

MAN of FAITH

Understanding and Living Out Biblical Faith

Lim Kou

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Feedback and comments on this book are welcome and can be e-mailed to: feedback@godandtruth.com.

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Preface

I am pleased to offer this book, *Man of Faith*, for the edification of God's children everywhere. My first book, *Understanding Job* (2003), is a reflection on the meaning and purpose of Job's suffering. My second, *The Two Kingdoms* (2005), presents the biblical teaching on the kingdom of God and the fallen world, the meaning of our earthly existence and how we can live well as citizens of heaven in a fallen world. I am thankful to the Lord for much encouraging feedback on both books from brethren in different parts of the world. This third book deals with the meaning of true faith and what it means to be a man of faith. Just as for the first two titles, this book is offered free of charge.

These books grew out of more than thirty years of warm fellowship and ministry in a local congregation. These were years of learning and growing, both for me and for the congregation.

It has been my approach, in preaching and writing, to present scriptural truths in such a way that the hearers and readers can satisfy for themselves that the teachings are scripturally sound and not the mere assertions and opinions of man. I have tried to exercise care in quoting and interpreting scriptural texts, and in showing how the truths are arrived at.

The publication of these books would not have been possible without the help offered by the brethren in recording the audio messages, and in transcribing and editing them. Brethren in other countries have also helped in the printing and distribution of these books. I am thankful to the Lord for their participation. This, to me, is a meaningful expression of fellowship among God's people in the local congregation and in the universal church.

These books are part of an ongoing project to provide wholesome scriptural materials to help Christians grow and serve the Lord. The three books, together with other text and audio messages on major issues of the Christian faith, are available on the website www.godandtruth.com, and they may be freely downloaded for personal use or for distribution.

I would appreciate your prayers for the Lord's guidance in this whole project so that it may contribute to the growth of believers, to their becoming men and women of faith, firmly grounded in the Scriptures.

Lim Kou

Introduction

It delights the heart of God when His children learn to truly walk by faith. But just what is true faith and how does one live by faith? On this subject, misconceptions abound.

This book is based on a collection of eight messages preached in a local congregation over a period of eight years (1980-87). Each message can be appreciated on its own, especially the last three messages. They have been compiled into a book because together they can contribute to an understanding of what true faith is, and how one can live by faith and become a man of faith.

The first five messages are a mini-series on faith and they lay the foundation for our understanding of this subject. The two messages that follow are part of the message series *Appearance and Reality*, and they examine the subject of faith from the standpoint of Paul's conversion and calling as an apostle, and of Joseph as a slave and prisoner. The final message about a heart on fire was preached as a single message.

Message 1 discusses what true faith is, and why it is an integral part of a life pleasing to God.

Message 2 helps us see that the life of faith is a Christ-centred life. The beginning, the continuation and the consummation of the life of faith all centre on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Message 3 points the way to how we can grow in quality of faith by discussing where faith comes from and how it grows.

Message 4 considers faith in action, as illustrated in the lives of Mary and Moses.

Message 5 considers the need to persevere in faith through puzzling and difficult situations, with a reflection on the Israelites' deliverance from Egypt, and how we can work together with God in faith.

In *Message 6*, we seek to understand the heart of Paul before his "sudden" conversion, the meaning of his conversion, and the depth of his response to the Lord. This can shed light on what constitutes a man of faith and how we can become men of faith. Paul's unceasing

zeal is a powerful testimony to how much the man of faith can accomplish in God's kingdom by His grace.

In *Message 7*, we reflect on Joseph as a man of faith, while still a slave and a prisoner. His life is a strong encouragement to us to walk by faith, even in the most trying of circumstances.

Message 8 rounds up the book by viewing the man of faith as one whose heart burns for God. It considers what a heart on fire means, how it comes about and how it grows in intensity and meaning.

Questions have been included at the end of each message for personal reflection and group discussion. This is in response to requests by readers of my earlier books.

Living by faith is a fundamental aspect of the Christian life. It is my prayer that this book can help believers move towards a clearer understanding of what it means to live by faith. May it challenge each one of us to become a man or woman of faith. This is the kind of life God desires for all His children.

The Meaning and Importance of Faith

Many passages in the Scriptures deal with this important subject of faith. There is a whole chapter devoted to it – Hebrews 11 – which describes men and women of faith and their acts of faith.

When we think about the subject of faith, many questions may come to mind: Does having faith mean believing in the unseen? Does it mean believing without good reason and acting without understanding? Isn't living by faith difficult and confusing? Why do we have to live by faith to gain God's approval? Why can't we live our lives well without exercising faith?

In this message, we will seek to understand what faith is, why it is important, and why living by faith is meaningful. Here, I am using "faith" in the sense of healthy, biblical faith – faith that God approves of.

Misconceptions about faith

Many regard faith as mysterious, difficult to understand, and hard to live out. There are many misconceptions. Let us consider some of these misconceptions.

Misconception #1 – How we feel indicates the quality of our faith
We often make the mistake of measuring our faith by how we feel. If we feel low, we think our faith is of a low quality and our life is in a poor state. If we feel high, we think our faith is of a high quality and our life is in a good state. This is clearly an inadequate way of understanding our lives and the meaning of faith. Our spiritual health and the quality of our faith are not measured by the state of our feelings.

Let us consider an event in the life of the Lord Jesus recorded in Matthew 26.

Matthew 26:37-38

37 And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and distressed.

38 Then He said to them, “My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death; remain here and keep watch with Me.”

Here, we see the Lord Jesus being grieved and distressed. It may appear that He was having a crisis of faith. But when we look at the next verse, we will see that this was not the case.

Matthew 26:39

And He went a little beyond them, and fell on His face and prayed, saying, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will.”

Despite being deeply grieved and distressed, the Lord Jesus was faithful and obedient to God the Father. He did not shrink from the terrible, agonising death on the Cross, but went through it triumphantly.

Consider also the life of the apostle Paul. In his second letter to the Corinthians, he spoke much about the victorious Christian life. Some people have the idea that the victorious life is one that transcends the human experience, where we are not subject to human emotions, not taxed or in distress. But this is far from the truth. See how Paul describes in this letter his experience and that of his co-workers: “We were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life” (2 Cor. 1:8). He also tells us about their being afflicted, perplexed, persecuted and struck down. Yet he also tells us how in the midst of the distresses, they were not crushed or despairing, not forsaken or destroyed (2 Cor. 4:8-9).

Clearly, in the case of the Lord Jesus and the apostle Paul, though they were grieved and distressed, their lives were not in a poor state. On the contrary, they were able to live a triumphant life of faith under the most difficult of circumstances.

So, let us not think that when we are feeling low, distressed, sad, or grieved over certain matters, it means our faith is of a poor quality. Conversely, let us not think that when we are feeling high, it means our faith is strong and healthy. We may be feeling high, but

the feeling may be superficial, emotional or temporary.

In the parable of the sower (Luke 8:4-15), the Lord Jesus tells the story of seed that fell on different kinds of ground. He compares the seed that fell on rocky soil to those who receive the word of God with joy, but after some time, fall away. Some people feel much joy when they become Christians and they are under the impression that their faith is very strong. After a while, however, they find their walk with the Lord lacking in vitality and they become discouraged. They may then wonder: Why is this happening to me? Why does my faith fluctuate so badly? Why do I feel so high one moment and so low the next? Why is my faith so strong one moment and so weak the next? Why has my life become so miserable all of a sudden? The truth of the matter is that their faith in the Lord has not been strong from the beginning, even when they were feeling high. Emotions are not a good measure of the quality of a person's faith.

Misconception #2 – Believing and acting on something we do not understand is expression of faith

Another misconception is that we are exercising faith when we believe and act on something we do not understand. A person who cannot give a good or reasonable answer to the course of action he is taking may say, "I am doing this in faith." But the fact that he thinks he is acting in faith does not mean that all will be well. The outcome can be tragic. Consider what happened to the Jewish exorcists in Acts 19:

Acts 19:13-16

13 But also some of the Jewish exorcists, who went from place to place, attempted to name over those who had the evil spirits the name of the Lord Jesus, saying, "I adjure you by Jesus whom Paul preaches."

14 Seven sons of one Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this.

15 And the evil spirit answered and said to them, "I recognize Jesus, and I know about Paul, but who are you?"

16 And the man, in whom was the evil spirit, leaped on them and subdued all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded.

These Jewish exorcists did not understand the workings in the spiritual realm. They thought they could exercise the same kind of power as Paul did just by using the name of Jesus over the evil spirits. But they met with a disgraceful and negative outcome. From this episode, we see that it does not mean when we do something we do not understand, we are doing it in faith.

Misconception #3 – Strong belief equals strong faith

Some people think that so long as they hope for something and believe very strongly in it, they are exercising faith. They misapply Hebrews 11:1: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen”. They think that the more they believe in something, the stronger their faith is, and the more likely that thing will come to pass. For example, some students may strongly believe that they will pass their examinations and they think that the stronger their belief is, the more likely it will happen. But when they fail their examinations, they may become discouraged, thinking that God has not honoured their faith. Some, on the other hand, may think that they fail because they did not believe hard enough, and they conclude that their faith was weak.

Misconception #4 – Doing something dangerous and risky is manifestation of faith

Some people associate faith with doing dangerous and risky things. Thus, if you dare to row a small boat across a great ocean, or if you leave your comfortable home to serve God in a poorly-developed country, they will say you have great faith. But is this how God looks at our lives? Is this how He commends us? Does it mean that the more difficult or riskier the thing we do, the stronger our faith is? This way of thinking is clearly flawed. Quality of faith is not judged by how dangerous or risky the act is.

Misconception #5 – Sincerity is proof of faith

Even when we are sincere in the things we do, it does not guarantee that our actions would be acts of faith. We can be very sincere and yet totally wrong. We may sincerely believe that we should act in a certain way, but we may be mistaken or deceived by the evil one.

If we are mistaken or deceived, we would not be acting in true faith. Belief in wrong doctrines can lead us astray. We can be sincere, yet influenced by wrong teaching. Having full confidence in something or someone does not mean that all will turn out well.

A boy from a tribal village wounded his leg one day. His mother brought him to the witch doctor, whom she was confident could heal her son. The witch doctor brewed a concoction and placed it on the wound. A few days later, an infection developed and the wound was infested with maggots. To save his life, the boy's leg was amputated. His mother had trusted the witch doctor and had sincerely believed all would turn out well. But her strong belief could not ensure that all would indeed turn out well. Though the boy's life was spared, he lost his leg. Sincerity of belief is not proof of true faith.

What is true faith?

Having seen the misconceptions of faith, let us consider what true faith is. It is very important that we are clear about this issue as true faith is essential for living a life pleasing to God.

Biblical faith has two essential elements. First, it is belief in the truth. What we believe in must be based on facts, on what is true. Truth includes total reality, and total reality includes both the seen and the unseen realms. Belief in the truth in itself is, however, not true faith. There must be the second element: the appropriate response to the truth. In other words, we must be living out the truth.

Such a life, that is, the life of true faith, would mean trusting God and obeying Him, believing in His word and living it out – for He is the God of truth and His word is truth. It would mean living according to what the Scriptures teaches and according to God's guidance. It is a life based on an accurate understanding of the Scriptures – who God is and what He has truly revealed. If we misapply the Scriptures or are deceived, we would not be exercising biblical faith.

The apostle Paul tells us this is the life of faith that God intends for all His children: “God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth” (2 Thess. 2:13). “Faith in the truth” in this context would mean the appropriate response of the heart to the accurate understanding of all

that God has revealed in the Scriptures and to His will for our lives. This is the way for us to attain to all that God intends in His salvation plan for us in Christ.

We must check the various concepts of faith that come to our mind against this understanding of true faith: Are there these two elements of true faith – believing in the truth and living in accordance with the truth?

True faith results in truly positive outcome

Hebrews 11 illustrates true faith in action. In the many examples of faith cited, we see three aspects of true faith: First, knowing the truth; second, living the truth; and third, the positive outcome. The first two aspects are expressions of faith. The third shows us that ultimately, those who exercised true faith were not disappointed, for God rewarded them (v. 6). God approved of their lives, and their expressions of faith had positive impact in God's kingdom. Let us look at the examples of Noah and Abraham.

Example of Noah

Hebrews 11:7

By faith Noah, being warned by God about things not yet seen, in reverence prepared an ark for the salvation of his household, by which he condemned the world, and became an heir of the righteousness which is according to faith.

Noah was warned by God about things not yet seen. Faith can involve things we have not yet seen or which we do not fully understand.

Noah heard God and he responded by preparing an ark. His obedient action led to the salvation of his household and the pronouncement of the Scriptures that he was an heir of the righteousness which is according to faith.

Noah was commended for his faith not merely because he acted on something difficult and which he did not fully understand. He was commended because he acted on God's instructions.

Example of Abraham

Now, let us consider the life of faith in Abraham.

Hebrews 11:8

By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going.

Some people think that it is an act of faith to go forth when they do not know where they are going. But this in itself may not be a true act of faith. The crucial question is: Has God called? Abraham's going forth was an act of faith because he acted on God's call. Even if Abraham were prepared to take all kinds of risks, he would not have acted in true faith if God had not called him. Yes, Abraham did face many uncertainties – "he went out, not knowing where he was going". He could not fully comprehend what his action will lead to. Humanly speaking, there were risks involved. But one thing was clear to him: God had called. And Abraham trusted God and obeyed. That was a step of faith.

Besides trusting in God's call to go to a foreign land, Abraham also trusted in God's promise about his descendants (Rom. 4:16-21).

Hebrews 11:12

Therefore there was born even of one man, and him as good as dead at that, as many descendants as the stars of heaven in number, and innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore.

Even though Abraham was old and incapable of producing a son, "him as good as dead" as the Scriptures puts it, he trusted in God's promise of a son. Because of his faith in God, there was a positive outcome – Isaac was born, and through him, descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven. And so, Abraham is held up in the Scriptures as a shining example of a man of faith and he has a place of honour in God's kingdom.

As we can see from the examples of Noah and Abraham, faith is a response of our total being. It involves our mind in understanding, and our spirit in perceiving spiritual reality. It also involves our will in choosing. Unless we choose to respond appropriately to the truth

we have come to understand, the response of faith is not yet complete.

Man of faith – one who loves truth and righteousness

Who then is the man of faith? As I see it, he is one who loves truth and righteousness, and who earnestly desires to grow in understanding in order to live according to the truth. To be a man of faith, you must love truth and righteousness. No matter how intelligent you are, or how quick you are to grasp issues, if you do not love truth and righteousness, you cannot be a man of faith. Even if you are able to understand many issues, your ability to gain insight into these things would be hindered, and you would not be able to properly express the life of faith.

Faith is a moral issue. It does not just descend on us as a gift. That is why God approves of those who exercise faith. God does not praise us because we are gifted – whether in preaching, in teaching, in counselling, or in other areas of life. God does not reward us for the fact that we have certain gifts because these are gifts He has given to us. When God praises us, when He approves of our lives, it is because of our good moral response. Though some people may not be able to understand very much with their mind, they can still become men of faith. God has His ways of helping us recognise the truth. The critical issue is whether there is hunger in our hearts to know the truth because we want to walk in truth and righteousness.

Acts of faith need not be spectacular or dangerous. A life of daily obedience to God, of trusting Him, of keeping His word; simple acts of love and kindness – these are expressions of a life of faith. At the heart of a life of faith is love for God, confidence in Him, and faithfulness to Him, the God of truth and righteousness.

True faith builds upon knowledge and understanding

Biblical faith is never blind. It is not an abdication of the mind. It does not despise knowledge or understanding. Rather, true faith builds upon the foundation of knowledge and understanding. And just as a building rises above its foundation, a man of faith acts beyond what he can grasp and understand, but not in contradiction to it. So we can act with conviction on issues even when we do not fully understand them, so long as we know we are acting in accordance

with God's will and instructions. This is because we know God is perfect and therefore absolutely reliable.

Abraham might not have fully understood the meaning and implications of God's call for him to go to another country, to take so risky and dangerous a step (humanly speaking), but it does not mean that when he went forth, he was acting in contradiction to the totality of what he was able to understand. He had already come to know God, and he knew God loved him, cared for him and was reliable. So when God called him, he could go forth in faith.

This point is important because communication between God and man is not perfect. There will be times when we are unclear whether a course of action is of God. What do we do then? At such times, we need to evaluate carefully by considering the relevant factors, especially if the issues are significant. If we think that the course of action may be contrary to scriptural principles, we should pause. We ought not proceed with a course of action that we recognise to be contrary to the fundamental principles we have already come to understand. But we need not act only when we are able to understand fully. In other words, faith is not blind. It builds upon understanding and knowledge and does not contradict them.

Importance and meaningfulness of living by faith

Why is living by faith so important? Why can't we live a life that is pleasing to God without exercising faith? Why do we have to act beyond what we can fully understand? Why is the conviction of things not seen an essential part of a life of faith? I would like to suggest nine reasons for the importance and meaningfulness of living by faith:

1. The being of God

A fundamental reason for our need to exercise faith has to do with the being of God – who He is. Indeed, His attributes have vast implications on how we should live our lives and consequently, the need for faith. Let us consider just two attributes of God.

First, God is invisible. Not only is He invisible, we often do not feel His presence. To relate with such a God, we cannot live only on the basis of the realm of the seen, on what we can see or feel.

Instead, we have to live based on what we have come to know and understand of God.

Second, God is infinite. He is infinite in His being and in His knowledge, wisdom and power. We, on the other hand, are finite and fallen creatures. There is a huge gap between God and us. It is not feasible for us to fully understand God and His ways. In the path of growth and development, God will seek to teach us and bring us more and more into maturity of understanding. Yet there will be paths He wants us to take, the whys or hows of which we may not fully understand. If we insist on living based on what we can fully comprehend, we will fail to live a life of obedience to God. Our lives will be so much poorer because we will then limit the way the almighty God works in and through us.

There are many examples in practical daily living which show that this manner of approach to life – acting on things we do not fully understand – is a reasonable one.

Consider a father-child relationship. When the child is young, he does not understand many things. When he falls ill, his father says, “Take this medicine, it is good for you.” He does not like to take it because it is bitter. He does not understand that he needs the medicine. But because he trusts his father and believes that his father loves him and knows what he is doing, he takes the medicine and benefits from it.

The trials that we go through in life may be likened to the bitter medicine. As we go through them, trusting God, they will transform us and lead us into a deeper experience of God and His grace. They will also help us understand the spiritual realm better.

Consider another example from daily life. When we board an aeroplane, we may not fully understand how the aeroplane is able to carry us through the air and land safely in another airport. But through experience and having some understanding of pilots and aeroplanes, we have sufficient confidence that the aeroplane will bring us there.

Think also of the surgeries that people undergo. Although there are risks involved, these people are prepared to take the risks because they have sufficient confidence that the surgeries will do them good.

But, of course, like many other things in life that we put our

trust in, aeroplanes may fail us and surgeries may go wrong. Yet we still put our trust in them. How much more then should we put our trust in God, who is perfect and never fails?

Living by faith can be difficult. Just think of Noah building the huge ark to house all species of animals. How difficult it must have been for him to believe that there would be a flood so severe that if he did not build the ark, he and his family and all the animals would perish. While building that ark, many people must have ridiculed and jeered at him, saying, “What a foolish man you are! What are you trying to do? On this dry piece of land, you are building such a huge ship!” It must have been very hard for him to explain to them what he was doing. Who would have believed him? But whatever people might have said or thought of him, he persevered in building the ark day after day, month after month, believing in what God had warned, even though he might not have grasped its full import.

2. How God has created man

God has created man with a constitution and capacity for a quality of life higher than just living according to our five senses. Our lives do not merely consist of the physical aspects – sight, taste, smell, touch, and hearing. There are higher aspects of man’s life – the moral and spiritual aspects – and these are in the realm of the unseen. They concern the soul and the spirit of man. Related to these, and also in the realm of the unseen, are our character, our love, our principles, our moral values and so on. The highest and richest experiences of man are not in the visible, physical realm like eating and drinking. Instead, they centre on the quality of being and relationships – fellowship with God and fellowship among the brethren.

And so, to live life to its fullest as God intends, we need to live by faith, taking into account the invisible realm. If we merely live by the visible realm, it would not be feasible for us to enter into the wonderful moral and spiritual dimension of life God intends for us. To live a life without entering into these richer, spiritual aspects would be a tragedy.

3. The fall of man and the way of salvation

A major reason for the fall of man is the lack of faith in God and in His love and goodness. Thus, in ordaining the way of personal salvation, God requires that we reaffirm our faith in Him and in His love and goodness.

We need faith to believe that Christ died on the Cross for our sins. We were not there at Calvary and we did not witness the Lord Jesus dying on the Cross. And we may not fully understand how or why God provides forgiveness of sins and reconciliation to Himself through the death of Christ. Yet, we need to respond positively to God, to trust Him and His word before we can be saved. This requires a measure of faith.

Faith is also required for spiritual growth. To grow spiritually, we need to trust God and obey His instructions in the Scriptures. If we do not trust and obey, we will not be able to grow. Although we may not fully understand many of God's instructions, once we are clear about the meaning of His instructions on how we should live, we ought to live accordingly.

