

## CHAPTER 1

### ARE CHRISTIANS LOSING THE RIGHT FOCUS IN THE LAST DAYS?

As we survey the spiritual scene and development among believers and church groups today, we see much emphasis on programmes, methods, activities and efforts to make the gospel more palatable and attractive to non-believers. For some groups, there is the stress on the keeping of traditions; others concentrate on the spectacular, the spiritual experiences, the emotional “highs”, the promises of success, prosperity and freedom from all that is negative in life. Then there are those who strategise on the best approach to share the gospel and to reach the world, employing management principles, planning and training know-how and the use of all that is available in science and technology.

### IS THE LORD GOD PLEASED?

Are such developments in line with the right focus for believers as we see the day of the Lord approaching? Is the Lord God pleased with what is going on among His people?

*To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:  
These are the words of him who holds the seven  
stars in his right hand and walks among the seven  
golden lampstands: I know your deeds, your hard  
work and your perseverance.*

*I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name and not grown weary.*

*Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.*

#### Revelation 2:1-5

It is clear that it was the Lord Jesus Himself who addressed the church in Ephesus. Although the letter was addressed specifically to the church in Ephesus at that point of time, the principles apply to all of God's people and churches for all time.

Notice that the Lord Jesus knew the state of the church in Ephesus. The believers in Ephesus were diligent. They toiled as a people of God. They also persevered and endured for the name of the Lord and did not grow weary. They had spiritual insight and were able to test the false apostles, and they would not tolerate wicked men. They could identify with the concerns of the Lord Jesus in the area of rejecting false teaching.

If we look at the list of achievements secured by the church in Ephesus then, we must acknowledge that it is rather outstanding. Not many congregations today can

boast of even a few of those achievements, not to mention the whole list. Many congregations today already fail with regard to the first item in the list; they lack diligence and refuse to work hard. It was not the case with the church in Ephesus. There are congregations today that work hard but cannot last and endure. The church in Ephesus was able to persevere and endure. Not too few congregations can be easily fooled by false apostles but the church in Ephesus was able to test the false apostles and found them to be so. The church also would not tolerate wicked men and her moral standards were commendable when compared to many other groups.

## **GOD VALUES OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH HIM ABOVE EVERYTHING ELSE**

Yet the Lord Jesus was not pleased with the church in Ephesus although He noted all these positive points. The pronouncement from the Lord was: *“I hold this against you. You have forsaken your first love.”*

All the toil, perseverance, endurance, insight, concern for God’s name and for what is morally right may come to no avail if God’s people have forsaken their first love. And what is this first love? Is it not with reference to the relationship between God’s people and the Lord Jesus Christ, the relationship that was so refreshing, so filled with gratitude and so much alive when God’s people first come to know and to love Him? Some believers may recall how this first love awakened them to awe and wonder, adoration

and worship of God beyond their ordinary human experience and imagination.

When God's people lose this first love, when the right focus on the Lord Jesus is diminished and lost, all the positive points listed above become meaningless and displeasing to the Lord. The Lord God values our relationship with Him above everything else. If this relationship is jeopardised, nothing else can replace it. Even prayers and service can become an abomination when the heart is cold and not right with God. If we lose the right focus on the Lord Jesus, we lose this right relationship with Him. The focus on spiritual activities, strategies, programmes, vision and the like cannot replace fixing our eyes on Jesus Christ in the Christian walk.

### **WE MAY BECOME MORE INTERESTED IN GODLINESS THAN IN GOD HIMSELF**

We need to be aware of a subtle but great danger: we may actually be more interested in godliness than in God Himself. We immerse ourselves in principles of godliness, seminars, programmes and activities to pursue godliness and end up showing very little interest in God Himself. It is as if we are so familiar with the ethics and principles of marriage but fail to spend time with our spouse and to love him or her. True spirituality is *not knowing about God* but *knowing God*, and this requires not the wisdom of men but the grace of God.

We must acknowledge that the “positive characteristics” of the church in Ephesus were far more superior to the many activities we see in congregations today. Nonetheless, the church in Ephesus was told to repent. Obviously, repentance is not called for if there is no failure or sin on the part of God’s people. In this case, the failure, in God’s eyes, was deemed as significant. What about us? Are we also called to repent? Is the Lord God pleased with what is going on among God’s people today? Are we faring better than the church in Ephesus then? Can it be said that God’s people have not lost their right focus on the Lord Jesus in these last days?

### **A GOOD TREE OR A BAD TREE?**

*A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognise them. Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’*

Matthew 7: 18-23

In the above passage, the Lord Jesus made reference to false prophets and disclosed the point that we would recognise them by their fruit. It is sobering to note that calling the Lord Jesus ‘Lord’ and carrying out deeds like prophesying in His name, casting out demons and performing miracles in themselves do not necessarily mean that the doers of such deeds are acceptable and pleasing to God. It is not these outward deeds in themselves, impressive though they may appear to be, but the actual good fruit that the Lord seeks in His servants. For the good fruit must come from a good tree and only one who does the will of God qualifies to be a ‘good tree’. Only children of God who are in a pleasing relationship with the triune God can produce good fruit which will last.

### **ARE OUR DEEDS ACCORDING TO HIS WILL?**

And that brings us back to the question, “Have we forsaken our first love; have we lost our proper focus on Him in our lives and ministry?” Activities, programmes, strategies, even miracles and casting out of demons – all these can be carried out apart from the will of God and apart from the love for God – and this would be displeasing to the Lord God. Notice the words of the Lord Jesus in Matthew 7: “*I never knew you*”. At the heart of it, are all our spiritual works an outflow from our knowledge of Him and our relationship with Him? Supposedly spiritual deeds might come forth from hearts which are far from God or worse, from hearts which are essentially evil.

In these last days, are believers losing the right focus? In fact, are we losing the only proper focus? We shall look, in more detail, at what this right focus ought to be in the next chapter.

