4:18-19

Just as David asked God to help him, we can ask the Lord to help us live by the truth. Sometimes we tell a lie and we don't understand why.²⁹ We can ask the Lord, "Why did I tell that lie?" And then ask Him to heal the cause. From time to time we all need inner healing. We may have suffered from some hurtful trauma in the past or we have unmet needs from childhood that lead us into deceitful behavior. Here is God's promise, "*I have seen his ways, but I will heal him; I will guide him and restore comfort to him.*" *Isaiah 57:18*

My greatest temptation to lie came from a weakness I asked the Lord to heal -- I used to deny that negative things were happening in a relationship in order to avoid angry confrontation. At the root of my denial was my need to be accepted and my fear of confrontation.

Now, when I am angry, I ask the Lord to give me wisdom and help me deal with any necessary confrontation. I also try to remember, "Am I willing to listen to their side or am I going to try to control or cause another to feel inadequate? Is this the right time to discuss the issue?"

Jesus promised He is "*the way, and the truth and the life.*"³⁰ If we ask Him to help us, He will teach us what we need to know about ourselves and will heal us. We are set free to discover the life for which we were created. "*If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.*" *John 8:31-32*

Some of us are not willing to accept that our deceit weakens us and the consequences affect many. John Donne wrote, "No man is an island," and Paul wrote, "*we are members one of another.*"³¹ Our negative actions *always* affect others and our denial in this regard makes matters worse.

David knew he found excuses for his behavior, so he prayed: "*Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place. Test me, O Lord; and try me, examine my heart and my mind; for your love is ever before me, and I walk continually in your truth.*" *Psalms 51:6, Psalm 26:2-3*

The Bible reveals that God is Spirit and truth. We are enabled by His Spirit to live by His truth.³² The Holy Spirit also helps us to recognize when we are being deceitful.³³ This is part of God's transforming work in us.

²⁹ Romans 7:15-25

³⁰ John 14:6

³¹ Ephesians 4:25 RSV

³² John 14:7, 15:26, 16:13

³³ Romans 9:1

“For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves.” Colossians 1:13

We have been looking at how truth is connected to life. Truth must also be connected with love. A sign of maturity is our ability to speak the truth in love. Truth without love can be brutal. Truth joined with love redeems and heals.

When I prepare to speak the truth in love, I try to be sure I am assuming my part of the responsibility for the truth. For example, when my feelings are hurt, I must be willing to take the responsibility for allowing someone to hurt me. Perhaps my feelings were hurt because I felt threatened.

Speaking the truth in love means being gentle, just and respectful, never condemning or demeaning -- or allowing ourselves to be condemned or demeaned. It means praying for God’s wisdom and timing, and for His help in preparing us to speak and to hear. Truth holds together and enhances our relationships, our families, our communities and our nation. God will help us to be faithful to the truth. All that we need to do is depend on His healing and help.

“Keep me from deceitful ways; be gracious to me through your law. I have chosen the way of truth; I have set my heart on your laws. I hold fast to your statutes, O Lord; do not let me be put to shame. I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free.” Psalm 119:29-32

Practical Application

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Why do you think Christ’s statement *“the truth will set you free”* is a great guideline for living? **John 8:31-32**

Living by Faith

2. Our consciences have been given to us to help us (see Romans 2:15, 9:1). How can we make sure our consciences do not become ineffective. Why is this important? _____

3. Describe what it means to you to speak the truth in love. What precautions should you take before confronting someone? _____

Suggestions for Prayer-Listening

Lord Jesus, what is the most common reason that I make a false statement?

Lord, reveal to me the root cause of my weakness and heal me.

Is there a truth about myself that I need to accept and live by more fully?

Suggestions for Meditation

Meditate for a few moments about your desire to live by the truth. Jesus is with you and knows the desires of your heart.

“Whoever lives by the truth comes into the light.”

Now accept that your mind and body are flooded with light. Your soul and spirit are flooded with light. This present moment is flooded with light. Thank God for the light of His truth.

Love at the Center

Love at the Center of Life

Perhaps the most revealing statement in the Bible is, “*God is love*”³⁴ God has created us in love and it is His desire to enjoy a loving relationship with us. He patiently and persistently calls us to discover that the core of life is love. Julian of Norwich wrote, “There is no created being who can know how much and how sweetly and how tenderly the Creator loves us.”³⁵

The apostle Paul believed that of the great gifts of God -- faith, hope and love, the greatest of these is love.³⁶ Love is greater than faith and hope because the end is greater than the means. The purpose of faith and hope is to draw us to God and discover a life filled with love.

It seems, however, that it is our tendency to look elsewhere for our needs to be met. We try to find fulfillment in superficial relationships and accomplishments. But this does not satisfy us for long and the noise of our willfulness and conflicting emotions drowns out His still, small voice calling us in love. In addition, many of us have been wounded in the past by the frailties of human love. Since we can love others only as we have experienced love, we are humanly inadequate to love as God wants.

How can we receive God’s gift of love in an ever-increasing way and allow our lives to be shaped by it? We are to desire His love and learn to nurture it within us in the following ways: private and public worship, prayer, reading the Scriptures, loving others and observing the wonders of God’s love around us.

Love at the Center of Relationships

God challenges us to bring love into all our relationships: “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind . . . and love your neighbor as yourself.*” *Deuteronomy 6:5, Matthew 22:37,39*

³⁴ I John 4:8

³⁵ *Showings*, Paulist Press, New York

³⁶ I Corinthians 13:13

Living by Faith

It is through the miracle of God's unconditional love, our response to it and the love bestowed on us by the Holy Spirit that we can love deeply and unconditionally. We draw on the deep well of love that God keeps pouring into us.

"The love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us." Romans 5:5

Our responsibility is to be open and cleansed vessels to receive it. We do this by confessing and repenting of our wrongdoings in prayer, by forgiving those who have wronged us, and by depending on God to fill us with His love. Then, as we reach out to others in love we become more loving. Love begets love. It melts hardened hearts, heals fearful souls and frees them to love others.

Perhaps the greatest reason we are called to love others is that we are meant to reflect the love of God. This is an awesome responsibility. Each hour and each day God seeks to be known to the world as love. Even though no one has seen God directly, God abides in those who love, and so is known to them and through them. *"If we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us."*³⁷

Love at the Center of Work

God's love is also be active when we are at work. Our responsibility is to acknowledge our need and invite His love to be part of our workplace. *"Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men."*³⁸

When I was young, I didn't know I was to seek God's will and trust Him to guide me in my work. Now I believe that when I am trusting God, He places desires in my heart and they are activated through God-given opportunities. God's creative love moves within us and throughout the realm that surrounds us. We come to love our work and our friends and we discover our greatest potential. But everything depends on the eyes through which we see things. Each day offers opportunities to see His love at work. One of my favorite prayers is, "Lord, open the doors you want open, close the doors you want closed, grant me the gifts I will need and place me in the center of your will."