4. Feelings and appearance may not correspond to reality

As fallen creatures, our emotions are unstable and they fluctuate. They do not always correspond to reality nor always incline us to do what we ought to. At times, the circumstances we go through may raise doubts in us and discourage us. At times we may feel as if everything is going wrong and God does not care. It is therefore important that we learn to live above the realm of the seen, beyond what we feel and see, and be able to know who God is and to trust in Him. Otherwise, we will be unstable and our lives will veer away from the path of truth and righteousness. To be stable, we need to be grounded in God and in the Scriptures. We need to know that God is unchanging in His attributes. He is always great, always all-powerful, always present, wherever we may be. He is also always loving and good to us. Although circumstances may seem to indicate that God does not care, we know that He does care and He does love us. So our lives must ultimately be based on the truths and principles that we have come to understand. Living in this way requires faith.

5. Trust – vital ingredient in relationship

Trust is an important aspect of relationship. It enhances the beauty and quality of the relationship. For example, as we trust God – that He is a God of love, wisdom and faithfulness – it enhances the quality of our relationship with Him. We see this illustrated in the lives of those who love God.

Paul demonstrated a high degree of trust and confidence in God in an incident recorded in Acts 27. On that occasion, he was caught in a violent storm together with many others. For days, strong winds battered the ship they were in. They were in dire straits. Their lives hung precariously. The others on the ship had given up hope that they would survive the storm. They were so frightened and traumatised by the storm that they had gone a long time without food. But Paul exhorted them to face the situation with courage, telling them that an angel of God had appeared to him and assured him that God would preserve every life (vs. 22-24). He continued in verse 25: “Therefore, keep up your courage, men, for I believe God that it will turn out exactly as I have been told”. Paul was in the same dangerous situation as the other men. Yet, unlike the others, Paul manifested unwavering faith in God – in the God who is loving, faithful and wise. What a heart-warming testimony! If God has promised that He will preserve us, we can trust Him that He will, even if the situation seems hopeless.

Even in our relationship with one another, confidence and trust are essential to deep friendship. Human beings appreciate being trusted. The problem is that we are not fully reliable, though we should try our best to be. But God is fully reliable and it would be good if we are able to grow in faith and be able to fully trust Him.

6. God works through faith

God has created us as moral beings and has given us a free will. As such, He will not compel us to love and obey Him, nor compel us to be channels of His blessings to others. We must be willing to live a holy and righteous life. We must be willing to love and serve Him. We must be willing for God to work in and through us. We express this willingness through faith in Him. And it is through our faith in Him that He works in us and through us. If we do not exercise faith

in Him, if we are unwilling to do so, God cannot fully express His purposes in and through our lives. Faith is the medium through which God expresses His infinite love, power and wisdom through frail and finite creatures like us.

For there to be electricity in our homes, the cables must be connected to the power station. For there to be water flowing through the tap, the pipes must be connected to the reservoir. In the same way, for the power and wisdom and knowledge of God to be expressed through our lives, we must exercise faith in God. Faith is the link. Without it, God's greatness and goodness cannot be expressed through us.

7. The outworking of God's purposes requires faith

God has revealed in the Scriptures His purposes and how we can have a meaningful part in the outworking of His purposes. It requires faith for us to believe these things that God has revealed to us, such as how church life should function and how we should live. It requires faith for us to believe that God will be true to His promises and that as we abide by His word, the best possible result will occur, even though at times it does not appear to be so. However, we often think we know better and we substitute God's ways with our own ideas and methods. As a result, the work of God suffers. This is a significant problem in the Lord's work.

Faith enables us to understand and appreciate what took place in the past – God's dealing with the nation of Israel and what Christ has accomplished for us. Faith continues to be relevant in the present as it helps us understand how we should live as Christians and what we should concentrate upon. And finally, faith assures us of our future – the hope that is before us and our having a part in God's glorious kingdom in eternity.

8. Faith is essential in spiritual warfare

The devil and the powers of darkness, who seek to oppose God and His purposes, are invisible. They are spiritual beings and the warfare they wage is in the spiritual realm. Without faith, it is impossible for us to fight our enemies and overcome them. In fact, we cannot even begin to fight. We will also be oblivious to the wiles and attacks of the evil one, who can then easily inflict serious damage on our

lives. If we are living only according to the realm of the seen, it is impossible for us to engage in spiritual battles. Physical weapons are useless in spiritual warfare. The whole armour of God portrayed in Ephesians 6 is in the invisible realm. The belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith, the sword of the Spirit – they are all divinely powerful, but also all invisible. Thus, it requires faith for us to engage in spiritual warfare.

9. Faith reminds us of what endures and what does not

The need to live by faith is a constant reminder to us that the realm of the seen is of the fallen world and is temporary, and that we should neither live for it nor by it. It is a constant reminder to us that the eternal and spiritual realm is unseen and that the more important aspects of life such as the kingdom of God are invisible. This is what Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 4:17-18:

2 Corinthians 4:17-18

17 For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison,

18 while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

This perspective undergirds the lives and ministries of Paul and his co-workers. This perspective should also undergird our lives. The more we align our lives with the eternal and spiritual kingdom of God, the more fully we will identify with what truly matters, and the more we will appreciate the significance and meaningfulness of living by faith. In so doing, we will be able to live by faith more and more, growing from strength to strength and from faith to faith.

Concluding remarks

It is important that we know what true faith is – the kind that God approves of. A belief based on falsehood is useless. We need to grow in understanding of the truth and have a deep desire to abide by it. Otherwise, the knowledge we gain will be useless to us and there will be no true faith. We need to recognise why faith is so important to our lives. We need to constantly live our lives taking into

consideration the total reality in both the visible and the invisible realms. In fact, we need to recognise that the realm of the unseen is more important than the realm of the seen. God is invisible, and many important aspects of our lives on earth take place in the realm of the unseen and involve issues we may not fully comprehend.

Let us not, because of our lack of faith, hinder God from working in and through our lives. Let us nurture our love for the truth and deepen our commitment to live by it. Let us seek to grow in our knowledge of God and His ways so that we can respond well and live out the life of fullness God intends for us in Christ.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What are some misconceptions about faith? Share examples based on your own experiences.
2. What is true faith? What are the two essential elements of true faith? Why are they essential?
3. Read Hebrews 11:7-12 and Romans 4:16-21. What aspects of Noah's and Abraham's faith are highlighted in these verses? How do their lives exemplify true faith?
4. Share your understanding of these statements:
 - a. "Faith is a moral issue".
 - b. "Acts of faith need not be spectacular or dangerous".
 - c. "Biblical faith is never blind".
5. Why is it important and meaningful for us to live by faith?

Message 2

The Life of Faith – A Christ-centred Life

In this message, I wish to consider with you the theological basis and framework for the life of faith. Understanding the life of faith must begin with the recognition of the dilemma of man – his frailty and his sinful state – which renders him incapable of having a meaningful relationship with the almighty and holy God. We will see how God resolves man’s dilemma through the Lord Jesus Christ.

God has an eternal purpose, and it is summed up in a key expression in the Scriptures: the mystery. The term “mystery” used here does not have the same meaning as that often used in novels, where “mystery” refers to something mysterious. In the New Testament, especially in the epistles of Paul, “mystery” often refers to the revelation of what is in the heart of God – His plan hidden in ages past, but now revealed to us through the Holy Spirit¹. At the heart of the mystery is the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. God the Son became the God-man, and through His death on the Cross, enables us to become partakers of the divine nature so that we can relate meaningfully with God and work out His purposes together with Him – on earth and in eternity. This is the gospel – the good news of the richness of life made possible in Christ Jesus.

In John 14:6, the Lord Jesus says: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life”. Since Christ is the truth and faith must be based on the truth, our life of faith must be vitally linked to Christ. Since Christ is also the way – the way to God and the way to live our life – our whole life must be characterised by a close walk with the Lord Jesus.

¹ For a fuller consideration of this subject, please refer to my messages P002-009 in the series *The Fulfilment of God’s Purposes*, which are available on the website www.godandtruth.com.

And since Christ is the life, we must abide in Him so that we may be spiritually strengthened and nourished by the life of God and be able to live an abundant life. The Lord Jesus is the way, and the truth, and the life. The beginning, continuation and consummation of our life of faith must thus centre on Christ Jesus.

The life of faith begins with Christ

After commending the heroes of faith in chapter 11, the writer to the Hebrews exhorts us to look to Jesus, the *author* and perfecter of faith. We may ask: Why is the Lord Jesus the author of our faith, and how do we begin our life of faith in Him?

To answer these questions, we need to understand the dilemma of man without God. The apostle Paul makes this clear to us in Ephesians 2:1-3.

Ephesians 2:1-3

- 1 And you were dead in your trespasses and sins,
- 2 in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience.
- 3 Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.

Before knowing God, we were dead in our trespasses and sins. We were living in darkness and walking according to the ways of the evil one, according to the pull of this world and the desires of our flesh. We were disqualified from having fellowship with God, who is light and in whom is no darkness at all. There was a barrier between us and God because of our sins. We were under God's wrath and judgement. We were "dead", not having the life of God in us.

To be reconciled to God, our sins have to be dealt with. This we are unable to do on our own. The Scriptures tells us: "by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight" (Rom. 3:20). We are unable, by our own effort, to live a righteous life no matter how hard we try. We are also unable to eradicate our past sins or cancel the punishment due to us. We are powerless to save ourselves; and other human beings are just as powerless, for all have sinned.

There is no way for us to be reconciled to God except through the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ came into this world to deal with our sins. He came to die for us and to bear the punishment that is due to us. He could die on our behalf because He is the sinless Son of God. And because He is divine and not merely a man, He was able to bear the weight of the sins of the whole world and the punishment due to all mankind. His death on the Cross is infinitely valuable and efficacious. Through His atoning work at the Cross, we can now be forgiven, cleansed of all our sins and made right with God.

But how can we benefit from the work of Christ? What kind of faith must we have to be converted and enter into salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ? What are the essential elements of “saving faith”?

Saving faith

Saving faith requires that we first *recognise the truth*, which in this case is the recognition of who Jesus Christ is and what He has done for us.

1 John 5:1

Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God...

This verse highlights that Jesus is the Christ – the Messiah, the Deliverer, God’s appointed Saviour – and that to be born again or born of God, we must believe that Jesus is the Christ.

During His earthly ministry, the Lord Jesus preached this message: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). To enter the kingdom of God, we need to repent and believe in the gospel. But what is the gospel we must believe in? In 1 Corinthians 15:1-4, Paul explains the essence of the gospel.

1 Corinthians 15:1-4

1 Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand,

2 by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain.

3 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,

4 and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,

The heart of the gospel is that Christ died for *our* sins, was buried, and was raised on the third day. To be saved, we must acknowledge that we are sinful and guilty before God, and that Christ has died for our sins and has dealt with the problem of sin in our life. We must believe that Christ was raised from the dead. His resurrection testifies to His deity and His triumph over the powers of darkness (Col. 2:15), and that He is indeed a living Saviour. It is also the stamp of God's approval on what Christ has accomplished at the Cross.

We see then that the first aspect of saving faith concerns recognition of the truth, the truth of who Christ is and what He has done for us on the Cross.

The second aspect of saving faith is the *proper response* to the truth. Mere recognition of the truth and mental assent to the gospel is insufficient. The demons also recognise who the Lord Jesus Christ is but they shudder. Their recognition does not help them. Saving faith requires that we repent of our sins and receive Christ into our lives as our Saviour and Lord. It is only then that we can become children of God.

John 1:12

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name,

There is no true salvation unless there is a proper response to the gospel. The Lord Jesus helps us to understand the way of true salvation when He says: "Why do you call Me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?" (Luke 6:46) and "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter" (Matt. 7:21). It is not enough for us to merely acknowledge that Jesus is Lord. We must have a determined desire to walk with God and to do His will by His gracious enabling.

Believing in the gospel is a moral issue. In response to the Holy

Spirit at work in our hearts, we turn from a life of darkness and sin to a life of submission to the lordship of Christ, to a life of walking in His light and truth.

Having this understanding can make a significant difference to the way we present the gospel to others. All too often, in our eagerness to bring people to the Lord, we emphasise the attractiveness of the gospel and downplay or neglect the issue of discipleship. We may give the impression that all that is needful is for a person to receive Christ as his Saviour, whereas submitting to His lordship is optional. The outcome is that Christians end up not having a clear understanding of the importance of wholehearted commitment to the Lord. It would be worse if those who have not repented think they have become Christians. Such people are not regenerated and have not entered into new life in Christ. Without true repentance, there is no saving faith.

It is important that we emphasise Christ as both Saviour and Lord. Submission to the lordship of Christ should take place at conversion. The Lord Jesus says: “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me” (Luke 9:23). These are the demands of discipleship. They commence at the time when we receive the Lord Jesus Christ into our lives, not at some point later.

Salvation involves a fundamental change of heart and direction in life. It does not mean that we become perfect or that we will no longer sin, but it does mean a determined intention in our heart and will to be committed to God. It involves turning away from living according to the ways of the world and according to our own desires, to living a life for God. This is the attitude of heart we must continue in as we work out our salvation. We must not return to wallowing in the mire, as the apostle Peter warns us in 2 Peter 2:22.

The life of faith continues with Christ

Not only does the life of faith begin with Christ, it also continues with Christ.

The overcoming life

Having had our past sins dealt with, we now have to live a life in

accordance with the truth. This we cannot do on our own. God has not created us with the capacity to live righteously apart from Him. Our inability to live righteously on our own is aggravated by the weakness of the flesh. We are fallen creatures living in a fallen world and in the presence of a powerful enemy. If we try to live out the truth on our own, we will fail. Our life will be miserable, like what Paul describes in Romans 7.

Romans 7:14-19

14 For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin.

15 For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate.

16 But if I do the very thing I do not want to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that the Law is good.

17 So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.

18 For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not.

19 For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want.

In this passage, Paul tells us that even when we recognise the truth and strive to live accordingly, we often fail. We fail to do what we recognise we ought to, and we keep doing what we recognise as evil and harmful.

Romans 7:22-24

22 For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man,
23 but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members.

24 Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?

This will be our state if we do not know deliverance in the Lord Jesus Christ. We will find ourselves crying out: “Wretched man that

I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?" We need to be set free, but who will set us free? The answer lies in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Romans 7:25

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! ...

The Scriptures speaks much about the richness of life in Christ. The Lord Jesus tells us in John 10:10 that He "came that they may have life, and have it abundantly". But how can we enter into such a life?

Paul says: "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13). He also says: "But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us" (Rom. 8:37). What a marked contrast to the life of failure he describes in Romans 7! Paul has found the answer to the victorious life. With the Lord Jesus strengthening us, we too can arrive at the stage where we can say, "I can do all things and overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loves me."

Christ died to set us free not only from the penalty of sin, but also from bondage to sin. He not only reconciles us to God, He also strengthens us and enables us to do all things in accordance with the truth. Through Him, we can overcome the power of the evil one and the temptations of the world. In Him, we have the power to live a holy, righteous and good life. Apart from Christ, we cannot bear good fruit (John 15:5).

Growing in richness of life in Christ

It is vital not only to begin well but also to continue well in the life of faith. Paul knew very well what this meant. He testified to the believers in Philippi: "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Phil. 1:21). His life was bound up with the Lord Jesus Christ and completely centred on Him. He sought to know the Lord Jesus in increasing measure. He set his heart to exalt the Lord Jesus at all times and to live by the power of the risen Christ, that the life of Christ might be manifested through his life.

In his epistle to the Colossians, Paul dwells on truths that have tremendous implications and significance for our lives. In 1:25-2:10, he tells us that at the very heart of God's plan is the glorious mystery

now revealed. It indicates the way God's intention for man can be realised, which is "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (1:27); it is Christ coming into our lives and being with us. All the wealth that comes from a true knowledge of God's mystery is attainable in Christ, and in Him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (2:2-3). And in 2:9-10, Paul writes: "In Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete".

God does not merely forgive us and cleanse us of our sins. He is seeking to raise us up to such a level of moral and spiritual stature that He, the infinite, almighty and perfect God, can relate intimately with us as friends.

Although we are finite and frail creatures, we now have the Lord Jesus Christ dwelling in us. This is a spiritual reality. Because of this spiritual reality, we can be transformed and be partakers of the divine nature. We can become children of God in a very deep sense. Deep communion with God is no longer just a vain hope, but an attainable goal.

In Colossians 2:6-7, we see the importance of continuing the life of faith in Christ.

Colossians 2:6-7

6 Therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him,

7 having been firmly rooted and now being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, and overflowing with gratitude.

Our spiritual growth is inseparably linked to our relationship with Christ. Our faith must be established, rooted and built up in Him. Our constant longing must be to know Him more and more, and to grow to be more and more like Him in character. It is to this end that Paul expended his energy – that every believer may be complete or mature in Christ.

Colossians 1:28-2:2

28 We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ.

29 For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me.

1 For I want you to know how great a struggle I have on your behalf...

2 that their hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together in love, and attaining to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ Himself,

Paul laboured and strived to help believers attain maturity in Christ. He desired to see them attain to the full richness of life that goes together with a deep knowledge of Christ. This longing was so strong that he described it as a "struggle" (2:1). This "struggle" could be his earnest longing expressed in striving and persevering in prayer for the believers and their growth in Christ.

A fruitful and abundant life

The Lord Jesus Christ teaches His disciples: "Abide in Me, and I in you" (John 15:4). He also teaches them: "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). A fruitful life is possible only as we depend on Him so that His life may be manifested in and through our lives.

Some people think it is inevitable that the Christian life has its ups and downs. It is true that feelings and life's circumstances may fluctuate, but scriptural teaching does not suggest the quality and meaning of our walk with God must inevitably fluctuate between faring well and faring poorly. It can be stable, firmly rooted in Christ, and continually being built up in Him. Such a life is expressed in Romans 8:2.

Romans 8:2

For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.

In this verse, Paul tells us that we can live an overcoming life in Christ and in dependence on Him. In Him, we can live a life of

freedom in the Holy Spirit and our life need not fluctuate or alternate between defeat and victory. In Christ, we can experience freedom from the law of sin and of death. Such a life of continual victory in the Lord Jesus Christ can be our constant experience.

Running the race

The Book of Hebrews has much to teach us concerning the life of faith. Hebrews 12:1-2, in particular, shows us how to run the race, which is the life of faith.

Hebrews 12:1-2

1 Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,

2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

The writer to the Hebrews exhorts us to fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith. Not on the Jesus walking on earth, not on the Jesus lying in the tomb, but on the Lord Jesus exalted and seated at the right hand of the throne of God. As we run the race, we set our eyes on the exalted Christ, in all His triumph and power and glory. We are also to be mindful that we are seated with Him in the heavenly places (Eph. 2:6). Thus, we run the race and live out our life of faith “in Christ”, from the position of Christ’s victory, power and glory.

Many of us tend to focus on the visible things around us and view things from the world’s perspective. As a result, we are easily discouraged and find life difficult and hopeless. However, if we view life through the eyes of faith and from the perspective of God’s kingdom, we can live fruitful and overcoming lives at all times. We need not feel discouraged in any situation if we maintain our spiritual vision, constantly fixing our eyes on the Lord Jesus.

If we live in faithfulness to God, our lives will never be fruitless or a failure, although circumstances may suggest otherwise. Consider the death of the Lord Jesus. It may appear to be a devastating defeat.

He who was to be the Saviour of the world died on the Cross while His disciples fled. It all seemed so dark and hopeless, but in reality, it is the greatest triumph in history and the supreme example of faith and obedience to God. It has far-reaching implications for the fulfilment of God's purposes, and it laid the foundation for the advancement of God's kingdom. Likewise, if we live faithfully in the Lord, in accordance with God's guidance and enabling, and in accordance with His instructions as revealed in the Scriptures, our labour will never be in vain. But if we live according to our own thinking, strength and desires, we will not be abiding in Christ, and our labour will be in vain even if it appears successful.

Bringing to completion our life of faith in Christ

We have seen the writer to the Hebrews exhorting us to fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and *perfecter* of faith. This means we must look to the Lord to live our life of faith from beginning to end. He is seeking to bring to completion the work He has begun in our hearts (Phil. 1:6). We must cooperate with Him and grow as much as we can in moral and spiritual stature and in conforming to the image of Christ during our time on earth. We will then be ready for the Second Coming of Christ.

The Lord Jesus promises us that He will come again (John 14:3). When He appears, we will be like Him (1 John 3:2). He will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory (Phil. 3:21). The meaning of our eternal life and all that is important in eternity is bound up with our knowledge of and relationship with God the Father and Christ the Son (John 17:3).

“Christ in you, the hope of glory” is not just for our life on earth, but also for eternity, when Christ will be the firstborn among many brethren (Rom. 8:29). Why does He call us His brethren (Heb. 2:11)? Because Christ is now in us and we are in Him. Having been made partakers of the divine nature, we are no longer weak and frail creatures, but people with tremendous potential. We are the temple of the Holy Spirit. God is transforming our character and our very being, and He wants us to grow in moral, spiritual beauty and stature so that we may be increasingly conformed to the image of Christ. God has seated us with Him in the heavenly places in

Christ “so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:7). While we do not fully comprehend what all this will mean, we do know that there is very much that we can look forward to.