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## CHAPTER TWO

### THE RIGHT FOCUS: JESUS CHRIST

*“...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.”*

Hebrews 12: 1(b)-2

The author of the book of Hebrews exhorts us to fix our eyes on Jesus as we run the Christian race with perseverance. Clearly, our focus ought to be on Him alone. Why must this be so?

In the scriptures, we are told that Jesus Christ is the author and perfecter of our faith. He is the way, the truth and the life and no one comes to the Father except through Him. There is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved. He is the one mediator between God and men. Jesus Christ, though totally sinless, suffered on our behalf and paid the penalty of our sin, which is death and separation from God. He did this to satisfy the righteous demands of the holiness and justice of God His Father. He was the perfect sacrifice.

## **GOD'S GRACE IS NEEDED ALL THE WAY**

As the author of our faith, scriptures reveal that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. Our faith begins with Him. By faith, we are justified freely by God's grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

A righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. The apostle Paul put it clearly: *"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast."* (Ephesians 2: 8-9) We have been saved by grace through faith. Our salvation begins by grace and the whole process of salvation continues to see faith and grace still in operation (Romans 5: 2). God's grace is required throughout the whole outworking and process of salvation (Philippians 1: 6). In other words, grace is required for forgiveness of sin as well as for sanctification.

It is not surprising then that Jesus Christ is not just the author of our faith, but He is also the perfecter of our faith. Jesus has risen from the dead and is seated at the right hand of God the Father. He intercedes for us from His throne of grace; He is our advocate who speaks to the Father in our defence. He sent the Holy Spirit to us to enable us to be transformed into His likeness. The Holy Spirit is our teacher and guide, our comforter, our counselor who leads us into all truth. He glorifies the Lord Jesus by taking what is from Jesus and makes it known to us. We see therefore

how the Lord Jesus Christ is truly the author and perfecter of our faith. Unless we fix our eyes on Him from beginning to end, we cannot hope to run the race with perseverance until the end. If we turn our eyes away from Him and focus on something else or somebody else, we are in deep trouble. Our eyes must be fixed on Him and the right focus is none other than Jesus Christ.

## **REMAINING (ABIDING) IN HIM**

*I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.*

John 15: 5-6

These are the words of the Lord Jesus Himself. They confirm the absolute need to remain or abide in Him in order to be spiritually fruitful and alive. Fixing our eyes on Him and focusing on Him would ensure that we remain in Him. If we lose our focus on Him and our eyes wander away, we are in real danger of not remaining in Him. However, if we fix our eyes on Him and focus on Him, we would be in the centre of God's will and we will not go wrong. All that is good in God's eyes and purpose will be fulfilled if God's people learn to keep focusing on Him all the way. On the other hand, if we turn our focus away from Him and no longer abide and remain in Him, then the Lord's statements sound out very clearly: "*apart from me,*

*you can do nothing*". All our spiritual activities and endeavours would amount to nothing if we fail to remain in Him.

## **LOSING THE FOCUS ON HIM**

*I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? Have you suffered so much for nothing – if it really was for nothing? Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard?*

Galatians 3: 2-5

The Apostle Paul was deeply concerned for the Galatian Christians. They began by believing and by faith, but turned away from faith and sought to attain their Christian goal by human effort and observing the law. They had turned their eyes away from fixing on Jesus and focusing on Him, and they had instead turned to the flesh to perfect their faith.

So great was Paul's burden for them that he exclaimed: "*My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you*" (Galatians 4:19). The Galatian Christians, by not fixing their eyes on Jesus,

had in fact turned to another gospel. They were listening to the false Jewish teachers who told them that besides believing the gospel, they needed to be circumcised in order to be saved. The false teachers were preaching a different gospel. They were adding circumcision as a prerequisite to being saved. Superficially, it may seem not to be so serious – after all, they were not rejecting the gospel per se – all they were requesting was that the believers should be circumcised as well. But, in reality, this was and is a very serious error. They were in fact saying that the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus on the cross was not adequate to secure salvation for the people of God. Something else was needed – circumcision.

The Apostle Paul described such a development in very strong terms: *“But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!”* (Galatians 1:8).

## **NO OTHER GOSPEL**

We must not forget the seriousness of turning to another gospel. In today’s context, it may not be a case for circumcision; it may be a subtle insistence on the need to add certain church traditions; it may take the form of certain rules and culture; it may be a call to be loyal to a particular leader and his teachings; it may be insistence on some special spiritual knowledge or experience. Whatever it is, any addition to the original gospel of Christ is a turning to another gospel and Paul’s warnings should sound out loud and clear to us! Notice how we can begin well

with grace and faith and yet, somehow along the way, we slowly abandon grace and faith although we may insist that we still abide by such principles. Hence, invariably, when we start abandoning grace and faith, our eyes are no longer fixed on Jesus and our focus has already shifted.

Conversely, we may not add on to the gospel but instead, we may take away truths from the gospel of Christ, demanding certain terms that make the gospel less than what it ought to be. This is equally serious! In the same vein, we are no longer fixing our eyes on Jesus and the focus has definitely shifted. We must not add on to the gospel or take away from the gospel of Jesus Christ! Paul's warnings underscore the serious consequences of preaching another gospel.

The scriptures make it very clear: we need to keep fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith all the way in the Christian race until we reach the finishing line. We cannot afford to shift our focus away from Him.

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## CHAPTER THREE

### RIGHT RELATIONSHIPS

If our eyes are fixed firmly on Jesus and our focus is right, certain implications should follow in our Christian lives. The first of this is right relationships.

*“The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”*

Mark 12: 29-31

Here, the Lord Jesus made it clear what are the most important commandments for His people and keeping these commandments essentially fulfil the moral requirements of the law. These two commandments also point to the right relationships for God’s people.

We would remember how the Lord Jesus rebuked the church in Ephesus in Revelation 2 when He told them that they had forsaken their first love. This has to do with the first commandment: to love the Lord God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our mind and with all our strength. This right and vital relationship between the believer and God must be treasured and nurtured

throughout our journey on earth and beyond. Otherwise, all else is in vain.

