

LIVING IN THE LAST DAYS

"But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons."

- 1 Timothy 4:1

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PREFACE

This book arose from a burden to urge Christians to be determined to live well for the Lord God in the last days.

It is written in three parts.

The first part deals with the right perspective believers should have as they live as God's children. A wrong perspective would be a major stumbling block to the outworking of the lives of Christians. The perspective is examined in the light of several pertinent questions asked.

The second part records the various problem areas believers will encounter as faithful Christians and disciples of the Lord in the last days. It also offers some suggestions to counter these problem areas.

The third part focuses on what we can do to ensure that we stand and not fall in the last days. It examines the priorities believers ought to have if they desire to be victorious children of God. The last chapter in this part concentrates on the overall response and posture believers need to take as they recognise the significant issues involved in living well for God.

QUEK KOH CHOON
JANUARY 2001

PART I

THE RIGHT PERSPECTIVE IN THE LAST DAYS

"But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up. Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness."

- 2 Peter 3:10-11

CHAPTER 1

WHAT DO WE LOOK FOR IN LIFE?

The Scriptures and events in the world seem to indicate more and more that we are living in the last days. What should be our focus, our values and our choices as we recognise the impending judgment and the imminence of the Lord's Second Coming? What would be the problem areas and challenges we will face as disciples of the Lord? How can we make sure that we do not fall in these last days? These are the many issues that will be addressed in this book.

In the last days, it is important for believers to have the right perspective in life. Otherwise, we can easily be led astray from the narrow path of discipleship. In seeking to examine this perspective, it is helpful to ponder over several pertinent questions.

We shall first look at a question which is fundamental and the answers to it may determine the outcome and direction of our lives in the last days. The question is "What do we look for in life?" What is it that truly offers fulfilment and satisfaction to our lives? In other words, what do we pursue; what is our ambition in life? Some of God's children may of course respond, "As Christians, surely it is understood what we look for in life; after all, should not our ambition be centred upon God and the will of God?" Some others may exclaim, "Certainly it is to seek after God's desires and to please Him!" In reality, we know that the outworking in the lives of many of God's children is far more complicated than this. It will be particularly so in the last days.

"But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times, some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons" (1 Timothy 4:1). "But realise this, that in the last days, difficult times will come. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; Avoid such men" (2 Timothy 3:1-5).

From these two passages, we notice the difficult times Christians and non-Christians will be exposed to in the last days. The term *"some will fall away from the faith"* suggests that among them were those who were originally of the faith. The other term *"holding to a form of godliness"* points to various ones who outwardly appeared to be Christians and yet in reality had gone far away from God. The dangers of pursuing ambitions motivated by the love of self, pleasure and money are not confined to non-Christians. God's children can also be easily led astray, especially in the context of the pressure and temptations in the last days. Similarly, the ambition to be great and to have power and authority is not only a problem with non-Christians; the Lord's people, in pursuing such a desire, can easily be manipulated by the evil one and deceived into championing doctrines and teachings taught by deceitful spirits and demons.

The warnings in the Scriptures are clear and distinct. What we look for in life must also be crystal clear to ourselves. Otherwise, we may not even be aware of the secret longings lurking in our hearts which may make their appearance time and again and yet we are not even conscious that they have always been there. So, we may even make assertions that we desire to honour God and to do His will in our lives but these are mixed up with other motivations which may not be far different from those harboured by many non-Christians.

If we ask non-Christians what they look for in life, we may receive a wide spectrum of answers. These may include friendship, love in marriage, academic success, fame, status and wealth. We know that in real life, for many who managed to taste some of these desires, they found no true lasting satisfaction and meaning after attaining them. There are countless true life stories of many wealthy individuals who are disillusioned and bored; equally many are those who find disappointment in earthly friendship, in marriage and in valueless status in this life. However, many others still continue to pursue these temporal longings and illusions, each one saying to

himself that it would be different for him - "I would not end up like the other person, when I get rich, I would find true happiness". The story repeats itself again and again with so many shipwrecked upon the sea of life, clinging on to false hope and memories of what it could have been.

The Bible records for us the varied experiences of one man who had tasted so many things in life and also the verdict he arrived at, at the end of all these encounters (see Ecclesiastes 1:8 - 2:11). Notice the wide range of worldly pursuits the writer was involved in, which many men may not even have the opportunity to experience, and yet observe also the tone of emptiness, boredom and despair in the conclusions he made with regard to all these he experienced.

1:8(a)- *all things are wearisome;*

1:9(b)- *so there is nothing new under the sun.*

All seem boring and unsatisfying after some time to the preacher.

1:14(b)- *all is vanity and striving after wind.*

2:1(b)- *and behold, it too was futility.*

We see this sense of emptiness and despair coming through again and again and pervading the whole account of Ecclesiastes. The preacher, here, had the opportunity to taste all that many men and women longed for and his conclusion was undoubtedly clear - nothing on this earth truly satisfies ultimately. Worldly pursuits appear attractive initially but the end of it all is futility and emptiness; this would be the experience of all those who seek worldly ambitions and live lives apart from God and eternal issues. The world and all it can offer, with all the engineering of the evil one, cannot give true and meaningful fulfilment in life. In fact, hidden in it is much sorrow, despair and spiritual death.

The many pursuits in life and what the world can offer can be likened to the water we drink which does not quench our thirst and satisfy us. True satisfaction and meaning in life is only found in the Lord Jesus and in what He offers. "*Jesus answered and said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks the water that I will give him shall never thirst; but the water that I will give will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life'*" (John 4:13-14). Only the Lord Jesus can give us the living water which would truly quench our thirst and give us true meaning and fulfilment, with eternal life. All other water may appear to be able to quench our thirst but it is only an illusion - we will thirst again!

In John 4:34, the Lord gives us an indication of the satisfaction in His own life as well as the implications for our lives. That which is food and satisfaction to Him is to do the will of the Father and to accomplish His works. So it is for ourselves too. If we truly desire true fulfilment and satisfaction, it cannot be apart from the will of God for our lives. All other pursuits, which are not in line with God's will, will not bring true fulfilment; instead they will ultimately destroy our true happiness and lives.

We have the clear warning from the writings of the apostle Paul regarding the dangers of the love of money and the desire to get rich in 1 Timothy 6:9-10. These can lead on to other harmful desires and all sorts of evil, culminating in destruction and ruin. For the child of God, it might also mean straying from the faith and walk with God. Although the warning is directed at the unhealthy longing to be rich, the principles and implications would also apply to other wrong pursuits in life, which may include the ambition to be great, to have status and power in life. Such desires would lead to corruption and the contamination of the soul.

Even though God may allow some of His children to be in a position of having wealth, status and authority in society, yet, He would require them to maintain the right perspective as well as the proper outworking. We see this elaborated in 1 Timothy 6:17-19 for those who are rich in this present world. What is clearly needful is to keep the right perspective and focus. The ultimate hope and security is in God alone and the outworking should concentrate on the eternal

rather than the earthly and temporal. We need, as it were, to store up treasures in heaven, rather than treasures on earth which will rust. The principles apply similarly to status, power and authority. These should be seen in the proper light and they are meant for service and for the building of God's kingdom rather than for personal desires and satisfaction. We see therefore that apart from God, all earthly pursuits do not satisfy and give fulfilment. Also, such pursuits are temporal; they cannot be looked upon as our true hope and security. They are uncertain and they do not last. Then why is it that God's people continue to allow such pursuits and desires to take hold of their hearts and lives?

We must recognise that we have a formidable foe who is an expert in the art of deception and temptation. If God's children allow themselves to be spiritually shortsighted and allow the flesh to feed itself, then, it is not surprising that many will fall away from the faith. There needs to be consistent vigilance in keeping the right perspective as well as putting to death the desires and deeds of the flesh. Only then can God's children ensure that they walk along the narrow path to true eternal life and fulfilment. 2 Timothy 4:10 stands as a grim reminder of what can be the outcome of the life of one man who had tasted God's goodness and had been accorded the privilege to be a co-worker of the apostle Paul. Despite his exposure as a co-worker and Paul's own positive example, Demas ended up loving the world. The attractions, offer and pull of the world proved too much for Demas and he succumbed. Let us prayerfully and humbly seek to be true to the Lord in our direction of life.

What do we look for in life? What ought we to look for in life? We see here the driving force and motivation behind the life of the apostle Paul in Philippians 3:8-17. There is a sense of intensity coming through as Paul expressed his desires and longings to know the Lord Jesus, to enter into a deep and meaningful fellowship with Him and to experience the power of His resurrection. In expressing all these, Paul also enjoined other Christian brothers and sisters to join in following his example. He wrote, *"Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude, and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you"* (Philippians 3:15). It is clear that Paul's ambition of pressing on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus was not just limited to himself - his desire was that all of God's children would follow him in the same quest and in the same direction in life. And in this same passage, Paul also lamented that there were many who set their minds on earthly things. As children of God, our citizenship is in heaven and we wait eagerly for our Saviour, the Lord Jesus. It is imperative then that we do not allow our minds to be set on earthly things but instead, we should press on, together with the other saints, along the road that Paul had travelled.

In sharing his godly ambition, the apostle also touched upon areas which manifested his own views and insight into the futility of many earthly pursuits and values. Status in life and intellectual achievements, for example, were things which Paul saw clearly as not valuable in God's scale of values. If we observe Paul's early life (see Philippians 3:5-8), there seems to be much that Paul could boast of in the flesh. He was from the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew among Hebrews, a Pharisee and someone trained in the religious training of Israel and generally respected by many. Also, in other passages, we know that Paul was also a scholar, tutored by the well known Gamaliel. In his own religious life, Paul was meticulous in following the Law, describing himself as blameless as to the righteousness which is in the Law. Not many young men could boast of such a background in Israel. Yet, all these things Paul counted as loss for the sake of knowing Christ. In fact, in his own words, he counted them as rubbish as contrasted with knowing and gaining Christ. He knew that status, background and intellectual achievement, by themselves, could not contribute in any significant manner to his quest to know the Lord and to be like the Lord. The Lord God might be able to use such areas if they are properly surrendered to Him. Nevertheless, these areas can easily be used to bolster the flesh rather than contribute to true spirituality. In his own life and ministry therefore, Paul was careful not to depend on human wisdom or human resources to fulfil his objective. The apostle, having seen clearly these issues,

did not allow himself to pursue status or intellectual achievements as part of his ambition and longing in life.

We see the great adaptability of the apostle Paul in his life and ministry in Philippians 4:11-13. We note also how wealth and luxury did not have any hold on the life of this godly apostle. In whatever circumstances he might be in, Paul learnt to be content and not only this, he could adjust himself to carry on in humble means or in prosperity. Whether hungry or filled, suffering need or in abundance, Paul pressed on with his goals and ministry. With such a posture and with such deep convictions, the temptation to get rich or to be physically well-off had no effect on the life of this man. Paul was very clear as to what he looked for in life. Obviously, wealth and material success were not items which interested him in the least. He knew how to make use of the circumstances to fulfil his responsibility and commitment to God and His kingdom. Certainly, we can do well to learn deeply from Paul in this instance. And if Demas had learnt this well from Paul, he could have kept himself pure and true for the Lord. But alas, he did not have the strength and convictions to see him through.

What about friendship and emotional ties? These are not wrong in themselves but could such areas be snares that cause the Christian to compromise? In the epistles of the apostle Paul, we can see many occasions where he revealed his appreciation of Christian friendship and fellowship. Particularly, in the closing of the various epistles, Paul saluted various ones by name and indicated his warm appreciation of these dear ones who had stood by him in his ministry. Certainly, Paul was one man who valued friendship and fellowship in the Lord. However, when it comes to situations where friendship stands in the way of loyalty and faithfulness to God, the apostle would not compromise.

He was prepared to stand alone with God if need be, in order to preserve the purity of the gospel (see 2 Timothy 4:16-18). We see this stand of Paul expressed clearly at a crucial period in his life. No one supported him. In fact, all deserted him and Paul had to stand alone in the defence of his life and ministry. Yet, at the same time, the apostle experienced God's enabling and strengthening, for the Lord stood by him and saw him through. It was at such a time perhaps that Paul remembered how the Lord Jesus Himself was left alone at His trial and crucifixion when all His disciples fled and deserted Him. Nevertheless, the Lord remained steadfast and obedient to the Father and this must have been an inspiration to Paul himself to realise that ultimately, what counts is to be true to God even though friends and emotional relationships may let you down.

Paul's relationship with Mark probably serves as a good illustration of how the apostle viewed friendship in relation to faithfulness to God (see Acts 15:36-40). This is not an easy passage to discuss and here we do not intend to go into the passage proper in detail. What we want to highlight is that the passage reveals that Paul was not keen to bring Mark along and the reason given was that Mark had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. The reason that Paul gave was not a personal one. It is evidently not so much that Paul had something personal against Mark but on an objective ground, he felt it unwise to bring Mark along.

In 2 Timothy 4:11, we see Paul, in later years, appreciating Mark and asking Timothy to bring Mark along as he was useful for service. This verse itself perhaps confirms that Paul all along had not rejected Mark on personal grounds but rather that the apostle was evaluating Mark on objective grounds in as far as he could understand what was the wisest thing to do. Paul was willing for Mark to come along subsequently when he noticed that Mark was ready and useful for service. This incident seems to suggest and confirm what we had earlier shared about Paul in that he was a man who, although he valued friendship and fellowship, would not allow friendship and emotional ties to stand in the way of what he recognised as loyalty and faithfulness to God.

Perhaps some of us may say - "Wealth, status, fame, friendship - all these do not really matter much to us. What we really look for in life is to be able to carry on in our Christian life without too much difficulty, pressure and discomfort. Yes, we are willing to walk with the Lord,

but please do not make it too difficult, otherwise we will crumble." At the heart of it, we are not willing to bear the cost of discipleship or to suffer for the sake of the Lord. Christian living is alright with us but Christian suffering and spiritual pressure is something else. We would rather live without them.

If we look at Philippians 1:29-30, and 2 Timothy 1:8; 2:3; 3:12, we see that the apostle Paul was clear that suffering for the Lord and persecution are part and parcel of godly living and Christian discipleship. He did not shrink back from them. He did not lose heart, for he knew that *"though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day"* (2 Corinthians 4:16). It was in fact from within the four walls of a prison, awaiting sentence and possible death, that Paul wrote triumphantly to the Philippian Christians (see Philippians 1:12-14, 19-21 and 4:4). He was prepared for suffering; he rejoiced in the Lord in the midst of suffering and he was victorious in suffering. The evil one could not use the opportunity to cause Paul to be discouraged or dejected; he could not dampen his spirit nor cause his faith in God to falter. It was in the midst of suffering that Paul continued to minister and to encourage others to rejoice. The apostle Paul did not look for comfort and convenience in life - he sought to glorify the Lord whatever the circumstances may be.

Many of God's children, however, shrink back at the thought of suffering and pain. Some even believe that a victorious Christian life means freedom from physical sufferings, calamities, illnesses or pain. There are those who would advocate the "prosperity gospel" - since the Lord God is the King of kings, all His children should be prosperous and successful in life. A study of the life of the apostle Paul would reveal how much this godly man suffered for his master. Nevertheless, the apostle Paul was definitely victorious in his Christian life and ministry and his life stands as a positive example to all believers in subsequent generations.

What do we look for in life? Is our Christian longing mixed up with desire for status, wealth, power, friendship and comfort, apart from God? Particularly in the last days, the evil one seeks to distract God's people with all these attractions. He can give us wealth and status; he can bring along friendship into our lives; he can promise power, success and comfortable living, and together with all these, deception, destruction and death. The pressure will increase in the last days. Will God's people stand steadfast in Him? Will we remain faithful and loyal? A great deal will depend upon what we look for in life. Are we very clear as to what our ambition should be? What do we really look for in life?

CHAPTER 2

WHAT IS THE BASIS UPON WHICH WE RESPOND IN LIFE?

The question we will focus on next is "What is the basis upon which we respond in life?" As we live as God's children and serve Him in this dramatic age, we need to be clear as to what is the basis upon which we react and respond in the changing circumstances of life. If our basis and understanding are vague and uncertain, then it will come as no surprise if we were to respond just like the children of this world and age. It is important, therefore, for us to take note of our basis and even more so, to be able to make decisions upon this basis in reality.

The first aspect of this basis is the proper perspective of life in general. The Lord Jesus introduced this principle in Matthew 6:26-34. Notice in particular what the Lord said, "*...Look at the birds of the air, ... Observe how the lilies of the field grow...*". As we observe and ponder upon the meaning of the Lord's words, we should be able to recognise the proper perspective we need to take in life.

The birds of the air need not sow nor reap and yet God provides food for them. The lilies of the field do not toil nor spin and yet they are so beautifully clothed in all their splendour. When compared to birds of the air and the grass of the fields, surely we are more valuable than them in the eyes of the Lord! And yet, God's children often worry about many of the things of life like food, clothing and the likes, forgetting what should be the right and proper perspective. In the midst of all these anxieties, we forget our priority - that is, to acknowledge that God and His kingdom should be first in our lives. We allow many other things to crowd our minds and our hearts such that we spend our energy and exercise our focus on areas which may be legitimate from a human point of view, but they drain us of what really matters in the eyes of God.