Ephesians 1:9-10 presents another aspect of the mystery.

Ephesians 1:9-10

9 He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him

10 with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth...

These verses tell us that the mystery, the grand revelation of God, has to do with the summing up of all things in Christ. In eternity, it is only those who are in Christ who will have a meaningful part in the continual outworking of God’s purposes. All who belong to God will be in Christ as members of His body.

Life of faith in Christ in the context of His body

As we consider the life of faith, how it begins with Christ, continues with Him and looks forward to the glorious future in Him and together with Him, it is important that we view all this in the context of the church, the body of Christ.

Salvation begins with a personal response of repentance and faith in God through the Lord Jesus Christ. But our life of faith in Christ is not meant to be individualistic. The moment we are born of the Spirit and become children of God, we are baptised into the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13). This means we are not merely spiritually joined to the Lord Jesus Christ, but also to one another in the body of Christ. We must be mindful that we do not live as individuals, but as members of His body. We need to abide by the principles that govern the outworking of body-life – unity, interdependence, cooperation, and submission to Christ as the ultimate authority, who supervises, guides and enables. These are revealed to us in many passages of the Scriptures, such as Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12-14 and Ephesians 4.

In Ephesians 1:22-23, Paul shares with us the perspective of our life in the context of the body.

Ephesians 1:22-23

22 And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church,
23 which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

The church is the body of Christ. God has given Christ as head over all things to the church. As Christ's body, the church is meant to manifest the fullness of Christ. An individual can never manifest the fullness of Christ the way the church can. If the church is functioning properly, it can express the fullness and the beauty of Christ – His love, wisdom, power and glory. There is tremendous potential in the outworking of church life when body-life is functioning well and individual believers and the whole body are submitted to the lordship of Christ.

Ephesians 3:8-11

8 To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ,
9 and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things;
10 so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places.
11 This was in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord,

Here, Paul tells us it is God's intention that the manifold wisdom of God be made known through the church, not only to men, but also to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. Although we will not be able to fully grasp the implications of this, what is clear is that church life worked out in the way God intends will have a tremendous impact on earth as well as in the heavenly places. Paul goes on to say that this has been God's eternal purpose, which is being fulfilled through the church in Christ Jesus.

Concluding remarks

As we seek to live out our life of faith, it is important that we are clear about the theological basis for such a life. Only then can we live effective lives in accordance with the truth.

As we have seen in this message, the life of faith – its beginning, continuation and consummation – must be centred on Christ, and lived out with the consciousness that we are members of His body, the church. God’s intention is that every believer should grow unto maturity in Christ. This is meant to take place in the outworking of healthy church life, working out according to God’s plan and instructions, and with each member of the body functioning well. As we progress in this way, the wisdom, the power and the glory of God will be manifested through the church, the enemy crushed, the perishing rescued, and the kingdom of God built up.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Reflect on John 14:6. What does this verse tell us about the life of faith being a Christ-centred life?
2. In Hebrews 12:2, the Lord Jesus is referred to as “the author of faith”. In what sense is He the author of faith? How does one begin his or her life of faith in Him?
3. What do you understand by “saving faith”?
4. Read John 15:1-16; Romans 7:14-8:11; Colossians 1:25-2:10; Hebrews 11:1-2. What is the meaning of continuing the life of faith with Christ? Why is it necessary for us to continue our life of faith with Christ?
5. What is the meaning of bringing to completion our life of faith in Christ?
6. What is the relationship between the body of Christ and the individual Christian’s life of faith?

Where Faith Comes From and How It Grows

In this message, I would like to consider with you the important issue of where faith comes from and how it grows.

Faith is central to Christian living. It is crucial in every situation of life and at every stage of Christian development. Without faith, it is impossible to please God. Without faith, we will not be able to walk with God effectively, for faith releases the power of God to work in our lives.

Since faith is so important, all of us who love the Lord would desire to grow in faith. Yet, at times, we can be puzzled as to how we can grow in faith. Some people think that faith is just something we either have or do not have. Can this be the case? Is it something we cannot do anything about?

If we ponder about it, we know that this cannot be the case because this would be inconsistent with what the Bible reveals. The Bible teaches that God approves and rewards people who have faith and that He rebukes those of little faith. If it is something that we cannot do anything about, then God will neither commend us for our faith nor rebuke us for having little faith.

Some people think that faith is a gift of God. And since it comes from God as a gift, we must wait on God to give us faith. So, they keep waiting, but faith does not come. Then there are others who say that faith is basically the response of man. They say that we must exercise faith and they try hard to do so. But then they find that it does not seem to work because they are lacking in faith and have difficulty exercising faith. Their faith thus remains as weak as before.

To answer the questions as to where faith comes from and how we can grow in faith, it is important to go back to our understanding

of what true faith is.

What true faith involves

We saw, in the first message, there are two essential elements in true faith: firstly, the recognition of truth, and secondly, the appropriate response to the truth. If we understand these two aspects, we will see that true faith is neither something merely given by God nor something we generate. Neither of these adequately explains where faith comes from and how we can grow in faith. A life of faith is a relationship of trust in the God of truth. It is a life lived in accordance with the truth.

How faith comes about and how it grows

For faith to take place and grow, we need revelation of the truth. God is the One who reveals the truth to us. We must therefore look to Him to reveal the truth to us and help us understand, appreciate and absorb the truth into our hearts and live by it. When truth revealed by God is received into our hearts, faith is born. And when we live in accordance with the truth received into our hearts, we will be living a life of faith and faith will grow.

God delights to reveal the truth to those whose hearts are open, responsive and cooperative, to those who are hungry for truth and who will act on it.

You may ask, “What if there is no hunger in my heart for the truth? How then can I even begin to have faith?” In reality, it is God who takes the initiative and seeks to bring about every aspect needful for the life of faith and its growth. Our part is to cooperate with what God seeks to bring about in our hearts. The apostle Paul exhorts us to work out our salvation with fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12). He then tells us that it is God who is at work in us, “both to will and to work for His good pleasure” (v. 13). We see from here that both God and man have a part in it. We must not depend on ourselves for any aspect of the life of faith. We must depend on God. At the same time we must not be passive and merely wait for God to bring it about, but actively look to Him and cooperate with what He desires to do in our lives. I will explain and elaborate in the rest of the message how all this works out.

Faith and man's cooperation with God

Not only does God open up the truth to us, He also encourages and enables us to live out the truth. Even when we recognise the truth, we cannot live it out without God's enabling. We therefore need to cooperate with God and depend on His enabling to live out the life of faith.

The life of faith involves a few important elements. One element is the mind. The Lord renews our mind and helps us to grasp the truth and learn to see things from the perspective of God's kingdom. Another element is the will. Having recognised the truth, we have to exercise our will to choose and act accordingly. This can at times be very difficult, for example, when we are going through intense spiritual opposition and attacks by the forces of darkness. We may be misunderstood, persecuted and maligned, and we may have to pay a high price for obedience to God. We may feel spiritually dry and exhausted and God seems far away. At such times, we need all the more to exercise our will to choose to walk by faith, in obedience to the Lord, despite our disinclination to do so. However, we need to do so in fellowship with God. As we affirm our faith in Him, we can be assured God is watching over us and will help us to be triumphant in all of life's situations.

Outworking of true faith does not just involve the mind and the will. Revelation of truth, spiritual insight and absorption of the truth into our lives take place in our heart, mind and spirit. Our whole being is involved. Our whole being must commit to living according to God's revelation and to the light He has shown us.

As we walk with God in this way, He will continually reveal more to us. We will grow in our appreciation of who He is and be drawn into closer fellowship with Him. Our spirit will grow stronger and we will grow in spiritual maturity. Our life of faith will then grow in meaning and quality.

Some people say they just want a simple faith. They say, "I just trust God and that is enough." As a result, they neglect to seek true knowledge. This is a wrong idea of simple faith. If we do not grow in our understanding of God and His ways and how we are to work out our lives together with the brethren, and if we do not know how the enemy works, how can we effectively cooperate with God? If we

do not know what the truth is, how can we live it out? We must therefore not neglect seeking God for true knowledge. We must earnestly desire to understand the truth so that we can act upon it. This is the will of God for us. Paul prayed unceasingly for the Colossian believers that they may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that they may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God (Col. 1:9-10).

I will now go on to consider with you various aspects of the life of faith to understand how it works and how we can grow in faith.

The Lord Jesus – Author and Perfecter of our faith

Hebrews 12:2 exhorts us to fix our eyes on the Lord Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith. That the Lord Jesus is the author of our faith tells us that the initiative comes from God. He is also the perfecter of our faith. All that is needful for a life of faith comes from God.

The Scriptures tells us that God is the Father of lights (James 1:17). And the Lord Jesus also proclaims: "I am the Light of the world" (John 8:12). He is the light that shines forth that we may walk in the light. It does not mean, however, that the moment light is revealed, we will automatically walk in it. There is a need for us to respond positively to the light revealed and to follow the Lord Jesus. That is why the Lord Jesus tells us in John 8:12: "He who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life".

The Lord Jesus also tells us in John 14:6: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life". He is the way in which we should walk. He is the truth on which our faith should be built. He invites us to draw near to Him when He says: "Come to Me" (Matt. 11:28). The life of faith is thus one that is characterised by a close walk with Christ.

Along this line, we see John 1 revealing the Lord Jesus as One who is full of grace and truth.

John 1:14, 17

14 And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.

17 For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ.

“Grace and truth were realised through Jesus Christ” can be understood along two lines. The first is that grace and truth characterised His life, being manifested in all His words and actions. The other line of understanding is that we can realise a life of grace and truth in our lives through the Lord Jesus Christ. We can attain to and live out a life full of grace and truth in union with Him. As we walk with Him, and are united with Him, we too can live a life that manifests grace and truth – a life that demonstrates God’s grace, and one that is lived according to the truth. This in essence is the life of faith.

So if we want to live a life of faith, we have to focus on the Lord Jesus Christ. We have to grow in our knowledge of Him, be united with Him, and walk in Him who is the truth.

In Luke 8:22-25, we read of an occasion in which the Lord Jesus rebuked the disciples for their lack of faith. The disciples were in a boat with the Lord Jesus when they encountered a strong wind and a raging sea. At that time, the Lord Jesus was asleep and the disciples were filled with fear. They woke Him up, exclaiming: “Master, Master, we are perishing!” At that, the Lord Jesus rebuked the wind and the surging waves and they became still. Then He said to the disciples: “Where is your faith?”

Why did the Lord Jesus rebuke them for their lack of faith? One reason is that they had not truly appreciated who the Lord Jesus is. If they had understood who He is, the Creator of the universe, and that all things are under His control, they would not have that kind of fear. They would have known that, being together with Him, they were safe. Lack of faith has to do with a failure to appreciate who the Lord is and a failure to trust and rely upon Him.

The work of the Holy Spirit in the life of faith

The Holy Spirit plays an important part in the life of faith. The Lord Jesus reveals to us that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth. As the Spirit of truth, He leads and guides us into all the truth.

John 16:13-14

13 “But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come.

14 “He will glorify Me, for He will take of Mine and will disclose it to you.

We see an interesting relationship between the work of the Holy Spirit and the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. We saw earlier that the Lord Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. As the Lord Jesus is the truth and as the Spirit of God reveals to us the truth, it would mean that the Spirit of God reveals the Lord Jesus to us and helps us to appreciate Him. Verse 14 points in that direction. It is the Holy Spirit who brings conviction to our hearts and enlightens our minds to understand and appreciate who Jesus is.

In the wider context, the Spirit of truth will guide us into all the truth. Whatever area of truth we desire to know, we can look to the Holy Spirit to help us. Truth should not just remain as head knowledge. It should become a part of our lives. And this can come about only through the Holy Spirit helping us to grasp the truth and assimilate it into our lives.

David tells us God desires truth in the innermost being (Ps. 51:6). The Spirit of truth helps us to know the truth, absorb the truth into our innermost being, walk in truth and be men of truth. This is the way we become men of faith and live the life of faith.

In Galatians 5, faith is listed as one aspect of the fruit of the Spirit.

Galatians 5:22

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,

The word “faithfulness” in verse 22 can also be translated “faith”. The two concepts are closely related. The life of faithfulness is the life of faith – the life of obedience to God. As the Spirit of God works in our hearts and minds, He will produce in us the fruit of the Spirit, and consequently we grow in faith as well. But this is not

solely the work of God. We must respond positively to God and cooperate with Him to bring this about.

The Scriptures and the life of faith

Another important aspect to consider is the place of the Scriptures in the life of faith.

In John 17:17, the Lord Jesus prayed: “Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth”. Here, the Lord Jesus was praying to God the Father that we may be set apart to walk in the truth and live a holy life. He went on to say: “Your word is truth”. This clearly implies that the word of God is very important in our knowing the truth and walking in it.

When we refer to “the word of God”, some people immediately think of the Bible. The word of God is not synonymous with the Bible. The word of God refers to what God communicates to us; it can include what God is speaking to our hearts in our daily experience and as we spend time with Him in prayer. However, much of what God desires to communicate and reveal to us come through the Scriptures. The Scriptures is a very important source of truth. The apostle Paul tells us: “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16-17). The Scriptures can equip us to know how to walk in faith and truth.

Romans 10:17 is a verse often referred to when people talk about where faith comes from.

Romans 10:17

So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.

The first part of this verse tells us that faith comes from hearing. The second part tells us this has much to do with the Lord Jesus Christ – who He is and what He has taught.

D.L. Moody was a great evangelist who brought many people to the Lord. He loved the Lord deeply and was well regarded as a man of faith. He recounted how he used to keep on praying that the Lord would grant him faith. But it just did not seem to come. One

day, he read Romans 10:17 and the verse struck him. Yes! Faith comes from hearing the word of God (the KJV has the alternative reading “the word of God” instead of “the word of Christ”). It dawned on him that he should not just keep on praying for faith, but he should spend more time searching the Scriptures. As he concentrated on studying the Scriptures, he found his faith growing stronger.

We should long to know the Scriptures. 1 Peter 2:2 exhorts believers to “long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation”. As we read the Scriptures prayerfully, being eager to learn and receive from the Lord, He will speak to us and nourish our spiritual life.

If the Scriptures is important in helping us grow in faith, what happens to people who do not have access to the Scriptures or who are illiterate? I consider these to be special circumstances. The Lord can still minister to such people. And there is still a need for them to understand and obey the truth.

But where the Scriptures is available, God expects us to spend time to search the Scriptures, meditate on it, and grow in our understanding of the truth.

The Lord Jesus says: “The words that I speak to you, they are spirit and are life”. As we read the Scriptures in faith, looking to God with a responsive heart, the Spirit of God makes the Scriptures alive to us and through it speaks to us and ministers life to us. We will find the truths of God becoming clearer to us. We will grow in appreciation of God and will be drawn closer to Him. We will have greater confidence to trust Him in the different situations of life. I am sure many of us, from time to time, do find this true in our own lives.

Faith acts on God’s revelation

Example of Paul

Let us consider how the apostle Paul responded to God in faith. Before becoming a Christian, Paul was not living in accordance with the truth. He was persecuting the Lord’s disciples instead. While on his way to Damascus to persecute Christians in that city, the Lord Jesus appeared to him.

Acts 22:7-8, 10

7 and I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?’

8 “And I answered, ‘Who are You, Lord?’ And He said to me, ‘I am Jesus the Nazarene, whom you are persecuting.’

10 “And I said, ‘What shall I do, Lord?’ And the Lord said to me, ‘Get up and go on into Damascus, and there you will be told of all that has been appointed for you to do.’

Before this encounter, Paul did not understand that Jesus is the Lord. But in that dramatic encounter, he recognised Jesus to be the Lord. And the moment he recognised who the Lord is, he said: “What shall I do, Lord?” He did not stop at mere recognition of Jesus as Lord. He did not say, “Well, that’s it. I have met the Lord. Now I will carry on with my own life.” Instead, he responded positively to the revelation and cooperated with the Lord. And so the Lord instructed him: “Get up and go on into Damascus, and there you will be told of all that has been appointed for you to do”.

From then on, we see Paul faithfully seeking to understand the truth, to grow in the knowledge of God and His will, and to faithfully work them out in his life, whatever the cost, no matter how difficult. For Paul, it was a continual process of receiving and living out God’s revelations, resulting in growth of faith.

Years later, when Paul appeared before King Agrippa, he gave an account of his conversion experience. He recounted what the Lord had told him:

Acts 26:16-18

16 ‘But get up and stand on your feet; for this purpose I have appeared to you, to appoint you a minister and a witness not only to the things which you have seen, but also to the things in which I will appear to you;

17 rescuing you from the Jewish people and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you,

18 to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me.’

The Lord Jesus had appointed Paul and commissioned him. Paul summed up his response to the Lord in verse 19:

Acts 26:19

“So, King Agrippa, I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision,

Paul was not disobedient. He was faithful; he obeyed what the Lord had revealed to him.

Example of Noah and Abraham

In Hebrews 11, we see other believers acting on God’s revelation with a responsive heart. Hebrews 11:7 tells us about Noah’s faith.

Hebrews 11:7

By faith Noah, being warned by God about things not yet seen, in reverence prepared an ark for the salvation of his household, by which he condemned the world, and became an heir of the righteousness which is according to faith.

Here, we see God revealing to Noah about things to come. Although Noah had not seen with his physical eyes what God had warned him, yet in faith and with a responsive heart, he acted on God’s instructions.

In the same way, when called by God, Abraham “obeyed by going out”.

So we see consistently that in a true life of faith, there is a revelation of the truth, whether directly from God or indirectly through His people or other means. The man of faith will respond to what God has revealed and act upon it.

A life of faith does not merely consist of specific acts. It is a life that is focused on God and lived in fellowship with Him. The man of faith will not just wait for specific instructions from God. As God has revealed many spiritual truths and principles in the Scriptures, the man of faith will align the whole direction of his life to faithfully work out what God has revealed, with the Spirit of God drawing him and enabling him in that direction.

Praying for more faith

What I have said earlier about praying for faith might have given the impression that we ought not to pray for faith. That is not what I meant. It is proper to pray for faith. But we need to understand how it works. Faith has to do with God's revelation and God's enabling as well as man's response.

In Mark 9:22-24, we read of an incident involving a father and his demon-possessed child. The father told the Lord Jesus:

Mark 9:22

...if You can do anything, take pity on us and help us!"

In His reply, the Lord Jesus made clear to him the importance of faith, of believing in Him and what He can accomplish.

Mark 9:23

And Jesus said to him, " 'If You can?' All things are possible to him who believes."

Immediately, the boy's father cried out: "I do believe; help my unbelief" (v. 24). This man's cry is a prayer for more faith. On the one hand, he said "I believe" because he had some idea who the Lord Jesus was. But on the other hand, he also said "help my unbelief" because he knew he had inadequate knowledge of the Lord and could not trust Him properly. He knew his faith was weak. So he cried out to the Lord to help him deepen the quality of his faith.

What this man saw in himself is also true in many of us – we believe, yet we know our belief is not wholehearted. We know something is lacking, and we too may cry out to the Lord for more faith, for a greater revelation of the truth, and for a deeper appreciation of who He is. When we have such a longing, the Holy Spirit can reveal to us more of the truth, more of who God the Father is, and more of who the Lord Jesus is. As we see more of the truth, we may be convicted of certain courses of action. Yet we find ourselves too weak to act on them. In such situations, we can pray to the Lord to strengthen us and enable us to fulfil His will, and He will encourage and help us to carry out those courses of action. This is an illustration

of praying for more faith and how the Lord responds to the cry of our heart.

Let us look at another passage – Luke 22. After warning Simon Peter that Satan would be sifting him like wheat, the Lord Jesus told Peter that He was praying for him.

Luke 22:32

but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.”

The Lord Jesus prayed for the disciples, that their faith may not fail. Following the Lord’s example, we too can pray for our own faith and for the faith of other believers. As we seek to live for the Lord in trying situations, we can cry out to Him to guide us, grant us wisdom and make clearer to us the path we should walk, and strengthen us to walk in it.

Our prayer life is very closely related to our faith. True prayer is placing our confidence in God, and believing that He hears us. As we spend time in prayer, we develop in our relationship with God and grow in our understanding of who He is and of the realities in the spiritual realm. As we grow in our knowledge of God, our confidence in Him grows; so will our ability to walk in accordance with His ways. In this way, our faith grows.

Growing in faith

We see then that if we want to grow in faith, we must earnestly desire for it in our hearts, and we must diligently seek to understand and obey the truth as revealed in the Scriptures. It is important for us to spend time alone with God each day in prayer and in reading and pondering over the Scriptures. We must also gather regularly with the brethren for worship, prayer and fellowship, listening to the preaching of the word, learning together from the Scriptures and encouraging one another to live out the truth.

If we glance through the pages of church history and read biographies of great men of God, we will find two outstanding characteristics of such men. One is the way they love the Scriptures, the way they study it, meditate on it and assimilate it into their

lives. The other is their prayer life. They recognise the importance of prayer and give priority to developing their prayer life. Likewise, if we want to grow in faith, we need to give priority to the Scriptures and to prayer.