## **THE FIRST FOREMOST COMMANDMENT**

*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. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.*

1 John 4: 9-10

We must acknowledge the fact that it is God who initiated His love towards us, and in His love, He sent His only Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. In His grace, Christ died for us even when we were yet sinners and enemies of the cross. If we truly appreciate deeply His love, we ought to love Him in return. It is His love that enables us to love Him and to love others. It is His grace that reached out to us even though we were wretched in all our ways. As we learn to love Him in return, worship, gratitude and thankfulness take root in our hearts and spur us on to live lives worthy of Him and His high calling.

## **OBEDIENCE REFLECTS OUR LOVE FOR HIM**

*If you love me, you will obey what I command...Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me*



*will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him  
and show myself to him.*

John 14: 15, 21

The Lord Jesus disclosed that the manifestation of our love for Him is our obedience to His commands. A life of obedience to the Lord is a reflection of our love for Him and this would in turn cause the Father and the Son to love us. Fixing our eyes on Jesus would include living a life of obedience to Him in love. Obedience to God is to be seen in the routine things of life, not just in spectacular deeds. As we focus on Him and grow in our appreciation of His sacrifice and love for us, we grow in the quality of our worship of Him as well as in our depth of gratitude to Him.

What is the quality of our worship of Him in our lives? How deeply grateful and thankful are we to the Lord for what He has done for us? These would serve as yardsticks or measurements of our love for the Lord and God of our lives. They can be seen in our longing to spend time with the One we love; also in our pursuit of God and in our desire to grow in our knowledge of Him and the truth. If all these are lacking, perhaps our eyes are no longer fixed on Jesus. In all probability, our focus is on something else or somebody else.

## THE SECOND FOREMOST COMMANDMENT

The second commandment has to do with our relationship with our neighbour. Do we love our neighbour as ourselves? What did Jesus mean by ‘loving your neighbour as yourself’? Jesus was referring to the healthy attitude of concern for self and loving the self. This attitude has to do with desiring what is for our own good and to seek that also for our neighbour. This healthy attitude is legitimate and is different from the love of self-life and the preoccupation with the self that is self-centred and negative.

*Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love...Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.*

1 John 4: 7-8, 11

Apostle John communicated clearly that we are to love one another because love comes from God and God is love. Our knowledge of God and our new birth in Christ are authenticated by our lives of love. And we love because God first loves us. In other words, it is not possible for a true child of God not to love.

Loving our neighbour as ourselves would include the willingness to forgive our neighbour. Oftentimes, when we find it difficult to forgive others who have wronged us, it is

not so much because we cannot forgive but rather because we do not appreciate enough how much we have been forgiven by God. Loving our neighbour would involve practical concerns for our neighbour. We are familiar with the parable of the good Samaritan. In this parable, we see how a Samaritan was willing to help a Jewish stranger who was robbed and injured. He was prepared to be inconvenienced; he was willing to dress the wounds of the injured man and to pay the expenses for his stay in the inn. The parable illustrates that true love and compassion, to be real, must be manifested in deeds. The Samaritan, in contrast to the Levite and priest, showed us that love is more concerned about doing the right thing before God than doing the safe thing to preserve self-life. The Levite and priest might have felt sorry for the stranger, but no amount of positive feelings can take the place of faithful doing because of love.

Loving our neighbour would mean being other-centred rather than being self-centred. It may involve inconvenience; it may incur a cost and sometimes it may cause us much pain. To love, we must be prepared to be vulnerable. When we love, we must be willing to suffer pain. Most of us fail in this area. The Lord Jesus is our supreme example as seen in Philippians 2: 5-11. He did not consider equality with God something to be grasped but made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness, He humbled Himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross! And He did all these because of love. If we refuse to move towards someone in the spirit of love because we are afraid they

may disappoint us, then we are seeking to protect ourselves from pain rather than seeking to love others. In effect, we are disobeying God's command to love our neighbour and disobedience is sin.

## **LOVING OUR BRETHREN**

Loving our neighbour must include loving our brethren, and much more so, because we belong to the same family of God.

*We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him. This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.*

1 John 3: 14-18

The evidence that we have passed from death to life is our love for our brethren. And this love is meant to be a sacrificial love as exemplified by the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus for us. Also, it is to be a practical love – not just

limited to our words – but demonstrated by our deeds and our actions.

We see how significant and central this truth is: no true child of God can excuse himself from not loving his brethren. If we do not love our brethren, we have to seriously evaluate whether we have been truly born again.

It is easy to say that we love from our hearts but true Christian love would be seen in practical loving deeds and actions. When believers find it hard to be kind to one another; when even saying ‘Hello’ becomes such a difficult task and a chore, how can we claim that we indeed love one another? When we spend most of our energy and time concentrating on building our own lives, careers and families and have so little left for our brethren, how can we show practical love and concern to our brethren apart from the occasional ‘How are you doing?’ Do we seriously have time to pray for our leaders, for the needs of the brethren; have we sufficient energy left to render practical help to those who are really in need?

The Apostle John made it clear that our love for the brethren ought to be sacrificial, even to the point of being willing to lay down our lives for them. For many believers however, even overcoming small inconveniences involved in rendering a little help to the brethren become such an insurmountable obstacle; what more if we are referring to sacrifice.

## TRUTH AND LOVE GO HAND IN GLOVE

But the Apostle John also wrote that we are to love in truth. And that would imply the need to “*put off falsehood and speak truthfully to our neighbour for we are all members of one body*” (Ephesians 4: 25). It may involve correction and rebuke in love, for truth and love must go hand in glove. When we condone falsehood and sin in our brethren and dare not speak up for fear of men, we are, in effect, not loving our brethren in truth. However, we need to be honest and ensure that truth is applied in genuine love and not as an excuse to vent our displeasure and own frustration. Nevertheless, focusing on Jesus must necessarily be focusing on truth and love. Even though it may be unpleasant at times, God’s truth must be upheld at all times, for God is love and God is light.

*If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work.*

2 John 10-11

Notice that although Christians are to love and to be hospitable, the Apostle John warned the believers not to be hospitable to false teachers, for to do so would be to share in their wicked work. In wisdom, we must know how to draw the line, yet in a spirit of love and truth.