³⁷ I John 4:12

³⁸ Colossians 3:17,23

As we invite God to be the center of our work, His love gradually frees us from a “results” mentality -- striving for unrealistic results that can be extremely stressful. It is good to work toward excellence, but we can become burdened if we live by “*the ways of this world*”³⁹ -- trying to meet unreasonable expectations of society. We cannot appreciate the present moment because threats of failure or unemployment haunt us. It is only by trusting our work into God’s hands that we can be delivered from unwise priorities and concern about the future. We rely on Him for our talents and abilities and we commit to Him our diligent and faithful efforts. Then we leave the results to God. He uses all our efforts and His love bestows continuing affirmation of who we are and who we are becoming.

Love at the Center of Eternal Life

“*Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.*”⁴⁰ The word “know” in the Greek signifies the most intimate, loving relationship. The God of love is calling us to an eternal banquet of love. It is like a wedding feast and we are the bride, God’s beloved. The feast awaits us because we are trusting that Jesus has prepared a place for us. The celebration at the wedding banquet is love and being loved forever.

Practical Application

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. The simple statement, “*God is love,*” should have a profound impact on us. How would you finish this sentence? God is love, therefore _____

³⁹ Ephesians 2:1-2

⁴⁰ John 17:3

Living by Faith

2. Read **I Corinthians 13:4-7**. Of the many descriptions of love, in what area do you think you most need to improve? _____

_____ What can you do about it? _____

3. Love is built on trust. How will trusting God with specific needs in your life help your love for Him to grow? _____

Suggestions for Prayer-Listening

Lord Jesus, is there some way I need to change my life so that I give more time and love to my relationships?

Is there a relationship(s) where I need to be more loving right now?

Suggestions for Meditation

Visualize and meditate on the following: You, and several people you have invited to join you, are seated at a banquet table with Jesus. You are experiencing a greater intimacy of knowing Jesus and you begin to see those you invited as Jesus sees them.

At the completion of your meditation, describe your experience. Who was at the table with you? How did you feel (a) toward them (b) toward Jesus?

Making the Most of Each Day

Each day we have a choice as to how we are going to respond to life. We can either diminish our life or enlarge it. God challenges us, *“This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him.”* Deuteronomy 30:19-20a

To all who seek Him, God gives three great gifts to live life to the fullest: faith, love and hope.⁴¹ Let us begin with the gift of faith. *“Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.”*⁴² What a difference it makes when we truly believe God is helping us! In the midst of difficult situations, we can remind ourselves that God is always working on our behalf. He has made covenant promises to His people. By faith we trust in His promises and they become a reality. Here is one of God’s promises:

“I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you.” Psalm 32:8

God is faithful when we trust Him. Learning and claiming the *“very great and precious promises”* of God⁴³ helps us to maintain our trust.

Each morning, we can rise early and read some of God’s promises. Then, when we are driving or working or facing a challenge, we can claim a promise of God and our faith is strengthened. Everything we do is affected by our faith and trust in God.

Sometimes it is difficult for me to act on my faith and maintain my trust. I find myself returning to old self-defeating ways of thinking and behaving. I blame others or I think God has forgotten me or I am not worthy of His help. But then I remember His promises and I claim again His victory.

The second great gift of God (not in order of importance) is His love. So much in our day depends on the way we think about ourselves. Do we feel loved and

⁴¹ I Corinthians 13:13

⁴² Hebrews 11:1

⁴³ II Peter 1:4

affirmed or do we feed negative thoughts to ourselves, allowing them to affect who we are? Occasionally we need to observe our thinking and train ourselves to replace our negative thoughts with the truth of God's love.

Jesus taught that it is not what comes to us from the outside that defiles us so much as what comes from the inside.⁴⁴ In other words, our thinking, our desires and our motives can harm and demean us far more than what someone else does to us.

“Our battle is to bring down every deceptive fantasy and every imposing defense that men erect against the true knowledge of God. We even fight to capture every thought until it acknowledges the authority of Christ.” II Corinthians 10:5 Phillips

So many believe that God is just waiting until we do something wrong so He can punish us. The truth is that He loves us beyond our greatest imagining and wants to bless us. Keeping this in mind throughout the day will put a spring in our step and confidence in our actions.

“The Lord will send a blessing on your barns and on everything you put your hand to. The Lord will establish you as his holy people, as he promised you on oath, if you keep the commands of the Lord your God and walk in his ways.” Deuteronomy 28:8a-9

When it is difficult to believe that God loves us and is waiting to bless us, we can pray, “Heavenly Father, help me to believe in and receive your blessings. Help me to trust you and walk in your love.” Then in childlike trust, we can share our challenges with Him and these become opportunities for Him to reveal His love for us. And the more we trust Him, the more we see His love at work and the more we love Him in return. It is a wonderful circle of love.

“The Lord's unfailing love surrounds the man who trusts in him.” Psalm 32:10b

The third great gift that God gives us for daily living is hope. Christian hope is defined as the confident expectation of the future blessings of God. We can begin our days expectantly because we know God has blessings in store for us.

“‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. And you will have confidence, because there is hope, you will be protected and take your rest in safety.’ ” Jeremiah 29:11 and Job 11:18

⁴⁴ Mark 7:15

Praising God helps me to grow in hope. In fact, one of the most important things I can have is a grateful heart. Too many times I take things for granted and focus on what I don't have instead of what I do have. It is then I sink into self-pity or depression -- the opposite of hope. Some years ago I asked God why I was often anxious. I believe He showed me it was because I did not have a grateful heart. I was focusing on my problems rather than on God's blessings. When I think negatively, I affirm my problems and allow them a greater hold over me. Praise and thanksgiving change my attitude. I cease my negative thinking and begin to expect good things to happen. I am filled with hope.

The three great gifts of God gradually transform us and people recognize our faith, love and optimism. God's gifts grow in us when we are faithful to the disciplines (privileges) of prayer, worship, Christian fellowship and reading the Scriptures. Each day we can look forward to God working in us, for us and through us to others. This was the privilege of Christ's life, and it is to be ours as well. This is how we make the most of each day!

Practical Application

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. In what ways do we diminish our days? _____

In what ways do we enlarge our days? _____

2. Read **II Peter 1:3-4**. Why is it important to know the promises God has made to _____ His people? _____

Living by Faith

3. How do the following enrich your life?

(a) faith _____

(b) hope _____

c) love _____

Suggestions for Prayer-Listening

Lord Jesus, what is the most important thing I need to learn to make the most of each day?

Suggestions for Meditation

With your hands in your lap -- palms up to receive -- seek the fullness of God's blessings.

Heavenly Father, increase in me

your gift of faith,

your gift of love,

your gift of hope.

My Peace I Give to You

God knows that one of our greatest needs in life is peace. If we have God's peace within us, we can face anything. God loves His people and He has bound Himself to us with certain covenant promises. The prophet Isaiah declared his covenant of peace:

“Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed.” says the Lord, who has compassion on you.”

Isaiah 54:10

The world thinks of peace as the absence of difficulties or strife. What God offers is peace in spite of our difficulties -- a tranquility of mind and spirit -- a quiet confidence that God is in control. The first step we must take is to desire God's peace.