Besides these, it is also important to rely on the Holy Spirit to reveal the truth to us and to enable us to act upon it. This is what Paul means when he tells us in Galatians 5:16 to walk by the Spirit. We are not able to meet the requirements of God in our own strength. We will find ourselves constantly failing and indulging in the desires of the flesh. That is why the Scriptures exhorts us to walk by the Spirit, that we may put to death the deeds of the body and not indulge in the desires of the flesh.

Since knowing the truth is important to a life of faith, some may think they need to have much knowledge of the truth before they can grow in faith. This is not true. For most of us, the starting point is not that of asking the Lord to reveal more truths to us, for we already have sufficient knowledge. Rather, it is to act upon what we already know.

Often, we fail to grow in greater understanding of the truth because we fail to act on what we already know. And if we neglect to live according to what we already know, if we are unwilling to submit ourselves to God, the Lord may not reveal more to us. We may hear the truths, but we fail to gain spiritual insight because the Spirit of God does not open up to us the riches in His truths. Hence it is important for us to act on what we already know. As we do so, we can earnestly look to God to reveal more. In this way, our faith will grow.

When we think of revelation of the truth, it is helpful to think of both its width and depth. We often think only of the width – learning new truths. But we should also seek to grow in depth – a richer grasp of truths which we already know, a deeper insight into their meaning, including their practical outworking and implications.

For example, we all know that God is love. But it is possible to appreciate God's love in ever deepening degrees. This is true also for the other attributes of God such as His sovereignty, omniscience, omnipotence and wisdom. We may know each of these attributes of God, but how deep is our grasp of their meaning and reality in

our lives? As we look to the Lord, He can reveal to us deeper meanings of these attributes and how such knowledge can make a difference in the way we live our lives.

Life of faith and purity of heart

The quality of our faith is closely related to the purity of our heart. In the Beatitudes, the Lord Jesus tells us: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matt. 5:8).

As far as I am able to understand, there are two main elements in the issue of the purity of heart. One element has to do with our hearts being cleansed by the blood of Christ so that sin is no longer a barrier in our relationship with God and to His working in our lives. The other has to do with the whole direction of our lives, which must be towards truth, holiness, righteousness and purity. The pure in heart are those whose hearts have been cleansed, and who have set their hearts on what is of God, that which is holy, righteous, good and pure.

We can see these two aspects in Hebrews 12:1-2.

Hebrews 12:1-2

1 Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,

2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

On the one hand, there is purity of life – the laying aside of every encumbrance and the sin which entangles us. On the other hand, there is the direction – running the race, moving in the direction God desires us to, setting our eyes on the Lord Jesus.

A life of faith is a Christ-centred life, one lived in union with the Lord, and one in which we walk steadfastly, undistracted by temptations or hardships. As we set our heart to live such a life, the Lord Jesus will continue to perfect our faith and complete what He has begun in us.

After a whole chapter on faith in Hebrews 11, the writer continues to exhort his readers about living by faith in Hebrews 12. In verses 10-11, he tells us a life of faith includes the discipline of God.

Hebrews 12:10-11

10 For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness.

11 All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

God disciplines us for our good that we may share His holiness. Discipline is not pleasant, but it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness. A life of righteousness and holiness is God's goal for us.

Life of faith and challenges and "risks"

A life of faith is not always plain sailing. It does, from time to time, involve challenges and "risks". Here, I am using "risk" the way people usually use it. They may anticipate dangers, or things going wrong, and they then become fearful for themselves or for others. To them, these are risks.

Take for example Daniel's three friends. In the face of tremendous pressure, they held fast to what they believed and refused to bow down to the image of Nebuchadnezzar. They knew they were taking a great "risk", for Nebuchadnezzar had threatened to put them to death.

If we stand up for God, we may likewise have to go through trials and tribulations. But this is not risk in the ultimate sense because as we trust God, we will never suffer ultimate harm. All things will work together for good to those who love God. Even if we lay down our lives, it would be a glorious death. God appreciates this kind of faith and will richly reward those who walk with Him in this way. Out of such sufferings come blessings. The kingdom of God is built up through such lives.

We cannot cross a chasm with two small steps. It requires one big step. Likewise, in the life of faith, there are times when we have to take a big step. When we are at a crossroad, we may be fearful and uncertain. But if we are clear of the path God wants us to take, we

have to be prepared to take that step, trusting God as we do so.

It was not easy for Abraham to go forth when God called him out of the land of Ur. He did not know what it all meant and where it would lead to. He had to take a giant step of faith. He could not step out just a little and then return home. He had to trust God all the way.

It was just as difficult for Noah when God called him to build the ark. Many of us read the account in a matter-of-fact way. But if we ponder on it, we will realise it was a huge undertaking of faith. The ark that Noah had to build was huge, large enough to take in all species of the animal kingdom. An ark as big as this would have taken Noah many months to build. And there were no indications of an impending flood that would cover the earth and destroy all flesh. All he had was the word of God. But that was sufficient for Noah to proceed in faith and build the ark. Most likely, as Noah worked on the ark, many people would be laughing and sneering at him for his folly. But Noah trusted God and kept on building the ark.

At times, we may be called to take a giant step of faith like this. Even before we start, we must be prepared to build the whole ark, as it were. It is no use building half an ark or a quarter or one tenth. There must be that wholehearted submission to the Lord to obey Him, even if it appears to others a risky venture or an act of folly.

However, it is helpful also to remember that where major issues are concerned, we need to be more cautious and prayerfully consider the whole matter before the Lord. It would also be good to discuss with the brethren and to seek counsel and prayer support from them.

There must be a sufficient basis before we move and it must be from God's perspective, how He desires us to act, and not according to natural thinking or how the people of the world expect us to act.

One who bases his actions on natural thinking may say to himself: I want concrete evidence that shows a big flood is coming. Show me scientific evidence that a thunderstorm is brewing, or the ice cap in the North Pole is melting, or something catastrophic is about to take place. If not, I don't have sufficient basis to build the ark. But this is not the sufficient basis we are talking about.

The sufficient basis I am referring to is our understanding of

who God is, what He desires, and all that He has revealed to us in the Scriptures. In our understanding of where God is leading us towards, has He sufficiently shown us that this is the step we should take?

In other words, we are not rash when it comes to taking a big step and making a major decision. In fact, we should never be rash, and all the more so where major issues are concerned. Instead, we should be very cautious and very prayerful. In all honesty before God, as we pray and look to Him, has He made it sufficiently clear to us what we should be doing?

I use the expression “sufficiently clear” because in the things of God, there are at times unknown factors. For example, when God called Abraham to leave his homeland, Abraham did not know exactly what would happen in the days ahead. He did not and should not wait till God had revealed to him all that would happen in the future. In any case, the Lord might not reveal that much to him. But what God had revealed was sufficient, and Abraham acted on that basis.

In many major issues of life, there will be unknown factors. As responsible Christians, we need to be sufficiently clear that God is leading us. Once we are clear about it, we should be prepared to act as He leads. This is a mark of someone with quality faith.

For most of us, we do not have to face the kind of challenges that Noah and Abraham had to face. But as we learn to step out in faith in lesser issues, the Lord may lead us through more difficult situations, to issues of greater significance, where a more definite act of faith is needed.

Quality faith is stable, not easily tossed to and fro

Quality faith is one that is not easily tossed to and fro or dictated by circumstances or the realm of the visible.

We may go through situations that appear dark and dreary, discouraging and hopeless. But God is the unchanging, perfect God of glory; He is always faithful and reliable. No matter how dark situations may appear, He is still the God of light. In Him, we will find light and life, hope and grace. There will always be direction from above. He will not let us struggle through life alone. He always watches over those who desire to walk with Him.

A true life of faith transcends feelings and circumstances. It is based on knowledge and truth. We may not feel good. We may not feel God's presence. We may not even feel that we have faith. But we have already come to know who God is. We know that God is near to those who are faithful to Him. We know that He is with us as we walk with Him, and we know the Holy Spirit dwells within us. So, we do not respond according to our feelings or the outward circumstances. We act on the basis of knowledge, on the basis of truth. A life that is stable and of quality is one that is steadfastly lived out on the basis of truth. This is a point I cannot over emphasize. From time to time, we will be assailed in this area. Let us grasp this issue well and nurture this settled posture of living on the basis of truth. Otherwise, we will not be able to attain stability and, from time to time, our faith will be shaken and our life in turmoil.

Faith includes trusting and believing in what we do not see in the visible realm. As we walk faithfully in this way, God may let us see His hand at work. As we trust Him, we know that we will not be acting in vain. Positive results will follow. Sometimes we see partial results, sometimes we see more. When we are clear about the path God desires us to take, we must persevere in it whatever the outward appearance of things.

An example of such a situation is what Abraham went through, which Paul refers to in Romans 4:19-21.

Romans 4:19-21

- 19 Without becoming weak in faith he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old, and the deadness of Sarah's womb;
20 yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God,
21 and being fully assured that what God had promised, He was able also to perform.

Abraham contemplated his own body. He was advanced in years. His body was as good as dead; so too was Sarah's womb. Humanly speaking, it was a hopeless situation. How could they possibly have a child of their own? Yet, Abraham did not waiver with respect to

the promise of God. Instead, he grew strong in faith, giving glory to God, believing that God would do what He had promised. Abraham's faith did not rest on natural thinking or on what he could see with his natural eyes. It rested on the promise of the unchanging, faithful God. And as events turned out, Abraham did have a child with Sarah. Isaac was born.

As we walk in faith with God, we may not see the fruit or the consequence of our actions immediately. There will also be many things that we do not fully appreciate or see now. The full results may only be revealed in eternity. While on earth, we must trust God and continue to do what is right in His sight.

Concluding remarks

Quality faith is not accidental; it does not just come upon us. It does not depend on how intelligent we are. It also does not depend on how hard we believe or how willing we are to take risks. These are not at the heart of true faith.

True faith, ultimately, is a moral issue. It has to do with our love for truth and righteousness and our positive response to God and what He is seeking to bring about in our lives. These are the critical issues.

It is feasible for us to live a life of faith. God desires us to live a godly life and He has made all the provisions for us to do so (2 Pet. 1:3). God takes the initiative to reveal the truth to us and draw us to Himself. He also works in our hearts and encourages us to respond positively. But He does not compel us. Our response of faith has to be voluntary. And the quality of our response will determine how well we grow in faith. Ultimately, positive response to God is what differentiates the man who grows well in the Lord from the one who does not.

There are other factors that affect the life of faith, such as learning and growing in the context of healthy church life. However, at the very heart of it, the life of faith has to do with the person's desire and determination to live out the truth and walk in the light. May we, by the grace of God, strive to live such a life.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Some people say:
 - a. Faith is something you either have or do not have. There is nothing you can do about it.
 - b. Faith is a “gift of God”. You just have to wait for God to give it to you.

Share your thoughts on these views.

2. Reflect on Philippians 2:12. How does this verse help us understand our part and God’s part with regard to our growing in faith? What other scriptural passages can you think of that speak on this subject?
3. Some people say they just want a “simple faith”. In what sense is this attitude positive and in what sense negative?
4. Share your appreciation of the role of (a) the Lord Jesus Christ (b) the Holy Spirit (c) the Scriptures, in nurturing our faith.
5. “A life that is stable and of quality is one that is steadfastly lived out on the basis of truth”. Which biblical characters exemplify this quality? Elaborate.
6. From this message, summarise the key elements of a faith that is stable and of quality.
7. Reflect on your own life and consider what may be deficient in your faith. What steps can you take to nurture your faith?

Faith in Action – Mary and Moses

In this message, I would like to consider with you the outworking of faith, that is, faith in action. We will look at two examples in the Scriptures: one, a woman of faith and another, a man of faith. Their lives illustrate two key features of faith: belief in God's word and active response to God and His word. We will also consider different kinds of testing and outworking of faith.

Mary – a woman of faith

One day, the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, who was then still a virgin, announcing to her that she would bear a son, who would be great and would be called the Son of the Most High. After the angel departed, Mary went to the hill country to visit Elizabeth her relative, who had also conceived even though she was past child-bearing age. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, this was what she said about Mary:

Luke 1:45

“And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what had been spoken to her by the Lord.”

What is it that Mary believed? Mary believed what God had spoken to her would be fulfilled. She believed in the truth, in what God had said.

We may wonder why the Scriptures says: “Blessed is she who believed”. Why “blessed”? Wasn't it easy for Mary to believe God since the message to her was so clear? We may think our problem is that we do not hear God speaking to us in such a clear and direct way. We imagine that if God were to speak to us in the same way He did to Mary, we would surely believe. We may then think that it would have been easy for Mary to believe what the Lord had said. But was it really that easy for Mary to believe? To truly believe or to

have true faith requires a positive response to the truth we have come to recognise. And this can be very difficult.

Let us first look at the context of Luke 1 and compare the responses of two persons: Zacharias and Mary.

Zacharias' question

Luke 1:5-6

5 In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah; and he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.

6 They were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord.

Zacharias was a righteous man who walked blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord. He feared the Lord and walked close to Him.

One day, the angel Gabriel told Zacharias that his wife Elizabeth would bear a son, who would be a forerunner of the Lord Jesus Christ, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord. Zacharias asked: "How will I know this for certain? For I am an old man and my wife is advanced in years" (Luke 1:18).

Why did Zacharias say these words? Verse 20 tells us he did so because he doubted the words of the angel. He did not believe he and his wife could have a child. God therefore disciplined Zacharias, causing him to be mute for a time.

Luke 1:19-20

19 The angel answered and said to him, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news.

20 "And behold, you shall be silent and unable to speak until the day when these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their proper time."

Mary's question

Let us now look at how Mary responded when the angel told her that she would bear a child.

Luke 1:34

Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?”

On the surface, it appears that Mary doubted the angel Gabriel the same way Zacharias did. But if we look closer at the text, we will see that there is a difference in their responses. Mary did believe. She was not doubting the words of the Lord through the angel Gabriel when she asked the question: “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” Rather, she was asking, “How is it going to happen? How does this take place?” This was because in the normal course of events, a virgin is unable to give birth.

This is clear when we study the passage more closely. Consider the way the angel answered her: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you” (v. 35). The angel’s answer explained how it was going to happen, suggesting that this was the meaning of Mary’s question. On hearing the angel’s answer, Mary submitted herself to God’s will.

Luke 1:38

And Mary said, “Behold, the bondslave of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her.

So Mary did not disbelieve the angel. She was merely asking how it was going to happen. Verse 45 confirms that Mary did believe.

Luke 1:45

“And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what had been spoken to her by the Lord.”

Difficult for Mary to believe

I would like now to consider how difficult it must have been for Mary to believe and respond positively to the words of the Lord.

To begin with, Mary was a virgin. According to the angel Gabriel, she was to give birth while a virgin. This is something extremely difficult for any woman to accept. A virgin giving birth is against the natural order.

Consider further what was said about the Child whom Mary would give birth to.

Luke 1:32-33

32 “He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David;

33 and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end.”

He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and God will give Him the throne of David, and His kingdom will have no end. What a promise! Any woman would have found it difficult to believe such words about her child. It would be especially so for Mary who was a simple, humble woman. There is no indication in the Scriptures that she was of any stature in society. And her husband-to-be, Joseph, was a carpenter. Yet Mary believed that the words spoken about her Child would be fulfilled.

The angel Gabriel told Mary that the Holy Spirit would come upon her and that the holy Child would be called *the Son of God* (v. 35). The Child she would conceive through the Holy Spirit would not be an ordinary human being sitting on the throne of David, but the Son of God. Again, this is something very difficult for anyone to believe. Yet Mary did believe.

Although such a miraculous conception had never happened before, nothing is impossible with God (v. 37). In verse 38, we see Mary submitting herself, saying: “Behold, the bondservant of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word”. Great must have been Mary’s faith.

Implications on Mary’s character

Many of us may think what a glorious privilege it must be to be the mother of the Son of God. But let us consider it from another angle. Mary had to suffer much travail, not just of childbirth, but also of the doubts that must have been cast on her character. Mary was an unmarried woman, yet she was bearing a child. How was Mary to face all the people who would be pointing an accusing finger at her?

Who would believe that she was still a chaste woman? For someone who loved the Lord in all purity, this must have been terribly hard to bear. Just consider the embarrassment and misunderstanding she had to endure.

Even Joseph initially misunderstood her and “planned to send her away secretly” (Matt. 1:19) or, “to divorce her”, which is indicated in the margin of the NASB as an alternative translation. Joseph was able to accept it only after an angel of the Lord explained the whole matter to him in a dream (Matt. 1:20-21). If even Joseph had doubted her, how would other people believe Mary? How could they accept it? And it is likely the evil one would try to exploit the situation by stirring up others against her and casting doubts on her character so as to intensify and aggravate the whole situation. The evil one would want to make the situation as difficult as possible for Mary as it involved the birth of the Saviour of the world. However, what the evil one could do would be subject to God’s sovereignty and what He allows.

Mary rejoices

Luke tells us that Mary not only believed, she also rejoiced (Luke 1:46-49). This passage reveals Mary’s perspective and attitude.

Luke 1:46-49

46 And Mary said:

“My soul exalts the Lord,

47 And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.

48 “For He has had regard for the humble state of His bondservant;
For behold, from this time on all generations will count me
blessed.

49 “For the Mighty One has done great things for me;
And holy is His name.

Mary did not look at things merely from the human point of view. She saw things also from the spiritual perspective and rejoiced and praised God for the privilege granted to her to be the mother of the Son of God. She looked beyond the immediate into the future saying: “For behold, from this time on all generations will count me blessed”.

At times, like Mary, we may have to go through situations we do not fully understand or situations that are difficult. This is where faith in God comes in. Trust in God enhances the quality and the beauty of our relationship with Him. We believe that He is who He has said He is. When we say, “Lord God, I worship You. You are the perfect God”, these ought not be empty words. If they are truly from our hearts, it would mean we are prepared to trust Him through all kinds of situations. We would trust His wisdom, His love and His faithfulness to do what He has said.

Faith in what God has revealed

We build our faith on what God has truly revealed and spoken. But it is possible to be mistaken in thinking God has spoken when He has not. If that happens, our faith will be misplaced.

However, we know the Lord has revealed many things clearly to us. We have no doubt about them. We know God is great and good. We know He is the God of almighty power and steadfast love. We know God will always be true to His character and His promises. He has promised forgiveness and eternal life to those who truly repent and believe in Christ, and that if we abide in Christ and He in us, we will bear much fruit. We are also assured that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.

We know all these are facts. We know God will be true to what He has revealed about Himself and His purposes. But many situations of life may not seem to correspond with what God has revealed about Himself. When we face difficult circumstances in life, we may find ourselves doubting the love and goodness of God, and our faith in Him may begin to waver. And Satan will cast many doubts in our mind: Is God really good? Does He really love us? Does He really care for us? Will He undertake in the situation? Is He able to?

In such circumstances, we have to continue living on the basis of what God has revealed. The Scriptures pronounce Mary blessed because she believed what had been spoken to her would be fulfilled. We too can be blessed when we believe that God will fulfil what He has said.

Moses – a man of faith

Moses is an outstanding man of faith. Let's reflect on a short passage in the epistle to the Hebrews and see what we can learn about faith from Moses and how he led the children of Israel out of Egypt.

Hebrews 11:24-29

24 By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter,

25 choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin,

26 considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward.

27 By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured, as seeing Him who is unseen.

28 By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of the blood, so that he who destroyed the firstborn would not touch them.

29 By faith they passed through the Red Sea as though they were passing through dry land; and the Egyptians, when they attempted it, were drowned.

Faith involves proper exercise of choice

We read in verses 24 and 25: "By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin". Moses was in a difficult situation. He had to make a choice, and he chose to be identified with God's people rather than to enjoy the pleasures of this world. We see then that faith is not passive. Rather, it is active and requires the constant choosing of the will of God. The proper exercise of our ability to choose is an important feature in the life of faith.

Faith focuses on the spiritual and eternal

As the son of Pharaoh's daughter, Moses could have enjoyed much prestige, power and "the passing pleasures of sin". But Moses rejected all these. Why? Because he considered "the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward" (v. 26). This verse clearly reveals Moses' perspective and attitude. He did not consider things merely on the basis of the visible and temporal.

Instead, he viewed the whole situation from the spiritual perspective, from God's point of view. That is why he considered "the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt". At that time, Egypt was powerful and had many treasures. As the son of Pharaoh's daughter, he could have indulged himself in the pleasures of this world and lived a life of luxury. But Moses was "looking to the reward". What kind of a reward was he looking for? Not the earthly, material kind, for if it had been so, he would have remained as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He was looking for the spiritual reward.

The way Moses considered the reproach of Christ and the reward illustrates the point that true faith has an element of the future. True faith is not just grounded on the immediate and the temporary, but also on the eternal perspective. Our whole basis of life must include not just the realm of the visible and the temporary, but also the realm of the unseen and the eternal. In fact, the spiritual realm and eternal perspective must be primary in our consideration and approach.

Faith chooses the path of the Cross

We read in verse 25 that Moses chose to endure ill-treatment. He did not choose ill-treatment for its own sake. Rather, he chose this path of identification with the people of God as an expression of faith, even though he knew it would include ill-treatment. If we desire to live a life of faith, we too must be prepared to choose a course of action even if we know it would entail difficulties and pain.