Sometimes, in life, we need certain circumstances to jolt us into the right frame of mind and into a situation where we are able to see clearly with the proper perspective. The Gulf War in 1990 reveals many stories of those who escaped from Kuwait with only their personal belongings and their lives, leaving behind homes, luxurious cars and other assets. Almost without exception, all of them shared how grateful they were to be alive despite their many material losses. They were prepared to exchange all these in order to live to see another day. In such circumstances, many realise that life is more important than personal and material assets. Yet, in daily living, under ordinary circumstances, many individuals, including God's children, pursue material success, often at a cost to their own lives, incurring mental stress, ill-health and sacrificing meaningful relationships. The plight of the Kurdish refugees from Iraq reveals tales of suffering and hunger. Countless children died from malnutrition and diseases. Women collected snow for drinking water and many were unsure of the next meal. However, many parents today, including God's people, worry that their children are too thin or underweight or they become rather anxious about their children's academic performance and the fact that other children are doing better in so many other ways. For the Kurdish mother, survival was the matter at hand; all these other factors did not concern her at that point of time.

The various examples raised reveal situations in which individuals realised that life itself and relationship are more important than many other pursuits of life. Often, it requires situations like these for us to realise this. As children of God, we know that our lives with God should be the first priority in our lives. The Lord Jesus Himself said, "*What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?*" (Mark 8:36). Yet, in daily outworking, somehow, we lose sight of this priority. Many nitty gritty things of life become so very important to us. We worry about many issues of life which lose their significance when we are face to face with death and when we need to give an account of our lives to God. We do not need such circumstances described earlier to help us to have the proper perspective in life. We can learn from the situation of others and from the happenings around us. The Lord Jesus said, "*Look at the birds of the air, ... Observe how the*

lilies of the field grow..." Let us observe the circumstances and happenings in the world around us; let us ponder over the lives of those we know who have taken the wrong path and priorities in life, and let us learn well.

Notice the warning in Luke 17:26-30 for us living in the last days. People in Noah's time and in Lot's time were involved in activities which were legitimate. Eating, drinking, marrying, buying, selling, planting and building are activities which are common in society. However, these people were so engrossed in these activities that they lost the proper perspective in life. They were not ready when judgment came and they did not escape the wrath of God. So it will be too when the Son of Man is revealed. If we immerse ourselves in many of these activities to the detriment of our spiritual health and lives, then we are indeed foolish! We will find ourselves not ready when the Lord Jesus comes again. It will come as a surprise and a shock to us to realise how much we have wandered away from what is really important from God's point of view.

If we do maintain the proper perspective of life in general, then certain things should follow. Firstly, there ought to be the spirit of gratefulness as well as the consciousness to count our blessings. Even simple things God gives can be deeply appreciated. Instead of complaining about many things we do not have in life and many areas we cannot achieve, we become more aware of God's goodness in many things He has bestowed upon us. The apostle Paul's statement that he knew how to get along with humble means and also how to live in prosperity would also become a reality in our lives eventually. Related to this is the spirit of godliness with contentment as written in 1 Timothy 6:6-8. We learn to be contented in God and in what He provides. Such a spirit frees us from discouragement and depression. Instead we begin to learn to enjoy each day with God and to enjoy God Himself in our lives. Various happenings can be looked upon from God's point of view and they no longer need to trouble us. That does not mean we become indifferent and complacent. We still need to strive with God's enabling in our lives and to exercise discipline in the pursuit of godliness. However, there is that freedom of not being affected by many issues in the way that the people of the world are affected. Do we indeed see such a life among God's people today? Is there consistent gratefulness and contentment in a world where so many clamour for more and so many grumble and complain about their state of affairs?

We go on now to see another aspect of the basis upon which we should respond in life, and that is the consciousness and awareness of the eternal. As God's people, we should realise this fully in our daily living. The apostle Peter in 2 Peter 3:10-14 made it clear to us what would be the end of the earth we live in. The elements will be destroyed and the earth and its works will be burned up - nothing will remain. He who is wise would not invest his life and energy in that which will not remain. Instead, the faithful child of God is looking for new heavens and a new earth, an eternal inheritance that will not fade away and his life is lived with the focus on eternal issues. We also see this highlighted for us by the apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:1-8. Notice particularly the contrast between the temporal and the eternal. God's children should be fully aware of the eternal home that awaits them and the way they live their lives here on earth should reflect the recognition of the temporal here on earth and the eternal that is to come.

"But this I say, brethren, the time has been shortened, so that from now on those who have wives should be as though they had none; and those who weep, as though they did not weep; and those who rejoice, as though they did not rejoice, and those who buy, as though they did not possess; and those who use the world, as though they did not make full use of it; for the form of this world is passing away" (1 Corinthians 7:29-31). *"The time has been shortened"* and *"the form of this world is passing away"* indicate to us the context of the last days. And in the last days, there should be this form of emphasis, living as it were, with a healthy detachment - being in the world and yet not of the world.

Let us look at the various areas closely. *"Those who have wives should be as though they had none"* - what does Paul mean by this? Was he advocating that husbands should not care for their wives and their marriage? That cannot be the case. In Ephesians 5 for instance, Paul encouraged

husbands to love their wives just as Christ also loves the church. Paul was actually indicating to Christians to have a healthy detachment in marriage. There should be love and concern for the spouse in marriage but one should not be so taken up in marriage in a negative sense such that one becomes preoccupied with the affairs of marriage at the expense of faithfulness to God.

There is definitely a tendency in marriage for the husband to please the wife and the wife to please the husband to a point that it is very easy to allow this to jeopardise our undistracted devotion to God. In other words, marriage and the affairs of marriage, which include children and family, can cause us to forget our priorities and our relationship with God. This is something very real indeed and we must take note of it.

I remember interacting with some Christians who were rather enthusiastic for the Lord in their younger days but subsequently they lost their zeal after marriage and being involved in raising a family. They found themselves so immersed in the affairs of marriage and family that they had no time for God and the things that matter to God. Many of them sought to console themselves that when things become more settled down they would go back to serving God and walking with Him. Yet, almost everyone of them did not come back at all!

What about *"those who weep, as though they did not weep and those who rejoice, as though they did not rejoice"*? Is the apostle Paul someone who was against emotion and the display of it? No, it was the same Paul who wept for those who turned away from the Lord and it was the same apostle who rejoiced, even in his sufferings and imprisonment. Emotions are not meant to rule us and to determine the course and actions in our lives. Emotions need to be healthily subjected to God and to proper outworking of the Christian life. Worldly sorrow produces death as contrasted to godly sorrow which leads to repentance (see 2 Corinthians 7:9-10). If we are not careful, we can be so overwhelmed with grief that we cannot carry on properly for God.

I remember an elderly Christian sister with such a problem. Her husband passed away rather suddenly and she was clearly overwhelmed with sorrow and grief. This affected her not just for a few weeks but for months and years. Each time she talked about her husband, she would break into tears so much so that her own children could not bear with the situation. Initially, they empathised with her but later on they found it unbearable and they even became angry and upset with her. It was only through much counselling, prayer and medication that she finally got out of the situation.

We must not allow worldly sorrow to cripple us to the point that we become a casualty in spiritual warfare. On the other hand, we must also be careful not to be so carried away with worldly joy and be overcome by it that we become careless and frivolous. In such a state, we would be lowering our guard and vigilance and we can certainly be easy targets for the evil one to manipulate. There ought to be a healthy detachment in the realm of emotion, not allowing sorrow or joy to affect us in such a manner that we lose sight of our responsibilities before God. This does not mean that we become emotionless and cold. Instead, we become more wholesome and more able to regulate our emotions in the direction of honouring God and pleasing Him.

"Those who buy as though they did not possess and those who use the world as though they did not make full use of it, for the form of this world is passing away" - what did the apostle Paul mean by this statement? Let us remember that whatever it is, be it business, career, education, wealth, status and the possessions in life, it will not last; it is passing away. Let us not get unhealthily involved with them. As children of God, are we easily affected by work situations, examination results, opinion of others and developments that affect our material possessions and wealth? Do all these things grip us in an unhealthy manner to an extent that we are no longer able to concentrate on issues that are eternal and good? Let us learn to cultivate a healthy detachment in all these areas of life. This does not mean that we become irresponsible and unreliable in them. On the contrary, we can be responsible and dependable, yet without being affected in such a way that it hampers us from being truly effective for God. A wholesome, healthy detachment would in fact help us to enjoy true freedom in the Lord in living out our lives here on earth, being able

to use the things of the world for God and yet not being controlled and gripped by them. It is in fact living in the temporal realm, with our eyes on the eternal.

The consciousness and awareness of the eternal would help us in our response towards sufferings and pain. In Romans 8:17-23 and 2 Corinthians 4:16-18, we see how the apostle Paul looked at the subject of suffering, affliction and pain. He sincerely believed that the sufferings on earth could not be compared to the eternal weight of glory that will belong to those who are faithful. He also saw that the sufferings actually contribute to the preparation for the future if God's people know how to respond. When God's children go through sufferings with the right attitude, their faith is strengthened and their character is moulded (see James 1:2-4). Hence, sufferings and afflictions did not bring along discouragement to the apostle Paul. His consciousness of the eternal caused him to see beyond the sufferings and pain to the glory that is to come for those who remain faithful and true to God. How different this is for many of God's children today! In the midst of suffering and pain, very few manage to look beyond the present. More often than not, we get so worked up with what is happening to our lives that we fail to see the relevance of the eternal and the heavenly. Despair, disillusionment and discouragement often set in and spiritually, God's people become defeated and broken in the midst of spiritual warfare.

The appreciation of the eternal should also cause us to persevere in our Christian walk and service despite various pressures and difficulties. Let us always remember that our labour and toil is not vain in the Lord (see 1 Corinthians 15:58). We see Paul the apostle himself making a declaration in Acts 20:24 that he did not consider his life of any account as dear to himself, so that he may finish his course and ministry which he received from the Lord. Paul saw the relevance and significance of his ministry in the context of the eternal consequences and he was prepared to sacrifice his own life in order to finish what God had entrusted to him. It is interesting to note that in the context of 1 Corinthians 15, the subject of death was also mentioned. In verses 53-57, Paul shared about what will take place - the perishable must put on the imperishable and the mortal must put on immortality and death would lose its victory and its sting. No longer do God's children need to fear the unknown and the uncertainty in what comes after death. In Christ Jesus, there should be no fear of death; victory is secure and the certainty of the eternal in God is as sure as God is faithful. What is the degree of consciousness of the eternal among God's people today? Do we respond to situations in life with the deep consciousness of the eternal or do we just live for the present with the concern for what we can get out of life for today? The life of victory and perseverance depends a great deal on the answers to these questions.

We take a brief look now at the third aspect of the basis upon which we should respond in life. This has to do with a lively fellowship and oneness with God. Oftentimes, God's people respond badly to situations because of the poor quality of this oneness with God in their lives. For such ones, fellowship with God and oneness with Him only border on the external and superficial. This is indeed a very big subject but we would just highlight a few points in the apostle Paul's life to illustrate how a deep oneness with God can be so helpful in maintaining a healthy response to various and diverse situations of life. In 1 Corinthians 4:3-5, Paul made it clear that what really mattered to him was God's opinion and judgment and not men's opinion or even his own opinion. Paul was confident of his stand before God arising from his deep oneness with God. As such, the judgment of others and the opinion of others regarding his life did not affect him in the way that many others would be affected. In the context of his epistles to the Corinthian Christians, the apostle was more concerned for the purity of the gospel and for the kingdom of God. He was not so much seeking to defend himself per se but to protect and uphold the gospel of the Lord Jesus. How different Paul was from so many others! Many of God's children may outwardly profess concern for God's kingdom but in reality, they are easily affected by the opinion and words of others! It is very important that we honestly evaluate our lives on this count. Let us not allow ourselves to respond to situations and others because of the concern for what others might say. We need to ensure that what matters is how the Lord looks at the situation. In this respect, we see

Paul stating an important principle in Acts 24:16. He endeavoured always to keep a clear conscience, first of all towards God and then towards men. There is certainly a place not to cause others to misunderstand us unnecessarily; however, when we have done our best to ensure that, then we ought to entrust the situation to the Lord, maintaining a clear conscience before Him and before men in general.

If we can do this consistently, then we would appreciate what Paul wrote in Philippians 4:6-7. Paul's deep oneness with the Lord enabled him to experience the wonderful peace of God in his life. So whether it be pain, imprisonment, persecution or misunderstanding, his response was one free from anxiety, with his heart and mind centred on the Lord and the peace of God reigning in his life.

It would, of course, take time to cultivate oneness with God in our lives. But we need to pursue it consistently and look to God for His grace. As we serve the Lord in these last days, let us be conscious of our proper perspective in life and of the eternal realm. Let us also nurture oneness with the Lord to the point that we can truly respond wholesomely whatever the circumstances may be.

CHAPTER 3

WHAT DO WE TRANSMIT AND COMMUNICATE IN LIFE?

As we live in the last days, we should be acutely aware of our calling to be good witnesses for the Lord and indeed one aspect of our witness would be in the area of what we transmit and communicate in our daily living. Whether we like it or not, what we transmit and communicate in life would affect others, either positively or negatively. Others are watching how we live our lives, the values we hold and the choices we make day by day. Every action or reaction, every word we utter - all these are being observed and evaluated - there is transmission all the time and we are communicating even without our realising it.

Let us ponder over what Moses said to the people of Israel in Deuteronomy 4:9-10. Although Moses was addressing the Israelites, the principles are applicable to us too. The Israelites were specifically instructed to make known to their sons and grandsons the ways and deeds of God and they were to teach their children to remember and to honour the Lord God. Here we see the special responsibility of parents to communicate and to transmit the truths and teachings of God to their children and subsequent generations. Even for those who are not parents, the principles are still applicable as they have the responsibility and privilege to nurture and to help spiritual children regarding the ways of God. Those who are older and wiser in the Lord should help the younger and the more inexperienced to grow in their knowledge of God and His ways. In this manner, the responsibility of communication and transmission applies to all, parents and non-parents alike.

It is interesting to take note that in this passage in Deuteronomy, the first thing that was highlighted to the Israelites was for them to take care of their own lives and to keep their souls diligently. This must take precedence before there can be any process of transmission and communication. After all, what is it that one can transmit spiritually if there is no substance for any form of transmission? So it is that many Christian parents today for example may be concerned for their children's moral and spiritual development and yet, in terms of their own lives and spiritual reality, it is truly lacking. Many of God's children may be critical of other believers and may desire to help them to grow spiritually and yet, for their own lives, there is very little substance and stature for any meaningful communication and transmission of life. One needs to pay attention to one's own life and development first before proceeding to communicate and to transmit. One must be in a position to minister, otherwise, one has virtually nothing that is truly helpful spiritually and eternally to transmit and communicate. So as we look at the subject of transmission and communication, we must first take a look at the subject of giving priority to our own development. We must learn, grow and consolidate in order to be effective for the Lord. This is a continual process. Learning, growing and consolidating - they are taking place all the time and at the same time as we grow and learn, we are also communicating and transmitting.

Let us take a closer look at the subject of transmission. As we grow spiritually and continue to learn and to consolidate, we would then be in a position to transmit positive values and life. The process of transmission may go on even without words being uttered. The way we live our lives, our values and our responses may all be caught by others observing our lives. We would remember how the disciples asked the Lord Jesus to teach them to pray and in all probability, they must have observed the prayer life of the Lord which prompted them to desire to learn to pray. The Lord's prayer life affected them positively as they lived together with Him in close quarters. So it is for us too - we can affect others positively, especially those who are in a position to observe our lives closely. Such situations may take place in the context of family life, between parents and children and also in work and school situations, among colleagues and friends. It is helpful to take note that what we transmit should be an outflow from a life that is real and not just a front which

we conveniently set up to impress. Putting up a front can cause serious damage in the long run, not just to the recipient but to the one who seeks to impress.

Ponder over what Paul told Timothy and Titus in 1 Timothy 4:11-12 and Titus 2:7-8. Basically, we ought to be good examples to those who believe in our words, our deeds and our actions. If we do that, then positive transmission would follow. Failure in any major area may result in our transmitting something which may actually stumble others. Many non-Christians have expressed their unwillingness to consider the gospel of the Lord Jesus primarily because of the negative example of one or more believers. To them, if being a Christian means being like this particular believer, then they would rather not consider Christianity. The key phrase in transmission is REALITY AND WHOLESOMENESS OF LIFE. There may be those who look at our lives and say - a Christian ought to be joyous and be at peace and yet they see so much anxiety in our lives. Then there are those who recognise that a Christian should be loving and caring and yet what they see in us basically is selfishness and self-centredness. It is no wonder that they do not wish to be like us. What are we indeed transmitting in our lives? Of course, we are aware that there may be those who are stumbled by us even though our lives are generally wholesome. Even the Lord Jesus, who was the perfect man on earth, encountered various ones who claimed to be stumbled by Him. We are not referring to such categories but to situations where the stumbling is due to the failure of God's children.

What about the subject of communication? What do we communicate to others, particularly in these last days? Here of course, communication in general would mean more than just the words we utter and in some ways, communication and transmission overlap each other. But in this context, we would be looking basically at communication with regard to the words that we say. As the Lord provides opportunity, what do we communicate? Let us be careful that we do not go around communicating without wisdom and prudence. I remember clearly, when I was a student, how various ones in the university hostel shared with me that they were very put off by Christians who went around knocking on their doors at odd hours and rattling on insistently to them, like a robot, some standard Christian cliché they called the gospel, even though they were politely told that there was no interest to hear. To these hostelites, this so-called communication of the gospel was a nuisance and the Christians who did it were looked upon as insensitive and overbearing personalities. Some patients who were rather ill in hospital have also complained how they were very angry with Christians who kept coming and telling them that they were going to hell.