Fixing our eyes on Jesus would mean nurturing our relationship with God and our relationship with our neighbour, especially our brethren. The Lord Jesus came to save a people for Himself, a holy people, a royal priesthood, a people belonging to God, a chosen people and relationship is central in this: relationship between God and men and relationship among the brethren. This is a relationship of love of the highest degree, a relationship of love in the context of truth, made possible only by God Himself.

What is the state of our relationship – with God and with the brethren? Are we keeping the right focus? Are we indeed fixing our eyes on Jesus?

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## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **RIGHT TEACHINGS AND UNDERSTANDING**

If our eyes are fixed on Jesus, a second implication follows in our Christian lives: right teachings and understanding. Wrong teachings creep in when our focus on the Lord Jesus becomes blurred and distorted.

### **ACCEPT BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE AND REVELATION**

From the early days of church history, various individuals had questioned the person of the Lord Jesus and His work on Calvary. We know clearly that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man. Yet there had been those, using human logic and reasoning, who queried how Jesus could be fully God and fully man at the same time. The Gnostics, who held the view that all material is evil, claimed that God, being Spirit, could not possibly dwell in a human body.

We need to acknowledge that human logic is limited, and biblical revelation and perspective transcend human logic and reasoning. For example, we believe that God is one and yet He is three persons. The doctrine of the Trinity is accepted by all true Bible-believing Christians. Yet we know that if we apply human logic to understand this doctrine, we would be baffled and stumped. How can God be one and three persons at the same time?

There are those who cling to distorted teachings and understanding because they cannot reconcile their logic with the plain biblical perspective and revelation. As such, all scriptures are interpreted in a way that supports their own presuppositions and in line with their own human logic and reasoning.

*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

Isaiah 55: 8-9

We must humbly acknowledge this truth as we seek to understand God's revelations and ways. Let us accept biblical revelation and perspective as they stand even though our human logic cannot comprehend them. For we know that the secret things belong to the Lord God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever.

## **REJECT FALSE TEACHINGS**

The teachings of Gnosticism penetrated the early church and apostles like Paul and John in particular sought to combat these wrong teachings.

*Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist – he denies the Father and the Son. No one who denies*

*the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also.*

1 John 2: 22-23

Whether it be Gnosticism or other forms of teachings, if there is denial that Jesus is the Christ, the spirit behind such teachings is the spirit of the antichrist and has to be rejected rigorously by God's people. Beware of those who claim that Jesus is not fully God and fully man even though they may use the scriptures and be apparently effective in their so called ministry. We must realise that the evil one himself was able to quote scriptures in the temptation scene of the Lord Jesus in Matthew 4.

The right biblical approach is to teach truth which comes forth from the proper study of the Bible rather than to use scriptures to support one's own novel ideas, however impressive these ideas may seem to be. Someone wisely said that you can use scriptures to support virtually any idea if you quote them out of context and in a manner that ignore other parts of scriptures which contradict your idea. Imagine the damage that can take place when such a distorted approach is used by an influential leader who commands much respect and popularity among his followers. Many a heresy begins in this manner and let us not conclude that when scriptures are used and quoted that everything is in order.

If we do not allow the language of scriptures to speak to us in context but try to make the text fit our own novel

ideas, then the meaning of any word in any part of the Bible depends on man's interpretation which can change according to whatever ideas are in fashion or in the forefront of our own speculation.

### **BEWARE LEST THE GIFTS BECOME MORE IMPORTANT THAN THE GIVER**

When the eyes are no longer firmly fixed on Jesus, the gifts can become more important than the Giver. Believers become rather obsessed with the gifts of the Spirit to the point that the Giver is not given the proper place and honour due to Him. In such a context, the Lord Jesus is not magnified and glorified in the various meetings. Instead, individuals and "spectacular gifts" take centre-stage. We must realise that when God is not the primary focus in our lives and ministry, then everything else becomes out of focus. The Holy Spirit's main ministry is to glorify Jesus Christ and to point the believers to Him and not to put Himself personally in the limelight. We need to bear this in mind when we evaluate whether a ministry is Christ-centred and whether the focus on Jesus Christ, His person, His work and His glory has been compromised.

### **THE SACRIFICE OF JESUS WAS ONCE FOR ALL AND COMPLETE**

When certain ones seem to suggest that Christ's sacrifice is not sufficient and that we need some other extra experiences and superior knowledge in our Christian lives – beware! Such an approach often causes division in the

church with some claiming that they are more spiritual than others or that others lack spiritually. This also compromises the gospel of the Lord Jesus.

*...But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgement, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.*

Hebrews 9: 26(b)-28

*Because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.*

Hebrews 10: 14

Scriptures make it clear that Christ's sacrifice was once for all and complete. Any attempt to discredit this truth is unacceptable and dishonouring to God. In the last days, God has spoken to us *by His Son* (Hebrews 1: 1-2). Any message from any person that is not consistent with what is spoken to us *by His Son* is to be rejected.

We need to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus such that we may not be led astray to the wrong teachings and understanding. We must keep our focus right.

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## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **RIGHT OUTWORKING**

We have examined two implications which follow in our lives if our focus is right and our eyes are fixed on Jesus Christ, the author and perfecter of our faith. We will now consider the third implication and that has to do with the right outworking, daily and long-term, in practical terms, in our Christian lives.

#### **GOD’S GRACE AND THE VARIOUS RESPONSES TO IT**

We have noted earlier that it is by grace we have been saved through faith – it is not from ourselves – it is a gift of God. We also noted that we should continue to work out our salvation by grace through faith until we see the Lord face to face. Jesus Christ is the author and perfecter of our faith and God’s grace comes from Him. Indeed, God’s favour comes to us basically through the merit and completed work of the Lord Jesus. We respond to Him through faith, in the beginning when we become believers and throughout our pilgrimage and journey in life. We are to fix our eyes on Jesus by faith in the Christian race until we cross the finishing line.