Anxiety is such a part of the world that we assume that this is the way life is. We need to identify what in our life is most responsible for robbing us of peace. When we identify the major sources of our anxiety, we can then pray specifically for God's help to resolve them. Are we feeling threatened in some relationship or in our employment? Are we irritable over some circumstance over which we have little control? Are we still grieving over a hurt or a loss? (Regardless of our circumstance, we are responsible for our response.) We can pray for help and ask that our response to our circumstance will change. God will give us His wisdom and will help us to receive His peace.

“He will keep in perfect peace all those who trust in him, whose thoughts turn often to the Lord! Trust in the Lord God always, for in the Lord Jehovah is your everlasting strength.” Isaiah 26:3-4 LB

God made further provision for our peace. He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to reveal His Father's love for us and to invite us to share in the blessings of God's kingdom.

“All this will be because the mercy of our God is very tender, and heaven's dawn is about to break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and death's shadow, and to guide us to the path of peace.” Luke 1:78-79 LB

Living by Faith

When Jesus came, He declared His promise of peace:

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.” John 14:27 RSV

In addition to promising us peace, He showed us how to have it.

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”
Matthew 11:29-30

Jesus may have been comparing His yoke with the yoke of the Old Testament Law. A yoke was something that oxen wore to ease the burden of their labor. The Hebrew people had hundreds of religious laws. By obedience to them, they believed God accepted them. The yoke of these laws burdened and chafed. In contrast, Christ’s yoke is one of forgiveness and unconditional love. When we take our burdens to Him and receive His forgiveness and love, we are blessed with His peace. The apostle Paul explained how we do this:

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” Philippians 4:6-7

Paul wrote these comforting words while he was in prison. When we give our troubles to Jesus, He will carry our burdens and see us through our difficulties. Even when there is no evidence that things are improving, we will have an overriding serenity that comes from the peace of Christ.

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.”
John 14:27

Notice in Paul’s teaching (above) that we are to include thanksgiving in our prayers. Some years ago, I asked God why I did not have His peace in my life. It was not long before I understood what was wrong. I did not have a grateful heart. I had been complaining and feeling sorry for myself. Negative feelings were destroying my peace.

“In everything give thanks,” the Scriptures say. I don’t have to be thankful **for** my problems, but I can be thankful **in** my problems that God is working with me, in me and through me to bring His highest and best.

To live in God’s peace is to be free from the burden of self and the pressures of the world. It is a liberty that comes from self-abandonment and trust in God. When our life is centered in Him, it will be characterized by His peace.

Personal Application

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. What did Isaiah write about trust and peace?

Isaiah 26:3-4 _____

2. If the great enemies of peace are anxiety and fear (John 14:27, Philippians 4:6-7), what are some of the things we can do to live a more peaceful life?

3. How would you explain to a young person the importance of living in God’s peace? _____

Suggestions for Prayer-Listening

Lord Jesus, what relationship or circumstance continually robs me of your peace?

Am I contributing to the problem in any way?

Heavenly Father, how do you want me to pray for the person(s) who disturbs my peace?

Suggestions for Meditation

a) What is your most peaceful memory? Go back to that memory, invite Jesus to be with you and spend time there with Him. Tell Him how you feel about your experience.

b). Meditate on the following verse and receive Christ's blessing:

"Peace is my parting gift to you, my own peace such as the world cannot give."
John 14:27 NEB

Waiting for the Lord

***“Wait for the Lord; be strong and
take heart and wait for the Lord.”***

Psalm 27:14

It is difficult to wait when there is something we eagerly desire. Especially if we are impulsive or willful we will want to move ahead quickly rather than take the time to seek God’s wisdom on the matter. Many times I have suffered the consequences of my foolishness. As we see in the above Scripture, David wrote, “be strong.” It takes a strong will not to run ahead and do what we wish without consulting our heavenly Father.

God wants us to dream and plan and pray about the future but, when we pray, our desire should also be to discover what *He* wants for us. Having decided upon our desires, most of us want to stay in control by bringing them about how and when we wish. We think we are safer and smarter when we are in control. Our prayers become only attempts to manipulate God to do what we want. Instead of surrendering to God’s way, we strive to bring about our own way.

There is a kind of waiting that is pleasing to the Lord; a quiet, trusting, relaxed expectation with rejoicing: *“Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him . . . wait in hope for the Lord; he is our help and our shield. In him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in his holy name . . . In the morning, O Lord, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait in expectation.”*

Psalm 37:4, 5:3, 33:20-21

Each time I experience God’s answer to some decision or desire I have shared with Him, my trust in Him grows, as well as my ability to hear and follow His guidance. Jesus said, *“My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.”*⁴⁵ I recall the first time I asked Him to take control of something. I was in charge of a charitable event and I trusted the outcome to Him. When I surrender to God’s way, it sometimes feels like I am losing control. It’s risky. I am afraid God has something in mind that is not nearly as good as what I have planned. This is when I try to remember that to walk in His will brings peace, expanded vision and fulfillment.

⁴⁵ John 10:27

Living by Faith

“As for God, his way is perfect; the word of the Lord is flawless. He is a shield for all who take refuge in him . . . it is God who arms me with strength and makes my way perfect.” Psalm 18:30,32

“You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you.” Isaiah 26:3

Some of us cannot trust in God’s way because we don’t feel worthy of good things happening to us. We may feel heavy with guilt and may not be aware we are expecting to be punished. We cannot thoroughly believe God forgives what we have confessed to Him. Or perhaps we expect trouble because so many bad things have happened to us in the past that our hope for the future has dimmed. After my husband died, everything else seemed to go wrong at the same time. I became so accustomed to trouble, I began to expect it.

“ ‘I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you.’ ” Jeremiah 29:11-12

Sometimes we have to die to a dream and let it go because God, in His wisdom, has something better in mind. For a long time I had a dream for the future. Years after my husband died, I began to hope that God would bring someone I would love into my life. As time went by and God didn’t respond to my desire, I felt sorry for myself and my life was diminished by my self-pity. I knew that God always brings His highest and best for me. But what I had accepted in my mind, I could not accept in my heart.

I remembered something I had learned about the gift of grieving in order to give something painful to the Lord and receive healing. I had experienced grief over events in my past, but I had never grieved over the loss of a dream for the future. I asked the Lord to help me grieve in order to relinquish my dream to Him, and He was faithful. Since then I have felt God guiding me to hope not for a husband but for a partner in ministry. I no longer feel sorry for myself or envy others who have been blessed with what I had desired. I am at peace.

God wants us to wait on Him for our needs and dreams to be fulfilled. If He has been silent for a long time regarding something we desire, perhaps we need to consider releasing it to Him. This is why it is helpful to seek God’s wisdom regarding our desires. Perhaps God wants us to adjust our dream or understand that His timing may be different than ours.

“I guide you in the way of wisdom and lead you along straight paths. When you walk, your steps will not be hampered; when you run, you will not stumble. Hold on to instruction, do not let it go; guard it well, for it is your life.” Proverbs 4:11-13

Seeking God’s wisdom and trusting Him for the outcome is something that takes practice. We need to ask the Lord to remind us to STOP, be still, wait and listen to Him regarding our decisions for the future. He will bless us with inner promptings that we will come to know as His quiet and loving guidance.