Here, we need to recognise that to a certain extent, the gospel message in itself can be offensive because of the truths contained in it; I am not advocating that we should not share the gospel but I am concerned as to the approach and manner of sharing and communicating. Certainly, we need much wisdom, prayerfulness and the Lord's guidance to communicate the gospel with love and with God's enabling.

Charles Colson, in "The Body - being light in darkness", made some interesting observations. He had been involved in many crusades for the past 20 years and he had seen many making decisions to become Christians by uttering certain correct words. However, many of these so called converts did not carry on in their faith. Instead, they went back to their old manner of living. Colson highlighted the difference between a decision and a true conversion. A true conversion involves the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration.

What are we communicating as we share the gospel? What is the wholesome approach? Are we just collecting statistics or are we prayerfully looking to God to communicate LIFE? Do we depend on our method or on the Holy Spirit of God?

As God's children, what are we really transmitting and communicating in our lives? *"But we proved to be gentle among you, as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children. Having so fond an affection for you, we were well pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us"* (1 Thessalonians 2:7-8).

We see here how Paul and his co-workers communicated the gospel. They imparted and transmitted not just the gospel but also their own lives. The lives transmitted were characterised by blamelessness, uprightness, holiness and tenderness, gentleness and sacrificial love. In contrast, what are we imparting in our words and in our lives? Are we taking our roles as salt of the earth and light of the world seriously? Are we indeed worthy ambassadors of the Lord Jesus?

PART II

SOME PROBLEM AREAS WE WILL ENCOUNTER IN THE LAST DAYS

"For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Christ', and will mislead many. You will be hearing of wars and rumors of war. See that you are not frightened, for those things must take place but that is not yet the end. For nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom, and in various places there will be famines and earthquakes. But all these things are merely the beginning of birth pangs."

- Matthew 24:5-8

CHAPTER 4

THE TEMPTATIONS AND PULL OF THIS WORLD

In Part II, we now focus on some problem areas we will encounter in the last days. The subject is very wide indeed but we would be concentrating on several broad categories.

The first of these broad categories is "The temptations and pull of this world". This affects God's children in several ways. Firstly, the world can impose her standards and values upon the people of God, sometimes in a subtle way but at times even in ways that are more direct and blunt. Take the example of cigarette advertising. In our society today, we are fortunate that we recognise the ills and dangers of cigarette smoking, and advertising to promote cigarette smoking is now a thing of the past. However, not too long ago, and even now in third world countries, cigarette smoking is promoted in advertisement as part of the good and finer things in life. The cigarette companies ensure that the advertisement projects a young successful man or woman who has made it in society, surrounded by the so-called fine things of life like a luxury car, a huge mansion, lots of friends and all of them puffing on the finest brand of cigarettes, each looking refreshed and contented with the smoke around them. We know better than that, but many young people in the third world today are subtly influenced to associate cigarette smoking with success and sophistication.

Here is a good illustration of how something that is harmful and dangerous can be projected as something sophisticated and associated with success. Cigarette companies are aware of the dangers of cigarette smoking, but the monetary profit and returns are so great that some are prepared to cover up the facts in order to continue to harvest the benefit. The sad consequence would be millions who will suffer from lung cancer and other associated ailments of the lungs and the heart.

The world can affect the children of God in like manner. Through the mass media, through books, through even the study of literature, philosophy and other apparently respectable avenues of knowledge, God's children may be led to believe that a certain lifestyle or a certain manner of living or values are manifestations of being progressive, liberated and modern. It may not be cigarette smoking; it may be something else. The motivation may not be money making; it may be for self, or status or even at times out of frustration and ignorance; nevertheless, it is almost always engineered by the prince of this world who seeks to stamp his influence on as many as possible.

Let us not underestimate the temptations and pull of this world. We should remember the rich young man who came to the Lord Jesus to seek for eternal life. He went away sad because he could not give up his riches (see Matthew 19:16-22). The love of money and wealth can be a snare and a bondage. Lot chose the plains of Sodom, seeing that it was rich and fertile. However, years later, he found it difficult to free himself from Sodom and Gomorrah, so much so that the angels of God had to seize his hand and bring him out, outside the city.

The world can suck us into her system and it may not be so easy to get out. It was said that many young ladies, when asked about their choice of an ideal marriage partner in today's society, preferred their men to have the 4 "Cs" - namely cash, credit card, car and condominium. Sadly, they left out a very important "C", that is, character. No doubt, their choice has been influenced, in no small way, by the standards and values of this world. The 4 "Cs" have been associated with success and achievement in society and this has been ingrained in the minds of many young people, Christians and non-Christians alike. For God's children, the effect can be very subtle. It can begin with the thought, "After all, as Christians, we should be good stewards of our money". So, the idea may start off with wanting to invest wisely which may be appropriate up to this point. But before long, the Lord's people may find themselves speculating in shares, foreign currencies and properties, no longer just investing but being carried away with the business of pursuing more

and more money, and being involved and immersed in worldly affairs and gambling to a point that they lose sight of the spiritual and the eternal. 1 Timothy 5:9-10 sounds out the warning loud and clear - *"But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith, and pierced themselves with many a pang"*.

Moses, as a young man, was faced with the temptations and pull of the world. Brought up as a prince in the splendour of Egypt, surrounded by the knowledge of the times and in the midst of wealth and power, Moses had a choice. He chose not to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, but to endure ill-treatment with the people of God, rather than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sins, considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt (see Hebrews 11:24-26). Will we allow the world to impose her values and standards upon us? Or, like Moses, will we choose to identify with something far more beautiful and meaningful in God's desires and values for us?

The temptations and pull of this world can affect us in another way. Besides imposing its values and standards of living upon us, the world can subtly cause MORAL DECAY to set in. Included in this are lust, sin and corruption. We may not have to look very far to see this illustrated. In the many films and books today, and among them are big box office attractions and best sellers, we can see the so-called hero often depicted as a man who is very individualistic and rebellious, one who believes in violence to right a wrong and he will not hesitate to arrogantly break many arms or to pump in bullets along the way, even hurting passers-by and damaging property all in the name of apparent justice. Such a hero is also one who does not believe in commitment and responsibility in marriage relationships. Women just swoon over him and he goes from one woman to another with such rapidity that one wonders whether there is any moral decency at all in his life.

In the world of pop music, lyrics glorifying drug addiction and loose moral values are sung with gusto and though the lives of the various pop stars are morally degrading and way out, yet, millions of young people idolise them and desire to pattern their lives after theirs. Some of the songs and lyrics are not just morally unacceptable, but the spirit behind the songs can actually be very damaging spiritually; yet the further these pop stars stray from good moral values, the more popular they seem to become. Those who seek to pattern their lives after the hero in the film or the pop star may think themselves as not "squares". They believe they can think for themselves and are different from the so-called establishment. In reality, they are under the bondage of moral decay and corruption. One day, they may wake up too late to realise this and their lives may have already been badly hurt.

However, moral decay is not just affecting the young and the gullible. It affects all strata of society, including the so-called sophisticated and educated who indulge in activities ranging from gossip to immoral behaviour; only they may not be so obvious or conspicuous to the eyes of the public.

Even religious circles are not spared. We read and hear of churches anointing homosexuals as bishops, and talking about a review and a more liberal view of various moral issues in society. For instance, consenting adults of the same sex can enter into a marriage union, approved by the church. The world can exert so much pressure as to cause even churches to compromise on moral issues which have clear scriptural teaching and backing. From what we can understand, this pressure would increase in the last days.

In 2 Peter 2:10-20 and 2 Peter 3:3, we see a description of the activities of the flesh and moral decay. In the last days, lust, corruption and indulgence of the flesh can become the order of the day and verse 20 suggests that even God's children who have escaped the defilement of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ can also become entangled again in them, the last state being worse for them than the first. The influence of the world in the direction of

moral decay will not spare even those who are children of God and we must take this seriously. It is with this concern that the apostle Peter sounded out the following warnings. *"Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking to and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat! But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells. Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found in Him in peace, spotless and blameless"* (2 Peter 3:11-14). Indeed, we need to be diligent in keeping ourselves free from the defilement of this world, and in maintaining a holy conduct worthy of our high calling.

The pull and temptations of this world can affect God's people in another manner, and this is manifested in disloyalty to God as well as outright rebellion and denial of the Lord. We are aware of how Demas, in love with the world, deserted Paul. In the Old Testament context, Korah was one man who epitomised the spirit of arrogance and rebellion, for he wanted the status and honour which were reserved by God for the house of Aaron. This longing for status and recognition on Korah's part was probably due to his yielding to the temptation of the world. The world's standards and values can draw Christians so far away that they begin to rationalise as well as harden their hearts and conscience to a point that they would reject the Lord's ways for their own lives.

We see the Lord Jesus Himself referring to this in Matthew 24:10-12 in the context of the last days. The prospect of many falling away, the reality of the love of many growing cold and denying the Lord are harsh reminders of how difficult the last days will be like. We need to take care of our own lives lest we too be disqualified and fall along the wayside.

Hebrews 6:4-8 spells out the dangers and seriousness of falling away and denying the Lord. The consequences and judgment of such a matter cannot be taken lightly. In the book of Hebrews, again and again these words of exhortation appear - *"Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts..."*

The world can seek to impose its standards upon us; it can sow the seed of moral decay and move us in the direction of falling away from the Lord but if we maintain an openness before God and refuse to harden our hearts and conscience when we hear His voice, there is still hope for us to overcome. On the other hand, if we co-operate with the spirit of the world and seek to have the better of both worlds, desiring what the world has to offer and yet still clinging somewhat to the promise of eternal life, then we are toying with the perils that may plunge us into a situation where there is no turning back! Let us not toy with the grace of God!

CHAPTER 5

THE PROLIFERATION OF FALSE TEACHINGS AND DECEPTION

The next problem area we will encounter in the last days is the proliferation of false teaching and deception and this includes false Christs and false prophets. The Lord Jesus Himself warned us of this in Matthew 24:4-5, 11, 23-24. We see this emphasised also in the various epistles in the New Testament. The apostle Peter spoke of false prophets and teachers arising from among the people who will secretly introduce destructive heresies. Jude refers to these as those who have crept in unnoticed, ungodly persons who turn the grace of God into licentiousness and deny the Master.

With regard to the words of the Lord Jesus, notice how the Lord reiterated again and again that the objective of these false Christs and prophets is to mislead many, even the elect. They will do this with signs and wonders and by employing deception and false teachings. We need to be on our guard, for it may not be easy to detect them. Many can easily be impressed with signs and wonders and if these false prophets refer to Scriptures as their basis, very few would be in a position to detect the false teachings, particularly when deception takes root in the heart. False teachings may not appear to be distorted at first sight and if we are careless or not properly grounded in the Scriptures, it becomes very easy for us to be led astray.

False teachings and deception can take many forms and approaches. Some may obviously be seen as being unacceptable, yet others may not be so clearly perceived as being unhealthy. There are followers of cults and heresies who may even be sincere in some cases; nevertheless they are still on the wrong path and the consequences would be serious. We see in the New Testament how the apostle Paul was so zealous to maintain the purity of the gospel. When he saw how the Galatian Christians were influenced negatively, he wrote to them in very strong words and with a harsh tone (see Galatians 3:1-11). The very basis of justification by faith was challenged when the Galatian Christians seemed to accept the teachings of false prophets who advocated justification by the law which included circumcision as mandatory. Paul defended vigorously the gospel and justification by faith. We see this concern of the apostle extended also to the Corinthian Christians. So great was Paul's burden and concern that he used very strong terms to describe the false apostles (see 2 Corinthians 11:2-4, 13-15).

With regard to false Christs, we may think it preposterous that some of God's children can actually be fooled by those who claim to be the Lord Jesus. Yet, in the history of the church, there have been many who claimed to be the Lord, and many of them had a large following which included those who were also generally sincere in their desire. The Korean by the name of Moon established a large following internationally called the Moonies and he was reported to have claimed to be the Son of God. And even though he has been investigated for tax evasion and other related issues in his multi-million business ventures, he is still holding his own in influencing many by his teachings.

"Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor fig from thistles, are they?.....Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness'" (Matthew 7:15-16, 22-23). Notice what the Lord Jesus said about the false prophets. They come to us in sheep's clothing but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. It is not easy to detect their true state when we look at their appearance and presentation. Outwardly they may call the Lord Jesus "Lord, Lord" and may even perform miracles, cast out demons and prophesy in the name of the Lord. But take note what the Lord Jesus will declare to them, *"I never knew you, Depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness."* In reality, such ones are not doing the will of the

heavenly Father and their lives are characterised by the practice of lawlessness. Their characters do not reflect true godliness and godly values - the believers will know them by their fruits. However, for the undiscerning, naïve and impressionable, their so-called miracles and supernatural deeds may make an impact and cause much deception. Here is a call for God's people to be alert and vigilant!

In addressing false teachings, false teachers and prophets, let us beware that we do not end up being overcritical in a negative sense, not giving room even to other Christian groups which are generally healthy but may have certain convictions which are different from ours, but not in significant core areas of fundamental Christian doctrines. In the name of being true to our beliefs, sometimes we may be guilty of throwing out Christian love and grace in our attitude towards our brethren. We must distinguish cults from Christian groups which may differ from us in minor areas of doctrines.

Nonetheless, the issue of false teachers, false prophets and false Christs is a real problem facing believers in the last days. The Lord Jesus told us beforehand that there will be false prophets, false Christs, false teaching as well as deception, and the objective is to mislead many, including God's children. We need to be alert, we need to be vigilant; above all, we need to be grounded in the Scriptures and be men and women who understand and appreciate what we believe.

The apostle Paul reminded the Corinthian Christians, "*Brethren, do not be children in your thinking, yet in evil be babes, but in your thinking, be mature*" (1 Corinthians 14:20). We must not be like little children tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine. Instead, let us learn to be men and women of stature and convictions.

CHAPTER 6

PERSECUTION

We turn our attention now to another major problem area - PERSECUTION. To some Christians, persecution and suffering are topics which they vaguely associate with Christian living. Persecution is not something real in the lives of these various ones, and many of the scriptural truths related to this topic are not clearly perceived and understood. They seem so distant and the attitudes and response to persecution when it does arise are rather disappointing for disciples of the Lord.

Let us take note of what the apostle Peter said in 1 Peter 4:12-16 - *"Beloved - do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you..."* When suffering and persecution do come, as God's children, we are not to be surprised - it is not something strange or unexpected. In fact, it is an area which we need to be prepared for if we seek to honour the Lord. The apostle Paul himself declared that all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. The degree of persecution may vary, with differing intensity, for different ones during different periods. Nevertheless, it is something God's children will have to encounter, particularly in the last days. We should therefore not be caught unprepared or off guard; persecution may not just be in terms of physical sufferings, it may take the form of unfair treatment by men or social disapproval by friends and even family members because of our faith.

The problems we encounter should be because of our faith and not because of wrongful or foolish behaviour. The apostle Peter emphasised that the suffering is for the name of our Lord and for being a Christian, and not because of being a murderer, a thief, an evildoer or a troublesome meddler. There may be those among God's children who find themselves in trouble because of foolishness in their approach towards others and because of unwise responses in life. This is not in the same category as suffering for the sake of the Lord.

The preparedness to suffer persecution as a Christian would help us in our response, should such a situation arise. I remember interacting with a young Christian some years back. He was lamenting that if he knew that Christian life would involve so much pain and suffering, he would have hesitated in becoming a Christian. Part of this, it seems, was due to how the gospel was shared with him. The gospel was presented to him as a wonderful prospect for his life, full of joy and meaning, and nothing much was mentioned about the cost of discipleship and the prospect of suffering and persecution. So when persecution did come, he was not prepared and he was badly shaken. Contrast this with a Christian sister whom I know. She was one who understood the cost of being a Christian and even though she had to leave home because of her faith and even now has to endure the displeasure of her own family and friends, she continues to press on in her walk with God. I am aware that it pains her heart to have her own family members turning against her, yet her love for the Lord and willingness to go on, despite the tears and agony, truly warm my heart.

The apostle Peter also touched on the attitude and response of Christians in the midst of persecution. He said, *"...to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing...if you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory and of God rests upon you"* (see 1 Peter 4:13-14). Yes, indeed, we are not just to grit our teeth and to endure and to hang on; we are to rejoice and to keep on rejoicing for we are truly blessed in the Lord! Peter went on to say that for the one who suffers as a Christian, let him not feel ashamed but in that name let him glorify God. Our attitude and response during such a time can be a positive testimony as well as a vehicle to glorify and to honour God. I read about a Christian brother who died for his faith in his homeland. His testimony and his words continue to be an inspiration to many to press on in their walk with God. Before he died, he was asked this question. "Are you

not afraid that you would be a social outcast by becoming a Christian?" And his reply was along this line, "I have thought this through over carefully and I am not just prepared to be shunned by my people but I rejoice even if I have to die for my Lord." This brother eventually gave his life for his Master and his words and testimony live on in the hearts of many of God's people in a land where being a disciple of the Lord would inevitably mean pain, persecution and suffering.

James, the brother of the Lord, also wrote about the attitude of the child of God towards times of sufferings and trials, in James 1:2-4 - *"Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."* Here the apostle James highlighted one significant reason why we can rejoice in the midst of pain and suffering. If we respond properly, times like these would purify and strengthen our faith and they would serve to mould our character. Something precious and wonderful can take place in our lives during periods of persecution and trials and this is certainly something to rejoice in.