When the Lord Jesus Christ says in Matthew 11:28: "Come to Me", He is not inviting us to a pleasant journey and an easy time, like having a picnic. Although there are many assurances of God's comfort and care, the Lord is calling us to a life of discipleship, a life in which the principle of the Cross is constantly in operation. This is what He meant when He said: "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me" (Luke 9:23).

When people suffer much pain, they may say, "Oh, the Cross has been heavy for me." What they say may not be accurate because the principle of the Cross does not refer to every kind of pain we may suffer. Even non-Christians suffer all kinds of pain, but that is not what the principle of the Cross really means.

In the scriptural context, the Cross is the pain and suffering that the believer experiences as a result of his following the Lord Jesus. It is the fellowship of Christ's suffering as exemplified by His death on the Cross. It is a path of pain and suffering because of the believer's obedience to the Lord.

The Lord has not called us to a life of ease, but one in which the principle of the Cross is a daily reality. It is a life of intense struggle in the spiritual realm. To be truly effective for God and to truly live out the life of faith, we will have to enter increasingly into the spiritual battle that is raging all the time. This spiritual battle will only cease when our days on earth are over and Satan is thrown into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:10). Although Satan has been defeated by the Lord Jesus Christ at the Cross, he still prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour (1 Pet. 5:8). His power has not been nullified and he is still a formidable foe. It is only on the basis of the victory of the Cross that we can, moment by moment, overcome the attacks of the evil one.

Faith and endurance

Another important quality of healthy faith we see in Hebrews 11:25 is endurance. Moses chose to *endure* ill-treatment. This indicates the quality of steadfastness in the face of difficulties, and of personal sacrifices in the face of danger. We read in verse 27: "By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king". Moses was not fearful of facing the wrath of the king. He was willing to make personal sacrifices and go through dangers with an attitude of steadfastness and a faith that does not shrink back when the way becomes costly.

In Hebrews 10, the writer highlights the importance of endurance.

Hebrews 10:36-39

36 For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised.

37 For yet in a very little while, He who is coming will come, and will not delay.

38 But My righteous one shall live by faith;

And if he shrinks back, My soul has no pleasure in him.

39 But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul.

The life of faith can be very difficult. We will experience anguish, sorrow and tears. Verse 36 tells us that we need endurance to do the will of God and to receive what was promised. And verse 38 tells us: “If he shrinks back, My soul has no pleasure in him”. So we cannot shrink back when the going gets tough. We must constantly remind ourselves that we cannot live according to the visible and the material realm. If we live on that basis, the kind of life that God desires us to live does not make sense. We can carry on with endurance only because we recognise that total reality includes the realm of the unseen and the eternal. It is only when we have such a perspective that all the suffering, pain and agony in the life of faith make sense.

Faith yields positive outcome

Hebrews 11:28

By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of the blood, so that he who destroyed the firstborn would not touch them.

By faith, Moses kept the Passover. Why was keeping the Passover regarded as faith? It was faith because it was in response to God's instructions and promise. God had promised that if they were to keep the Passover and the sprinkling of the blood, “he who destroyed the firstborn would not touch them”. As they obeyed God's instructions, there was a positive outcome. Their firstborn were preserved. A genuine response to God in faith will always yield a positive outcome though the positive outcome is not always obvious.

Faith is active

Hebrews 11:29

By faith they passed through the Red Sea as though they were passing through dry land; and the Egyptians, when they attempted it, were drowned.

In this verse, we again see faith in action. The Israelites did not just say, “Lord, we have faith in You, we trust You.” They acted according to their faith. The enemy was pursuing them and they were cornered. They were hemmed in between the pursuing enemy

and the Red Sea. There was no way out. Death seemed certain. But God intervened. What seemed impossible became possible. The Israelites went forth in faith as instructed by God through Moses, and they “went through the midst of the sea on the dry land, and the waters were like a wall to them on their right hand and on their left” (Exod. 14:13-18, 21-22). God does intervene as He sees fit, even in seemingly impossible situations.

But look at the contrast. The Egyptians attempted to cross the Red Sea as the children of Israel did and all of them drowned. We must therefore not think that by merely following the external actions of others, we will obtain similar results. Faith is a moral response to God and what He requires of our lives. Just imitating the outward responses of others may not yield similar outcome. In fact, the outcome could be disastrous, as in the case of the Egyptians.

Examples of Mary and Moses illustrate key elements of true faith
The examples of Mary and Moses illustrate the two key elements of biblical faith that we considered in the first message: belief in the truth and the appropriate response to the truth, that is, living out the truth. True faith must be grounded in the truth, on what God says, and the life of true faith would mean trusting God and obeying Him, believing in His word and living it out.

Different kinds of testing and outworking of faith

I would now like to consider with you different kinds of testing and outworking of faith. Let us look at Hebrews 11:29-40.

Hebrews 11:29-40

29 By faith they passed through the Red Sea as though they were passing through dry land; and the Egyptians, when they attempted it, were drowned.

30 By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days.

31 By faith Rahab the harlot did not perish along with those who were disobedient, after she had welcomed the spies in peace.

32 And what more shall I say? For time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets,

33 who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions,
34 quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.
35 Women received back their dead by resurrection; and others were tortured, not accepting their release, so that they might obtain a better resurrection;
36 and others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment.
37 They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated
38 (men of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground.
39 And all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised,
40 because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they would not be made perfect.

This is an account of people who faced different kinds of testing in life and who expressed their life of faith in different ways. They are men and women of faith who trusted the unchanging, faithful God in the most challenging of circumstances. Let us observe carefully what they had to go through and learn that living for God does involve times like these. The Scriptures portrays them as having lived triumphant lives of faith so that we may be encouraged and learn from their example.

Obvious examples of faith

Sometimes triumphs in faith are more obvious; at other times, they are not so. Verses 29 to 34 show us those that are more obvious. The children of Israel passed through the Red Sea as though it was dry land. The wall of Jericho fell after being encircled for seven days. Rahab did not perish along with many others in Jericho because of her faith and her kindness to the spies. Other men of faith “conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of

the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight”.

Less obvious examples of faith

A life of faith may not always appear to us as triumphant. It may even be very puzzling. It may also at times appear to be a life of defeat: being tortured, mocked, scourged and imprisoned; being stoned, sawn in two, put to death; going about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated; wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground. Such lives seem sad and pitiful. The devil seems to have triumphed instead. However, the Scriptures holds these forth as examples of triumphant faith. These are “men of whom the world was not worthy”.

Sometimes we do not fully understand the purposes of God and how He works them out, but we need not be unduly disturbed. Let us not remain as children in our understanding of these things. A life of faith is not one that is always pleasant and enjoyable. It includes times of deep sorrow, pain and anguish. During such times, the man of faith does not shrink back, but carries on with courage and perseverance. Let us consider the anguish of the Lord Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Matthew 26:36-39

36 Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to His disciples, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.”

37 And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and distressed.

38 Then He said to them, “My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death; remain here and keep watch with Me.”

39 And He went a little beyond them, and fell on His face and prayed, saying, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will.”

The Lord Jesus lived the perfect life of faith, yet also one of deep anguish and agony. Even in such a difficult situation, He was committed to doing the will of God. When we are thrust into situations of deep grief and distress, will we be able to pray like He did?

We may ask: “Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me”. But will we be able to add “yet not as I will but as You will”, and mean it with all our hearts? Can we accept whatever our lot in life and continue to praise and worship God, knowing that His will is perfect, and that He is ever true to His character and word?

True quality of faith revealed in adversity

True quality of faith is revealed when a believer perseveres in the midst of trying times. When circumstances are very painful and difficult, when we are puzzled by what is happening, can we continue to affirm our trust in God, and with conviction sing “Faith is the Victory” and “Great is Thy faithfulness”?

The foundation of true faith must rest on knowledge, not on imaginations or falsehood. But the life of faith must on occasions go beyond what we can fully understand. The beauty of faith really shines through when we are able to go on from that foundation of knowledge and trust God even when we do not fully comprehend why the Lord should bring us through a certain path.

In the Book of Job, we read that God had allowed Satan to test Job severely. Job could not understand why he had to go through such severe testing when he had been living a holy and righteous life. Although he did waver at some points, he showed remarkable faith in God. The Book of Job teaches us the importance of unwavering faith in God in all circumstances, including very difficult and puzzling situations. There is purpose and meaning in what God allows His children to go through and we must learn to persevere by God’s grace right to the very end¹.

The Lord Jesus – supreme example of faith

When we face difficult times and find life hard-going, it is helpful to meditate on the Cross. The Son of God, the righteous, perfect Man, died what appears to be a miserable and terrible death on the Cross. It seems a horrible defeat. It seems that His life of purity and righteousness had been lived in vain. From all appearances, Satan

¹ For a fuller discussion of these issues, please refer to my book *Understanding Job*, which is available on the website www.godandtruth.com.

had triumphed. But in reality, this is not so, as Hebrews 2:14 tells us.

Hebrews 2:14

Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil,

The Lord Jesus died that He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil. This was the purpose for which the Lord Jesus came into this world – to destroy the works of the devil. This is His great accomplishment on the Cross, and it opens the way of salvation and deliverance to all who would believe in Him.

Concluding remarks

In many situations we go through, we may not be able to understand God's purpose for us at that time. Even after a long time, we still may not understand. And there are some things we may never be able to understand while we are on this earth. But whatever happens, we must maintain our faith in the Lord. Beyond not blaming God, we must also be able to truly worship and praise Him come what may, knowing that He is still the sovereign Lord and that, if we are faithful to Him, His purposes will be worked out. We can be assured that there will be meaning and positive outcome in every expression that is consistent with a life of faith.

There is a hymn that has meant very much to me. The title of the hymn is "Faith of Our Fathers".

Faith of Our Fathers

Faith of our fathers, living still,
In spite of dungeon, fire and sword;
Oh how our hearts beat high with joy,
Whene'er we hear that glorious Word!

Faith of our fathers, holy faith,
We will be true to Thee till death.

Our fathers chained in prisons dark,
Were still in heart and conscience free;
How sweet would be their children's fate,
If they, like them, could die for Thee!

This hymn expresses the kind of faith that I have been talking about. It is faith in the Lord till the very end, come what may, including dying for our faith. Many who have lived such a life have gone before us. Let us follow their example of faith and be willing to lay down our lives for the Lord.

Let us consider what our faith means to us. Is our faith grounded on circumstances or is it grounded on God and what He has revealed? Let us count the cost and prepare our hearts so that whatever the trials that come our way, however puzzling the situations we go through, however painful the anguish that pierces our hearts, we will be able to continue to be faithful to the Lord. Let us be like the Lord Jesus, who for the joy set before Him, endured the Cross, despising the shame. He died for us so that we might be able to live for Him and follow in His steps faithfully.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Read Luke 1. Compare and contrast Mary's and Zechariah's response to the angel Gabriel. How is Mary a good example of a woman of faith?
2. Read Hebrews 11:24-29. What can we learn from Moses as a good example of a man of faith?
3. What are some less obvious examples of men of faith recorded in Hebrews 11? What lessons can we learn about faith from the record of their lives?
4. Reflect on your own life. Is it grounded on God and on what He has revealed in the Scriptures? Are you prepared to be committed to God, trust Him and be faithful to Him whatever the trials that may come your way?

Outworking of Faith – Working Together With God

As I was pondering over the issue of faith and its outworking, I was impressed with the truth in 2 Corinthians 6:1, that we are working together with God.

2 Corinthians 6:1

And working together with Him, we also urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain—

To live a fruitful and meaningful life, we have to work together with God, not just in our own life, but also in fulfilling God's eternal purpose. This will be clear when we examine the context of chapters 5 and 6 – where Paul talks about Christ's death on the Cross for the sins of the whole world, and God entrusting to us, His ambassadors, the ministry of reconciliation. It is indeed a great privilege that we can have a part in fulfilling God's great purpose.

To work together with God, we need His grace to draw us to Himself and to guide, strengthen and enable us, moment by moment.

However, Paul also warns us that it is possible for us to receive God's grace in vain. Although we serve an almighty God, and God's grace is available to us, we can live a wasted life. But it need not be.

As we work with God, we have to be mindful that it is not an equal partnership. He is God, and we are His creatures; He is our heavenly Father, and we are His children. It is His purposes, not ours, that we are seeking to work out, and we must do so according to His ways, not ours.

At times, God's ways may appear puzzling. Various questions may come to our minds. At such times, we should continue to live by faith, actively working out with God, looking to Him and cooperating with Him.

To illustrate the importance of this approach in the outworking of faith, I would like to consider with you a historical event recorded in the Book of Exodus.

Deliverance from Egypt

The deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt is a very important event, one to which the Jews constantly look back. Whether they are worshipping God and giving thanks to Him or are feeling discouraged, they often look back to this great event to remind themselves of God's greatness and goodness.

There are many lessons we can learn from this account and I would like to share with you some of these from selected portions of the Book of Exodus.

The call of Moses

Let us begin by looking at the account in Exodus 3 of God appearing to Moses in a blazing fire from the midst of a bush. God told Moses that He knew the Jews had been suffering in the land of Egypt. He revealed to Moses His purpose and intention, which was for Moses to lead the sons of Israel out of Egypt.

Exodus 3:10

“Therefore, come now, and I will send you to Pharaoh, so that you may bring My people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt.”

Forty years earlier, as the son of Pharaoh's daughter, Moses was a man of power, position and status. He thought he could do many things. He once intervened when he saw an Egyptian beating an Israelite. He struck down the Egyptian and killed him. When Pharaoh sought to kill him, Moses fled from Egypt (Exod. 2:11-15). Now, after having spent forty years tending sheep in the wilderness, he was very reluctant when God called him to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. He was very conscious of his inability to fulfil this great mission that God had called him to.

Exodus 3:11

But Moses said to God, “Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?”

Exodus 4:1

Then Moses said, “What if they will not believe me or listen to what I say? For they may say, ‘The Lord has not appeared to you.’”

Moses told God: “Who am I?” In the face of the enormity of the task, Moses felt his own weaknesses and frailties acutely. He knew there would be many difficulties ahead. Who was he that he should go and confront Pharaoh, the mighty ruler of Egypt? How would he be able to lead the nation of Israel? Would they believe him? Would they cooperate with him?

God's assurance of His presence

To answer Moses' fear, God said: “Certainly I will be with you” (Exod. 3:12).

Notice the way God answered Moses. He emphasised to Moses that He would be with him. The issue was not how capable or incapable Moses was or saw himself to be. The important thing was that the almighty God would be with him and would be working through him and with him. “I will be with you” – this fact should answer all of Moses' fears.

God went on to tell Moses that He would manifest His power through him.

Exodus 4:2-7

2 The Lord said to him, “What is that in your hand?” And he said, “A staff.”

3 Then He said, “Throw it on the ground.” So he threw it on the ground, and it became a serpent; and Moses fled from it.

4 But the Lord said to Moses, “Stretch out your hand and grasp it by its tail”—so he stretched out his hand and caught it, and it became a staff in his hand—

5 “that they may believe that the Lord, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you.”

6 The Lord furthermore said to him, “Now put your hand into your bosom.” So he put his hand into his bosom, and when he took it out, behold, his hand was leprous like snow.

7 Then He said, “Put your hand into your bosom again.” So he

put his hand into his bosom again, and when he took it out of his bosom, behold, it was restored like the rest of his flesh.

As instructed by God, Moses threw the staff he was holding onto the ground, and it became a serpent. When he grasped the serpent by its tail, it became a staff in his hand. Following God's instruction, Moses put his hand into his bosom, and when he took it out, his hand became leprous. When he repeated the action, his hand was restored.

However, despite these manifestations of God's power, Moses was still hesitant.

Exodus 4:10-12

10 Then Moses said to the Lord, "Please, Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither recently nor in time past, nor since You have spoken to Your servant; for I am slow of speech and slow of tongue."

11 The Lord said to him, "Who has made man's mouth? Or who makes him mute or deaf, or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?"

12 "Now then go, and I, even I, will be with your mouth, and teach you what you are to say."

Moses said that all along he had been slow of speech and slow of tongue. God then reminded Moses that He is the Creator, the One who made his mouth. He assured Moses that He would guide him as to what to say. God was the answer to Moses' predicament. He would enable Moses to accomplish whatever task He entrusted to him. God would demonstrate His power, and He would do it through Moses.

Just as God was with Moses, He too could be with us. But that does not mean everything will be plain sailing. There will be setbacks and difficulties, trials and testing, and these were what the Israelites went through.

Wavering in the face of difficulties

Exodus 4:31

So the people believed; and when they heard that the Lord was concerned about the sons of Israel and that He had seen their affliction, then they bowed low and worshiped.

At the beginning, when the Israelites learned that God was concerned about their suffering, they worshipped Him reverently. But, as we shall soon see, when things took a turn for the worse, their trust in God began to waver.

Exodus 5:1-9

1 And afterward Moses and Aaron came and said to Pharaoh, “Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, ‘Let My people go that they may celebrate a feast to Me in the wilderness.’ ”

2 But Pharaoh said, “Who is the Lord that I should obey His voice to let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and besides, I will not let Israel go.”

3 Then they said, “The God of the Hebrews has met with us. Please, let us go a three days’ journey into the wilderness that we may sacrifice to the Lord our God, otherwise He will fall upon us with pestilence or with the sword.”

4 But the king of Egypt said to them, “Moses and Aaron, why do you draw the people away from their work? Get back to your labors!”

5 Again Pharaoh said, “Look, the people of the land are now many, and you would have them cease from their labors!”

6 So the same day Pharaoh commanded the taskmasters over the people and their foremen, saying,

7 “You are no longer to give the people straw to make brick as previously; let them go and gather straw for themselves.

8 “But the quota of bricks which they were making previously, you shall impose on them; you are not to reduce any of it. Because they are lazy, therefore they cry out, ‘Let us go and sacrifice to our God.’

9 “Let the labor be heavier on the men, and let them work at it so that they will pay no attention to false words.”

In this passage, we see Pharaoh putting up an obstacle. Not only was he unwilling to let the people go, he was making life harder for the people. What was happening? Were not the Israelites obeying God? Why then did the situation deteriorate?

Here is an important principle on spiritual warfare: As we work out our lives together with God, especially in significant areas, we will meet with difficulties. But that does not mean we are on the

wrong track. When we advance in the right direction, we should expect to meet with resistance, for we are engaging Satan and the forces of darkness in the spiritual realm. It is because we are on the right track that we meet with such strong opposition. Satan would intensify his attacks on us. He would seek all ways – including manipulating external circumstances – to discourage us, confuse us, and weaken our faith.

Of course, there will be situations in which the difficulties we encounter are of our own making, or God's indications to us that we are on the wrong track. There could be errors in our lives we need to correct, or approaches we are taking that need to be adjusted. We have to be open and sensitive to His guidance, continually looking to Him to ascertain whether what we are doing is right or wrong.

When the Israelites met with increasing difficulties and hardships, they did not respond well.

Exodus 5:20-21

20 When they left Pharaoh's presence, they met Moses and Aaron as they were waiting for them.

21 They said to them, "May the Lord look upon you and judge you, for you have made us odious in Pharaoh's sight and in the sight of his servants, to put a sword in their hand to kill us."

They professed belief initially, but became antagonistic towards Moses and Aaron when things became difficult. The response of the Israelites was highly improper. Under the circumstances, even their leader Moses wavered.

Exodus 5:22-23

22 Then Moses returned to the Lord and said, "O Lord, why have You brought harm to this people? Why did You ever send me?"

23 "Ever since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has done harm to this people, and You have not delivered Your people at all."

Moses questioned the Lord for His apparent inaction. Moses said something to this effect: O Lord, You said that You would

deliver Your people. You have sent me, and I have acted in accordance with Your command. But why didn't You deliver Your people? Why is the situation getting from bad to worse?

God in control

We see the Lord responding to Moses:

Exodus 6:1-8

1 Then the Lord said to Moses, "Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh; for under compulsion he will let them go, and under compulsion he will drive them out of his land."

2 God spoke further to Moses and said to him, "I am the Lord; 3 and I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as God Almighty, but by My name, Lord, I did not make Myself known to them.

4 "I also established My covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they sojourned.

5 "Furthermore I have heard the groaning of the sons of Israel, because the Egyptians are holding them in bondage, and I have remembered My covenant.

6 "Say, therefore, to the sons of Israel, 'I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their bondage. I will also redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments.

7 'Then I will take you for My people, and I will be your God; and you shall know that I am the Lord your God, who brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.

8 'I will bring you to the land which I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and I will give it to you for a possession; I am the Lord.' "

God told Moses to watch how He would deal with Pharaoh, and that under compulsion, Pharaoh would eventually let the people go.

In the midst of the trial, the people were not so conscious of God's promise and of His almighty power. Even Moses wavered. So God reminded Moses, and through Moses the Israelites, about His almighty power and the covenant He had made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

God had told the people He would be delivering them from Pharaoh. He had the power to do so. They must learn to trust Him.