“Listen to my instruction and be wise; do not ignore it. Blessed is the man who listens to me, watching daily at my doors, waiting at my doorway. For whoever finds me finds life and receives favor from the Lord.” Proverbs 8:33-35

Waiting for the Lord is not a passive thing. It is actively listening for His wisdom and guidance. It may also mean surrendering our own way so God can bring us a new and better way. The prophet Habakkuk described how determined he was to seek God’s way. He said, *“I will stand at my watch and station myself on the ramparts; I will look to see what he will say to me.”*⁴⁶ He deliberately set aside special time and expected God to speak to him. When we learn to do this, our lives will be blessed beyond measure

“God has surely listened and heard my voice in prayer. Praise be to God, who has not rejected my prayer or withheld his love from me!” “I wait for you, O Lord; you will answer, O Lord my God.” Psalm 66:19-20, 38:15

Practical Application

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Why are the following instructions of David difficult for some people:⁴⁷
 - a) *Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him* _____
-

⁴⁶ Habakkuk 2:1

⁴⁷ Psalm 37:7, 33:20-21

Living by Faith

b) *Wait in hope for the Lord . . . and rejoice . . .*

2. Why is it important to express our praise to God while we are waiting for Him to act?

3. The most important foundation for peaceful ‘waiting with rejoicing’ is trust in God. What does the following passage mean to you? **Jeremiah 17:7-8**

Suggestions for Prayer-Listening

Heavenly father, am I carrying any feelings of self-pity or anger towards you because my life isn’t going exactly the way I want?

Is there some way you want me to change my prayers for the future?

Suggestions for Meditation

Meditate for a few moments on each phrase of the following verse:

“God surely listens and hears my voice in prayer. Praise be to God, who does not reject my prayer or withhold his love from me!”

*Psalm 66:19-20*⁴⁸

⁴⁸ present tense mine

Growing in Prayer

Prayer for most of us begins with our need for help. However, it is what our prayer life grows into that shapes the quality of our lives. Anyone can pray, yet to be faithful in good times and bad, prayer can be so strenuous that it challenges the most hardy. Prayer is a privilege, a challenge, a delight and a mystery, but most of all it is a loving, creative and transforming fellowship with God.

I used to pray only when I wanted something important or when I was frightened. I was the center of my life, and God and others existed primarily to serve my purposes. Now I know that when I pray, my heart, my mind and my spirit are linked with God and something wonderful happens in me, for me and through me to others. God knows me better than I know myself. He loves me better than I love myself. How comforting to draw close to someone who loves me and wants to help me and those for whom I pray!

The Bible reveals that God wants to be known and He wants to have fellowship with His people. It is knowing God in an intimate way that enables us to live a unique quality of life. Jesus described this fellowship: *“He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him . . . and we will come to him and make our home with him.”* John 14:21,23

For many years I wanted my life to be centered in prayer, but I discovered I was not always faithful to pray regularly. Because I usually find time to do what I want, I had to admit my weakness regarding prayer and ask God to give me the desire and the time to pray. The amount of time I devote to prayer is evidence of how much I trust God to meet me in my need and transform my weakness by His strength.

The Scriptures record that Jesus frequently went off by Himself to pray. His prayer life sustained and equipped Him with strength and wisdom. In the few years Jesus spent with His disciples, He did not teach them how to spread the gospel or how to organize His church. He taught them how to pray. He knew that if they learned how to pray they would be equipped for life. After Jesus died, the disciples were faithful in prayer. They had an inner freedom and peace in spite of the difficulties they faced. They were known for their hope, their love and their giftedness in ministering to others. If we are faithful in prayer like the early disciples, we will experience the same inner freedom and quality of living. God spoke through the prophet Jeremiah to call us to prayer:

“ ‘Call to me, and I will answer you, and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know’ . . . ‘For I know the plans I have for you’, declares the Lord, ‘plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.’ ”

Jeremiah 33:3, 29:11-13

Jesus also appeals to us to seek His Father in prayer:

“Ask and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. What man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!”

Matthew 7:7-11 NKJV

Jesus used three different verbs to set forth His promise of answered prayer. When we **“ask,”** we show a willingness to recognize our need. It is difficult for some of us to accept the fact that we are in need.

When we **“seek,”** we have a desire to know the mind of God on the matter. It means we are willing to be patient until we receive insight into God’s eternal point of view.

“Knock and it will be opened to you,” is an encouragement to be an active part of the answer. We are not to sit passively and wait for God to place the answer in our laps. We are to act positively to help bring the answer about. In this passage, Jesus is not teaching that our requests will always be granted in the way we want. He is encouraging a kind of persistent journey of asking, seeking and knocking.

There are times when my desire to pray weakens and I allow trivial things to keep me from prayer. Then I feel guilty and think, “I haven’t been able to pray as I should. I am hopeless.” I feel less drawn to prayer because I am looking at the past and my failure rather than looking to the future and to God’s love for me. My guilt drives me farther away from Him. This is when I ask God to change my heart once again so that it becomes a top priority for me to be with Him in prayer. *“I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees.”* *Ezekiel 36:26*

When we want to do the will of God, He helps us be obedient. God showed me that the best part of the day to spend time with Him is in the morning. I gradually became more disciplined in the evening and retired earlier so I would be rested in the morning and have the time and the desire to be with Him.

We have to be careful about the problem of guilt insofar as prayer is concerned because it can discourage us from praying. Most of the time we are not as bad as we think we are, nor are we as good as we think we are. The truth is, we are who God *says* we are. We are His beloved children. He loves us because of who *He* is and not because of who we are or how faithful we are to pray.

One thing is certain: God honors our prayers and is faithful to answer them -- not always how we would like or when we would like, but always for our highest good and His loving purpose.

“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! How gracious he will be when you cry for help! As soon as he hears, he will answer you.”
Isaiah 30:18,19b

Practical Application

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. How can you take advantage of the promises regarding prayer recorded by Paul? **Romans 8:26-27** _____

Living by Faith

2. How does the Holy Spirit work, especially as we pray? **I Corinthians 2:9-12**

3. How have your ideas about prayer changed since you were a child? _____

4. What challenges you now about growing in your prayer life? _____

Suggestions for Prayer-Listening

Heavenly Father, is there something about my daily routine that needs to change in order to provide more time for prayer?

Lord Jesus, is there someone you want me to pray for right now?

How do you want me to pray?

Suggestions for Meditation

a) Slowly say the Lord's prayer, meditating for a few moments on each phrase. *Matthew 6:9-13*

God is Faithful

When I was in my early thirties, I attended a neighborhood coffee. I didn't know there was going to be someone there who would be speaking about the Christian faith or I would not have attended. I was skeptical about people who lived their faith differently than I did. I kept God in a "Sunday box" and lived my life rarely asking for His help or guidance. My eyes were opened that day to the possibility of a new relationship with God through Jesus Christ. The speaker told me that God had a plan for my life that was better than anything I could attain on my own. Not wanting to miss out on anything, I assessed what I had to lose and what I might gain, and I did what she suggested, I invited Jesus Christ into my heart and into my life.

Soon after I made that important decision, I learned that God has bound Himself to His believing people through His covenant promises and He is faithful.