God does allow persecution and suffering to test and purify the faith of His people. Looking at the history of the church, we may recall how the Roman Christians were burnt at the stakes, stoned and thrown to the lions' den. Even today, in some contexts, the Lord's people still undergo torture, imprisonment and ostracism because of their faith. The church of God can become stronger and purer during such times of testing.

The evil one uses the pull of this world and deception to ensnare the people of God. In the area of persecution, the evil one is also very actively at work. And the primary weapon he uses in persecution is FEAR. Fear of pain, fear of suffering, fear of rejection - all these are harnessed to cause the children of God to falter and to compromise. So when the pull of the world and deception fail, the prince of this world would resort to fear as his offensive weapon. In practice, different combinations of the three may also be employed at the same time.

So, as we face the onslaught of persecution, let us pause and consider several principles which may help us in our perspective and response. *"Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell"* (Matthew 10:28). Let us take heart in the fact that the evil one is limited. He may inflict pain and suffering on our body but he cannot ultimately touch our soul if we remain steadfast and true to the Lord. The Scriptures remind us that the sufferings in this world are only temporal; they cannot be with the eternal weight of glory that awaits the faithful servants of God. Even physical death, which seems so terrifying to those without God, has lost its sting for those who have their eyes upon God and eternity. And the Lord would grant grace sufficient for us in each moment of trial if we learn to look to Him and to cast our burdens upon Him. The Lord, in His wisdom and faithfulness, would regulate and He would not allow us to be tempted beyond what we are able but will provide the way of escape that we may be able to endure it. Hence, we need not succumb to the fiery darts hurled at us by the evil one; we need not be fearful of those who kill the body, for our lives and our souls are secure in the hands of our dear Lord and Master.

Not only have we nothing to fear; in fact, we can count it a privilege to suffer for our Lord and Master. The Lord will not overlook our faithful response during such times. *"Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you, when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you"* (Matthew 5:10-12). The Lord Jesus Himself here affirms that those who are persecuted for righteousness sake and on account of Him are indeed blessed. They should be glad, for their reward is great in heaven.

During times of persecution and suffering, let us not forget to look at the example of our Lord Jesus Christ. The apostle Peter, in writing on the subject of suffering unjustly, sought to help the Christians to remember this (see 1 Peter 2:19-24). The Lord has indeed left us an example for us to follow in His steps. Let us learn to walk in the steps of the Master and let us always remember

that all our sufferings cannot ever be compared with what the Lord has gone through for us at Calvary. Let us humbly learn from Him and seek to honour Him in all our ways.

CHAPTER 7

PHYSICAL UPHEAVALS

Somewhat related to the major area of persecution is the area of physical upheavals in this world which is associated with pain and suffering. This will become more and more frequent as we approach the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus. *"You will be hearing of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not frightened, for those things must take place, but that is not yet the end. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and in various places there will be famines and earthquakes. But all these things are merely the beginning of birth pangs"* (Matthew 24:6-8). The phenomena of wars, earthquakes and famine are not something uncommon today; in fact, we need only to look at the newspapers each day and almost without fail, we will read about such events in various parts of the world. Civil wars and disorders in Sri Lanka, Ireland and many African states are ongoing. Famine, droughts, floods - these are happening in increasing frequency in many parts of the world and in a manner that is bizarre and unprecedented. Earthquakes are constantly in the headlines - whether it be in Taiwan, Turkey, Japan, China or Indonesia. In 1995, in one month alone, twenty earthquakes were recorded, measuring about 7 on the Richter scale, in various places. And earthquakes are still taking place in increasing frequency and intensity.

The physical upheavals are not abating and some scientists are predicting more disasters and catastrophes coming our way, with global warming, deforestation and thinning of the ozone layer among the many problems that have to be addressed. Knowing that the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat and the earth and its works will be burned up, it is therefore not surprising that physical upheavals are getting more intense and frequent.

As God's children, we need to be wholesome in our attitude towards such areas. There is definitely a place to care and to pray for those undergoing suffering and pain; yet at the same time, we must not lose sight of our priorities and the consciousness of the spiritual and eternal needs and consequences. As we recognise the fact that the things of this world are passing away, let us not be caught up with pursuing them and giving our lives to achieve all these that will go up in flames. On the other hand, we can be responsible, for instance, to do our part in conserving the environment. Yet, we should be careful not to end up giving our lives crusading for such issues to a point that we are no longer effective as God's ambassadors in more critical issues of life.

Even in the area of lobbying for conservation of the environment, there can be spiritual dangers involved. I read of groups whose zeal for the preservation of nature borders on worshipping nature. Such groups gather together to sing songs in praise of nature and their form of activities resembles suspiciously the Christian worship service, except that the object of adoration is not God but nature. So in what appears to be generally positive and responsible, the cry to preserve the environment and nature, we see the real dangers that can lead God's people onto the wrong path in worship. The evil one specialises in using what seems innocent and harmless to create diversion, deception and destruction. Let us be mindful of his ways.

The world is not getting any better. The Scriptures reveal that evil men and imposters will proceed from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. Difficult times will come in the last days and immorality, sin, corruption and all forms of evil will be on the rise. Physically, the world is going to see more upheavals and chaos, culminating in the day when the *"sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light and the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken"* (Matthew 24:29) before the Lord comes again. Let us therefore keep our hearts and spirits on the right track and not lay up treasures on earth which finally will be burned and destroyed.

During times of such physical upheavals, it is helpful to ponder over what is recorded in the Scriptures. *"And He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away"* (Revelation 21:4). If we persevere in faithfulness, we can truly look forward to such a day with the Lord.

CHAPTER 8

SPIRITUAL ATTACKS

We go on now to look at another major problem area which we will encounter in increasing measures as we live in the last days. This is the area of increased activity of the evil one in spiritual attacks and warfare.

We see an example of such attacks in the life of Job in the Old Testament. We can remember Job encountering various painful problems in the family, in his possessions, and even in his social life and physical well-being, all as a result of attacks from the evil one. We are aware also that these attacks came about not because of any significant ground that had been given on Job's part. The Lord God had allowed these because of His confidence in Job and because of His being pleased generally with Job's life. We see therefore that spiritual attacks from the evil one can take place even in the lives of those whose general direction in life is pleasing to God. The apostle Paul himself and the other apostles also encountered such forms of attacks, directed at their personal lives and ministry, and these, as far as we know, were attacks not because of any major failure in their lives. However, the Scriptures do indicate that attacks of such nature may come about because of moral failure or spiritual ground given to the evil one. We see this being referred to in 1 Corinthians 5:1,5 and 2 Corinthians 2:10-11. The evil one is certainly looking for opportunity to take advantage of situations or areas of weaknesses in the lives of believers to launch various forms of attacks.

It is with this in view that the apostle Peter urged the children of God to be vigilant and alert in 1 Peter 5:7. Like a roaring lion, the prince of this world is waiting to pounce on his victims. It becomes easier for him to operate if God's people are not conscious of spiritual warfare. Their ignorance, indifference and lack of alertness may render them more prone to being manipulated by the prince of darkness. There needs therefore to be a healthy awareness of the spiritual realm and the principles of spiritual warfare and, yet, without being preoccupied with spiritual attacks.

Spiritual attacks and activity of the evil one will be more pronounced in the context of the last days (see Revelation 2:10; 13:5-19; 16:13-14). There are clear indications that the activity of the evil one and his forces will increase in tempo and intensity and their objective will be to hamper or destroy the work and people of God. Also, the forces of darkness will seek to rally the people of the world and their leaders to their side. Here, let us note that in trying to do this, they will perform signs and wonders to deceive and impress even the believers. We cannot therefore allow such acts to be the basis for our differentiation between the activity of God and the activity of the evil one. Supernatural acts need not be acts of God. The devil can dress up as an angel of light. Perhaps one reason for the increased activity of the forces of darkness can be found in Revelation 12:12. The time for the evil one is truly limited and he realises that his time is running out. Hence, he will seek to do as much damage as he can in the remaining time he has.

In the light of all these, how should God's children respond? As we encounter the attacks of the evil one in increasing pressure, let us not be discouraged, particularly if the attacks are not as a result of our own moral failure. Instead, let us take heart in the fact that because his time is limited, the evil one is desperately seeking to establish as much influence as he can and the various attacks could be an indication that we are on the right track in our lives and ministry. John 16:33 is one verse we can cling to as the basis for our confidence in the last days. Let us take courage that the Lord Jesus has indeed overcome the world. Victory has been secured by Him and victory is certain in Him if we learn to cling to Him. John 14:27 is another reassuring verse. In the midst of all the increased activity of the evil one, let us not be troubled or fearful in our hearts. Let us learn instead to rest in the Lord and to continue to experience continuous peace in our hearts.

At the same time, let us pay heed to the words of the apostle Paul as we seek to do battle (see Ephesians 6:10-18). We need to be strong in the Lord as we realise who our foes are. We

must learn to take up the full armor of God and be ready for battle, to resist in the evil day and stand firm in God. It is a time for us to be alert and sober. It is also a time for us to live well for the Lord, giving no room and no ground for the evil one to take opportunity to hurt us in this spiritual battle. The battle cry is to persevere and to endure. Let us fight the good fight and finish the race.

"And they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even when faced with death" (Revelation 12:11). Notice the three aspects that contributed to the victory of the saints over the evil one. The first has to do with the blood of the Lamb, with what the Lord Jesus has accomplished on the cross. This is the basis of their confidence and victory. The blood of the Lamb cleanses them; it gives them the victory over sin and death such that the evil one, the accuser of the brethren, has no ground to hurt them. The other two aspects, the word of their testimony and they did not love their life even when faced with death, indicate the quality of the lives of these dear ones in the Lord. With such a stand, they were able to overcome the evil one.

Although the attacks are designed to weaken and destroy, yet these very attacks are used by God to strengthen the lives of His people who manifest wholesome and commendable qualities in their lives. It therefore comes as no surprise that such ones overcome the evil one despite the increased intensity and tempo of spiritual attacks. The pressures take their toll on the weak soldier, but for the warrior, the very same pressures would mould and make him to be battle seasoned and fighting fit.

Persecution, physical upheavals, spiritual attacks - all these can break and discourage the people of God - yet paradoxically, they can also serve to make and strengthen the character and quality of the lives of those who respond well. Our attitude, our responses and our choices in God would make the essential difference. Let us determine to keep the banner of the Lord flying and to endure until the Lord Jesus comes again.

PART III

WHAT WE CAN DO TO ENSURE THAT WE STAND IN THE LAST DAYS

"It is a trustworthy statement. For if we died with Him, we will also live with Him; If we endure, we will also reign with Him; If we deny Him, He also will deny us; If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself."

- 2 Timothy 2:11-13

CHAPTER 9

DEVELOPING OUR CHARACTER

As we consider the various problem areas and challenges facing us in the last days and realise how formidable the foe is, what can we do to ensure that we stand in the last days? In Part III, we shall now consider certain broad areas of emphasis that may be helpful for us to take note of, as we earnestly desire not to fail the Lord during such a time.

We noted that the influence of the world, the lust of the flesh, the love of money and corruption would feature more and more in the last days. In the face of all these, what is it that we can do to ensure that we not only are able to fend off such influences, but also end up more than conquerors with the right and proper longings in our hearts?

The one area we need to pay heed to and to develop is our CHARACTER. We need to nurture our character to be like that of the Lord Jesus. As we do this, we would find that God's values become more and more our own, and we begin to love what the Lord loves and seek to uphold what is upon the heart of God. No longer do we give room to dishonesty to become rich and famous, in fact, no longer do we even desire to be rich and famous. What we begin to long for is to be what the Lord desires us to be. We do not have to struggle to hang on to what we recognise to be sound biblical principles and moral values. Instead, these very principles and moral values become integrated and incorporated into our very beings. In other words, we no longer need to strive so very hard to be godly; godliness becomes part and parcel of our lives. Desiring and defending godly principles and truths become a spontaneous outflow of our lives, and living pure and holy lives become as natural and as unsurprising as breathing in and breathing out air in the physical realm. This seems rather hard to imagine and yet it is feasible for a child of God to attain. God has given ample resources for His children to grow into godliness such that His children would be conformed to the image of His only begotten Son. With such a character, the influence of the world and the lust of the flesh will not be able to affect the lives of God's people to any significant degree. They become, as it were, "immune" to the contamination and "infection" of the world system. The world and its values then become an abomination, something detestable and undesirable. God's people, in such a state and with such a character, can see right through the system of the world. They perceive its ugliness, its deception and its lies and they are then able to keep themselves unblemished.

Nurturing a godly character is a process, a building process in fact, and it takes time and diligence. We see the apostle Peter referring to this in 2 Peter 1:4-11. Notice in particular some of the practical steps needed. *"Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, ...knowledge;..."* (2 Peter 1:5). What is clear is that a great deal of diligence is required on the part of the believer. It is not a process that takes place automatically. It requires much hard work and it is something deliberate. The believer, in his faith, applying all diligence is to supply all these various virtues, leading to godliness, brotherly kindness and love. Our faith is to be characterised by moral excellence, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness and love, all demonstrating various aspects of the divine nature. We are to be partakers of the divine nature, manifesting traits and aspects of God's own attributes and nature. This is our high calling and we are to work hard to achieve this.

It is helpful here to distinguish between "character" and "gifts." "Character" is part and parcel of the being of the believer and it is realised through transformation of life as the believer co-operates with the Holy Spirit of God. "Gifts" may be bestowed by the Holy Spirit in the life of believers for specific functions and roles. They may also be removed, should the Lord see it fit to do so.

Although the Corinthian Christians were not lacking in gifts, yet they were looked upon as fleshly and unspiritual by the apostle Paul (see 1 Corinthians 1:5-7 and 3:1-3). A believer who has many gifts is therefore not necessarily one who is spiritual. In fact, a believer who is lacking in godly character but yet has many gifts is often affected by spiritual pride and a lack of discernment. Such a person tends to contribute to dissension and disorder amongst the brethren, instead of edification.

In 2 Peter 1:8, Peter made mention of these virtues as increasing. It is not something stagnant; it is dynamic and growing. There are various depths that we can grow into and experience by God's grace. And if this is so in our lives, then we can ensure that we will not end up useless and unfruitful in our Christian lives. If these qualities and virtues are to increase and to grow, it will imply that the process of character building is to be a continual process; we are to add on to our faith an increasing measure of godliness and all other virtues continually.

In 2 Peter 1:10, Peter wrote, "*As long as you practice these things, you will never stumble...*". Here we see another aspect of the practical steps needed. The wholesome outworking of our faith involves practising all these virtues in our lives daily and in increasing measure. However, it is God who gives the resources and it is He who promises and enables us through the Lord Jesus Christ. All that we need for this outworking are found in God's provision and promises given to us in His Son! (see 2 Peter 1:3-4). So God's calling for us is not something unattainable; it is feasible and He has ensured that we have all the resources and promises necessary to reach our goal.

Having said that, it does not mean that the process is going to be easy and painless. In fact, it is a long and painful process involving God's dealings with the direction, desires and state of the heart and the inner being. For God's children to be like the Lord in character and nature, it would mean that all characteristics that are apart from God and contrary to God's ways ought to be removed. The removal of these would involve the willingness to allow God to mould us, to correct us and to deal with ugly and fleshly traits in our lives. And certainly, this can be something very difficult and painful to bear. However, if we make progress in this, it would mean less and less of "I", "me" and "myself", and more and more of "God", "His ways", "His desires" and "His Life". Increasingly, we would become more and more partakers of the divine nature. What is manifested then would be a life of purity, holiness and godliness.

In practical terms, what would this involve? Firstly, there should be a willingness to apply and to work out what the Lord reveals to us, whether it be through the Scriptures, through brothers and sisters in the Lord, or through other means which God may be pleased to employ to speak to us. There must be the honesty and openness to accept the truths about ourselves and about deficiencies in our lives. It is only when we act upon what God desires that we make progress in the process of character moulding and transformation.

Related to this, there must be a preparedness to welcome opportunities to learn various aspects of Christian virtues such as self-control, love and perseverance in the midst of provocative situations. Such situations and pressures should not evoke responses of complaints and grumbling; instead, they should be looked upon as God's opportunities for us to learn to be more like the Lord, provided of course we are clear that the situations are what the Lord has allowed for our lives and development. Together with this, there ought also to be the humility to receive rebuke and correction, as well as the perseverance to carry on, learning long-suffering in this process. When we do fail, we need to repent, to pick ourselves up and to press on and continue in the Lord. We will then see our character slowly but surely being transformed.

CHAPTER 10

COMMITMENT

In the last days, persecution, suffering and pain will increase in varying degrees, and these will be accompanied by physical upheavals and changes in the world. In the face of all these, what can contribute positively to enable God's children not to falter? Here, the one significant factor that must be resolved in the lives of God's children is the issue of COMMITMENT. Commitment to the Lord is vital during such times. It is commitment that will see God's people through, no matter how hard the going might be, whether it be through persecution, pain or suffering. In the midst of uncertainty, dangers and many changes and fluid situations, it is commitment that would make the essential difference.

Commitment involves a crisis decision and stand. There ought to be a time in the lives of God's people when they make a definite stand and decision to follow the Lord wholeheartedly and knowingly. By "wholeheartedly", I mean that every aspect of the life is surrendered to God without reservation, knowing full well that we are serving a good and perfect Master who desires the best for us. And by "knowingly", I mean having counted the cost and realising the full implications and consequences of following the Lord and turning our backs to the world, we still make the definite decision and choice in our lives to follow the Lord Jesus. Just as we take a definite step to accept the Lord Jesus as our Savior and become believers, we ought also to take a definite step to commit ourselves totally to our Lord and Master, forsaking all, taking up the cross and following Him. Has there been such a definite crisis and decision in our lives? Or are we still vacillating and not making up our minds, wanting the world and yet wanting the Lord as well?