They must trust His timing and His ways. This is an area of truth God's children must learn well. This was just the beginning of the deliverance and the people were already grumbling to the Lord. So God spoke to Moses to reassure His people that He knew what was happening and that He was in control.

Discouragement set in

Moses transmitted God's message to the people, but they did not listen.

Exodus 6:9

So Moses spoke thus to the sons of Israel, but they did not listen to Moses on account of their despondency and cruel bondage.

The people were too affected by their surroundings, by the hardship and the suffering. Their faith was not of high quality. When things were comfortable, when God acted and things began to move, the people believed and rejoiced. But when the going became difficult, they became despondent and would not listen to Moses. The attitude and response of the people had an adverse effect on Moses.

Exodus 6:10-12

10 Now the Lord spoke to Moses, saying,

11 "Go, tell Pharaoh king of Egypt to let the sons of Israel go out of his land."

12 But Moses spoke before the Lord, saying, "Behold, the sons of Israel have not listened to me; how then will Pharaoh listen to me, for I am unskilled in speech?"

Despite the Lord giving clear instructions to him to go to Pharaoh, Moses told the Lord he was unskilled in speech and not up to the task. Besides, the sons of Israel were not cooperating with him.

Here we see Moses, a great man, chosen of God, yet wavering in faith. In Exodus 5:21, when the people went against him, he wavered. He gained some confidence after God spoke to him, but became discouraged and wavered again when the Israelites did not listen to him.

We see here the importance of support for the leadership in the fulfilling of God's purposes. Believers often look to their leaders for

encouragement, and this is proper. Good leaders encourage those under their charge to walk well with the Lord. At the same time, the encouragement of the brethren can mean much to leaders, while negative response of the brethren and lack of encouragement can adversely affect them.

God continued to work

Fortunately in this case, God intervened. If He had not, the outcome could have been disastrous. God was gracious. He stepped in and prevented the whole incident from becoming hopeless. He continued to speak to Moses and Aaron, encouraging them to press on. With God's strengthening, Moses and Aaron could trust God and cooperate with Him, as we see in Exodus 7:8-10.

Exodus 7:8-10

8 Now the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying,

9 "When Pharaoh speaks to you, saying, 'Work a miracle,' then you shall say to Aaron, 'Take your staff and throw it down before Pharaoh, that it may become a serpent.' "

10 So Moses and Aaron came to Pharaoh, and thus they did just as the Lord had commanded; and Aaron threw his staff down before Pharaoh and his servants, and it became a serpent.

So, things began to move again. But it would take some time before deliverance came.

The next miracle was even more remarkable. It was a dramatic manifestation of the tremendous power of God. God turned water into blood, not just in one or two places, but throughout the land of Egypt. Even water contained in vessels turned into blood.

Exodus 7:19

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Say to Aaron, 'Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt, over their rivers, over their streams, and over their pools, and over all their reservoirs of water, that they may become blood; and there will be blood throughout all the land of Egypt, both in vessels of wood and in vessels of stone.' "

Yet deliverance delayed

When we read through this long account of the confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh, it may seem to us to be just a series of incidents and demonstrations of God's power. But try putting ourselves in the shoes of Moses and the Israelites as they went through one incident after another, one miracle after another. They must have been filled with great expectations of deliverance. As Moses obeyed God, following instruction after instruction, each time he must have thought that would be the time God would deliver them. But each time, deliverance did not materialise. He spoke to Pharaoh as instructed by God, yet God did not deliver them. He demonstrated God's power through the rod turning into a serpent. Still, God did not deliver them. And now, all the water in Egypt had been turned into blood. Surely God would deliver them now. Still, there was no deliverance.

Instead, Pharaoh continued to harden his heart, even as God continued to work miracles. In the next miracle, frogs covered the entire land. Imagine frogs coming out to cover the whole land of Egypt!

Exodus 8:6

So Aaron stretched out his hand over the waters of Egypt, and the frogs came up and covered the land of Egypt.

At last, there was a positive response from Pharaoh.

Exodus 8:8

Then Pharaoh called for Moses and Aaron and said, "Entreat the Lord that He remove the frogs from me and from my people; and I will let the people go, that they may sacrifice to the Lord."

Pharaoh said he would let the people go if God were to remove the frogs. The end seemed to be near and Moses probably heaved a sigh of relief.

But, alas, it was not the end. Just when there was a glimmer of hope, a sudden reversal of events took place.

Exodus 8:15

But when Pharaoh saw that there was relief, he hardened his heart and did not listen to them, as the Lord had said.

The Lord had already demonstrated His power beyond doubt. Pharaoh had seen and acknowledged it. He had said: "I will let the people go". But now, after Moses entreated the Lord and the frogs were gone, Pharaoh hardened his heart yet again and refused to let the people go. The situation thus continued to appear hopeless.

Deliverance seemed to be just a step ahead, yet it slipped through their fingers. By this time, Moses could have been stumped. He could have wondered what more he had to do before God would deliver them. If we were to face a situation like this, would we be disheartened by now? Would we have become weary because the battle is so long drawn? Would we question whether deliverance would ever come?

We see in this encounter between Moses and Pharaoh a picture of how spiritual battles can be very long drawn, even over just one issue. This is especially so if the issue is significant.

The confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh was not merely a confrontation between men. Satan and the forces of darkness were deeply involved as the deliverance of Israel from Egypt was a significant event in the fulfilment of God's purposes, and Satan would go all out to thwart it. God told Moses when He was about to inflict the last plague on Egypt that He would execute judgements against all the gods of Egypt (Exod. 12:12). An intense battle was taking place in the spiritual realm.

In this event that we are considering, there were many more rounds of spiritual battles to come. In Exodus 8:24, we see God continuing to manifest His power, causing insects to swarm all over the land and laying it to waste.

Exodus 8:24

Then the Lord did so. And there came great swarms of insects into the house of Pharaoh and the houses of his servants and the land was laid waste because of the swarms of insects in all the land of Egypt.

Again, Pharaoh said he would let the people go (v. 28). And again, he did not (v. 32). There seemed to be some movement, but the end had not come. Then God inflicted a severe pestilence on the livestock of Egypt, causing all the livestock to die (Exod. 9:6). Next we see God causing boils to break out on man and beast throughout the land.

Exodus 9:8-11

8 Then the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, “Take for yourselves handfuls of soot from a kiln, and let Moses throw it toward the sky in the sight of Pharaoh.

9 “It will become fine dust over all the land of Egypt, and will become boils breaking out with sores on man and beast through all the land of Egypt.”

10 So they took soot from a kiln, and stood before Pharaoh; and Moses threw it toward the sky, and it became boils breaking out with sores on man and beast.

11 The magicians could not stand before Moses because of the boils, for the boils were on the magicians as well as on all the Egyptians.

Even Pharaoh’s magicians were afflicted with boils. This clear demonstration of God’s power and sovereignty would surely be an encouragement to God’s people that at last Pharaoh would let them go. However, the struggle was not over.

Why difficulties prolonged

The question may be raised: Why did God’s people have to go through so many rounds of confrontation? Couldn’t God have delivered them in a single stroke? Sometimes we do not understand why God does things in a certain way. We may not understand what is happening while in the midst of it, though we may after the event is over. And there are some situations that we will not be able to understand until we meet the Lord. Whatever the case may be, we cannot allow such situations to shake our faith, hinder us from fighting the good fight of faith, or in any way adversely affect our walk with God. If we do, we fall into the design of the evil one. Though there are some issues we will not fully understand, we have

to continue to trust God on the basis of our knowledge of Him – that He is a good and faithful God.

The Book of Exodus reveals to us that God had good reasons for bringing the Israelites through the many rounds of confrontation. These confrontations did not take place in vain. This is what the Lord said to Pharaoh through Moses:

Exodus 9:15-16

15 “For if by now I had put forth My hand and struck you and your people with pestilence, you would then have been cut off from the earth.

16 “But, indeed, for this reason I have allowed you to remain, in order to show you My power and in order to proclaim My name through all the earth.

God said He could have cut off Pharaoh and the Egyptians from the earth in a single stroke. If He had done so, the Israelites would have been instantly delivered. But God said He had a purpose for the many rounds of confrontation. He did it this way to demonstrate to Pharaoh His great might and to proclaim His name through all the earth (v. 16). He also did it for the sake of the Israelites, to show them that despite the formidable and obstinate monarch they were up against, God was able to subdue him. God could deliver His people from slavery. God’s deliverance clearly demonstrates His power and greatness. It also demonstrates His goodness and love towards His people. This is one of the most significant events in the history of God’s people, one which the people of Israel still look back to. It shows them that the God they worship is One who could bring about a wonderful deliverance, and One to whom nothing is impossible. This is the purpose to which Exodus 10:2 points.

Exodus 10:2

and that you may tell in the hearing of your son, and of your grandson, how I made a mockery of the Egyptians and how I performed My signs among them, that you may know that I am the Lord.”

This is the purpose that God desired to accomplish: “that you may know that I am the Lord”. The many rounds of battle helped to bring across this important truth in a very powerful way.

Sometimes God allows us to go through prolonged difficulties because there are precious lessons He desires us to learn. If we are discerning, we may be able, even when we are in the midst of it, to appreciate why God desires us to face the long-drawn-out battle.

But whether or not we understand what we are going through, God has His purposes. As for God’s deliverance of the Israelites, God desires that this event would be a lesson not only for the people at that time, but also for generations to come – “that you may tell in the hearing of your son, and of your grandson”. And indeed the Exodus is a momentous event that has significant effects right through the centuries – not only for the Israelites, but also for the church. Throughout the history of the church, believers constantly draw encouragement from this event.

Coming back to the confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh, we see that the rounds of confrontation continued. In Exodus 9:23, we see thunder, hail and fire. In Exodus 10:14, we see swarms of locusts coming over the whole land of Egypt, more numerous than on any previous occasion. After that, an intense darkness fell over the land of Egypt for three days (Exod. 10:21-22). With that, we see God’s hour approaching.

Persevere in faith to the end

As chapter 11 tells us, there would be one more plague.

Exodus 11:1

Now the Lord said to Moses, “One more plague I will bring on Pharaoh and on Egypt; after that he will let you go from here. When he lets you go, he will surely drive you out from here completely.

However, even when the end was near, the situation was still very tense, difficult and dangerous. Just before God’s announcement of the final plague, we see Pharaoh in a defiant mood.

Exodus 10:28

Then Pharaoh said to him, “Get away from me! Beware, do not see my face again, for in the day you see my face you shall die!”

Pharaoh remained stubborn and unyielding. Even with the miracle of thick darkness that lasted three days, Pharaoh still refused to budge. Not only that, he told Moses: “Beware, do not see my face again, for in the day you see my face you shall die!” It was God who had instructed Moses to confront Pharaoh. If Moses could not see Pharaoh’s face anymore, how could the task be accomplished? Moses had already gone through many rounds of confrontation with Pharaoh. Each time Pharaoh made a promise that he would let the people go, he changed his mind. Things had been difficult and discouraging enough for Moses. The tension mounted when Pharaoh threatened to kill him if he were to appear before him again. Interestingly, Pharaoh uttered these fiercely threatening words to Moses just before the Lord assured Moses deliverance was about to take place. There is a principle in spiritual warfare reflected here. Sometimes when the battle is about to be won, the evil one may put up one last fight. It is important not to waver and give up the fight at this point; otherwise the battle will be lost.

The last plague finally came, resulting in the death of all the firstborn in Egypt (but the sons of Israel were spared). After that, Pharaoh did let the people go. But he again changed his mind and ordered his army to pursue the fleeing Israelites. However, God continued to watch over the Israelites and led His people safely through the Red Sea.

Lessons

I would like to bring together some lessons we could learn from this account in the Book of Exodus.

We see that underlying this whole series of events is God’s purposes for His people. We also see that throughout these events, the battle was the Lord’s. As we seek to live for the Lord, we should be conscious that ultimately, God has a purpose to fulfil. He is building His kingdom, and He will vindicate His name. Our part is to cooperate with the Lord in faith and persevere in the work He has entrusted to us.

Hebrews 10:36 reminds us of the importance of endurance.

Hebrews 10:36

For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised.

We must not shrink back when we meet with difficulties. If we do, the Lord will not have pleasure in us (Heb. 10:38). When we recognise the Lord's will, we must persevere in it however difficult it may be. We must maintain the spiritual vigilance and exertion needful to fight the good fight of faith. We must not grow weary and become discouraged when the intensity increases and the difficulties multiply, seemingly without end. Be patient, for the Lord has a purpose. At the right time, God will bring His purposes to pass and the battle to a successful completion.

Although there were many rounds in the encounter between Moses and Pharaoh, things were not just going round and round in circles without progression. There was definite progression towards ultimate victory.

How well Moses and the Israelites went through the various rounds of confrontation with Pharaoh would make a difference to how things develop. God had much to teach them in the process. It was important that they learn well. If they did, their relationship with God and their character would develop and they would be more equipped to face what lay ahead.

At every stage, we have to actively look to the Lord and work out His will together with Him. We should not adopt the attitude: The battle is the Lord's; He will fight it – and we just let things be.

We should cooperate with Him, and that can take various forms. At times, we cooperate through active involvement. At other times, we cooperate mainly through prayer. In our service to the Lord, spiritual warfare is to be expected. Let us do our part well so that things may turn out well.

Many things have gone wrong in church history because God's people have been lacking in faithfulness, in intensity, in perseverance. As a result, God's people have failed to accomplish many aspects of the will of God.

God will accomplish some aspects of His will without man's cooperation. When He says: "Let there be light", there will be light. When He says, "The Lord Jesus will come again", He will come again, whatever man may say or do, and whether or not man cooperates.

But there are many things in God's will where man's cooperation will affect the outcome. How well man fulfils his part and works together with God will have a bearing on the outcome. In His graciousness, God may intervene and execute His plans in spite of our failures. But there are also many things that are not accomplished because of man's failure.

As we encounter a difficult situation, the important question to ask is not how long it will last. The important question is: Are we on the right track and are we being faithful? The real issues are: How much have we learnt while going through the difficult situation? How much has been accomplished for God's kingdom through the whole event? These are the more important questions to ask. We should not be preoccupied with how long the battle is. Of course, some things are better not prolonged. In such circumstances, we can pray that the Lord will not delay, that He will act speedily. But some things will take time. It could be days, months or even years before we see a resolution.

If we are determined to stay faithful to the Lord, we will be involved in spiritual warfare throughout our time on earth. The battles will come, one after another. There will be specific things and issues we have to deal with, and some of these can be very difficult and prolonged.

As for the people of Israel, after the long-drawn-out confrontation with Pharaoh, they were finally delivered from Egypt. But it did not end there. After their deliverance, they wandered in the wilderness for forty years before they entered the Promised Land. And after they had entered the Promised Land, there were still many battles they had to fight in the land of Canaan.

As for us, we know our whole life will be a series of spiritual battles. So if we have the proper perspective, we will be more concerned about how faithful we are, rather than how long a specific

battle will last. If we are faithful, and if we cooperate with the Lord, the battle will not end later than it should.

In our walk with God, we will face many struggles. If we are faithful, victory is certain because the victory has already been won by the Lord Jesus Christ on the Cross. And we are claiming this victory and working it out day by day. We can have deep assurance and a strong sense of purpose and direction in life. Our life will not be a long and meaningless struggle.

As we work together with the Lord, He will encourage us and strengthen us. We will deepen in our fellowship with Him and with the brethren in church life. He will lead us into an ever-increasing appreciation and understanding of who He is and of the realities in the spiritual realm. He will help us nurture our spiritual growth and cultivate the fruit of the Spirit, leading to more vibrant expressions of body-life. This is at the heart of God's purposes.

And so, as we go through the various struggles in life, as we fight the battles that confront us, both in our own lives and in the outworking of church life, let us constantly remind ourselves of these major principles and the proper perspective. Let us not be like the Israelites, who failed the Lord so glaringly in so many ways. Let us not in one moment, express belief in God and in the next, grow weary and grumble. Let us not fail, for the consequences are serious. Instead, let us persevere in faith, working together with God.

Question for Reflection and Discussion

Reflect on how God delivered the children of Israel from Egypt. What lessons in the life of faith do you think God was seeking to teach the Israelites? What lessons can we draw for our own lives?

Understanding Paul's Conversion and Calling as an Apostle

This is the second message in the series *Appearance and Reality*¹. Paul is an outstanding example of a man of faith. However, at the time he was converted, he appeared an unlikely candidate for conversion. He had set his heart to destroy the church and was actively doing so when the Lord appeared to him, bringing about his conversion and calling him to be an apostle. To many, it is inconceivable that something like this should have happened.

In this message, we seek to understand why this persecutor of the church and the “chief of sinners” was “suddenly” converted and called by God to be an apostle. We will seek to understand the heart of Paul before his conversion, the meaning of his conversion and the depth of his response to the Lord. This will shed light on what constitutes a man of faith and how to become a man of faith. Paul’s unceasing zeal and earnestness in working out his faith is a powerful testimony to how much a man of faith can accomplish in God’s kingdom by God’s grace.

This message has been included in this book because it can contribute to our understanding of the man of faith and what God looks for in a man.

Appearance can be very different from reality. There is a tendency for many to conclude on the basis of outward appearance.

In John 7:24, the Lord Jesus teaches us not to judge according to appearance but to judge with righteous judgement. In 1 Samuel

¹ Messages in the series *Appearance and Reality* are available on the website www.godandtruth.com.

16:6-7, God cautioned Samuel against looking at outward appearance, for He looks at the heart.

When Moses was forty years of age, he thought he was ready to deliver the Israelites out of Egypt. But in reality he was not. After forty years in the wilderness, God called him to deliver the Israelites out of Egypt. This time, Moses appeared unready for the task. But in reality, he was ready.

To be effective disciples of the Lord, we need to perceive the truth and reality accurately. This will help us to see things the way God sees them, to enter into fellowship with Him and to move with Him. We can then respond well to people and situations, and we will not be deceived or make gross mistakes, which can have serious consequences for us, for others and also for the Lord's work.

Let us consider the example of the apostle Paul. We shall seek to understand the state of Paul before his conversion, his sudden and unexpected conversion, and his calling as an apostle to the Gentiles.

Paul before his conversion – a violent persecutor of the church

Before his conversion, Paul was a prominent and violent persecutor of the church. He appeared to be ruthless, heartless and hardened towards the truth. This is the picture we get when we read Acts 8.

Acts 8:1-3

1 Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death.

And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.

2 Some devout men buried Stephen, and made a loud lamentation over him.

3 But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison.

Paul, who was then known as Saul, was among the crowd when Stephen was being stoned. Saul was not merely a spectator; he was in hearty agreement with the stoning of Stephen, even though Stephen was a good and faithful disciple of the Lord Jesus. Stephen's meekness and forgiving spirit shone through in the way he faced the stoning

and in his prayer to the Lord to forgive those who stoned him (Acts 7:54-60).

Even after witnessing the wonderful testimony of Stephen and the gracious way Stephen went through his ordeal, Saul went on to ravage the church and, “entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison” (Acts 8:3). He was actively seeking to destroy the church. Not being satisfied with persecuting and imprisoning the Christians at Jerusalem, he headed for Damascus with fiery zeal to arrest Christians in that city.

Acts 9:1-2

1 Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest,
2 and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

A person observing Saul's actions would likely have the impression that he was a terrible man in a terrible state and doing terrible things. In persecuting the Christians, he was persecuting the Lord Jesus Himself (Acts 9:4-5), the Son of God, the Way, the Truth and the Life, and the true Light who has come into the world. Saul could justifiably be described as an enemy of God, the church and the truth.

Paul's sudden conversion and calling

As Saul headed for Damascus on his self-appointed mission, suddenly and dramatically, the Lord Jesus confronted him and stopped him in his tracks. Saul was blinded by a bright light that appeared from heaven. What followed was his wondrous conversion.

Acts 9:3-5

3 As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him;
4 and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?”
5 And he said, “Who are You, Lord?” And He said, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting,

In Damascus, Saul was greeted by Ananias, a disciple of the Lord. The Lord had earlier revealed to Ananias that Saul was His chosen instrument to bring the gospel to both the Gentiles and the Jews.

Acts 9:15-16

15 But the Lord said to him (Ananias), “Go, for he (Saul) is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel;

16 for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name’s sake.”

Paul’s conversion and calling appeared unthinkable

Who would have thought that a person like Saul could be converted so suddenly? There was no indication that he was near the kingdom of God. Even more incredible was the fact that Saul’s conversion took place at the height of his violent persecution of Christians, for he was at that time “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” (Acts 9:1).

It may also seem inconceivable and incomprehensible that God would call such a terrible persecutor of the church to so prominent a position as the great apostle to the Gentiles.

This account of Saul’s conversion and calling by God in Acts 9 raises two questions:

- How could a person who appeared so ruthless, heartless, hardened and anti-Christian be converted so suddenly, even while he was relentlessly persecuting the church of God?
- How could it be that at the time of Saul’s conversion, God had already decided and chosen him to be His special minister and witness, and the great apostle to the Gentiles?