However, there are several ways believers may respond wrongly to the grace of God.



## **GRACE DOES NOT ENCOURAGE SINNING AS A WAY OF LIFE**

*The law was added so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more, so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin, how can we live in it any longer?*

Romans 5: 20-21; 6: 1-2

There are those who argue that if sin increases, grace increases all the more, then we might as well go on sinning so that grace may increase. The Apostle Paul exclaimed, ‘*By no means, we died to sin, how can we live in it any longer?*’ If we are truly children of God, we have already died to sin. We are a new creation, how can we live in sin?

The Apostle John put it this way:

*No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him...No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God’s seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God.*

1 John 3: 6, 9

It is clear that those who are genuinely born-again Christians will not continue to sin as a way of life – they have died to sin. Those who continue to sin with the presumption that grace will increase as sin increases in their lives need to evaluate whether they are truly born-again believers. The teaching of antinomianism, which advocates freedom to live in any manner we like because we have already been forgiven by grace irrespective of how we live, is a very dangerous teaching. It is in fact encouraging various ones to continue sinning so that grace may increase. It is sad to see those who claim to be believers living carelessly and in sin, taking God's grace for granted. It is even sadder to hear Christian leaders preaching such a doctrine, giving false assurance to those who dishonour God's name by their negative manner of life.

We need to realise that although sin remains in us, sin is no longer our master. There is a great difference between sin living in us and we living in sin. The believer is no longer a *slave* to sin – he has died to sin in that sense – sin no more has dominion over him. As he looks to God and depends on Him, he is able to overcome sin with God's enabling. But there is no perfection in this life.

*If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us...If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.*

1 John 1: 8, 10

## GRACE IS NOT CONTRARY TO DISCIPLINE

Then there are those whose understanding of God's grace causes them to become unhealthily passive in their Christian lives. Grace does not mean freedom from any rules. Discipline, on the other hand, does not necessarily mean restraint and legalism (although it can lead to this – we shall touch on this subsequently). In fact, it is God's grace that teaches discipline in our lives.

*For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope – the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.*

Titus 2: 11-14

The Apostle Paul made it clear that God's grace teaches believers self-control and disciplined godly living. Grace is not contrary to godly discipline and it certainly does not promote passivity.

Unfortunately, many believers who promote discipline tend to work out discipline in their own strength. It is so very easy to depend on ourselves, our efforts and

performance, and this results in the work of the flesh. We are called to be responsible, yet dependent on God. It is God who works in us to enable us in our outworking. Discipline can be the work of the flesh if it relies on human effort. But discipline need not be carried out in reliance on human effort; it ought to be in dependent on God's strength and grace.

We see the positive example in Paul's life and ministry.

*We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me.*

Colossians 1: 28-29

Paul proclaimed and taught Christ; he laboured and struggled in his ministry, yet not with his own strength but with God's energy powerfully working in him. There was no doubt that Apostle Paul exercised much discipline, diligence and self-control, yet it is also true that all of Paul's toil and struggles were in dependence on God's power and grace.

The Apostle Paul also communicated this truth to the Philippians believers.

*Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed – not only in my presence, but now much*

*more in my absence – continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.*

Philippians 2: 12-13

The Philippian Christians were to work out their salvation soberly; yet the working out was to be in dependence on God who works in them to will and to act. We see that grace is not incompatible with discipline, and dependence on God's power and enabling is not incompatible with working out our salvation. The Holy Spirit does not do the work for us but He enables us to work. Our part is to work but to do so in reliance upon God. God's work makes our effort (which is necessary) effective.

## **FLESHLY DISCIPLINE LEADS TO LEGALISM**

Fleshly discipline leads to legalism – a keeping of rules and regulations to the point that we equate these rules with spirituality and measure our standing with God by the way we perform our spiritual disciplines. In reality, our daily relationship with God does not depend on how well we carry out our spiritual disciplines. It is dependent on God's grace, not on our efforts in earning God's approval. Godly discipline is always in the context of His grace and love. We are accepted in the Beloved, solely through the merit of the Lord Jesus and not on the basis of our performance. Even our performance, the very best of it, is like 'filthy

rags' to God – it cannot hope to satisfy God's requirement of justice and holiness.

Consider the parable of the Lord Jesus in Luke 18:

*To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.*

Luke 18: 9-14

Notice that the Pharisee was disciplined – he fasted twice a week and gave a tenth of all he got. He obviously refrained from carrying out any gross sins like adultery, robbery and the like. One would have thought that his performance should have gained approval from God and he would have been justified before God. It was the tax collector instead who was justified. The tax collector recognised his own sinfulness and unworthiness before a

holy righteous God, and he asked for mercy and cried out to God for His grace. It is the spirit of repentance and a crying out for God's mercy and grace that caused this man to go home justified before God. There was no merit on his part.

The Pharisee, however, was confident of his own righteousness and looked down on others. His spiritual disciplines had caused him to be proud and arrogant. Obviously, the disciplines had been carried out in dependence on his own human efforts.

## **LEGALISM CAN MAKE ONE PROUD OR GUILTY**

We see how legalism can make one proud and arrogant. Our ability to uphold spiritual rules, regulations and disciplines consistently (albeit in our own strength) causes pride to creep in into our lives. Conversely, when we fail, in our own strength, to maintain spiritual disciplines in our lives, we become dejected, discouraged and victims of guilt (made worse by the accusations of the evil one). We feel that our spiritual performance is below par and surely God cannot be pleased with us. In fact, God might even reject us, we think. But this is certainly not true. God accepts us because of Jesus and what He has done for us, not because of our own efforts and performance. However, as noted earlier, grace teaches us godly discipline and we cannot go about living our Christian lives carelessly and recklessly.

Preachers who promote legalism may unknowingly cause many to be under the bondage of guilt. Such ones

may be so despondent to the point of wanting to give up their faith. They feel that it is no use trying to live the Christian life, for although they try and try again and again, they just cannot live up to God's standards and expectations. Ours is a supernatural life and it is only by God's grace and supernatural power that we can live out such a life. When we fail, God is ever ready to forgive us in Christ Jesus if we repent and acknowledge our sins before Him.