Commitment involves love; it is not just a mental decision. It involves the whole being. It is, in one sense, an expression of our love for the Master. This aspect is clearly shown and expressed in Revelation 2:1-5. All the various deeds and activities, coupled with perseverance, may not amount to anything worthwhile if we have lost our first love for the Lord. Love is not necessarily measured by the amount of activities and deeds done. I remember an old lady who is staying with her youngest son. She is diabetic and rather ill, requiring much attention and care. The youngest son attends to all her physical needs lovingly and also takes time off to bring her to the doctor. All the other children would come by occasionally with various gifts and errands done for her. Yet, in her own words, she felt that it is the youngest son who loves her although the others may be prepared to undertake certain activities on her behalf. When it comes to the crunch and her real needs, it is the youngest son who is quietly present to meet her needs with care, tenderness and understanding. All the rest may come along rather boisterously with many words of advice and activities, but none, it seems, among them, is willing to be counted upon when she truly requires their assistance. God is not so concerned with what we can do for Him as much as whether we love Him. And love means also identifying with Him and appreciating His deepest longings. Love does not shrink back when it comes to suffering for the one we love, and love certainly is not ashamed to stand by the one who is loved.

Some time ago, I met an old gentleman at a clinic. After his consultation, he asked me the direction to go home. I was rather concerned whether he could reach home on his own as he appeared rather weak and was walking with the aid of two walking sticks. So I asked whether he came to the clinic on his own. To my surprise, he told me his son brought him to the clinic but had left him there alone and expected him to go home on his own. I then asked him whether he would want me to call his son to bring him home. He hesitated. When I asked again, tears came to his eyes and he expressed that his son was ashamed to be seen with him in public as he was rather old and incontinent, not being able to control his bladder, and his clothes were often soiled and dirty. He went on to share how miserable and dejected he felt, having a son and yet not having one in reality; for all intents and purposes, his son treated him as a stranger. What he shared with

me remains in my mind. Love means not being ashamed of the one we love. It means the willingness to identify with the one we love. The old man cannot help being incontinent. His bladder control had failed him. A retarded child is not to be blamed morally for his retardation. True commitment involves love. What is the quality of our commitment to the Lord? Do we indeed love Him; are we truly identified with Him and not ashamed to be called His child?

Commitment also implies daily outworking and decisions along the line of our commitment. Although commitment involves a crisis decision, it also involves making small and big choices along the way and perhaps this is the more difficult part of commitment. Many a child of God may well remember the time when he or she made a definite commitment to follow the Lord, whatever it takes, but somewhere along the way, this major decision may have been well forgotten and the daily encounters and choices of life eventually take on a character that it is so very different from what the original commitment meant. Somehow, the implications of the commitment become so faint and the issues of the day loom so large and so urgent that God's children choose and respond like people of the world. The affairs of the world, the business of making a living and the hustle and bustle of life for the busy housewife, the pressured student and the up-and-coming executive - all these seem so real and demanding that the child of God forgets what it means to be committed to God. And so the daily choices are made in favour of what matters most for the moment rather than what means more in the eyes of God.

Many a time, the problems we encounter in our Christian life have their roots in the meaning and consistency of our commitment to God. When we say we have no time to read the Bible, it often means we are not prepared to miss our favourite TV programme. When we say we cannot afford time to attend a Christian meeting, it often means we are not willing to give up our badminton game for that day or our round of golf or whatever it might be. And so ultimately, it boils down to our priorities, to what really matters most to our lives. In our declaration of our commitment to the Lord, we say that we are willing for Him to be the Lord and Master of our lives. But when it comes to daily outworking, it is an entirely different matter!

Here I am reminded of the story of a lady surgeon. She was a paediatric surgeon and worked very long hours. She had to be on call regularly, and at odd hours of the day and night, she might be called upon to operate or to review emergency cases. At the time of her training, when she was busiest and most committed to her work, she became interested in a man, with a view to marriage. Soon she found that her work became affected and before long, she was called up by her superior and questioned about her commitment to her surgical training programme. Her answer was, "I have a life of my own to live too." The superior replied, "Go ahead and live your life but drop out of your surgical training programme. We require and demand the best, not only of you but also of ourselves." So even in the secular realm, commitment means doing what is required of you, and for the surgeon in training, it means availability at odd hours for operation, emergencies and not being late for ward rounds and medical meetings. She had to make a choice at that point of her life - was she still committed to be a paediatric surgeon?

Unfortunately, for many of God's children, commitment to the Lord does not mean daily outworking and choices. We give only bits and pieces to the Lord and carry on as if we were committed. Does not He, who made the eyes, see our state and condition? Wherein is our commitment? Where indeed is our heart?

True commitment to the Lord would also mean a growing identification with the perspective and values that God holds regarding issues of life on earth as well as eternal issues. This ought to be seen in the way we make our decisions in life as well as in the pursuits of our lives. It is starkly inconsistent if we say that we are in agreement with how God looks at an issue and yet, in our outworking, we choose and pursue that which is the very opposite of what we are supposed to uphold and believe in. We say that what matters is what God thinks of us and not the views of men and yet, we get so very upset when we are misunderstood by men or looked upon in a degrading manner. We declare that we trust in a God who answers prayer and a God who cares

and desires the best for us and yet, in daily living, we get so easily bogged down by anxiety, fears and apprehension, living as if we are a people who have no hope, no peace and no God.

In such a state, it is no wonder then that when persecution or suffering comes along, the child of God easily breaks. In the context of the last days when the degree of persecution and suffering increases, then there is very little room for optimism for many of God's children whose commitment to God remains as a question mark.

When there is true commitment to God, there is loyalty and faithfulness to Him in varying and changing circumstances. No matter how difficult it is and how long it takes, the true child of God would endure in faithfulness and in steadfast loyalty. The winds of change and uncertainty and the onslaught of persecution and pain cannot move such a one as this.

We can recall the picture of true commitment in the lives of David's mighty men. Against overwhelming odds, in the face of death and danger, they stood their ground and achieved victory. A deeply committed Christian does not easily bend in the face of adversity.

Adoniram Judson, a Christian worker to Burma, endured untold hardship to reach the lost for Christ. For seven heartbreaking years he suffered hunger and privation. During this time he was thrown into prison and for seventeen months, he was subjected to almost incredible mistreatment. As a result, for the rest of his life he carried the ugly marks made by the chains and iron shackles. Upon his release, Judson immediately asked for permission to enter another province. The Burmese ruler angrily denied his request saying, "My people are not fools enough to listen to anything a Christian might say but I fear they might be impressed by your scars and turn to your religion." Judson's scars remain as a testimony of his commitment to Christ and the gospel.

The great Christian leader, John Wesley, knew the value of having committed men. He said, "Give me one hundred men who fear nothing but sin and desire nothing but God, and I will shake the world." Yes, indeed the church needs committed men and women of God. When the goings get rough and painful, who can we depend upon? Who can God look to, who continues to be faithful and trustworthy?

We started by considering what we can do to ensure that we stand in the last days. We saw two areas we can nurture and cultivate - our character and our commitment to the Lord Jesus. A godly and wholesome character can withstand all the negative influences and pull of the world and still remain intact in the Lord. A true and deep commitment to God would remain steadfast and unwavering, despite all the pain, suffering and persecution that might come along.

Remember, character and commitment take time to develop. Let us not be discouraged by our failures along the way. Instead, let us make sure that our direction of life is correct and with God's grace and enabling, we will see definite progress in our lives and development.

CHAPTER 11

A LIFE OF QUALITY

We continue to focus on what we can do to ensure that we stand in the last days. A major area we need to look into is to build a life of quality. There may be some overlapping truths with the areas of character and commitment; however, a life of quality is something so important that it should be looked at on its own. In this respect, we would be considering some significant aspects that reflect a life of quality.

The first aspect we can ponder upon is an adequate and wholesome knowledge of God and the truths in Christian living. For the child of God, without this adequate and wholesome knowledge, there can be no life of quality. Spiritual life would be superficial and with worldly influences and pressures present in abundance, the child of God would certainly be tossed to and fro in his faith and understanding. He would then be easily led astray by false teachings and wrong emphasis. In addition, it becomes very much easier for the child of God to pursue "beliefs" coloured by deception and distortion.

Once, I was involved in conducting a test for advanced first-aiders. And in the test, I realised how important it is, even in the area of knowledge of first-aid, for the student to have adequate and wholesome knowledge. Otherwise, the first-aider may become a stumbling block and even a danger to the injured instead of being a help. I asked a few candidates what they understood by the term "shock." I was alarmed by the answers. The term "shock" here refers to a condition where there has been excessive loss of blood and the body becomes cold and clammy with fast but feeble heart beat. Such a condition is an emergency and the injured requires urgent blood transfusion and fluid replacement. It is significant therefore for the first-aider to know this condition and to recognise it in an injured person in order to be able to help save his life. You can imagine how taken aback I was when a few candidates told me that "shock" is a condition when they receive bad news or alarming news, like failing an examination. Of course, this meaning is what is generally used in the English language but it certainly does not refer to the circulatory shock that a first-aider must know and recognise. Some candidates were able to answer the question reasonably. For those who could not, they were obviously lacking in adequate knowledge of first aid. Even for those who could answer the question, quite a few demonstrated that they did not grasp the subject wholesomely. When I asked the question, "Is it possible for a person to be in shock even though there is no visible blood loss?" Several answered "no." However, in reality, a person can be in shock because of internal blood loss as in the case of a massive fracture of a large bone, or rupture of an internal organ. In such cases, externally, there may be no blood loss seen, but the person may be very ill or in shock. Even in the secular realm, adequate and wholesome knowledge is important; how much more in the spiritual realm and in our spiritual lives? Inadequate and unwholesome knowledge certainly pose a threat to the lives of God's people. This is one aspect we cannot afford to ignore.

The Corinthian Christians were endowed with many spiritual gifts. Not a few of them felt that they were wise and knowledgeable to a point that the apostle Paul rebuked them for their arrogance and boasting. In the epistles to the Corinthians, Paul demonstrated to them how inadequate and unwholesome they were in their knowledge as well as in their spiritual state. This unwholesomeness had resulted in the Corinthians being carnal, boastful, arrogant and quarrelsome, and they themselves were led astray by false prophets and teachers who exploited them in their inadequate state.

The Galatian Christians formed another group which displayed this trait of unwholesomeness in their knowledge and understanding of the gospel in particular. As such, although they started well in their Christian life, they were deceived into following another gospel by those who seemed so authoritative and impressive. The apostle Paul had to rebuke them sternly

for their wrong direction and emphasis in their lives. Here we see clearly how essential it is for God's people to have adequate and wholesome knowledge of God and the spiritual truths in order for them to be kept unblemished and unstained, particularly in the face of spiritual pressures of various kinds. The Scriptures refer to the example of the people of God in Berea who were noble-minded, for they received the word of God with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see for themselves whether what they heard were so (see Acts 17:11). For ourselves, we need to take heed of this example and discipline ourselves, with the Lord's enabling, to study the Scriptures and to be men and women approved by God, handling accurately the word of truth. A life of quality would invariably imply a life where there is adequate and wholesome knowledge of who and what we believe in. Do we have this to see us through?

Another aspect of a life of quality is a high level and degree of vigilance in our lives. This is particularly needful in the face of the various schemes that can be employed by the evil one. A life of vigilance does not mean a life lived in constant fear and anxiety, wondering when and where the enemy would strike. On the contrary, vigilance can go hand in glove with confidence in the Lord and with the peace of heart and mind that is the privilege of every true child of God. We know that Satan can disguise himself as an angel of light, and many false apostles and deceitful workers disguise themselves as servants of God. In view of this, we see how very important it is for God's people to be alert in their spiritual lives.

I recall a story in the second world war when the German army sent in some German officers disguised as British officers to penetrate the allies and to seek vital intelligence reports which may affect the outcome of the war. These German officers were highly trained to speak and to behave like British officers. So it would be difficult to discover their disguise. In one such story, a British officer suspected one officer to be a German spy. However, he found it very difficult to uncover his disguise. He finally had an idea. He decided to catch this officer off-guard by suddenly switching from the English language to the German language. This German officer was caught in the trap, for he spontaneously responded in German and was apprehended. It was recorded that quite a few German officers were successful in posing as British officers and gaining vital intelligence information for their forces. We see here how in physical warfare, deception and disguises by the enemy, when undetected, can cause so much havoc and damage. Let us be fully conscious that the dangers are as real and even greater in spiritual warfare. Let us not be caught unprepared and thereby suffer spiritual setbacks unnecessarily.

In practice, vigilance does not mean that we become suspicious of everyone and everything and start questioning every issue. It does mean, however, that we need to be careful in evaluating situations and decisions prayerfully. We should not react to situations hastily and in a manner that is typical of the people of the world. We should be careful of not speaking impulsively and saying things that may damage the kingdom of God and His people because we are personally hurt or misunderstood. It is important that we do not accept ideas and concepts which have not been clearly examined in the light of the Scriptures and godly principles. Sometimes, the exercise of vigilance may require the use of spiritual common sense. We are aware how some individuals have been tricked by confidence tricksters who managed to swindle their victims of large sums of money. In many of these cases, the situations could have been prevented by taking simple measures to countercheck the various points presented by the tricksters. These would amount to common sense in some instances; nevertheless, this may be lacking when they are panicky and lose control of the situation. In other instances, the same people involved would have chosen the wiser options.

As regards spiritual common sense, the children of God should not, for example, conclude that whenever there is something spectacular or supernatural, then it is necessarily the work of God. The Scriptures clearly reveal that the evil one is capable of performing feats that are supernatural. Similarly, a person who can impress with his speech, appearance and charisma need not necessarily be sincere in promoting the kingdom of God. There ought to be vigilance in

examining what he has to say in the light of known scriptural principles. Nonetheless, many Christians would be easily carried away by such individuals or be impressed by works of miracles. This is a reflection of a lack of spiritual common sense and vigilance.

Another aspect of a life of spiritual quality is a genuine and true spirit of discipleship. Too often, many of God's children do not realise the implications of being true disciples of the Lord and when pressures, perplexities and difficulties come along, many withdraw from following the Lord. We see such an incident recorded in John 6:59-67. Here, many withdrew from following the Lord and the reason highlighted by the Lord Jesus in verse 64 is the problem of unbelief. Earlier on, many of the disciples grumbled at the difficult statement made by the Lord. They were perplexed; they could not understand what the Lord was trying to communicate, and in their own frame of values and understanding, the statement made by the Lord was unacceptable. Perhaps, they were wondering how it is possible for one to eat the flesh of the Lord and to drink His blood. This did not make sense to them. So they doubted the Lord and withdrew from Him.

When we are faced with perplexing situations, when we need to understand why certain events occur and somehow we cannot receive satisfactory answers, how do we respond? We know that there are many spiritual truths and principles which are hard to understand. In this world, we should be aware that there are many questions which might remain unanswered or partially answered. Should we then begin to doubt the Lord and to abandon the path of discipleship, just like those who withdrew in John chapter 6? Can God count upon us as true disciples who have counted the cost and are committed to pursuing the course the Lord has assigned to us? Or are we easily shaken and is our discipleship so superficial that we easily crumble in our faith? The evil one can readily capitalise on the lack of quality of discipleship in our lives. It is so very easy for him to sow seeds of doubt and discord.

It is significant to note that the Lord Jesus did not compromise on the standard of discipleship for His followers (see Luke 9:23-26). To deny oneself and to take up one's cross daily is part and parcel of true discipleship. These may be painful to some. Many find it hard to say "no" to self and "yes" to God. Many shrink back from carrying their own cross. In fact, they will have nothing to do with suffering or pain, even if these are for the sake of the Lord. They would not mind the more pleasant aspects of following the Lord but they fail to recognise that the disciple must be prepared to walk the narrow path and to experience "Calvary" in their lives.

Luke 9:62 states very clearly and soberly what it means to follow the Lord. However, it is not uncommon for many to look back or even to turn back. The Lord might be asking us this same question, *"Would you also go away?"*

For some, an area that is difficult to give up is the area of human relationship. It might be a family member or a loved one. When it comes to the issue of loyalty to the Lord and acknowledging the Lord first before everything else, quite a few may find it hard to respond as true disciples (see Matthew 10:34-37). It is relevant to take note of what the Lord brought out in this passage:- *"For I came to set a man against his father and a daughter against her mother and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's enemies will be the members of his household."* This will be especially true in the context of the last days. Although the Lord is a God of love and He has come to bring peace on earth and salvation, yet here He clearly stated that for those who follow Him and seek to love Him above all else, situations of conflicts may occur in family relationships.

After exhorting the Ephesian believers to be strong and to put on the full armour of God, Paul came to verse 18 of chapter 6 where prayer was singled out as a very important aspect in the battle against the evil forces. Paul wrote, *"With all prayer and petition, pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints"* (Ephesians 6:18). Here we see beyond any doubt the importance and significance of prayer in our war against the negative spiritual forces. Certainly, the quality of our prayer life is one area that contributes to a life of quality in our walk with God. When we refer to how we can stand in the

last days, prayer and the quality of our prayer life must feature prominently. This is especially so as we recognise that much of the pressure and persecution in the last days are engineered and orchestrated by the evil one and his allies. We cannot hope to effectively counter his attacks and manipulations if we forget that our battle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, the powers and world forces of this darkness and the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. We need to learn to pray, and we need to pray at all times in the Spirit. It is not just time set aside for prayer - it is in fact a posture and an attitude of prayer - praying at all times, manifesting a prayerful spirit as we serve the Lord and as we encounter various events and situations in life. It is continually being prayerful in big things and small things, in daily events and in major decisions and by prayer, to move God to demonstrate His power and His sovereignty to the glory of His name.