Inadequate explanations for Paul’s sudden conversion and calling

If we look at the situation superficially, we may answer these two questions as follows:

- Conversion can take place at any time, in any person, even when it seems most unlikely.
- This event demonstrates the wonder of God's grace, that even a person in a state like Saul's can be converted and chosen to fulfil such a significant role in God's kingdom.
- It is God's prerogative to choose whoever He wishes to fulfil whatever role He assigns in the outworking of His purposes. This is an expression of God's sovereignty. His choice is not dependent on the qualities or the merits of the man chosen.
- The infinite God often works in strange, incomprehensible ways – ways that finite men do not and cannot understand.

It is true that the conversion of Saul and his appointment as an apostle demonstrate the bountiful grace of God towards Saul. It is also true that they are an expression of God's sovereignty. However, are the above answers adequate and satisfying? Is there more to the whole episode that we can try to understand from the scriptural records?

Understanding what God wants us to understand

As finite men, we have our limitations. At times, we cannot comprehend the ways of the infinite God. However, we should not use this as an excuse for our neglect and failure. God desires us to grow in our understanding of Him and His ways so that we can have quality fellowship with Him and participate more meaningfully and effectively in His purposes.

There is much that God desires to teach us and reveal to us through His Spirit. We must therefore seek Him earnestly, diligently and humbly. This is an important aspect of our friendship with God.

One major reason for our failure to understand people and situations accurately is our failure to perceive the realities beyond the outward appearance.

Paul's true state before his conversion

Let us seek to understand the true state of Paul just before his conversion. We will examine two aspects:

- Was he really heartless, cruel, against the truth and against God?
- Is his conversion and calling really so incomprehensible?

To understand why the Lord appeared to him on the road to Damascus and why He appointed him to be His apostle to the Gentiles, we need to learn to perceive what was going on in Saul's heart. This is God's approach: He "looks at the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7).

Paul not against God or the truth

Saul thought that in persecuting the church, he was being zealous for God. He testified to this in Acts 22:3-4, when he was making his defence to the people.

Acts 22:3-4

3 "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated under Gamaliel, strictly according to the law of our fathers, being zealous for God, just as you all are today.

4 "And I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and putting both men and women into prisons,

"I persecuted this Way to the death" was an expression of his zeal for God. Growing up, he was educated under Gamaliel, a famous teacher of the Law. He sought sincerely and earnestly to keep the Law as he understood it, and could testify in Philippians 3:6 that he was blameless as to the righteousness which is in the Law. Though what Saul did was contrary to God's will, in his heart, he was not against God and the truth. In fact, he was trying earnestly to keep the laws of God and to serve God zealously.

Paul's frame of mind as a Pharisee

Saul persecuted the Christians so severely because he was convinced they could not be of God. To him, the Lord Jesus could not be the

Messiah, or the Son of God, or even have the approval of God upon Him. The Lord Jesus was crucified on the cross, and “he who is hanged is accursed of God” (Deut. 21:23). As a Jew well-versed in the Law, Saul was sure that the One who died such a death could not be the Messiah, the Saviour of mankind, or be equal with God, as He had claimed to be.

It must have appeared outrageous to him for the Christians to claim that He who died such an ignoble death has risen from the dead by the power of God, and has ascended and even been exalted. In his mind, these blasphemous people and their false teachings must be nullified and the whole movement snuffed out! They must not be allowed to lead the people astray!

Like many Jews in his days, Saul could also have thought that the true Messiah would be a victorious, reigning king who would come as a deliverer of Israel. What Saul knew about the Lord Jesus was that He was a weak and helpless person crucified on the cross. He could not imagine that God would permit His Messiah to die such a pathetic death.

It was only after his conversion that he came to appreciate very deeply that the Lord Jesus willingly offered Himself to be cursed on our behalf. He stated this in Galatians 3:13.

Galatians 3:13

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”—

It is also helpful for us to remember that Saul, as a Pharisee, would have undergone rigorous training in Judaism. Such training concentrated very much on the observance of the laws of the Old Testament, temple sacrifices, and Jewish traditions and interpretations developed and passed down over many years. The whole religion of Israel then was very much centred on the belief that man could become right with God and be saved through the observance of these rituals and traditions. The Lord Jesus had pointed out on several occasions that mere outward observance of these rituals and traditions without the inward reality was inadequate. He often

rebuked the Pharisees for emphasising the strict observance of these rituals and traditions while violating the true principles in the Scriptures.

As Saul was steeped in the Judaistic understanding of salvation, he would have great difficulty understanding and accepting the new concept of salvation through faith in Christ as well as other teachings of the Lord Jesus that the Christians were proclaiming. Saul and the other Jews must have felt very threatened by this new teaching of the Lord Jesus and His disciples.

Whatever may be the other reasons in the heart of Saul, it is clear that he persecuted the believers not because he was against God and the ways of God, but because he was convinced that the disciples were leading people astray by making false claims and imparting false teachings. Saul's persecution of the Christians is a warning to us that a person can be deceived or led astray and can do terrible deeds, yet think he is serving God.

Our attempt to understand the state of Saul's heart is not intended to excuse him or to minimise the seriousness of what he had done. There was moral failure, which he acknowledged in his letter to Timothy.

1 Timothy 1:12-15

12 I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because He considered me faithful, putting me into service,

13 even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. Yet I was shown mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief;

14 and the grace of our Lord was more than abundant, with the faith and love which are found in Christ Jesus.

15 It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all.

In this passage, Paul was referring to what he did before he became a Christian – that he was once a persecutor and a violent aggressor, and that he had acted ignorantly in unbelief. At that time, he did not believe in the claims of the Lord Jesus. But when he became a Christian, he was deeply appreciative of God's grace towards

him, the “foremost” of sinners (v. 15).

It is clear that Saul was very different from someone with evil intent; he was not a terrible, ruthless, heartless and hardened man who was against God and the truth.

Paul's deep response to God's call

Looking beyond Paul's outward conduct before his conversion, God saw the great potential and qualities within his heart. He knew that if Saul were to come to recognise the truth and experience the enabling of God, he would wholeheartedly commit his life to God and serve Him faithfully. As the Scriptures clearly shows, he did not disappoint the Lord.

The moment Saul came to recognise the truth of the gospel, that the Lord Jesus is indeed the Saviour of mankind, he committed himself without reservation to the Lord and to His service. The qualities within him emerged very quickly, indicating that basically these realities and their potential were already present within him.

Believers often make professions of wholehearted commitment to God and to His service, but the quality of their commitment is often much lower than what we see in Paul. Among Christians, the expression “total commitment” or “wholehearted commitment to God and to His service” is often used too glibly and treated too lightly. Paul's commitment to the Lord and to His service was of a very high quality.

Let us look again at the account given in Acts 9, when the Lord Jesus suddenly appeared to Saul as he was journeying to Damascus.

Acts 9:3-6

3 As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him;

4 and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?”

5 And he said, “Who are You, Lord?” And He said, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting,

6 but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do.”

Let us note the quality of Saul's response to the Lord the moment the Lord Jesus appeared to him. He instantly recognised it was a supernatural revelation from God and he therefore asked, "Who are You, Lord?" This question implied that there was a spirit of submission to God.

This is verified by Paul's own account of the same incident.

Acts 22:6-10

6 "But it happened that as I was on my way, approaching Damascus about noontime, a very bright light suddenly flashed from heaven all around me,

7 and I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?'

8 "And I answered, 'Who are You, Lord?' And He said to me, 'I am Jesus the Nazarene, whom you are persecuting.'

9 "And those who were with me saw the light, to be sure, but did not understand the voice of the One who was speaking to me.

10 "And I said, 'What shall I do, Lord?' And the Lord said to me, 'Get up and go on into Damascus, and there you will be told of all that has been appointed for you to do.'

In verse 8, we see Saul asking the first question: "Who are You, Lord?" Then in verse 10, we see him asking a second question: "What shall I do, Lord?" Here Saul again addressed Jesus as "Lord" and sought to know what the Lord desired of him. His spontaneous response to the Lord was an expression of his desire to know God's will and then to submit to it. This was a consistent posture in Paul's life and is a key quality of true discipleship.

This attitude is reflected in the pattern prayer that the Lord Jesus teaches us: "Your will be done". The prayer of our hearts should be for the will of God to be done. And for this to take place, we should first seek to know what the Lord's will is and then cooperate with the Lord so that His will can be fulfilled in our lives.

After many years of service, when recounting the same incident on the road to Damascus in his testimony before King Agrippa, Paul declared: "So, King Agrippa, I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision" (Acts 26:19). This declaration confirms that Paul's two questions: "Who are You, Lord?" and "What shall I do, Lord?"

reflect deep positive qualities of true discipleship in the heart of Paul. Paul not only desired to know God's will, but also to submit to it and fulfil it in his life from then on. Indeed, Paul proved to be faithful, obedient and persevering in doing all that the Lord desired of him, and he also accomplished the mission and tasks God entrusted to him.

Regardless of the obstacles he encountered, Paul did not deviate from God's call. He went through much suffering, afflictions, pain and hardship, but still he continued in this path. At the end of his life, he could say: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith". He had the assurance in his heart that God was pleased with his life and would reward him with "the crown of righteousness" (2 Tim. 4:7-8).

The kind of attitude that Paul adopted, the life he lived, and the way he responded to God from the moment of conversion, reflected the earnest longings within his heart to serve God and to be true to Him even before his conversion. He did not know the Lord and the way of truth then, but once he came to know Him, his heart was set in that direction.

"Who are You, Lord?," "What shall I do, Lord?," "I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision". These questions and words epitomise the key elements of true discipleship and the life of faith: to know the Lord, live out His will, and be faithful to Him till the end.

The working of the Holy Spirit and Paul's striving

Some may attribute the success of Paul's life to the working of the Holy Spirit. Certainly, the Holy Spirit was working mightily in Paul to strengthen and enable him to accomplish all that he did. However, it was not solely because the Spirit of God strengthened and worked in him in a special way. How the Spirit of God worked in and through Paul was related to his deep response and faithfulness to God. Paul could have been disobedient to God's call. But he was not. Instead, he laboured hard and fought the good fight of faith, and he sought to encourage all true believers to move in the same direction.

It is important that we learn to strive according to the power of the Holy Spirit working within us. Let us learn from the example

of Paul, as he testified in Colossians 1:29: “I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me”.

Let us look more closely at the relationship between Paul’s striving and the gracious working of God in and through his life.

1 Corinthians 15:10

But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me.

In saying “by the grace of God I am what I am”, Paul was referring not only to what he managed to accomplish (i.e., his doing), but also to his attainments in spiritual development (i.e., his being). God’s grace towards him could have been in vain, but it was not. Together with God’s working, Paul labored all the more – but in the same breath he added: “yet not I, but the grace of God with me”. He wanted to make sure we understand that even his earnest labouring was possible only by God’s gracious enabling. Many temptations, distractions and hardships could have caused him to falter, but it was the grace of God that enabled him to be faithful to the path of truth, even as he himself was determined to remain faithful to God and continue in His grace.

1 Corinthians 15:10 is one of the clearest verses in the Scriptures on the relationship between God’s part and man’s part in the life of the man of faith. Whatever we can attain to in moral and spiritual stature and whatever we are able to do that is of true value is by God’s gracious working in and through our lives. At the same time we must fulfil our part and cooperate with God – otherwise His gracious working in our lives would be in vain.

The moral and spiritual principles involved are the same with regard to our growing in faith and all expressions of true faith. There is God’s part as well as man’s part – man must respond positively to God’s gracious working in his heart.

God desires to do a deep work in the lives of all His children. Though the gifts and the kind of work entrusted to each one of us may differ, He wants all of us to be faithful and fruitful disciples living the abundant life in Christ. God is calling us to attain unto

maturity in Christ, to the measure of the stature that belongs to the fullness of Christ (Eph. 4:13). Many of us, however, fall far short of the kind of life God intends for us. Let us therefore respond to Him more deeply so that His grace towards us would not be in vain.

Further explanations for Paul's sudden conversion

Having seen Paul's true state before his conversion and his deep response to God, we can say that Paul's conversion did not happen out of the blue; neither was it incomprehensible, though there were no obvious indications he was about to be converted. It did not happen contrary to his whole manner of life, as it might appear to be.

Powerful impact of the testimony of Stephen and other Christians

There is another aspect regarding Paul's conversion helpful for us to consider: the likely impact of the testimony of those whom Paul persecuted, including Stephen's. Paul heard the words and saw the lives of these faithful disciples, and the way they faced the persecution. A genuine manifestation of the power of the Holy Spirit could be seen in the love, joy and peace in their hearts, and in their faithfulness to God in the midst of trials and persecution.

The strength and courage manifested in the life and conduct of Stephen must have been a very powerful testimony. Stephen was filled with the Spirit (Acts 7:55). He was empowered by God to be a testimony to the truth. His face was "like the face of an angel" to those who were beholding him (Acts 6:15); and as he was being stoned to death, he was praying to the Lord not to hold this grievous sin against those stoning him (Acts 7:59-60).

Although under great pressure, the believers remained steadfast and were even willing to die for their faith. Their testimony would likely have had an impact on Paul and helped to prepare his heart for the "Damascus road" experience.

Disciples' testimony on Jesus' life and teachings

It is also likely that Paul would have heard the disciples' testimony of the Lord Jesus as the Christ, and about His life and teaching and the miracles He performed. He would have heard them directly or indirectly in many different ways. For example, the disciples whom

Paul had persecuted, imprisoned and perhaps interrogated would have borne witness to seeing the risen Christ, a significant event at that time.

The empty tomb and the risen Christ

Furthermore, there seemed to be no good explanation for the empty tomb apart from the fact that Christ had indeed risen. Paul might have thought over some possible explanations: Could it be that the disciples had taken away the body of the Lord Jesus? But if indeed they had taken away His body, could they still have testified so definitely and boldly about something they knew to be untrue? Would they have been willing to die for a lie? Or could it be that the authorities had taken away the body of Jesus? But if they had, they would likely have produced it to discount the claims of the apostles. Or could it be that He was not fully dead, and that He got up and escaped? What about the huge stone that was placed over the head of the tomb, and the guards who were stationed there? How could He have disappeared without a trace?

God preparing Paul's heart for the "Damascus road" experience

Though Paul was still persecuting the believers vehemently, there would likely be many things causing unease within him. Could these people indeed be testifying to the truth? Otherwise, why would they be prepared to die for their faith?

It is likely that the Spirit of God would also have been working in Paul's heart and mind during that period, in the midst of all that was taking place. So finally, when the risen Lord Himself appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus, he was smitten in his heart and he submitted to the Lord and to the truth. He had heard many testimonies but was unable to believe. But when the Lord Jesus appeared to him, he knew instantly that the disciples were telling the truth – Jesus has indeed risen and He is the Christ!

To sum up, it would be reasonable to say that under God's gracious oversight, the experiences Paul went through prepared him for his conversion. So, though at first glance, his conversion may seem very sudden, unexpected and incomprehensible, in reality, it was not.

Lessons from our reflection on Paul's conversion and his calling

As we reflect on Paul's conversion and his calling as an apostle to the Gentiles, there are various lessons that we can learn.

1. The state of a person's heart before his conversion has a bearing on the quality of his faith and whether he becomes a man of faith.

2. The depth of a person's response and commitment to the Lord at conversion can give him a good start on the road to becoming a man of faith.

3. "Hardened people" may be near the kingdom of God.

Those who appear hardened and antagonistic towards Christians and the Christian faith may not necessarily be far from God's kingdom. Like Paul, some of them, while at the height of their anti-Christian stance, could in fact be near to God's kingdom. But it is also true that many who are antagonistic may actually be very far from God's kingdom. When we encounter such situations, we should try to understand what the reality is, and not be deterred because of wrong conclusions based on the outward appearance.

4. The true state of a person may not be easy to perceive.

This is especially so when the outward appearance portrays a very different picture from the realities within the heart. Many things that are not obvious may be going on in the heart and mind of the person. We need to be alert and open to this possibility instead of being over-confident in our assessment of things and thus concluding hastily. Sometimes, even the person himself may not understand what is going on.

The difficulty in understanding these things can be illustrated by the initial response of the disciple Ananias to the Lord's instructions to him concerning Paul.

Acts 9:10-15

10 Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and the Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord."

11 And the Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called

Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying,

12 and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him, so that he might regain his sight.”

13 But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Your saints at Jerusalem;

14 and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name.”

15 But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel;

From the above account, we see that the devout Ananias was hesitant when he was instructed by the Lord to go to Paul and minister to him. It is understandable that Ananias was uneasy and reluctant, knowing the fearsome reputation of Paul that preceded him. Besides, it would seem a dangerous mission for Ananias. He could not perceive the reality of the situation and the state of Paul’s heart at that time. But when God specifically commanded him, he obeyed.

5. The key to understanding the true state of a person is to try to perceive what lies in the heart.

Our approach should be to understand the underlying attitudes and longings of a person and not to conclude based only on the outward conduct. Otherwise our conclusions may be wrong and damaging. We need to discern the quality and strength of the positive attitudes and longings in a person’s heart. At the same time, we need to understand the seriousness of the negative features and traits that are present and the degree of moral failure and culpability of the person. These are the key areas to focus on rather than the external behaviour of the person.

Recognising the correct approach is helpful, but it may still be difficult for us to know the true state because we may not be able to fathom what is going on in the hearts of people. We should therefore not be careless, presumptuous or over-confident. If we are prayerful, the Lord will help us, and we are less likely to make a gross error. We should form tentative impressions and continue to evaluate as

things unfold. With passing time, and in the light of further developments, things may become clearer. As we grow in maturity and in our fellowship with the Lord, we can develop our ability to perceive more accurately.

6. The positive impact of Christians may not be obvious.

The conduct and testimony of Christians, including Stephen and others whom Paul had persecuted or observed, might not appear to have had a positive impact on him. In fact, they appeared to have infuriated him and caused him to be even more antagonistic. In reality, they could have caused him to become less certain about his stand against the Christian faith, thus preparing him for conversion.

In our desire to be faithful witnesses for God, we may at times not appear to have positive impact on others, or we may even appear to infuriate them. Let us not conclude that just because there appears to be no positive impact, there is indeed none. However, we need to exercise care that our lives and conduct do not actually hinder others from entering the kingdom of God.

Generally, the conversion of a person is not solely due to a particular experience or event. Many things would have been taking place in his life. It is an on-going process, and along the way, the testimonies of faithful brethren would have contributed to the final positive outcome.

By their faithful lives and words, believers can also contribute significantly to the quality of response in conversion. If the testimony is strong, the likelihood of a conversion of quality is greater. After becoming a Christian, the person can often look back and point to the positive impact of Christians he had come in contact with or whose lives he had observed, even those observed from a distance.

We should therefore not think that our lives have no positive impact on others just because it appears that way. Though a person's response to God is a matter of personal choice, it is nevertheless important that we, as lights of the world, strive to be faithful to God because potentially, the impact on others can be very significant.

In the same manner, we should also not conclude that there is great impact of our lives on others just because it appears to be that way. They may be merely expressing superficial words, sometimes

out of politeness, without a deep response in the heart.

7. Faithful testimony of Christians can have positive impact on others not only at conversion, but also after conversion.

After conversion, a person can still reflect over the quality of the testimony he had observed in the lives of believers. This can be a source of encouragement to him and can contribute greatly to his own spiritual development even long after the event. However, if there is little quality, the impact is likely to be minimal.

For example, it is unlikely Paul would forget the life and testimony of Stephen and the other faithful disciples and their willingness to suffer for the Lord. They would have been an encouragement to him to be earnest and faithful, and would have helped to prepare him for a life of suffering for the faith.

God knew from the beginning that the ministry He intended for Paul would include much suffering. God told Ananias in Acts 9:15-16 that Paul was not only a “chosen instrument” of God but also one who would suffer much for His name’s sake.

In later years, Paul wrote much about the place and meaningfulness of suffering in Christian living. In Philippians 1:29, Paul expresses that suffering is a privilege: “For to you it has been granted for Christ’s sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake”. He teaches that suffering for the Lord’s sake can be a very meaningful experience for faithful Christians:

Philippians 3:10

that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death;

Colossians 1:24

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church, in filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions.

In his epistle to the Corinthians, he elaborates on the principle of suffering and death and how it produces life in others:

2 Corinthians 4:8-12

8 we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing;

9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed;

10 always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.

11 For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.

12 So death works in us, but life in you.

It could well be that Paul learned to appreciate the meaning and purpose of suffering in a Christian's life not only through his personal experience, but also from observing and being encouraged by the positive example of Stephen and the other believers.

8. The true man of faith will persevere and run the race well until he finishes his course on earth.

Paul's life and faithful ministry from his conversion to the end of his time on earth is a good illustration of this point and a powerful testimony to how much God can do in and through a man of faith.

Concluding remarks

In this message, we have sought to understand Paul's conversion and calling as an apostle. These events in his life may seem sudden and incomprehensible because he was a violent and relentless persecutor of the church just before his conversion. Yet, as we have examined, Paul was in reality seeking zealously to serve God and keep His laws. The Lord saw beyond Paul's apparent anti-God and anti-Christian stance. He knew Paul's true state of heart and the positive qualities within him. This helps us understand the Lord's intervention in Paul's life that led to his conversion and his calling as an apostle. Paul vindicated God's confidence in him. The moment he was converted, he became a committed disciple of the Lord. He laboured hard to serve the Lord and did not receive the grace of God in vain. Paul became an outstanding example of a man of faith.