"I will not violate my covenant or alter what my lips have uttered. In my faithfulness, I will reward them and make an everlasting covenant with them."
Psalm 89:34, Isaiah 61:8

There are two major covenants recorded in the Old Testament: the Abrahamic Covenant and the Davidic Covenant.⁴⁹ In the covenant God made with Abraham, He promised blessings to Abraham's descendants, to the nation of Israel and to Gentile nations.⁵⁰ In the covenant He made with David, God promised that David would be the head of an eternal dynasty. The Messiah would be born into that dynasty to bring an everlasting kingdom.⁵¹

It is significant that in Old Testament times, the blood of animal sacrifices was the sign of the covenant bond between God and Israel. In the New Testament, the blood of the sacrifice of Jesus is the sign of the final and perfect sacrifice uniting believers to God. Isaiah prophesied about a new covenant for the people, uniting believers to God.⁵² Jesus later spoke of "*the new covenant in my blood.*"⁵³

⁴⁹ God made three other covenants with Israel. They were concerned primarily with governing the people through social and religious principles: Edenic (Genesis 2:16), Noahic (Genesis 6:18), Mosaic (Exodus 19:5)

⁵⁰ Genesis 12:2, 13:15, 15:18, 17:7-8

⁵¹ II Samuel 7:16, Psalm 89:20-38, Psalm 132

⁵² Jeremiah 31:27, Isaiah 42:6, 49:8

⁵³ I Corinthians 11:25

Jeremiah also prophesied about a new covenant. Instead of being written on stone as was the covenant with Moses (the ten commandments), it would be written on people's hearts. It would not simply call for an external obedience to a set of laws, but an internal obedience of the heart.

In addition to His promises, God's covenants include obligations. In the old covenants, God's people were obligated to be faithful to the law and when they failed, God's punishment was expected. In the new covenant, Christ has paid the penalty for our failures; so all that is needed is our earnest desire to be obedient and our dependence on Him to receive forgiveness and reconciliation with God.

How can we experience the blessings of God's covenant promises? We do so by becoming one of His children -- a member of His family -- through faith in Jesus Christ. *"To all who received him, he gave the right to become children of God. All they needed to do was to trust him to save them. All those who believe this are reborn! -- not a physical rebirth resulting from human passion or plan -- but from the will of God."* John 1:12-13 LB

God wants me to experience His faithfulness. The Christian faith is first an experiment, then it becomes an experience. This was my experiment: I would learn a promise of God in the Scriptures, being careful to note any instruction connected with the promise. I would step out as if it were true to discover it was true indeed, because God is faithful.

"Understand, therefore, that the Lord your God is the faithful God who for a thousand generations keeps his promises and constantly loves those who love him and who obey his command . . . The Lord is faithful to all his promises and loving toward all he has made." Deuteronomy 7:9 LB, Psalm 145:13b

With most promises in the Bible there is included an instruction by which we enter into the promise. For example, *"Listen to my instruction and be wise; do not ignore it. Blessed is the man who listens to me, watching daily at my doors, waiting at my doorway. For whoever finds me finds life and receives favor from the Lord."* (Proverbs 8:33-35) We are to seek God's wisdom and listen for His guidance. If we do this regularly, we will learn to recognize His leading and we will be blessed.

I have learned that, even when I fail and am not faithful to follow His way, God remains faithful to me. It is I who have turned away from Him. When I return to Him in confession and with resolve to change my ways, I am open once more to receive His blessings. *"Even when we are too weak to have any faith left, he remains faithful to us and will help us, for he cannot disown us who are part of*

himself, and he will always carry out his promises to us . . . Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness." II Timothy 2:13 LB Lamentations 3:22-23

God does not want me to take the wonder of His loving faithfulness for granted. The greatest sign of my gratitude for His faithfulness is my praise. Even when things are not going as well as I would like, I try to remember to praise Him for His faithful and loving provision. I also give praise to Jesus because He came to redeem the darkness, and I lift up my difficult situations to Him for His transformation. *"O Lord, you are my God; I will exalt you and praise your name, for in perfect faithfulness you have done marvelous things, things planned long ago."* Isaiah 25:1

I have discovered that praising God for His faithfulness produces a "living hope" within me.⁵⁴ It is a firm confidence in God's promises that, through Jesus Christ, the future holds His love, guidance and blessings. My responsibility is to draw close to Christ and allow Him to be Lord of my life.

"He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful." I Corinthians 1:8-9

Practical Application

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Describe what it means to you to be born into the family of God.

a) **John 1:12-13** _____

⁵⁴ I Peter 1:3

Living by Faith

b) **Romans 8:14-17** _____

2. “*Christ is faithful as a son over God’s house.*” (Hebrews 3:6) What is our responsibility? **Hebrews 4:16, 11:6** _____

3. What does it mean to you personally that God is faithful? _____

Suggestions for Prayer-Listening

Heavenly Father, I want to be faithful to listen to you in my times of prayer, “*watching daily at my doors.*” Is there some wisdom or guidance you want to give me today?

Suggestions for Meditation

Taking a phrase at a time, meditate for a few moments on the following verses of Scripture:

“*God, who has called you into fellowship with His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.*” *I Corinthians 1:8-9*

“*The Lord is faithful to His promises and loving toward all He has made.*”
Psalm 145:13b

Persevering in Christ

“Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.” Hebrews 12:1-3

The dictionary defines “persevering” as remaining constant to a purpose, idea or task in the face of obstacles or discouragement.⁵⁵ It requires forbearance and faith. Many of us have had to persevere regarding our health or a particularly trying relationship. Others of us have persevered regarding our work or finances. But whatever we face, Christians can persevere by drawing from the well of their faith as they patiently depend on God through Jesus Christ.

“Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid. The Lord, the Lord, is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation. With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.” Isaiah 12:2-3

Unfortunately, when things are going well or I become too busy, I find myself “coasting” where my faith is concerned. I become lazy and do not actively trust in God through the privileges He has given me: prayer, the Scriptures, worship and fellowship with other Christians.

When I withdraw from any of these blessings, to some extent I withdraw from close fellowship with God. It is when I am actively trusting Him that the well of my faith is deepened. In difficult circumstances, I am able to draw from that well and persevere. Each time I endure in faith, my well of faith becomes deeper for the next time I face a difficult challenge.

I have discovered that, of all the Christian privileges, when I persevere in prayer, I am able to persevere in life. Luke recorded two parables of Jesus encouraging us to “*always pray and not give up.*”⁵⁶ The first parable concerns a man who persisted in asking his friend for help. The second concerns an unjust judge who finally listens to a persistent widow. Jesus asks us to consider the generosity of the friend and the judge and imagine how much more our heavenly Father will honor those who persevere in prayer.

⁵⁵ American Heritage Dictionary

⁵⁶ Luke 11:5-13, 18:5-8

When I am faithful to pray God helps me to persevere. He gives me a sense of urgency to remain faithful to pray for a situation or a person. He also gives me a sense of release when it is no longer necessary to pray. Sometimes God has asked me to persevere for months or years. Soon after my husband died, I became concerned about the affect my husband's alcoholism and death had on my children. God placed it on my heart to be faithful to pray for their healing. It sometimes takes awhile for deep emotional healing to take place. God helped me to persevere and I have seen His marvelous work in answer to my prayers.