In fact, Apostle John wrote:

*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*

1 John 1:9

When God's servants preach on the many practical applications recorded in many of the epistles, they must not forget that these applications and exhortations are always with the background and context of God's grace and what has been accomplished by the Lord Jesus on the cross of Calvary. This needs to be emphasised, for it constitutes the whole biblical perspective and revelation. Otherwise, those who receive the message would invariably seek to respond with their own effort, even though the desire may be noble and commendable. We must not put burdens on the shoulders of our brethren which we ourselves are not able to carry. The wrong emphasis in our teaching and preaching may cause many to be committed to a set of



Christian values or a kind of Christian lifestyle without being committed to God Himself!

If we continue to fix our eyes on Jesus and focus on Him, we would realise soon enough that we have to depend upon Him, the perfecter of our faith, to finish the race and to be transformed into His likeness. As we gaze upon Him, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, we would be transformed from glory to glory (2 Corinthians 3:18). The more we gaze at Him and focus on Him, the more we want to become like Him. And the more we gaze at Him, the better we will know ourselves because truth comes to light in the presence of the eternal God.

## **PRIDE LEADS TO DOWNFALL**

We have noted earlier that legalism can make one proud. The sin of pride is perhaps the worst of all sins. It was pride that caused Lucifer to rebel against God. The one who is proud finds it hard to acknowledge that he has sinned. He finds it difficult to be teachable, and repentance requires teachability, true openness and acknowledgement of sin. This is especially so for those who have attained a certain spiritual standing in Christian leadership and some degree of popularity and success in ministry. Such ones may feel they are beyond rebuke and correction. They forget that they have only one Teacher and Master, the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is very easy to hide from the truth and imagine ourselves to be truthful, when in reality, we are not. It is

possible to be open and honest on the outside and yet hide from the truth on the inside. Let us realise that all of us, even the mature believers, are capable of hiding from truth. For Christian leaders, it is wise to be open not just to those who are beholden to them but also to those who will not be embarrassed or afraid to tell them the truth about themselves. It is so easy to be set in our own ideas that our minds are shut to the feedback of others. The conviction that our belief and methods alone are correct has been the cause of much tragedy and pain in the history of the church through the ages.

It is helpful to learn from the life of King David. The prophet Nathan's confrontation with David regarding his sin with Bathsheba was not pleasant – imagine telling a king 'You are the man'. Yet David was contrite and repentant – he responded almost immediately: 'I have sinned against the Lord'. David could have responded negatively like some other kings of Israel who ill-treated the prophets who had the courage to tell them the truth about their lives. Read what David wrote in the psalms:

*Let a righteous man strike me – it is a kindness;  
let him rebuke me – it is oil on my head. My head  
will not refuse it. Yet my prayer is ever against the  
deeds of evildoers.*

Psalm 141: 5

## **THE MORE GODLY THE MAN THE HUMBLER HE BECOMES**

We must remember that no one living is truly righteous before God, apart from His grace. Those who are pure in their own eyes are those who do not appreciate deeply the ugliness and gravity of sin.

It is interesting to observe that the closer a man gets to God, the lower he becomes. In other words, the extent we appreciate and acknowledge our wretchedness and the forgiveness of our sins will determine the measure and degree of our gratitude and love towards God. The more godly the man, the humbler he becomes. As we fix our eyes on Jesus and focus on Him, our faith in Him grows; our love for Him grows; our appreciation of grace grows and the consciousness of our own unworthiness and sins grows. The more believers are conformed to God's image, the more they recoil from sin and are conscious of it, even the less obvious one. They become more acutely aware of the gravity of sin and they would detest it and feel dismayed when they succumb to it.

It is no wonder Apostle Paul described himself in the following way:

*Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his*

*unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.*

1 Timothy 1: 15-16

*For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I, persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them – yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.*

1 Corinthians 15: 9-10

Apostle Paul was perhaps the most influential, godly and effective apostle. Yet he recognised deeply the grace of God in his life and he remained humble and ever conscious of his unworthiness and wretchedness before a holy God. There was no room for pride in his life; in fact, he thought of himself as the worst sinner and the least of the apostles, not deserving even to be called an apostle.

If we become proud like the Pharisee and look down on others and if we think of ourselves as having made it to a certain extent in our spiritual lives, pause and ponder: are our eyes still fixed on Jesus and focused on Him or have we been looking at ourselves, our own efforts, our achievements (spiritual though they may appear to be) and comparing ourselves unhealthily with others? What is the outworking of our Christian lives like – is it the right outworking or is it one independent of God and His

provision in Christ Jesus? Are we growing in the nurturing of a humble and contrite spirit or are we getting more and more confident in our spiritual achievements and standing? Is our godliness clothed with humility and an attitude of dependence on God or is it coloured by self-confidence and a 'holier than thou' attitude?

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## CHAPTER SIX

### RIGHT ASSURANCE AND CONFIDENCE

If our eyes are rightly fixed on Jesus, then we can certainly have the right assurance and confidence to run the race with perseverance right to the end.

Otherwise, we might think that we have the right confidence and assurance but the warnings from scriptures may question the reliability of such a conclusion.

We examined the message of the Lord Jesus to the church in Ephesus in Revelation 2. We noted that although the message was specifically directed to the church in Ephesus then, the principles apply to all of God's people and churches for all time. And this is also true for the messages of the Lord Jesus to the other six churches mentioned in Revelation 2. If we read through all the seven messages to the seven churches in Revelation 2, there is one common statement at the end of each message. The statement is: *"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."* It is as if scriptures are telling us to pay special attention to what the Spirit says to the seven churches; the messages to the seven churches are obviously relevant to the churches in yesteryears as well as to the churches today.