E. M. Bounds in his book, "Power Through Prayer", made a statement which we will do well to pay heed to. He said, "What the church needs today is not more machinery or better, not new organisations or more and novel methods, but men whom the Holy Spirit can use - men of prayer, men mighty in prayer. The Holy Spirit does not flow through methods, but through men. He does not come on machinery but on men. He does not anoint plans, but men - men of prayer."

As we approach the last days, we would see more and more organisations, more and newer methods, all mainly through the efforts of men who seek to contribute to the kingdom of God. Let us however not forget that we need to serve God in God's ways and by His enabling. And prayer features prominently in this respect.

We have considered one major area that can help us to stand in the last days. We need to cultivate a spiritual life of quality. We saw aspects of such a life - adequate and wholesome knowledge of God and the truths, vigilance, a true spirit of discipleship and a quality prayer life. A life of quality would ensure that we have the capacity to withstand the onslaught of the increasing pressures and negative influences in the last days. However, let us take note that a life of quality takes time to develop. A soldier does not become a warrior overnight. It takes years of training and hard work. Similarly, a life of quality spiritually may take many years to cultivate. Truths need to be learnt. They need to be reinforced over and over again; spiritual reality needs to be experienced, and those who are spiritually hungry and teachable would grow to assimilate them and to make them part of their lives.

Those who are unhealthily impatient and want quick results may miss the boat. In fact, they may even end up spiritually crippled and ineffective. On the other hand, there is no room for laziness and complacency. We need to take time to grow and to develop wholesomely with all diligence and perseverance. Nothing less than a life of quality would overcome in the last days. If we seek to be among those who would stand and overcome, then we cannot afford to live our lives carelessly. We cannot ignore the pursuit and cultivation of a life of quality.

CHAPTER 12

A LIFE FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT OF GOD

We continue to look at what we can do to ensure that we stand in the last days. We have seen how difficult it would be for God's children to maintain and uphold a life of quality, especially with all the pressures and influences coming from various quarters. This is so, even with a general life of commitment and discipleship. In the New Testament we are aware of the life of one well known disciple of the Lord who was generally sincere and committed in his life. Nonetheless, when the pressures mounted, despite his sincerity, he failed rather badly. We see this in Matthew 26:69-75. Prior to this incident, Peter had expressed his willingness even to die for the Lord. We look at another passage which demonstrates a different Peter (see Acts 2:37-41). Here we see Peter speaking confidently and testifying powerfully on behalf of the Lord and at the end of his sharing, about 3000 people responded positively to the message. What a different picture this is when compared to the previous scene when Peter was weeping so bitterly over his failure. Something happened, in between, that caused this dramatic change in the life of Peter.

It was at Pentecost that Peter, together with the other disciples, were filled with the Holy Spirit of God, and it was after this experience and incident that Peter became more courageous and effective in his testimony and communication (see Acts 2:1-4). Instead of fear, anxiety and denial of the Lord, we see boldness, courage and a powerful testimony for God and the gospel. The time lapse between the period when Peter failed the Lord and Pentecost was not a very long one in terms of years, but something definite and powerful took place in the lives of Peter and the other disciples, so much so that even in the face of threats and persecution, they stood firm and rejoiced in the fact that they were given the privilege to suffer for the Lord. It is reasonably clear that what made the difference was the filling with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

As we ponder over what we can do to ensure that we stand in the last days, one aspect of the answer must be "we ought to be filled with the Holy Spirit of God." It is a life filled with the Spirit that would enable the Christian to overcome tremendous odds and to live a life of holiness and victory. It is such a life that would manifest the various aspects of the fruit of the Spirit such as love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, meekness and self-control.

Perhaps one aspect of such a life that is most dramatic is boldness and courage. We saw a little of this in the life of Peter earlier on. We see it also in the life of the apostle Paul (see Acts 13:45-46 and Acts 14:19-22). We observe here the boldness and courage of Paul in the face of the jealousy of fellow Jews as well as in the face of intense persecution and violence. Although Paul was conscious of the Jews' jealousy, yet he did not hesitate to speak the truth boldly. Many others in his context would have compromised. Even though he was stoned and dragged out of the city, presumably dead, Paul stood up and continued on in his ministry, encouraging the disciples to press on. If we pause and consider what Paul went through, we would appreciate the degree of courage he displayed. It was not that Paul did not experience pain from the stoning. In fact the stoning must have been quite severe to a point that they thought that he was dead. Despite the pain and danger he encountered, he did not allow himself to be beset with self-pity and fear. He pressed on with his mission, being a source of encouragement and inspiration to those around him. And what was the event that contributed to Paul's boldness and courage?

Without any doubt, the experience of being filled with the Spirit started Paul off in his ministry and testimony which was creating so much impact that the Jews sought to kill him (see Acts 9:17-30). To stand in the last days, boldness and courage are essential for God's children - and this is part and parcel of the manifestation of a life filled with the Spirit of God.

During the reign of Emperor Nero of the Roman empire, a great number of Christians suffered intense persecution. Many were thrown to the lions' dens and burnt at the stakes. One striking observation that was recorded was the outstanding courage that was manifested in the

lives of those who died. Many sang at the burning stakes, and their boldness in the face of pain and death astounded many an observer. One description that was recorded about these martyrs was "These people know how to die...". And even though many of God's children suffered pain and physical death, yet their testimony continues to make an impact, causing many to pause and to ponder about the gospel and the Christian faith.

Related to the subject of boldness is the enabling to overcome and to live a life of victory over sin and corruption. We saw how the influences of the last days can be so overwhelming that many of God's children would compromise and fail the Lord, giving way to the flesh and the lust of life. Certainly this can be a real struggle even for those who are sincere and who wish to live lives that are holy and true. Many a time, they will find that although they may desire to overcome, in reality, they fail again and again.

The apostle Paul wrote of such a struggle in Romans 7:18-24. Thankfully, he did not stop at that. He went on to share the secret of the victory that is possible for the child of God (see Romans 7:25 - 8:6). The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set us free from the law of sin and death. Those who are filled with the Spirit of God are equipped and enabled by God's Spirit to overcome the law of sin and death. The Spirit of God empowers and strengthens us to live the life that God desires. He transforms us, as we co-operate with Him, into men and women who reflect the holiness of God in our lives. No longer do we need to be in the condition of Romans 7 where we struggle to overcome the weakness of the flesh. In the Lord Jesus Christ, and with the enabling of God's Spirit, we can and ought to live lives of victory over sin and the lust of the flesh.

The life of victory over sin, temptation and corruption is something real and attainable by the enabling of the Holy Spirit. This is not to say that the child of God will live a perfect life; however, more and more, as the Christian is continually filled with the Holy Spirit of God, his life is moulded and transformed by the Lord such that his character becomes one that is holy and godly. The child of God, at different stages of his life, learns to flee from temptations, to fight and overcome temptations and to be unaffected by the pull and influences of such temptations, desiring instead the will and desires of God. Such a consistent life of victory would only be the experience of those who have been filled with the Spirit of God. For the child of God who may be sincere and even mature in some ways, and yet has not experienced such a filling, the life of victory seems theoretical and so unreal. Nevertheless, for the one who has tasted and experienced being filled with the Spirit, such a life is feasible and is indeed part of the abundant life promised by the Lord Jesus.

A life filled with the Spirit of God would manifest the various aspects of the fruit of the Spirit. One aspect of the fruit is love - the love of God manifested in the life of the believer. We see a dramatic illustration of this in Acts 7:54-60. Here we see the response of Stephen in the face of opposition, persecution and impending death. Stephen was described in Acts 6 as a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit. He was one full of grace and power, performing great wonders and signs among the people. Even here in Acts 7, Stephen was noted to be one being full of the Holy Spirit and in this state, he saw the glory of God and the Lord Jesus standing at the right hand of God. In the midst of the stoning and pain, Stephen called upon the Lord. Even in his dying moments, he cried to God to forgive the very people who caused him to die. In this, we see Stephen demonstrating love - the love of God, praying and forgiving the very ones who hated him and who caused his pain and agony. To many who read the account of Stephen's life and death, his response seems so unbelievable and unreal. How could it be possible not to be bitter against those who persecuted you unjustly? How could it be possible to even love these very same ones and to pray for their welfare despite their hardness of heart and cruelty? Nevertheless, we see all these demonstrated in the life and heart of Stephen. Undoubtedly, it was because Stephen was filled with the Spirit of God, so much so that he could respond during such a time like his Master did

on the cross. We would remember the Lord Jesus praying to the Father to forgive those who crucified Him.

In the midst of the pain and pressures of the last days, would God's children end up angry, unforgiving and bitter, and in the process, lose the positive testimony and impact that could have been possible? The evil one seeks to cripple the life of many a child of God, and what better way to do it than to cause them to end up in a state of bitterness. In such a state, the Christian cannot be effective in serving the Lord, not to mention a life of faithfulness and victory.

The story is told of a Red Indian chief who was converted to Christianity. The chief's own son was killed by a rival chief and he had vowed vengeance in his heart since then. On one particular occasion, he had an opportunity to avenge the death of his son. Raising his bow and arrow, he had his son's murderer on target; yet he hesitated. Then he put down his bow and arrow saying, "Big chief wishes to kill son's killer but bigger Chief says to forgive". The term bigger Chief was used to refer to the Lord Jesus. Here we see how God's love can work in the life of one of His children. And certainly God's love can be seen in all its beauty and splendour in the lives of those filled with the Holy Spirit of God.

Two other aspects of the fruit of the Spirit are joy and peace. These are qualities quite lacking in the lives of many, including God's children. Many Christians, in the midst of stress and pressure, find that joy and peace are not easily found. Instead, they become restless, disturbed, depressed and discouraged. We see a contrast in Acts 16:22-34. Paul and Silas were beaten badly with rods and thrown into prison. In fact they were placed in the inner prison and their feet were fastened in the stocks. This was not due to any wrongdoing on their part but rather because they sought to be faithful in preaching the gospel. Nevertheless, in such a state, Paul and Silas prayed and sang hymns of praise to God. There was much joy and peace in their hearts despite the unfavourable circumstances they were in. Physically, they may be in prison and in chains, but their hearts were not imprisoned or chained. Their hearts were filled with the peace and joy of God. Silas and Paul were notably men who were full of the Spirit of God.

Many years later, while Paul was again in prison, he wrote to the Christians in this same region of Philippi in the epistle to the Philippians. Again, Paul was imprisoned because of his faithfulness to God. This time around, Paul faced the prospect of death and he knew that the time of his departure was at hand. Yet, in his epistle to the Philippians, he wrote, "*Rejoice in the Lord always and again I will say rejoice...And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension shall guard your heart and your minds in Christ Jesus*" (see Philippians 4:4, 7). Despite his physical environment and the prospect of death, joy and peace prevailed in the heart of the apostle and he sought to transmit these to the Philippian Christians, urging them to continue to have the joy and peace of God in their lives.

How do God's children face the pressure and persecution of the last days? In fact, for many of God's children, it does not take much to take away the joy and peace in their hearts. The prospect of failing an examination, or the prospect of being ill or being disappointed in work situation is enough to cause many of God's children to go around with long and drawn faces of despair and discouragement. The joy and peace of God are for God's children to experience and to keep, no matter what the circumstances may be. For the one who is filled with the Spirit of God, these aspects of the fruit of the Spirit should abound in his life.

As we consider a life filled with the Spirit of God, it is needful to realise that Satan can disguise himself as an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:14). In the area of the ministry of the Spirit of God as well as in the manifestations of the Spirit-filled life, there can be counterfeits and imitations. At times, in the midst of God's working, the evil one may also be at work, creating confusion and spiritual setbacks. There is a real need for God's people to be prayerful and vigilant. Do not assume that as long as we are sincere and that we are God's children, the evil one cannot attack us (see Matthew 16:22-23 and Luke 22:31-34). In these two incidents recorded in the two passages, it is clear that Satan was working in the life of Peter to cause him to fail. In the first

instance, the evil one instigated Peter to rebuke the Lord Jesus and to discourage the Lord from going to the cross. And the Lord Jesus turned and said to Peter, *"Get behind Me Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me, for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's."* In the second instance, Peter's subsequent denial of the Lord three times had very much to do with Satan's manipulation of his life. Although Peter was sincere and he was a close disciple of the Lord, he was not immune to the attacks of the evil one.

The situation becomes more precarious if we are insincere and we have mixed motives in our lives. Pride, a critical spirit and self-confidence can expose God's children to many dangers and manipulations of the evil one. Even in the midst of the working of the Holy Spirit of God, many things can go wrong and have gone wrong.

In the book "Blessing the Church?" by Clifford Hill and three others, all leaders from within the charismatic movement, the following was penned on pages 4 and 5:- "We wrote, not in the spirit of judgmentalism, or indeed with a negative critical attitude. Rather we write out of a deep concern for the church in which we have leadership responsibilities and for the future direction being taken by the charismatic movement. The prime purpose in writing is to draw attention to what we consider to be a serious drift away from biblically-based teaching into the realm of experientialism. This has led to the pernicious practice of using contemporary 'revelation' as the basis for doctrine and the justification for the formulation of new teachings and practice within the church which has no biblical foundation... We therefore write in a spirit of love and humility under the deep conviction that the Bible provides us with the only standard of truth that can guard against error, false doctrine, wrong practices and unrighteous behaviour." The book reviews the history and direction of the charismatic movement with candid acknowledgements of the many serious things that have gone wrong when experience parts company with sound biblical teaching.

The overemphasis on experience and emotion, at the expense of sound biblical teachings, can lead to serious errors, false doctrines, wrong practices and unrighteous living. In such a context, the evil one can operate, and manipulate the situation as well as the lives of the believers.

At this juncture, it may be helpful for us to see the relationship between being filled with the Spirit and the various other qualities we have considered earlier. Take the area of commitment to the Lord. We saw how important commitment to the Lord is in helping us to stand in the last days. Commitment to God is, however, closely tied up with a life filled with the Spirit. In fact, one of the conditions that needs to be fulfilled before one is filled with the Spirit of God is a life fully committed to the Lord. If the Christian life is filled with many personal fleshly desires and there is no significant degree of commitment to God, there is no place for the child of God to experience the filling of the Spirit. If we do desire to be filled, we must come to a point of commitment to God in our lives and we need to continue to reaffirm this commitment throughout our spiritual pilgrimage here on earth.

Then there is the area of the character taking on the characteristics of godliness and holiness. We see that the nurturing of such a character goes hand in hand with the life filled with the Spirit, which in turn manifests the various aspects of the fruit of the Spirit. All these aspects are integral in the character that is godly. As the child of God grows in his capacity to be filled with God's Spirit and as he continues to be filled, he would more and more manifest the character of God in his life. We see therefore how central being filled with the Spirit is in the process of nurturing a godly character. Transformation, renewal of the mind and the nurturing of a godly character are the work of the Holy Spirit of God although the Christian needs to co-operate with God in this process.

What about the aspect of a spiritual life of quality and its relationship with a Spirit-filled life? We saw how a life of quality is characterised by wholesome knowledge of God and His ways, a true spirit of discipleship, a life of vigilance and a quality prayer life. If we were to pause and ponder, we would realise how these various characteristics are related to a life filled with the

Spirit of God. Wholesome knowledge is closely linked to wholesome teaching and the Spirit of God is the ultimate teacher, teaching the child of God spiritual truths and principles which are not understood by natural men and women. True spiritual knowledge is imparted through the teaching and training by God through His Spirit. It is the Spirit of God also who teaches the child of God to pray in words and communication not generally appreciated by men. To be able to pray always and to maintain a prayerful life - this is not feasible without the ministry and enabling of the Holy Spirit. Hence we see again how various aspects of a life of spiritual quality are nurtured and maintained by the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer.

Similarly, when we refer to a life of vigilance and a true spirit of discipleship, they are also the benefit and fruit in the lives of those who have the privilege of experiencing the filling of the Spirit of God. So, as we consider what we can do to ensure that we stand in the last days, the answer can be summarised in one statement, "Make sure that we are filled with the Spirit of God and that we continue to experience this filling in increasing measure throughout our lives." Only then can there be a life of victory, only then can we experience true and wholesome transformation of our lives and character. It is in such a context that the child of God would find the enabling to be bold and to overcome all odds, no matter what the circumstances may be, and to stand after the final battle.

It is not enough just to be sincere Christians; it is not even enough just to have generally good and positive desires in life. There are many sincere believers who end up spiritually shipwrecked in their lives. There are many, with good desires, ending up spiritually crippled and disillusioned. What we need to ensure is that we are equipped to live for God and enabled to serve Him for His glory. To that end, let us pay heed to the words of the apostle Paul in Ephesians 5:15-18. Yes indeed, Paul's exhortation to the Christians remains - "Be filled with the Spirit". The question we need to ask ourselves soberly is - "Are we?"