It is not always easy to persist in prayer because we are walking by faith and not by sight.⁵⁷ We are to remain steadfast even when there is no evidence that God is at work. An understanding of Christ's sacrifice on the cross will help us.⁵⁸

Jesus died so that we could receive redemption and salvation. The meaning of these words is similar. "Redemption means deliverance -- freedom secured by payment of a price."⁵⁹ The English term "salvation" is derived from two Latin words, "salvare" and "salus" meaning "save," "help" and "health." The Greek and Hebrew words used in the Scriptures also mean "rescue," "recovery" and "welfare." Jesus came to redeem and help us.⁶⁰ It is our responsibility, however, to share our burdens with Him and trust Him to help us overcome.

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."
Matthew 11:28-30

The yoke that oxen wear distributes and lightens the load in order for them to bear it. The yoke of Christ is one of forgiveness and healing that lightens our burdens and shares the difficulties of living.

"For we continue to share in all that Christ has for us so long as we steadily maintain until the end the trust with which we began." Hebrews 3:14 Phillips

⁵⁷ II Corinthians 5:7

⁵⁸ Galatians 3:13, Ephesians 1:7

⁵⁹ The New Bible Dictionary, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI

⁶⁰ John 3:17-18

The disciples trusted their Master and they endured in times of suffering. They taught that perseverance produces character and character produces Christian hope - that confident expectation of the faithfulness and future blessings of God.⁶¹ It is this confident in God that brings the victorious life Christ promises.⁶²

“Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.”
James 1:12

Practical Application

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. What happens to our ability to endure difficult circumstances when our lives are over-obligated or out-of-balance? _____

2. Why is it better to walk by faith and not by sight?

II Corinthians 5:7 _____

3. Recall the last time you endured a difficult situation. What did you learn about your faith in Christ at that time?

⁶¹ Romans 5:3-4, James 1:4

⁶² John 10:10

Suggestions for Prayer-Listening

Heavenly Father, is there some way in which my life is over-obligated or out-of-balance and I am finding it difficult to be patient and persevere in some situations?

Suggestions for Meditation

Meditate on the following passage, taking a few moments for each phrase:

“Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. I say to myself, ‘The Lord is my portion; therefore I will wait for him.’ The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.” Lamentations 3:22-26

Inspired for Ministry

“I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit -- fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name.” John 15:14-16

For 2,000 years Jesus Christ has been inviting people to follow Him and minister to a hurting world. Countless people have responded even though He warned them it would be costly. *“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” (Mark 8:34)* In Jesus’ day, this statement no doubt had a startling affect because not many would miss its meaning. Roman law stated that a criminal about to be executed was to carry His own cross to his execution. When Jesus invited people to follow Him, they knew that taking up their cross meant, in some way, they were about to die.

People often confuse taking up a cross with the idea of carrying a burden in life. For example someone with arthritis may say, “This is my cross I am to bear.” Or someone will lose a loved one and may say, “This is the cross God has given me to bear.” This is not what Jesus meant when He said, “Take up your cross.” There is a difference between a burden and a cross. Burdens are difficulties that are common to daily life. To take up our cross means to die to self-centeredness and bear the burdens of others for the sake of Christ and His kingdom. Following Jesus is costly because He asks us to give up our selfish ways.

“Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.” John 12:24-26

When I first decided to follow Jesus Christ, I was uncertain about the idea of ministry. I thought only especially gifted people had a ‘ministry’. I wanted to learn to die to selfishness and give to others but I lacked confidence that I had anything to offer. And I didn’t know where to begin to reach out to others. One thing I did know, however, was that I felt an almost overwhelming gratitude for Christ’s love. His love was becoming very real to me -- and it was changing my life. This is the beginning of ministry -- to be so filled with Christ’s love that it spills over to others.

Our greatest privilege in life is to join with Christ in His mission of love to the world. We may not be experts in theology and we may feel unworthy because of things we have done wrong in the past. But let us look at three great men in history: Moses, Jeremiah and the apostle Paul. None of these men felt worthy to enter into service. Moses objected because he had a speech impediment and he was guilty of murdering a man in Egypt. Jeremiah thought he was too young, and Paul felt he was “*the least of the apostles*” because of his persecution of Christians.⁶³

God called these men despite their mistakes and weaknesses. He provided Aaron to speak for Moses. He touched Jeremiah’s lips and put His words into his mouth. He assured Paul of his calling by empowering Him with the Holy Spirit.⁶⁴ God met the needs of these men and inspired them to serve. Even though we may not feel gifted or worthy, Jesus honors our desire to serve Him and He meets us in our weakness. He enables us to rise above our human limitations by filling us with His Holy Spirit and granting us special gifts for service.⁶⁵

The apostle Paul wrote, “*Carry each other’s burdens and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.*”⁶⁶ We submit to the law of Christ, which is the law of the cross, and the law of love. We deny ourselves in order to love and win others to Him, sharing their joys and their sorrows and giving them encouragement and hope. Bearing someone’s burden may cost us something, but it will bring its reward of joy. Each Christian has a way to serve which is ordained by God.⁶⁷

Paul gladly left behind everything he had counted important in order to experience the power and peace of serving Christ.⁶⁸ He discovered the great joy of ministry: “*I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things . . . I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death. . . Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me . . . forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.*” *Philippians 3:8,10,12,14*

⁶³ Exodus 2:11-12, 6:28-7:1, Jeremiah 1:5-9, I Corinthians 15:9

⁶⁴ Acts 9:17-22

⁶⁵ John 15:26, I Corinthians 12:7-11

⁶⁶ Galatians 6:2

⁶⁷ Ephesians 2:10

⁶⁸ Philippians 3:7

The greatest inspiration for ministry is Christ Himself. He loves us unconditionally, and out of His love He calls us. Our response of gratitude becomes a solid foundation from which to serve. When we know we are loved unconditionally, we feel a swell of grateful love rising within us. Ministry to others then happens naturally because we have a compelling urge to share the love we have received. Only the well of grateful love is deep enough to sustain us through difficult times. It has been my experience that, just as Moses, Paul and Jesus spent time with God in solitary places, I must keep my times of solitude with the Lord as a high priority so I may stay in touch with how much I am loved.

Serving Christ in this world is not always easy, but we are promised help and reward:

“As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you . . . No one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age.” Joshua 1:5, Mark 10:29

Practical Application

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Peter was confident he would not fail his Master (Matthew 13:36-38). Why is it dangerous to be too self-confident when serving Jesus? _____

What is the kind of confidence we are to have? **II Corinthians 3:4-6** _____

Living by Faith

2. How does Paul help us to view our personal weaknesses when considering service for Jesus? **I Corinthians 2:1-5** _____

3. What did Paul consider to be the best equipment a disciple could have? **Ephesians 1:17-20** _____

Suggestions for Prayer-Listening

Lord Jesus, is there a seed (desire) for service you have placed within me that I need to acknowledge and nurture so it will come into being?

Is there something I need to change in my life so I can be a better ambassador of your love?