## **NO RIGHT CONFIDENCE IF WE LOSE OUR FIRST LOVE**

We saw how the Lord Jesus rebuked the church in Ephesus for having forsaken her first love for the Lord. The Lord warned this church to repent or else He would remove their lampstand from its place. From Revelation 1, we know that the lampstand refers to the church. A church no longer in its place means that the church is no longer functioning and the testimony and witness of the church is no longer existing. If we have forsaken our first love, we no longer can have the right assurance and confidence in our Christian race, not to mention anything about a right relationship with the Lord and a healthy witness.

## **NO PLACE FOR IMMORALITY, IDOLATRY AND WRONG TEACHINGS**

To the church in Pergamum, the Lord Jesus wrote: *“You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality”* (Revelation 2:14(b)). To the church in Thyatira, the message included: *“You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols”* (Revelation 2: 20(b)).

What was common to these two churches? – Sexual immorality, wrong teachings by false prophets/prophetesses and idolatry. The warnings were clear enough: the Lord

Jesus would not tolerate such development in His churches and judgement would be forthcoming unless there was repentance. The Lord God is holy and He expects His people to be holy. Idolatry does not just refer to the worship of idols/statues; anything or anyone that takes the place of God in our lives becomes an idol. The people are not to tolerate false teachings.

If all these are not corrected, we cannot truly have the right assurance and confidence in our lives. And such things take place principally because our eyes are no longer fixed on Jesus and our focus has shifted. We need to repent and correct the situation before it is too late. We must take stock of our spiritual state as a people of God.

## **NO PLACE FOR COMPLACENCY AND LUKEWARMNESS**

To the church in Sardis: *“You have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God”* (Revelation 3: 1(b)-2).

To the church in Laodicea: *“I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm – neither hot nor cold – I am about to spit you out of my mouth. You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing’. But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked”* (Revelation 3: 15-17).



Notice that the two churches, Sardis and Laodicea, had almost similar problems. Sardis was spiritually asleep, in fact spiritually dead, although she had a reputation of being alive. The Lord told her to wake up and strengthen what remained. Laodicea thought she was spiritually rich when in fact she was poor, blind, wretched, pitiful and naked, Laodicea also had another problem; she was lukewarm, neither hot nor cold. The Lord warned her that He was about to spit her out of His mouth. In all likelihood, Sardis also had a somewhat similar spiritual ailment – being half-dead spiritually and yet having a reputation of being alive would surely mean being neither hot nor cold as well.

Both churches had the wrong confidence. They thought they were very much alive spiritually and rather rich. Yet they were dying spiritually and were in a pitiful state. What is obvious is that both churches did not recognise their true spiritual state. They were oblivious to the reality in their lives! They could not see – they were spiritually blind. The Lord sought to awaken them to the real situation and to help them see. Sadly, their eyes were no longer fixed on Jesus.

Both churches were also luke-warm and lukewarmness can be a rather common problem in churches today. Being lukewarm would include being indifferent, complacent and presumptuous. Churches with this problem seem to be functioning as per normal but in reality, there is very little spiritual life present. They are just going through the motions, keeping the form without the life. Such churches are inward looking and they seek to preserve their own way

of life and functioning without much regard and concern for the lost world and the practical needs around. They have all the programmes and meetings though, but in terms of lives being transformed, there is very little movement. Yet, at the same time, they think they are doing alright; in fact, they may think they are doing very well. But as far as the Lord Jesus is concerned, He sees the reality and it saddens His heart.

Lukewarmness that gives rise to indifference also sees God's people not concerned for the defence of the truth and the preservation of the right doctrines. They are not willing to know the truth in all its totality for that would require disciplined study of scriptures. They are not bothered about lessons from church history, for that would involve time spent to examine church history. They are just willing to go along, receiving the teachings that are familiar to them and preaching which they are comfortable with. Those teachings which they cannot understand or those that are not acceptable to them are just ignored. At the heart of it, they are not willing to pay the price to preserve the truth that many had suffered for and died for in the past. They prefer not to get out of their "comfort zone" or to "rock the boat" as it were, even though the boat is already full of holes and is sinking. The fear of man and the unpleasantness of confrontation make it easier to just maintain the status quo, and the church of God suffers for it. The lukewarm and indifferent believers must know that there is no place for neutrality in the Christian life. The one who stands aloof from the good cause automatically helps the evil one and his evil cause.

## **BE FAITHFUL UNTIL THE END**

The messages to the last two churches draw a sharp contrast to those directed to the previous five.

To the church in Smyrna: *“Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life”* (Revelation 2: 10).

To the church in Philadelphia: *“I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name”* (Revelation 3:8).

The call to Smyrna was to be faithful, even to the point of death and not to be afraid of suffering. Similarly, Philadelphia, although she had little strength, was commended for her faithfulness to the Lord Jesus and her consistency in keeping the word of the Lord.

We can have the right assurance and confidence in the Lord as we press on in the Christian race if we remain faithful to the Lord even though it might involve suffering, pain and death. Although we have little strength, yet that does not mean we cannot be faithful – the church in Philadelphia can attest to that. Fixing our eyes on Jesus and keeping a right focus on Him would mean following Him and walking in His will.

*Then he said to them all: 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.'*

Luke 9: 23-24

There is no doubt that the Christian race requires perseverance, the preparedness to suffer for the Lord's sake even to the point of death and the willingness to deny oneself. The cross speaks of suffering and death. To take up the cross therefore means that we ought to be ready and willing to endure the worst that men can do to us, for the sake of being true and loyal to the Lord Jesus. If we are not prepared to leave our comfort zone and we reject any form of suffering and discipline that God allows, we are not truly His disciples. We cannot therefore have the confidence to remain faithful until the end. Fixing our eyes on Jesus, focusing on Him, the author and perfecter of our faith, must mean faithfulness to Him from start to finish, no matter what it takes and how long it takes (according to God's wisdom and sovereignty). Only then can we have the right assurance and confidence in Him; a confidence which will not disappoint us and one that will ensure that when we see Him face to face, we will not shrink back in shame. If we are true to Him in our lifetime, He will be true to us in eternity.