At this point, it may be helpful for us to ponder over what A.W. Tozer wrote in "Keys to the Deeper Life" (revised and expanded, pages 50, 52):- "The doctrine of the Spirit as it relates to the believer has over the last half century been shrouded in a mist such as lies upon a mountain in stormy weather. A world of confusion has surrounded the truth. The children of God have been taught contrary doctrines from the same texts, warned, threatened and intimidated until they instinctively recoil from every mention of the Bible teaching concerning the Holy Spirit. This confusion has not come by accident. An enemy has done this. Satan knows that Spiritless evangelicalism is as deadly as modernism or heresy, and has done everything in his power to prevent us from enjoying our true Christian heritage... The church can have light only as it is full of the Spirit, and it can be full only as the members that compose it are filled individually. Furthermore, no one can be filled until he is convinced that being filled is part of the total plan of God in redemption; that nothing is added or extra, nothing strange or queer, but a proper and spiritual operation of God, based upon and growing out of the work of Christ in atonement."

It is true that all believers have the Holy Spirit of God in their lives. It is also true that it is part of the total plan of God in redemption to have all believers filled with the Spirit of God, and living a life in the Spirit. However, we have seen that many things can go wrong. The evil one can manipulate God's people and cause much confusion in this area of truth. Nonetheless, it is still vital for God's people to be individually filled so that the church can be full of the Spirit of God.

CHAPTER 13

CENTRALITY OF THE CHURCH AND HEALTHY CHURCHLIFE

We continue to focus on what we can do to ensure that we stand in the last days. In 1 Peter 2:4-5, 9-10, we see clearly that God has called a people to be His, not just individuals, although individuals are important to Him. It is God's desire and plan that a group of individuals should be called out to be His people, His nation and His priests. It is therefore imperative that the believers, filled with the Spirit of God, should grow and develop towards maturity in the context of God's calling. The child of God should not stand alone and seek to grow alone. It has to be within the context of the church and healthy churchlife. The believer must recognise that he is a member of the family of God and he should take his proper place in the local congregation. Notice the term "healthy churchlife". It is not just a group of Christians coming together, but rather God's people congregating together after the pattern that God has prescribed in the Scriptures, manifesting the life of God in practical churchlife. We see therefore that one aspect of ensuring that we stand in the last days is to grow and develop in the context of the church of God and in the context of healthy churchlife. Why is it so, we may ask?

Let us consider how the church is so central in God's plan and desire for mankind (see Ephesians 2:19-22 and 3:6-10). Notice first of all how Paul reminded the Ephesians Christians that they are fellow citizens with all the saints and fellow members of God's household. As God's children, we do not stand alone, but we belong together with all the people of God. We have been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the cornerstone. We see the picture of a building whose foundations have been contributed by the apostles and prophets, and the building is held together and stabilised by the cornerstone, the Lord Jesus. The child of God is part of this great building, which is fitted together to be a holy temple for God to dwell in. In Ephesians chapter 3, Paul went on to reveal how the Gentiles and the Jews are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus. And indeed the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. We see how central the church is, in God's calling and desire for His people. The believer is called into this body and he has a role, together with others, in the building up of this body of Christ.

The last book of the New Testament, Revelation, records many events of the last days and it is interesting to note that the church features prominently in this book. The first few chapters record the message of the Lord Jesus to the seven churches in Asia. Here the message is universal, with its implications and applications for the church of God, even today. In it, the Lord dealt with the need to be faithful, to be true and to keep the first love for God in the hearts. The Lord also warned of the dangers that abound and the consequences of failing Him as a church. We see therefore the important role the church of God would fulfil in the last days and also how significant it is for the child of God to realise his role in the quest to ensure that the Lord God is glorified in His body. It is also interesting to observe that the seven churches of Asia were actual congregations. The number seven probably indicates that they are representative of the total church of God. Here we see also that the outworking of the church and churchlife does not take place in a theoretical or conceptual context but in the context of local congregations in daily outworking.

Note the centrality of the church in the events of the last days (see Revelation 19:7-8 and 21:1-3). We see here the bride of the Lord Jesus mentioned and the reference to the New Jerusalem. The church of God which consists of all the saints in Christ Jesus would dwell in the New Jerusalem. There God would be among His people and He would wipe away every tear from their eyes and there shall no longer be any death or mourning, or crying or pain. Once again, we see the central place the church takes in God's plan and calling and also in the final fulfilment of God's purpose for new heavens and a new earth with the New Jerusalem. Yet, in terms of practical application and outworking, we who desire to be in the mainstream of God's plan for His people

must ensure that we fulfil our responsibility in the context of healthy churchlife in the local congregation.

We now take a look at what healthy churchlife means. In Ephesians 4:11-16, we see that healthy churchlife must mean focusing on the equipping of the saints for the work of service to the building up of the body of Christ. Believers must be equipped adequately for service and the direction of service is to build up the body of Christ, not for personal gain or personal status and satisfaction. The church belongs to Christ, and not to any particular person or group. It is God's church, not "my church" or "your church". The process of equipping and building is a continual one, growing in quality and depth with the passage of time. The aim and objective pointed out here is attaining to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fulness of Christ. It is not just service without an aim. It is not just building and building without any sense of direction. It is to build God's people to be united in the faith, to become mature in the knowledge of God and to manifest the character of God as reflected in the being of Christ.

If we see this clearly, we would realise that a group of believers who come together, year in and year out, without equipping the believers for service and building has failed to realise one important aspect of healthy churchlife. If, at the end of many years, only a handful of believers are contributing to the building of the body of Christ because they have to, being given the task of sitting in committees, and the majority are just going along without any spiritual direction or contribution on their part, healthy churchlife is certainly missing! Is it not true that in the context of many Christian congregations, many believers come to worship service, behaving like observers, not participating in any way actively or spiritually? Is it not equally true that activities are conducted by those who have been assigned to the task - the care and concern committee would conduct visitation, the chairman of prayer meeting would conduct prayer meetings and so on? The spontaneous care and concern, the active spiritual exercise by each member, no matter how insignificant it may seem - all these are the manifestations of the reality that the believers are being equipped for service and for building of the body of Christ - are these lacking?

After many years, have believers grown in the knowledge of the Lord? Have they become more like the Lord Jesus, growing in maturity and towards the stature which belongs to the Lord? Here we are referring to spiritual knowledge and spiritual reality, not just in terms of mental knowledge and in terms of many activities and courses which have been conducted over the years, but essentially, the people still remain as carnal and as ignorant as they were many years ago. In Ephesians 4:14, Paul indicated how this growth can in one sense be measured. The children of God will no longer be children spiritually, easily deceived by false teachers and false teaching. They would be stable, understanding what they believe and why they believe.

Another manifestation would be speaking the truth in love and growing in all aspects into the Head, the Lord Jesus Christ. If the believers are growing well, they would not be afraid of the truth; they would welcome the truth and be prepared to face the truth no matter how painful it might be. And the truth would be spoken in love - for the purpose of edification and for building up, not for tearing down. However, love does not mean there is no correction and no rebuke. Love has to do with the motive and the desire for the best for one another. And love does hurt at times. Ephesians 4:15-16 paint for us a picture of harmony and love - the body being fitted and held together with the Head the Lord Jesus, the proper working of each individual part, and the growing and the building up of the body in love. This is essentially the pattern of healthy churchlife.

Now, if we put the individual believer within this beautiful picture, the believer contributing, receiving, growing and, together with the rest, building and being built in relation to the Head, we would realise how important it is for the believer to be in the context of healthy churchlife, if he were to ensure that he stands in the last days. The church is very central in God's plan and calling and also in the fulfilment of God's eternal purpose. Healthy churchlife is God's

pattern for proper growth and upbuilding of the body of Christ - God has intended for every believer, without exception, to have a place and part to fulfil in the building of the body of Christ.

We go on to consider some other practical reasons why the believer ought to be in the context of healthy churchlife. As we look at these reasons, we would marvel at the wisdom of God in His plan for His people. One obvious reason is that healthy churchlife offers protection to God's people. In the midst of spiritual warfare, deception and false teaching can easily creep in. In the context of healthy churchlife, proper teaching and correction in love would go a long way to prevent the child of God from going astray. Also, group leadership and Christ as the Head, would ensure that the church does not go astray because one person with charisma seeks to go his own way. The proper equipping of the saints, the proper teaching with the Scriptures as authoritative, and wholesome knowledge of God and His ways would ensure that the church does not succumb to the wrong emphasis or distortion of the truth. In the absence of healthy churchlife, it may not be difficult to imagine how believers can be swayed to the wrong direction either for personal reasons or on the ground of the scholarship of the person who introduced such a wrong view. We see how healthy churchlife can protect the children of God from such wrong teachings.

Protection is afforded also by virtue of the fact that healthy churchlife implies that the believers are growing and developing as a body of believers. It is widely known that many animals travel in groups to protect themselves against the common enemy. Wild buffaloes can battle against a common enemy like the tiger when they are together whereas they become victims if they wander away alone from the herd. There is some parallel in this in terms of spiritual protection for God's people in the context of healthy churchlife. But there is much more than what is seen in this illustration. As churchlife is ordained by God, He Himself would be pleased to bless His people in a special way as His people seek to be faithful in churchlife. For instance, there is much power in the prayer of the church which is far different from that of prayer of individuals alone; there is also the spiritual reality of being one in the Lord in the context of churchlife which has an impact in the spiritual realm and in spiritual warfare far beyond our understanding.

In Hebrews 10:24-25, we see how healthy churchlife can stimulate one another to love and good deeds and also encourage one another, and even more so, in the context of the last days. Such mutual encouragement and edification would protect the believers from spiritual discouragement and unhealthy depression and loneliness. Positive encouragement, stimulation and upbuilding in unity, love and fellowship can do much to ensure that the believer has every reason in the Lord to stand firm, even in the face of difficulties and pressure.

Besides protection, healthy churchlife also contributes to inter-dependence among believers, leading to complementary roles and the beautiful manifestation of body life (see 1 Corinthians 12:7-27). Such a life is attractive to those outside the church. In fact, from the days of the early church, many non-believers have been attracted and impressed by the life of believers growing together. They saw warmth and true Christian love expressed for one another; they saw mutual help and encouragement, seasoned with humility and sincerity and they wondered what made such a community possible. In a world of changes, stress and uncertainty, many look for friends they can depend upon and many search for true love. Nevertheless, for many of these, the search is in vain. But in healthy churchlife, there can be true friendship and fellowship in the Lord with wholesome Christian love; each one being different and yet together being one in the Lord, each one with a different gift and contribution and yet together being the body of Christ. Together, they have one Head, the Lord Jesus Christ and the same Holy Spirit works in them, distributing gifts individually to each one as He wills, to the end that there should be no division in the body but that the members should have the same care for one another. Every one has to give an account to the Head, the Lord Jesus and there is no room for pride or arrogance. Instead, this reality of inter-dependence and the need for one another should instil a deep sense of humility and meekness in every child of God. We are many and yet we are one. Certainly, this demonstrates the breadth and depth of the wisdom of God in His calling and founding of the church of God and body life!

In 1 Corinthians 12:7, we note the phrase "for the common good". The outworking of churchlife and body life is for the common good - we must always remember that. Whatever we can contribute, whatever we can receive, the motivation is for the common good in the Lord. It should never be for self-interests, neither for certain segments of the congregation because of prejudice or personal preference. Let us learn not to be upset with decisions for the common good just because we may be affected in a way that is not to our liking. We must recognise that we need one another and are part of one another. There is no room for unhealthy individualism and independence. In one sense, we are all our brothers' keepers. We cannot go around thinking that my life is my own and I can do whatever I like with it. Whether we like it or not, our lives affect one another and they affect the body of Christ. There is spiritual reality in the fact that when one member suffers, all the members suffer with it, if one member is honoured, all the members rejoice with it. We owe it to our brothers and sisters to live well in the Lord, for our lives would affect their lives and the life of the church. The fact that we need one another should cause us to be humble and to be open to learn from one another, even from those who are younger than us spiritually.

In the same passage of 1 Corinthians 12, we see that God has appointed various ones for various roles so that there may be proper order for the proper outworking of churchlife. There is secondary leadership and some may have more significant roles than others. In fulfilling our roles, we must not make it difficult for others to fulfil theirs. If we are called to teach and to preach, let us exercise them accordingly; if we are called to serve and to give, let us do them cheerfully in the Lord. If we are called to lead, let us do it diligently. Let not those who are called to serve and to follow make it difficult for those who are called to lead and vice versa. All would have to give an account to God and all would have to submit to Christ, the ultimate leader of the church.

We see therefore that healthy churchlife provides a most conducive environment for the believer to grow and to develop towards maturity. It allows him to be in a context where he can enjoy protection in the midst of various influences and pressures of the fallen world; it also affords him protection in the face of the spiritual attacks and onslaught of the evil one. It gives him the opportunity to receive wholesome preaching and teaching which are essential for his growth in the wholesome knowledge of God and His ways. There is also the context of the body life, where the believer can contribute, receive, encourage and receive encouragement. Through interaction and fellowship, the believer learns from others and in turn contributes to the lives of others, making progress in the building up of the body of Christ.

Hence, for the child of God to ensure that he stands in the last days, he ought to make sure that he grows and develops in the context of a local congregation and healthy churchlife.

CHAPTER 14

HEALTHY CHURCHLIFE- THE PRACTICAL OUTWORKING

Healthy churchlife is not something that develops spontaneously. It does not mean that whenever a group of Christians come together as a congregation, even though they may be sincere, that healthy churchlife will develop. What are some characteristics and features that contribute to and constitute healthy churchlife? Let us now ponder over some features which make up healthy churchlife in practical outworking.

It is fundamentally the people of God who contribute to healthy churchlife. The children of God, in one sense, can make or break healthy churchlife. It is not something static but rather, it is dynamic, either growing in quality with the passing of time or degenerating, as the case may be. It would very much depend on the response and cooperation of the believers involved in that context. Knowing this, we must ensure that we fulfil our roles and responsibilities in churchlife, and we must guard against just being mere "spectators" looking in, as it were, at churchlife and giving critical comments rather than being part and parcel of churchlife itself and seeking to contribute positively in any way that is fitting in the eyes of God.

Having said this, there is still the pattern and structure that need to be observed for churchlife to be healthy. Even though various believers may be sincere and may strive hard to fulfil their responsibilities as best as they can understand, without the healthy pattern and structure, there can be no definite headway made.

In Exodus 25:8, 9, 40 and 26:30, we see how Moses was clearly instructed to follow the pattern according to the plan God had shown him on the mountain, in his building and erecting of the tabernacle. Obviously, the following of this pattern is something very important, as God reiterated it to Moses again and again throughout the book of Exodus. Although we are not specifically told why the pattern is so important, we can reasonably form several conclusions. The tabernacle was to be a dwelling place for God and it is therefore imperative that it should be built and constructed in a manner that would be suitable for the Holy God to dwell in. Hence, the material used, the anointing of the tabernacle and so on must not violate the standards of the holiness of God. The various measurements and the various designs probably connote certain spiritual meaning which is relevant in the spiritual realm both in the Old Testament context and the New Testament contexts. Some aspects of the meaning may not even be obvious to Moses and the Israelites. However, they were told to follow God's instructions accordingly.

In Hebrews 8:5-6, we are clearly shown that the tabernacle and its pattern serve as a copy and shadow of the heavenly things. Hence, as a copy and a shadow, it is significant that various aspects of the tabernacle should point to certain heavenly aspects and meaning. Here, we have an inkling as to why the pattern for the tabernacle and its erection is so relevant and significant. But in this passage, we also see the Lord Jesus as the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted on better promises. The Lord Jesus did not enter a holy place made with hands, a mere copy of the true one, but into heaven itself to appear in the presence of God for us.

In 2 Corinthians 6:16 and Ephesians 2:19-22, we see that in the new covenant, those who believe in the Lord Jesus collectively form the temple of God. Just as God chose to dwell in the tabernacle of old in the Old Testament context, He chose to dwell in His people in the new covenant, the temple of God. This temple of God is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets and the cornerstone itself is the Lord Jesus Himself. We see how the church is so central as the temple of the Lord, a dwelling place for God.

If the pattern is so important for the tabernacle of God in the Old Testament, the structure and pattern is equally important for the temple of God in the New Testament. The pattern and structure must be such that God's holiness is not in any way compromised. It must also be such

that the heavenly meaning and the spiritual meaning in the spiritual realm are illustrated and demonstrated in churchlife. The church of God and churchlife must be such that it prepares God's people to dwell in the New Jerusalem, in the new heavens and a new earth. If churchlife is such that God is not pleased to dwell in and among His people, then the essential pattern of God's temple has been compromised and violated.

Looking at Exodus 40:16-35, we see a picture of how Moses followed closely all that God had commanded him. The phrase "*just as the Lord had commanded Moses*" was repeated again and again. Finally, verses 33-34 reveal the glory of God filling the tabernacle. After Moses had followed closely God's instructions in the building and erection of the tabernacle, God was pleased to fill the tabernacle with His glory. Similarly, we can look forward to God filling His temple with His glory in the New Testament context if God's people follow closely God's instructions and the pattern He desires for His people. In other words, if we take pains to build and nurture healthy churchlife according to God's instructions, we can expect the Lord to release His power and manifest His glory among His people. A group of believers coming together and ignoring all that God desires for His temple cannot look towards God for His blessings and enabling. The temple of God must be suitable for God to dwell in. We cannot therefore take lightly this task and responsibility of nurturing and upholding healthy churchlife.

With the proper structure and pattern, the life of God is poured forth and the glory of God manifested in His dwelling place. We see these two principles so closely intertwined. Without the proper structure, we cannot expect the outpouring of God's life and glory, and without God's life and enabling, the structure becomes dead and useless spiritually. Why are we spending so much time in establishing these truths? It is basically because we must understand that for healthy churchlife to be established and to continue, we must ensure that the proper pattern and structure is maintained and that the life of God continues to flow. Otherwise, churchlife will slowly diminish and what we will be left with are just activities, schedules and traditions which may externally look impressive but, in reality, there is no true life and spiritual meaning. If we understand these issues well, then certain implications would follow.