Suggestions for Meditation

Meditate on the following passage, allowing a few moments for each phrase:

“God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.” II Corinthians 9:8

Show Me Your Will, Lord

*"Here I am . . .
I have come to do your will, O God."*

Hebrews 10:7

I used to think I was responsible to plan my life. When I was introduced to the teachings of Jesus, I sought generally to do God's will, but I did most of the planning myself. Now I am eager to know God's will, and I try my best to be obedient.

Jesus regarded His privilege to do God's will as spiritual food, something which brought Him fulfillment: *"My food, said Jesus, is to do the will of Him who sent me and to finish His work."*⁶⁹ When we are doing God's will, no longing of our hearts can be more perfectly satisfied. We find the fulfillment we are searching for and life is meaningful and peaceful.

It is not unusual, however, to face doing God's will with reluctance and resignation. We think our way would be easier and not demand the discipline and personal cost of doing it God's way. If we insist on going our way, we will miss the rewards God promises:

"Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother." Mark 3:34

"God listens to the godly man who does his will." John 9:31

"The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever." I John 2:17

It may appear to be easier to follow our own way, but there are many pitfalls that cause us to stumble and we pay the consequences for our foolishness. God promises to go ahead of us and smooth the path.

"Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain, and the glory of the Lord will be revealed." Isaiah 40:4-5a

⁶⁹ John 4:34

We will not escape difficulties, but God will bring us through to victory. *"So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised."* Hebrews 10:35-36

Sometimes it is difficult to determine God's guidance. Our many human weaknesses cloud our perception: exhaustion, illness, negative feelings, selfishness and pride. But God promises to meet us in our weakness and provide us with His Holy Spirit to help us.

King David asked that God's Spirit would help him: *"Teach me to do your will, for you are my God, may your good Spirit lead me on level ground."* Psalm 143:10

The apostle Paul also understood how God helps us: *"We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God that we may understand what God has freely given us."* 1 Corinthians 2:12

How do we discern God's will? We are to make ourselves available to Him in times of solitude and prayer. Then we are to listen for His guidance either through reading the Scriptures (where we find many guidelines) or through prayer. We will receive an impression upon our minds, "This Scripture is for me, or this is what I am to do." If it is a very important decision, we can ask God to confirm His guidance by sharing our thinking with a mature Christian friend or counselor and receiving their opinion.

Sometimes we will experience a meaningful circumstance that will give us understanding into God's will. We can also ask God to make His purpose for us so clear we will not make a mistake. Then we proceed carefully, asking Him to close the doors that He wants closed, open the doors that He wants open and place us in the center of His will

When we do make a mistake and we understand His guidance incorrectly, God will honor our *desire* to be in His will. The moment we realize our mistake, we can ask the Lord to redeem our time on the wrong path. To redeem means "to set free and receive something valuable in exchange." Jesus promises to direct us back on to the right path and turn anything negative into something good.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Romans 8:28

"Jesus Christ gave Himself for us, to redeem us from all wickedness." "He redeems your life from the pit." Titus 2:14, Psalm 103:3-5

To seek God's will is to invite and nurture His kingdom within us - the reign of God in our hearts:

"Thy kingdom come, thy will be done." Matthew 6:10 NKJV

God wants us to know Him and His loving plan for our lives. Will you draw closer to Him and let Him guide you? Your life will be greatly blessed by doing so!

Paul and his companions prayed for all disciples:

"We have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding . . . that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured." Colossians 1:9, 4:12b

Practical Application

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. How did David feel about living a life according to God's will?

Psalm 119:35-37

2. What are the kinds of things that distract you from seeking God's will for your daily living?

3. When we believe God is asking us to deny ourselves in order to seek a better way, what are some of the things we can remember?

John 7:17, James 1:12 _____

Suggestions for Prayer-Listening

Heavenly Father, what is the most significant reason I have failed to seek your will in the past?

What wisdom regarding your will do I need at this time in my life?

Suggestions for Meditation

Reflect on the following promise of God:

“This is what the Lord says – your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel, ‘I am the Lord your God, who teaches you what is best for you and directs you in the way you should go.’” Isaiah 48:17

Allow yourself to be filled with gratitude and praise for His loving care.

Two Kinds of Love

“This is how God showed His love among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him.” *1 John 4:9*

Christians celebrate two kinds of love: God’s redemptive love for us revealed through Jesus Christ, and our response of grateful love. In a humble stable in Bethlehem, God entered human history to reveal the greatness of His love for each of us. The Bible reminds us of this love and gives us an opportunity to respond with gratitude.

Regardless of how much we feel we have failed, God never withholds His love. It does not matter our age or stage in life, He is pursuing us each day, each hour, each minute, so we will know His love more deeply. Jesus described the persistence of God’s love in His parable of the lost sheep: We are like stray sheep sought and found by our Shepherd. He rejoices when we are returned to the fold because He loves us so much.⁷¹

It is God’s love that begins to transform us when we accept Jesus as our Savior and Lord. It is not just an emotional feeling bestowed, but a personal activity working ceaselessly within us. The word “redemption” means deliverance from anything that would separate us from God. His redemptive love brings forgiveness, acceptance, healing and transformation. It is eternally creative -- a gift given to us without our doing anything to deserve it. God loves us not because of who we are, but because of *who He is*.

The Scriptures teach that we are to respond with love, *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment.”*⁷²

The soul is the center of the person where character and personality are formed. I have discovered that my heart, soul and mind are most involved when I respond to God with grateful love. My gratitude invites His love to become more a part of me. My life is being shaped by love -- God’s love for me and my response of grateful love. They form the lens through which I view life, seeing each day as a gift from God and drinking deeply of His blessings.

⁷¹ Luke 15:3-6

⁷² Matthew 22:37

When we are preoccupied with regrets about the past or anxiety about the future we cannot appreciate the present. Viewing life through our insecurities, we seek possessions or status to keep up with society. We cling to relationships in unhealthy ways or we try to control others so we won't feel vulnerable. These unhealthy ways of living leave us feeling even more insecure and unlovable.

The only real solution is to *thoroughly believe* God loves us *just the way we are*. We can do nothing to earn His love. If we have had a poor relationship with a parent it may be difficult for us to believe God loves us unconditionally and we may need to ask for God's healing and help.

The apostle Paul prayed for all of us: *“that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height -- to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”*⁷³

The Greek word “grounded” that Paul used is an architectural term. The higher a building is, the greater must be the foundation. It is equally true that the higher our aspirations are for the future, the deeper must be our foundation.

The greatest foundation we can have is formed by faith, hope and love.⁷⁴ I often ask God to increase in me His gifts of faith and hope because circumstances often have a way of robbing me of these. And I know that without faith and hope, God's love will not grow in me because my anxiety takes over and closes me to God.⁷⁵ When my faith and hope are strong, I have the discipline to live an orderly life governed by the privileges that nurture God's love in me: prayer, meditating on the Scriptures, worship, fellowship with other Christians and service to others. When I allow time for these, my trust and dependence upon God grows and so does my love.

My life's foundation becomes weak when I get caught up in a lifestyle that is faster or fuller than what God intends. The speed by which I live and my multiple obligations do not allow me to have a reflective mind to contemplate the love of God. I need both time and quietness to be assured of God's love and all the goodness that issues from it.