Such an assurance gives us the confidence in the words of the Apostle Paul in Romans 8: 35-39:

*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: 'For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered'. No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

*This is the confidence and assurance God want His children to have. Do we have it? Do we have reasons to be sure of this certainty? If we fix our eyes on Jesus and focus on Him, nothing can separate us from His love.*

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

#### RUNNING THE CHRISTIAN RACE

The Christian life has been likened to a race. It is however not like a short sprint that requires a sudden burst of energy and then it is all over. It is in fact more like a marathon which is a long, at times painful, energy-sapping, enduring race. The author to the book of Hebrews reminds us that in this race, we need to throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles (Hebrews 12: 1). We cannot run a marathon with heavy loads on our back and our feet shackled and entangled with weights, wires and the like. Unfortunately, there are many believers who seek to run the Christian race in this manner. They refuse to let go of the things that hinder and the things that entangle in their lives.

In a race, we have to begin well. We have seen that we begin by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul, in comparing the Christian life to a building, wrote: *“For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ”* (1 Corinthians 3: 11). We must be clear how we begin and what the foundation of our faith is. It is none other than Jesus Christ our Lord.

## NEED TO CONTINUE WELL

Beginning well alone does not guarantee that we would complete the race. We must continue well. How we live today matters if we desire to see the finishing line tomorrow. We cannot run a marathon by constantly stopping and looking back, refusing to go on. There are some believers who refuse to let go of things, people and positions in their lives and to move on. Holding on to them prevents us from pressing forward and finishing well. Every time we let go of what is not meaningful and helpful, we are in a position to move forward. Some believers find it difficult to give up the past. Their hearts are in the past and they will run, looking backwards and thinking of the good old days. Such believers must learn not to turn aside or linger over the lesser things while the greater things call them to march forward.

Paul reminds us, in comparing the Christian life to farming, that we can plant and we can water but it is the Lord God who causes the growth (1 Corinthians 3: 7). We are all merely God's fellow workers and the growth and glory belong to God. Hence, to continue well, we must fix our eyes on Jesus; we must focus on Him, for He is the author and perfecter of our faith. Whether we will continue well and finish well depends on Him. If we lose our focus on Him, we might get sidetracked in the race and go on to a wrong and different path that leads to death instead of life. Similarly, we are God's field; we are God's building – we are not the ones who make things grow; we are not the

foundation of the building and the master builder. We are just God's workers, building under God's instructions and direction.

It is always helpful to remember that the work and glory belong to God. It is never 'my church', 'my disciple' or 'my ministry'. It is always God's and we must know our proper place before Him. Indeed, a man's greatest glory is not what he has done but what God has done for him and in him. Knowing this would help us not to cling on when we need to move on. It also helps us to pass on the work to others when the time is right and to allow God to multiply and continue His work and ministry.

## **FINISHING WELL**

But the race is not over until we finish well. The fire will test the quality of each man's work on God's building, whether it will be burned up, for the day will bring it to light and show the work for what it is (1 Corinthians 3: 13). The fruit of the tree would be known on that day whether it is a good fruit or a bad fruit. Finishing well would mean presenting to God a good fruit and a building which will last. However, finishing well is finally evaluated by the lives we have touched for God rather than just the tasks we have finished.

The prophet Jeremiah finished well even though he preached against all odds and his task appeared not to be completed and well-received by those he ministered to, Stephen was stoned to death at the prime of his life and



ministry. Nevertheless, he finished well for his God. Both Jeremiah and Stephen still touch the lives of many today.

## **BEWARE OF DISQUALIFICATION**

Even the great Apostle Paul knew that if he himself was not careful, he could be disqualified in this race and not receive the prize (1 Corinthians 9: 26-27). Paul wrote to Timothy the following: *“Similarly, if anyone competes as an athlete he does not receive the victor’s crown unless he competes according to the rules. The hardworking farmer should be the first to receive a share of the crops”* (2 Timothy 2: 5-6).

The Apostle Paul exercised much spiritual discipline in his life and ministry; he did it in dependence on God and His grace. He preached the whole counsel of God and he was not afraid to suffer for the sake of the gospel even though it was unpleasant, painful and dangerous. He did not cling to his own life but endeavoured to finish the work God had entrusted to him.

Paul did finish the race well.

*For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith.*

2 Timothy 4: 6-7

He kept the faith and our faith is centred on Jesus Christ. He is the foundation of the building; He is the author and perfecter of our faith; He is the one who gives growth to the plant and He is the one who ensures that the building is completed. Indeed, *unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain* (Psalm 127: 1).

## **FIGHT THE GOOD FIGHT**

In 2 Timothy 4, Paul introduced another analogy for the Christian life – that of warfare. Paul wrote that he had fought a good fight. We need to realise that spiritual warfare is real in Christian ministry; we have a strong and formidable foe in the evil one. However, we must also realise that the war has been won by the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross at Calvary. The battles, however, remain although the war has been won. We need to fight a good fight as soldiers of Jesus Christ. Paul wrote to Timothy to endure hardship like a good soldier of Jesus Christ and every good soldier seeks to please his commanding officer (2 Timothy 2: 3-4). Our commanding officer and captain is none other than the Lord Jesus. We must fight under His commands and instructions and in that light, we must keep our eyes focused on Him. A good soldier must be prepared to endure hardship and not be involved in civilian affairs. Similarly, a good soldier of the Lord does not draw back from suffering and he knows how to focus on the battle and his captain, in obedience to Him. He does not get sidetracked by unimportant mundane issues; he does not allow other secondary matters to cause him to lose his focus.

It is paramount therefore if we want to continue well and to finish well the Christian race that we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus Christ and this focus must be maintained throughout the race. As God incarnate, Jesus reveals God to us and in Him, we see who God is. As the Son of man, He shows us how we ought to live our lives here on earth. In Him, God becomes man so that man can become like God, transformed into His likeness.

This is our high calling; this is what we fight for; this is what we are called to build. Let us do it well, by God's grace, and let us finish well this race marked out for us. At the end of the day, finishing well is what truly matters.

*If we died with him, we will also live with him. If we endure, we will also reign with him.*

2 Timothy 2: 11(b)-12

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