We would not conclude that any kind of churchlife will do. It has to be healthy churchlife; for God would dwell in all His glory only within such a healthy context. If such a healthy situation is missing, then the life and power of God would be lacking. To the degree that the life and power of God is lacking, to that degree the children of God would find it more difficult to triumph in the last days.

God's temple must be holy and conducive for the almighty God to dwell in. For the life of God to flow, it then becomes the responsibility of each and every member to ensure that the temple remains holy and true to God's expectation. The maintenance of a life that is right and pure before God, the spiritual exercise in participation, contribution and prayer - all these are important for churchlife to be alive and well.

We see a parallel in the tabernacle in the Old Testament. If any Israelite were to contaminate the tabernacle, then there would be spiritual consequences. If the Israelites did not maintain a holy environment in their camp, then God would not dwell in their midst. Each and every Israelite was to follow closely the Lord's instructions so that Israel will continue to be a people among whom God was pleased to dwell with and to manifest His life and glory. Similarly, every child of God must order his life in a way that will ensure that God is pleased to continue to dwell among His people, the church.

In our context today, it would mean that each and every member has a responsibility to live his life well before God - otherwise we can expect the quality of churchlife to be affected negatively, according to the seriousness of the failures of God's people. This principle does not only apply when we fail God in the way we live our lives in terms of devotion and holiness; it also applies when we fail to exercise the gifts and responsibilities God has entrusted to us. As churchlife is a manifestation of the lives of all the members of the body, it would invariably suffer

if any part of the body refuses to function for whatever reason. Hence we see how the lives of various ones are closely intertwined with the quality of body life and churchlife.

Take the issue of the headship and leadership in churchlife and also the authority of the Scriptures. If these areas go wrong, many other areas would follow and healthy churchlife will no longer be possible. Colossians 1:18 and Ephesians 1:22, 23 show us clearly that the Lord Jesus is the head of the body. Yet, in practice, we see the people of God putting church traditions or the traditions of organisations and denominations as more important than what the Lord has to say in the Scriptures. Some may not openly say that they are doing this. In reality however, they have ignored the instructions and desires of the Lord in preference to upholding the traditions of the group they belong to. It is very important that God's people not only subscribe to the headship of the Lord Jesus in words but also in practice. They should not allow traditions or the teachings of organisations or groups to cause them to compromise the leadership of the Lord Jesus. All such teachings and so-called traditions need to be evaluated in the light of what the Lord truly taught and revealed.

The thrust and truth in 2 Timothy 3:16-17 are compromised by many who claim to be open-minded and modern in their views of the Scriptures. Healthy churchlife can only be maintained and sustained if God's people appreciate and comprehend the teachings of the Scriptures wholesomely. They must also grow to a point when they can healthily evaluate many new claims and teachings that may be introduced especially in the last days, and be able to be positively critical in distinguishing what is of the Lord and consistent with the teachings of the Scriptures and what is false and unbalanced.

In some contexts, it may not be organisations but individuals who are responsible for distortion of the truth. Individuals with charisma who make claims that they are specially anointed and commissioned by God may lead many of God's people astray. Many who follow them may be sincere Christians too. For healthy churchlife to prevail, God's people must continually go back to the Scriptures and they must ensure that the headship of the Lord Jesus be preserved in His body. No man, no matter how impressive he is, should take the place of the Lord Jesus as head of His body.

Enough is said to help us realise that it is very easy for many things to go wrong in many areas in churchlife. What then is the guarantee that we can have to ensure that nothing major go wrong in churchlife? The Lord God is always faithful and He never fails. But the people of God do fail and the ways of God can be abandoned. So, we can say that from man's point of view, there is no guarantee. It will depend on how we choose; it will depend also on how we live our lives and how convicted we are regarding God's desire and purpose.

"But why the detailed emphasis on the centrality of the church and healthy churchlife?" - one may ask. A quotation from the writings of A.W. Tozer, from "Of God and Men", at this point may be enlightening. He wrote, "Christianity will always reproduce itself after its kind. A worldly-minded, unspiritual church, when she crosses the ocean to give her witness to peoples of other tongues and other cultures, is sure to bring forth on other shores a Christianity much like her own. Not the naked word only but the character of the witness determines the quality of the convert. The church can do no more than transplant herself. What she is in one land she will be in another. A crab tree does not become a Grimes golden by being carried from one country to another... The popular notion that the first obligation of the church is to preach the gospel to the uttermost parts of the earth is false. The church's first obligation is to be spiritually worthy to spread it. Our Lord said 'Go ye', but He also said 'Tarry ye', and the tarrying had to come before the going...."

We note that the quality of the church is important in fulfilling God's commission to make disciples of all nations. Healthy churchlife is part and parcel of this quality. It is interesting to note that Tozer highlighted that the first obligation of the church is to be spiritually worthy to spread the gospel. A church does not become spiritually worthy because of activities, programmes, methods and marketing principles. And yet, many congregations employ these to increase their

membership and to bolster church growth. They form an integral part of their strategy for church growth and expansion.

Charles Colson pinpointed this problem in his book, "The Body - being light in darkness". He emphasised that the primary role of the church is to make believers holy and not to make them feel good. He lamented the use of marketing strategy to promote church growth. To him, true growth of the church has to be spiritual growth and not growth in numbers or statistics; it is the spiritual quality of the character of the church that truly matters.

We need to have our priorities right. We need to start measuring and evaluating quality of churchlife from God's point of view and scale of measurement, as well as upon God's values and assessments. All other measurements only give a false assurance and may lull us into spiritual complacency and myopia.

CHAPTER 15

CONCLUSION - OVERALL RESPONSE AND POSTURE

We have been considering how the people of God should respond in the last days. We have pondered over many relevant questions and thought through the answers and implications. We have looked at what we ought to look for in life. We saw the basis upon which we should respond in life and what we transmit and communicate in our lives. We pondered also over the various problem areas we will encounter in the last days and finally on what we can do to ensure that we stand in the final days.

In conclusion, we would be looking at some general exhortations from the Scriptures with regard to our overall response and as we do this, may the Lord enable us to consolidate the many truths we have pondered upon.

"For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea; and all were baptised into Moses in the cloud and in the sea; and all ate the same spiritual food; and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ. Nevertheless, with most of them God was not well-pleased; for they were laid low in the wilderness. Now these things happened as examples for us, so that we would not crave evil things as they also craved. Do not be idolaters, as some of them were, as it is written, 'The people sat down to eat and drink, and stood up to play.' Nor let us act immorally, as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in one day. Nor let us try the Lord, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the serpents. Nor grumble, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer. Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall" (1 Corinthians 10:1-12).

Note first of all that all the Israelites in the time of Moses went through the same experiences and had similar privileges. They experienced the Lord's deliverance at the Red Sea and also the Lord's provision and sustenance in the wilderness. Nevertheless, the Lord was not pleased with many of them and judgment fell on them. As we live in the last days, let us be very mindful of this point. God's provision for us and our privileges and opportunities as a people of God do not mean that our lives and responses would invariably be pleasing to Him. We must never take our privileges for granted and think that all is well because we are God's people. Do not assume that we can fall back on our privileges to see us through even though our lives and outworking are far from what is expected. What happened to Israel in the wilderness must remain as a constant reminder to us of what can go wrong when God's people choose to go their own way.

We see a similar warning in Luke 3:7-9. The words of John the Baptist were rather harsh as he called the people to repentance. There is no place for the Israelites to think that all was well just because they were children of Abraham. In fact, from the way John warned the multitude, it was likely that many of the Israelites, including the religious teachers, were heading towards severe judgment unless there was true repentance in their lives. There is a need therefore to evaluate our lives and to recognise that our response to God must be consistent with what we profess to believe. Otherwise, we may end up in the same way as many of the Israelites and Pharisees who were lulled into believing that the keeping of the external laws and ceremony was sufficient to make them right before God. So, we may continue to be regular at prayer meetings and at worship services; we may continue to give faithfully our offerings and we may continue to maintain an outward form of decency and properness in our religious life; nevertheless, with many of us, God may not be pleased and serious judgment may be impending. Are we objective and honest enough to see the truth and realise the consequences for the way we live our lives?

In 1 Corinthians 10, we notice that the Israelites craved evil things. We see the background in Numbers 11:4-6. The Israelites in that context were craving for meat and for all the food they partook in Egypt. The people were not satisfied with the manna God provided, although God's provision for them was miraculous and they were sustained by the manna God gave them from heaven. Their greedy desires were accompanied by a sense of discontentment with God's provision and goodness. At the same time, the people were looking back to Egypt. They forgot that they were slaves in Egypt, in bondage and under torment by their Egyptian masters. All they could think of was the variety of food they could get in Egypt and they conveniently forgot all the sufferings and pain and how they cried out to God for deliverance. Egypt in that context, is a type of the world. For the people of God today, although the Lord Jesus has provided the way for us to be delivered from the bondage of sin and the world, yet, many still long for the things of the world, forgetting that in these very things are bondage and spiritual death. There is that same sense of discontentment with what God has provided, and there is that looking back to the world just like the Israelites who looked back to Egypt.

In the context of the last days, with all the influences and false promises of the world and the evil one, God's people are especially in real danger of failing in the same manner as the Israelites did many years ago. Have we really learnt from the example written in the Scriptures for our instruction or will we go the same way as the Israelites?

As we ponder on 1 Corinthians 10, we are told not to be idolaters, as some of the Israelites were. In the case of Israel, they fashioned a molten calf and worshipped it as God. In our context today, we may not be worshipping a molten calf, but the principle of idolatry may still live on in our hearts. When God's people allow any thing or any person to displace God in their lives, they are essentially holding on to idols in their lives. The evil one seeks to introduce many idols into the lives of God's children. He himself has always longed to be worshipped as God and even when the Lord Jesus was on earth as the perfect man, the evil one sought to tempt the Lord to worship him. Let us be careful not to allow any thing or any being to displace God from the first place in our hearts.

In 1 Corinthians 10, we saw how some of the Israelites acted immorally and some twenty three thousand were destroyed by a plague. The daughters of Moab, instigated by Balaam, caused Israel to sin against God in the area of immorality. As God's people, we must remember the injunction to be holy just as God is holy. The lust of the eyes and the lust of the flesh are perpetual snares for the people of God; we must tread carefully on the narrow path of purity of life.

"Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator who is blessed forever. Amen" (Romans 1:24-25). What the apostle Paul described here is not something far-fetched; in fact, it is happening now in many contexts in the present world. Various forms of unrighteousness and immorality are not only present today in many societies, but they are rampant and on the rise. We are aware of how various public figures are involved and accused of various forms of immorality and even individuals in the religious circle are not exempted. This may seem rather shocking and unbelievable initially; nevertheless, they remind us how sin and corruption can affect various strata of society, to a point that the community may apparently become oblivious of it. Some who are involved may even be looked upon as being courageous enough to speak up or even hailed as heroes by some quarters. Whatever it is, let us not forget how God looks at the issue and the people involved. The fact that some others are also doing it does not make it all right before God. The fact that various quarters may even applaud those who failed in this area does not make it any less serious in the eyes of God.

It is before God that we will have to stand on judgement day to give an account. Will we grieve the heart of God by our lives? Will we, who are called to be a holy priesthood, a royal nation, put to shame the name of our God and Lord, by stooping so low in our private lives and

in our values? When the Lord God looks at us, does He see a people who long for holiness and purity of life or does He see a group of people who are desperately putting up a front of appearing religious and yet in reality, are living in sin and unrighteousness?

Israel was recorded as sinning against God in the very heart of Jerusalem itself (see Ezekiel 8:7-18). Ezekiel's vision clearly revealed that nothing was hidden from the Lord. The people might be thinking that God did not see and they continued to carry on living in sin in the dark and privately. God does see and He knows exactly what is going on in the heart of every man and woman. With regard to Israel, the Lord told Ezekiel, *"Therefore, I indeed shall deal in wrath. My eye will have no pity nor shall I spare, and though they cry in My ears with a loud voice, yet I shall not listen to them"*.

It is helpful to note that the Lord will deal differently with those who long to follow Him and His ways, but fail because of weaknesses. For such ones who repent and continue to persevere in the right direction, the Lord's mercy and grace will still be available. Nevertheless, we must not treat lightly the area of sin and immorality; the Lord is a holy God and He will not condone immorality in the lives of His people.

"Nor let us try the Lord, as some of them did and were destroyed by the serpent. Nor grumble as some of them did, and was destroyed by the destroyer" (1 Corinthians 10:9-10). Here the people of Israel were guilty of speaking against the Lord God as well as grumbling against Him (See Numbers 21:4-6 and Numbers 16:41-49 as the background). They became impatient because of the long journey and they complained about the lack of food and water and they referred to the manna provided by God as miserable food. We see how judgement fell on the Israelites and many were destroyed by the serpents and the plagues. The people might feel that they had grounds to complain but they were in fact spiritually arrogant and rebellious; they allowed rationalisation and their own shortcomings to blur the issue. In the process, they lost sight of God's goodness and grace. Let us also prayerfully take note of our spirits within - whether what we say or do are consistent with a humble and contrite spirit which is precious in the eyes of God.

If we study the Book of Judges after Joshua passed away, we would notice that Israel served the Lord all the days of Joshua and all the days of the elders who survived Joshua, and had known all the deeds of the Lord which He had done for Israel. Subsequent to that, Israel very quickly degenerated spiritually and everyone did what was right in his own eyes. It is very sad to see how far Israel had degenerated following the days of Joshua. Somehow, the knowledge of God and the reality of serving Him and worshiping Him were lost to subsequent generations. What was left was a shell and some traditions. Yes, the people could still use some familiar phrases and clichés; they could still remember vaguely some religious practices and observances but all these bordered on the superficial, without true spiritual reality.

Before Joshua died, he did however communicate sternly the warnings for the people of Israel to pay heed to (See Joshua 23:6-8, 11-16 and 24:14-25). Nevertheless, all these were of no avail. Israel forsook God and abandoned all that were taught in the book of the Law. What about us in our own context; will we also forget all that God has communicated to us as His people?

The knowledge of God, the ways and teachings of God must be taught and transmitted. We must choose positively to know the Lord and walk in all His ways. What is written for our instructions must be studied and assimilated. We know that our choices and the condition of our hearts are our responsibility. The Lord might have communicated to us many truths and principles. Ultimately, it is still we who must choose, and it is we who must respond wholesomely to the call of the Lord. How we do it and how we transmit this to subsequent generations would be a main determining factor in ensuring that all is not lost with the passing of time. We have a role to fulfil in kingdom building. We have a part to contribute to eternity and to the kingdom of God, which is eternal. Let us weigh seriously the warnings of God in the Scriptures and not go the same way as the nation of Israel. Israel failed God in the wilderness, even under the leadership of a godly

man like Moses; a subsequent generation followed the Lord during the time of Joshua but the generation after Joshua quickly turned away from the ways of the Lord God.

One aspect of the proper response is to continue in the things we have learnt and become convinced of (see 2 Timothy 3:14-15). Many believers began well in their Christian life but somewhere along the way, they stopped, faltered and failed to continue in the things they had learnt and understood. In the context of the last days, there are many influences, attractions and distractions which can lead a child of God to fail to continue. Let us not take a wrong turn and be drawn to the wayside. Instead, fixing our eyes upon the Lord Jesus, let us continue to run the race and finish the course.

The apostle Paul wrote to Timothy to be mindful of certain areas (see 1 Timothy 6:11-14, 20-21). For the man of God, there are definite areas we ought to pursue - righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness. We need to grow in spiritual excellence in these areas. There are also definite areas we must flee from - the love of money, the desires and lust of the flesh, the pride of life and all that the world can offer. We must be clear with regard to our stand, choice and commitment. There is no place for fidgeting and being undecided. He who is a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

The apostle Paul also told Timothy to fight the good fight of faith and to take hold of the eternal life to which he was called. We know that the road is long and difficult. We have an enemy who seeks to destroy us. There are many battles ahead in the last days. We must do battle and we must learn to fight well this fight of faith. At the end of it all, by God's grace, we shall stand with all the saints and with all those who overcome.

However, we must not be presumptuous about the prospect of being victorious in the end. We must cling to God and look to Him for grace to be among those who overcome. Sincerity alone is not enough. Notice what the apostle Peter declared in Matthew 26:31-35. He said, *"Even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away...Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You."* In that context, all the other disciples also said the same thing. Certainly, the disciples and Peter were not insincere people. They were not hypocrites. The basic problem is that they did not know themselves well enough; they did not realise their true spiritual state. Perhaps it may not be inaccurate to say that they were overconfident and too sure of themselves in an unhealthy sense.

Even when the Lord Jesus told Peter, *"Truly, I say to you, this very night before a cock crows, you shall deny Me three times"*, Peter did not pause and give due consideration to the Lord's warning. Subsequently, when Peter did deny the Master three times and he remembered what the Lord told him, he wept bitterly. Peter not only denied the Lord; he also cursed and swore in his denial of any association with the Master.

Let us realise that Peter was no ordinary Christian. He was among the twelve, closest to the Lord Jesus, and he was trained by the Lord and had a certain measure of spiritual maturity and knowledge. If Peter, though he was sincere, could falter so badly, let us not assume that we would not fall. We need to keep a continual posture of dependence upon God and maintain a humble and contrite spirit throughout our pilgrim journey on this earth. May the Lord God cause His face to shine upon us and enable us to persevere until the end.

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