⁷³ Ephesians 3:17-19 NKJV

⁷⁴ I Corinthians 13:11-13

⁷⁵ I John 4:18

Nothing can completely separate us from the love of God,⁷⁶ but *we can allow* something to block it: a frenzied lifestyle, unconfessed sin, unforgiveness, bitterness, or lack of trust. If we feel distant from God we can ask Him if our lifestyle or negative feelings are blocking His love.

The most common problem is that we cannot love someone we don't trust. Trust leads to love. So to grow in our experience of God's love, we are to trust more things to His care. I began by trusting Him with seemingly unimportant things. But only God sees our life from beginning to end and only He knows what is unimportant. Even when we think we are sharing only small things with Him, we are allowing Him to reveal His providential love for us. When a greater challenge comes along, we will more readily entrust it to Him.

Seeing God at work in response to our trust fills us with gratitude, and grateful love becomes self-giving love and we reach out in love to others. When this happens, we are filled even more with the love of God. It is a wonderful circle of love.

“God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him . . . If we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.”
1 John 4:16 and 12

Practical Application

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. *“Having loved His own who were in the world, He now showed them the full extent of His love.” (John 13:1)* Why is Christ's sacrifice on the cross the greatest revelation of God's love for us? _____

⁷⁶ Romans 8:37-39

Living by Faith

2. If we think we have to earn God’s love, how does our faulty thinking have a negative affect on our lives? _____

3. How will it enhance our lives if we begin and end each day with a prayer of thanksgiving for God’s loving care? _____

Suggestions for Prayer-Listening

Heavenly Father, I know that your love continues to seek me out. What do I need to do to experience your love more deeply?

How can I be more disciplined about my time so I am not too tired or busy to express my grateful love for you each day?

Suggestions for Meditation

a) Meditate on the following and apply to some incident in your life.

When my circumstances are difficult, it does not mean that God loves me less. Instead, I will look at my circumstances through the confident knowledge of God’s love for me.

“Because of the Lord’s great love, we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”

Lamentations 3:22-23

Salvation and Healing

*“Lord, you alone can heal me, you alone
can save, and my praises are for you alone.”*

Jeremiah 17:14 LB

For the first 33 years of my life, the term “salvation” meant little to me. Even after I accepted Jesus Christ as my Savior, I thought of salvation as something mystical and ‘other-worldly.’

Salvation is something for which the Old Testament prophets “*searched intently.*” They spoke of salvation, but it was something they could only dimly discern. They sought favor from God through sacrifices and obedience to hundreds of laws. Even the angels longed to know how God was going to bring His wayward people back into fellowship with Him.⁷⁷ It is God’s will that all people be saved.⁷⁸ God’s love for His people is so great that something had to be done about our separation from Him -- our sin.

Jesus accomplished God’s purpose on the cross. There He bore the punishment for our sin, and reconciliation with God became possible. We do nothing to earn this gift freely offered by Him, but we must make the decision to receive it. When the gift of salvation is received, we are “born of the Spirit.” The Spirit of God gives birth to our spirit.⁷⁹ Our lives are transferred into the presence and fellowship of God where we can begin to enjoy the eternal blessings of His kingdom.

Salvation heals the divisions caused by sin. Sin is not so much an outward act as it is an inner disorder. The act is only a symptom of the disorder. Our willfulness and selfishness cause us to go our own way and separate us from God. It is only through the sacrificial death of Jesus that we are reconciled to God.

Salvation is not an “other-worldly” experience. It is a concrete, intensely personal blessing from God. Salvation brings unification with Him, with others and within us. It is a process of moving from darkness to light; from guilt to pardon, from alienation to loving relationship, from personal bondage to freedom, from disease to wholeness.

⁷⁸ I Timothy 2:3

⁷⁹ John 3:5-8

Living by Faith

Both the Hebrew and Greek words for salvation denote deliverance and wholeness. Isaiah prophesied about the saving death of the Messiah.

“Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows . . . he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed” Isaiah 53:4a,5

This prophecy contains two promises: Jesus will release us from the bondage of sin and He will heal us from sickness. We see this two-fold concern about sin and sickness in the earthly ministry of Jesus. He called people to salvation, and He offered them healing.

The healing benefits of Christ’s sacrifice come to our body, soul (the center of our personality) and spirit. Christ is our Great Healer. Cleansed by His forgiveness, the scars of our guilt and fear, our rebellion and pride -- are touched by His love. Healing takes place deep within and our behavior gradually matures.

“And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” II Corinthians 3:18

During His ministry, Christ’s healing miracles revealed the will and purpose of God. Jesus said, *“My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.”*⁸⁰ It is God’s desire that we be freed from suffering and sickness. He uses the medical profession to help as well as dealing directly with us. He wants us to live whole and healthy lives. *“I will heal my people and will let them enjoy abundant peace and security.”*⁸¹

Much of the earthly ministry of Jesus was spent in healing those in need. He did not seem concerned that it would divert people from His primary message of salvation. He did not tell those He healed that they needed to know there was something more important. He always responded as if healing was an important part of His ministry.

James wrote that the requirements for healing are the same as when Christ ministered on earth. We are to acknowledge our need and we are to pray in faith. We are to take the initiative to pray and to ask that others pray for us.

⁸⁰ John 4:34

⁸¹ Jeremiah 33:6b

“Is any of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven.” James 5:14-15

Most of us want to do things ourselves. We think if we depend on God, we will suffer a loss of control. But the opposite is true. Being truly dependent on God will bring feelings of control because God gives us peace, confidence and strength. Jesus heals us emotionally, physically and spiritually. When we are healed in our emotions, it affects us physically and spiritually. When we are healed physically, it affects us emotionally and spiritually. The greatest contributor to our wholeness and health is to draw close to Him so we will mature spiritually.

Healing is part of Christ’s work of reconciliation. He is reconciling us to His Father and to others, and He is reconciling us within ourselves, bringing unity and wholeness. Christ’s healing work is usually not completed overnight or even in a short period of time. It is a process. As we continue to open our lives to His work each day, He gradually brings us health and maturity. We are being prepared to fully enjoy the blessings of God’s kingdom -- more and more fully here on earth, and in complete perfection in heaven.

“He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.” 1 Peter 2:24 RSV

Practical Application

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. To someone inquiring into Christianity, how would you explain the term “salvation” ? _____

Living by Faith

2. How would you explain the phrase “*by his wounds we are healed*”?

Isaiah 53:5 _____

3. Why do you think it is difficult for some to acknowledge their need for healing and ask others to pray for them? _____

Suggestions for Prayer-Listening

Lord Jesus, you went to the cross so I could receive forgiveness for my sins and be healed of my unhealthy choices. If there is any wrongdoing in my life that I have not acknowledged, help me to confess it and give me understanding into my weakness.

Is there someone who needs healing that you want me to pray for?

Suggestions for Meditation

Meditate slowly on the following passages to be assured of God’s desire to heal you.

“How good it is to sing praises to our God, how pleasant and fitting to praise him! He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.”
Psalm 147:1,3

“I will heal my people and will let them enjoy abundant peace and security.” *Jeremiah 33:6*