We learn from this that what motivates our outward conduct is more important than the outward conduct itself. Ultimately, God is

most concerned about what lies within our hearts. However, let us not give excuses for our improper conduct by saying, “My heart’s attitudes are right; outward conduct does not matter.” Although appearance does not always reflect reality, our outward conduct often flows forth from what is within the heart and reveals its true state. It can help us understand ourselves and others.

We have seen that the faithful testimony of the disciples of Christ in the face of fiery persecution would likely have had a positive impact on the life of Paul, even though outwardly he continued to persecute Christians. It would have stirred Paul’s heart and helped to prepare him to receive the Lord Jesus. It would also have contributed much to Paul’s own faithful ministry as an apostle in the years that followed.

Let us not be deterred by outward appearance, but learn to persevere in faithful service and witness to the truth. There are those who may appear to be hardened towards the truth but in reality are near God’s kingdom. If we live our lives well, we can have a significant positive impact on others, even though it may not appear to be so. Let us take courage and not lose heart. The more wholeheartedly we live for the Lord, the greater will be the impact of our lives in the spiritual realm.

God desires to do a deep work in our lives so that we can bear much fruit. Like Paul, let us be fully submitted to God and let us learn to strive according to His power and His guidance.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How does this message help you understand the heart of Paul before his conversion, the meaning of his conversion and the depth of his response to the Lord?
2. How does this message help you understand what constitutes a man of faith and how to become a man of faith?
3. What can we learn from Paul’s conversion and his calling as an apostle to the Gentiles?

Joseph as a Slave and Prisoner

This is the 13th message in the series *Appearance and Reality*¹. Like the apostle Paul, Joseph is an outstanding man of faith. This comes through clearly and strongly in the scriptural record of his life when he was a slave and prisoner in Egypt.

This message has been included in this book to help us gain a deeper insight into how we can walk by faith and fare well in all circumstances, including situations often regarded as very unfavourable and miserable. We can learn much from the way Joseph trusted God and went through this difficult period in his life.

Introduction

Most of us are familiar with the story of Joseph. Since childhood, many of us have heard of his triumphs. When we think of him faring well, we tend to think of his success as the exalted ruler over all of Egypt. But what about the time when he was a slave, sold into the land of Egypt? And what about the time when he became a prisoner?

In this message, we seek to consider Joseph's experiences from two perspectives: First, what he seemed to be going through and second, the reality of his life experiences beyond the outward appearance.

Favourite son of Israel

The first few verses of Genesis 37 record the love of Israel (also known as Jacob) for Joseph. Israel's love for Joseph aroused the jealousy and hatred of Joseph's brothers towards him:

¹ The message series *Appearance and Reality* is available on the website www.godandtruth.com.

Genesis 37:3-4, 11

3 Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his sons, because he was the son of his old age; and he made him a varicolored tunic.

4 His brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers; and so they hated him and could not speak to him on friendly terms.

11 His brothers were jealous of him...

Joseph told his brothers about a dream he had in which his brothers' sheaves bowed down to his sheaf. He also told them another dream in which the sun and moon, and eleven stars were seen bowing down to him. His brothers knew the dreams implied that Joseph would one day be superior to them and rule over them (Gen. 37:5-10). This caused them to hate him even more (v. 5), and they hatched an evil plot against him.

Genesis 37:18-28

18 When they saw him from a distance and before he came close to them, they plotted against him to put him to death.

19 They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer!

20 "Now then, come and let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; and we will say, 'A wild beast devoured him.' Then let us see what will become of his dreams!"

21 But Reuben heard this and rescued him out of their hands and said, "Let us not take his life."

22 Reuben further said to them, "Shed no blood. Throw him into this pit that is in the wilderness, but do not lay hands on him"—that he might rescue him out of their hands, to restore him to his father.

23 So it came about, when Joseph reached his brothers, that they stripped Joseph of his tunic, the varicolored tunic that was on him;

24 and they took him and threw him into the pit. Now the pit was empty, without any water in it.

25 Then they sat down to eat a meal. And as they raised their eyes and looked, behold, a caravan of Ishmaelites was coming from Gilead, with their camels bearing aromatic gum and balm and myrrh, on their way to bring them down to Egypt.

26 Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it for us to kill our brother and cover up his blood?"

27 “Come and let us sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.” And his brothers listened to him.

28 Then some Midianite traders passed by, so they pulled him up and lifted Joseph out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver. Thus they brought Joseph into Egypt.

Joseph’s brothers had initially planned to kill him. But the Lord did not permit this to happen. We see his brothers selling him to the Midianite traders instead, who then sold him to Potiphar, an Egyptian officer. And thus, Joseph became a slave in Egypt.

Genesis 37:36

Meanwhile, the Midianites sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, Pharaoh’s officer, the captain of the bodyguard.

Slave and prisoner in Egypt

Genesis 39 relates the story of Joseph’s life as a slave in Egypt, and how he became a prisoner.

Genesis 39:1-20

1 Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt; and Potiphar, an Egyptian officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the bodyguard, bought him from the Ishmaelites, who had taken him down there.

2 The Lord was with Joseph, so he became a successful man. And he was in the house of his master, the Egyptian.

3 Now his master saw that the Lord was with him and how the Lord caused all that he did to prosper in his hand.

4 So Joseph found favor in his sight and became his personal servant; and he made him overseer over his house, and all that he owned he put in his charge.

5 It came about that from the time he made him overseer in his house and over all that he owned, the Lord blessed the Egyptian’s house on account of Joseph; thus the Lord’s blessing was upon all that he owned, in the house and in the field.

6 So he left everything he owned in Joseph’s charge; and with him there he did not concern himself with anything except the food which he ate.

Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance.

7 It came about after these events that his master’s wife looked

with desire at Joseph, and she said, “Lie with me.”

8 But he refused and said to his master’s wife, “Behold, with me here, my master does not concern himself with anything in the house, and he has put all that he owns in my charge.

9 “There is no one greater in this house than I, and he has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great evil and sin against God?”

10 As she spoke to Joseph day after day, he did not listen to her to lie beside her or be with her.

11 Now it happened one day that he went into the house to do his work, and none of the men of the household was there inside.

12 She caught him by his garment, saying, “Lie with me!” And he left his garment in her hand and fled, and went outside.

13 When she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had fled outside,

14 she called to the men of her household and said to them, “See, he has brought in a Hebrew to us to make sport of us; he came in to me to lie with me, and I screamed.

15 “When he heard that I raised my voice and screamed, he left his garment beside me and fled and went outside.”

16 So she left his garment beside her until his master came home.

17 Then she spoke to him with these words, “The Hebrew slave, whom you brought to us, came in to me to make sport of me;

18 and as I raised my voice and screamed, he left his garment beside me and fled outside.”

19 Now when his master heard the words of his wife, which she spoke to him, saying, “This is what your slave did to me,” his anger burned.

20 So Joseph’s master took him and put him into the jail, the place where the king’s prisoners were confined; and he was there in the jail.

Let us now consider what happened to Joseph from the two perspectives: (a) What he appeared to be going through and (b) The reality of what he was going through.

Appearance – what Joseph appeared to be going through

There are five related points I wish to make about this perspective:

a. Joseph appeared to fare badly as he was reduced from being a favourite son to a slave and then a prisoner.

From outward appearance, Joseph fared badly. From being the beloved son of his father Jacob, he became a slave in a foreign land – low in status, without any personal freedom, and having to do his master's bidding.

And then he was further reduced from being a slave to a prisoner. Although innocent, he was treated as a criminal.

b. He appeared to be in a miserable state and condition, as he was unfairly and cruelly treated by his own brothers and then by his master's wife.

Firstly, out of jealousy, his brothers treated him unfairly and cruelly.

Genesis 37:4, 11

4 His brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers; and so they hated him and could not speak to him on friendly terms.

11 His brothers were jealous of him...

They sold him to Egypt – far away from home, friends and familiar surroundings. As a slave in Egypt, he seemed to be in a miserable state and condition.

Secondly, when he refused to yield to the seduction of his master's wife, she accused him of making sexual advances towards her. Because of her accusation, Joseph was thrown into prison. His life seemed to be getting worse – from being a slave to being a prisoner on a false charge.

Psalm 105 records his afflictions:

Psalm 105:16-18

16 And He called for a famine upon the land;
He broke the whole staff of bread.

17 He sent a man before them,
Joseph, who was sold as a slave.

18 They afflicted his feet with fetters,
He himself was laid in irons;

The description in this psalm paints a seemingly pitiful picture of Joseph.

c. He appeared to be a helpless victim of circumstances and the evil schemes of other people.

Joseph's own brothers sold him into slavery. As a slave he tried to live his life well and he found favour with his master. However, this favour was short-lived. Because of the false accusation by his master's wife, his master relegated him to the position of a prisoner. As was the case when he was sold as a slave, Joseph was again unable to prevent himself from being unfairly treated.

Joseph appeared to be a helpless victim of circumstances, and of the evil schemes and designs of others.

d. The situation appeared very unfavourable and meaningless.

Joseph's master Potiphar initially favoured him.

Genesis 39:3-4

3 Now his master saw that the Lord was with him and how the Lord caused all that he did to prosper in his hand.

4 So Joseph found favor in his sight and became his personal servant; and he made him overseer over his house, and all that he owned he put in his charge.

However, Potiphar later believed his wife's accusation and threw Joseph into prison.

Genesis 39:19-20

19 Now when his master heard the words of his wife, which she spoke to him, saying, "This is what your slave did to me," his anger burned.

20 So Joseph's master took him and put him into the jail, the place where the king's prisoners were confined; and he was there in the jail.

Joseph seemed to have been put into the jail for an indefinite period of time. Such a prospect could be very discouraging for Joseph, especially when he was thrown into prison for being faithful to God, for refusing to yield to temptation and sin. He was wronged, yet

powerless to defend himself.

Subsequently, God helped Joseph to interpret the dreams for the cupbearer and the baker, his fellow prisoners. Joseph told the cupbearer that Pharaoh would reinstate him. Joseph then requested the cupbearer to help him get out of prison after his reinstatement. However, even this glimmer of hope for release appeared dashed because the cupbearer forgot all about Joseph's plight and failed to speak to Pharaoh about his wrongful imprisonment.

Genesis 40:14-15

14 "Only keep me in mind when it goes well with you, and please do me a kindness by mentioning me to Pharaoh and get me out of this house.

15 "For I was in fact kidnapped from the land of the Hebrews, and even here I have done nothing that they should have put me into the dungeon."

Genesis 40:23

Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him.

Days and months passed, and Joseph remained locked up in prison – for another two full years (Gen. 41:1).

Life may seem meaningless when a person suffers injustice, and efforts to change circumstances prove futile, with no hope in view.

e. His life as a slave and a prisoner appeared to be outside of God's will and purposes.

It is not easy to fare well in the midst of prolonged pain and suffering. If we know that the pain and suffering are associated with effective service for God, we may find them easier to bear. But if we cannot see any obvious relationship with effective service, enduring them can be much more difficult. Such suffering may appear to be pointless, outside of God's will, and not contributing to the fulfilling of God's purposes. This is especially so when the situation seems to be getting from bad to worse, like in Joseph's case – from suffering as a slave to suffering as a prisoner. The suffering that Joseph went through seemed to be meaningless.

When we go through similar situations – though often less severe than Joseph’s – we may easily become discouraged, and think that these are terrible situations to be in.

Reality – what Joseph was actually going through

What, indeed, is the reality? How does God view what Joseph went through? What is the true perspective? What is it that counts?

There are two points I wish to make: (1) The Lord was with Joseph and (2) Joseph’s moral and spiritual response was positive.

As we reflect on these two major points, we will see that what appears to be when we view things from the natural and temporal perspective can be very different from the reality when viewed from the spiritual and eternal perspective.

1. The Lord was with Joseph

Throughout the trials, the Lord was with Joseph, watching over him, undertaking for him and helping him. This is a crucial point.

Let us look at the remarkable statement in the Scriptures which introduces the beginning of Joseph’s life as a slave in Egypt.

Genesis 39:2

The Lord was with Joseph, so he became a successful man. And he was in the house of his master, the Egyptian.

In the margin of the NASB, it says “successful” can also be translated as “prosperous”. In the midst of the difficult circumstances, even while Joseph was still a slave, the Lord was with him, and he became a successful or prosperous man!

We read again that when Joseph was thrown into jail by his master, God was with him and whatever he did, the Lord made to prosper.

Genesis 39:21, 23

21 But the Lord was with Joseph and extended kindness to him, and gave him favor in the sight of the chief jailer.

23 The chief jailer did not supervise anything under Joseph’s charge because the Lord was with him; and whatever he did, the Lord made to prosper.

Note the two statements – “the Lord was with Joseph, so he became a successful man” (39:2) and “the Lord was with him; whatever he did, the Lord made to prosper” (39:23) – were made at the beginning of Joseph’s life in Egypt, when he was a slave and then a prisoner.

When we want to understand how a person is faring, what do we look at? The circumstances and events that the person is going through? The way that person is being treated? How does the Lord look at how a person is faring? What is the biblical perspective?

The Scriptures teaches us that it did not really matter whether Joseph was a slave or a prisoner. What really mattered was that the Lord was with him. This is what truly counts.

Notice also the way it is written in the Scriptures. It says: “The Lord was with Joseph, so he became a successful man”. The word, “so”, tells us how Joseph became a successful man. And it also points us towards the basis of true success – the Lord’s presence with Joseph.

The thinking of the world is very different. The world would never regard someone as successful and prospering who had been sold as a slave in a foreign land and then thrown into prison on a false charge. Instead, they would view him as pitiful and in a miserable state.

The Lord wants us to learn to view things with the right perspective. This requires the renewal of the mind – learning to understand issues from the biblical perspective.

Genesis 39:20 tells us Joseph was thrown into jail. His situation appeared to be getting from bad to worse. But verse 21 tells us this was not so. It reads: “But the Lord was with Joseph”. The “but” here tells us the reality of the situation was different from how things appeared. The Lord was with Joseph and this was what mattered.

Let us reflect on the reality and consider how it was closely linked with the Lord being with Joseph. There are five related points I wish to make. These points are in contrast with the earlier five points considered under the perspective of what Joseph appeared to be going through.

a. *While Joseph appeared to fare badly, in reality, he was faring well.*

Genesis 39:2

The Lord was with Joseph, so he became a successful man. And he was in the house of his master, the Egyptian.

The truth is that he became a successful and a prosperous man in the eyes of the Lord. The Lord's presence with Joseph was much more critical to how he fared than the negative circumstances of his life.

b. *Joseph was not in a miserable state or condition.*

How could Joseph be in a miserable state or condition when the Lord was with him? God is the source of light, comfort, joy and peace, and the One who brings meaning into our lives. You cannot be in a miserable state if the almighty God is with you, watching over you and undertaking all matters.

Genesis 39:21 tells us that the Lord was with Joseph and extended kindness to him and gave him favour in the sight of the chief jailer. Verse 3 states that his master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord caused all that he did to prosper.

Clearly Joseph was not in a miserable state.

c. *Joseph was not a helpless victim of circumstances or schemes of people.*

Although Joseph suffered much from the negative conduct of others, he was not a helpless victim. This was because the Lord was watching over him, undertaking for him and regulating the actions of men.

While the Lord is watching over and undertaking for a person, nothing can happen to him and no one, neither the evil one nor evil men, can do anything to him which God does not permit. The situations he goes through will have meaning and purpose. If he responds well, they will form a meaningful part of the fulfilment of God's purposes for his life.

For example, we saw that Joseph's brothers failed in their plans to kill him, for the Lord did not permit it to take place. But the Lord did allow him to be sold into Egypt as a slave, and be thrown into prison. There was reason for this. It formed a part of God's plan

for him to attain to an exalted position in Egypt. As Joseph continued to trust God, he grew in stature as a man of faith. What he went through would have helped him become more understanding towards others in difficult circumstances. This experience would enable him to fulfil his responsibilities better when he became second-in-command over Egypt.

When God allows people to mistreat us or difficult situations to come our way, we will find them unpleasant. But we are not helpless victims in these situations. The almighty God watches over those He loves, those who are walking with Him.

d. There was purpose and meaning in what Joseph went through. The Lord's presence with Joseph gave meaning and purpose to his life, and whatever he went through, he need not be discouraged. If the Lord is with us, and is pleased with our lives, He will give us meaning and purpose in life too. This is a crucial truth for us to grasp.

It is God, not circumstances or people, who gives us ultimate meaning and purpose. Whatever we go through, there will always be meaning, direction and purpose as we walk with God. We lose these only when we become discouraged and choose to disobey the Lord. But if we continually walk with God, trust Him and are faithful to Him, He will always lead us in the path of meaning and purpose.

The Lord Jesus tells us that He gives His peace to us, and He wants us to have fullness of joy in Him (John 14:27; 15:11). Peace and joy come from the Lord, and circumstances cannot take them away. If we maintain our faith and trust in God, we can have unshakeable peace and joy.

e. Joseph's life as a slave and prisoner was within God's will and purposes.

God saw it fit for Joseph to be sold as a slave into Egypt and then thrown into prison. When Joseph was subsequently in the exalted position of second-in-command over Egypt, he wisely administered the affairs of the land and was able to feed many, including his own family, during the years of famine. Joseph recognised that it was God who sent him to Egypt for this purpose.

Genesis 45:4-8

4 Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Please come closer to me." And they came closer. And he said, "I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt.

5 "Now do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life.

6 "For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are still five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvesting.

7 "God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant in the earth, and to keep you alive by a great deliverance.

8 "Now, therefore, it was not you who sent me here, but God; and He has made me a father to Pharaoh and lord of all his household and ruler over all the land of Egypt.

All this was part of the outworking of God's purposes. Bound up with it was God's intention for Israel to go down to Egypt.

Genesis 46:2-4

2 God spoke to Israel in visions of the night and said, "Jacob, Jacob." And he said, "Here I am."

3 He said, "I am God, the God of your father; do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you a great nation there.

4 "I will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also surely bring you up again; and Joseph will close your eyes."

God had made known to Abraham many years earlier that this would take place.

Genesis 15:13-16

13 God said to Abram, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years.

14 "But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve, and afterward they will come out with many possessions.

15 "As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you will be buried at a good old age.

16 "Then in the fourth generation they will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete."

God told Abraham that his descendants would go to a foreign land where they would be oppressed and enslaved for four hundred years. After that they would come out of the land with many possessions and return to Canaan. This prophecy was fulfilled when God led Israel out of Egypt to return to Canaan with many possessions, after four hundred years of slavery in Egypt.

And the Lord said that “in the fourth generation they will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete”. God had intended for the Israelites to eventually settle in the land of Canaan. But it was not time yet. They first had to go to Egypt until the time was right for them to return.

God sent Joseph to Egypt and allowed him to become a slave and be imprisoned. All these events were moving in the direction of the fulfilment of God’s plan and purposes for Israel.

Psalm 105:16-19

16 And He called for a famine upon the land;
He broke the whole staff of bread.

17 He sent a man before them,
Joseph, who was sold as a slave.

18 They afflicted his feet with fetters,
He himself was laid in irons;

19 Until the time that his word came to pass,
The word of the Lord tested him.

It is not clear how much Joseph understood of the meaning of his plight as a slave and prisoner. He might have been rather puzzled then. However, the important thing is: The Lord was with Joseph and was pleased with him. God had a plan and purpose for his life although he might not have discerned its full implications. As Joseph concentrated on being faithful to the Lord, he could be certain that there was meaning and purpose in what he was going through.

Likewise, what is crucial for us is our faithfulness to God. Let us ensure that we are walking with Him and obedient to Him. Then we can be assured that His hand will be upon us and there will be meaning and purpose in our lives. While it can be helpful to understand what we are going through in the midst of a difficult situation, such understanding is of secondary importance.

For Joseph, although the outward circumstances pointed otherwise, he was in reality in the centre of God's plan and purposes for his life. God had an important role for Joseph to fulfil in the outworking of His purposes, and it was very important that Joseph maintained his faith in God in the midst of the difficult circumstances.

This brings us to the second major point: Joseph's posture in life.

2. Joseph's moral and spiritual response was positive

Let us consider what we can learn from Joseph's attitudes and ways.

a. Joseph rejected evil and would not sin against God.

When the wife of Joseph's master kept trying to seduce him, Joseph resisted her advances. A young man in Joseph's situation could easily have given in to the temptation. But Joseph was prepared to take a firm stand, even though he would have been aware that rejecting his master's wife could result in her becoming hostile towards him.

Genesis 39:9

"There is no one greater in this house than I, and he has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great evil and sin against God?"

To Joseph, this was a moral issue. He knew he would have done an evil deed if he had yielded to the temptation.

When his master's wife caught him by his garment, Joseph abandoned the garment and fled from her presence.

Some may think that it is cowardice to flee. But it is not the case here. It takes courage of conviction for someone to walk away from a tempting situation. At times, the right thing to do is to move away from the scene as quickly as we can. This was what Joseph did. He took a stand for the truth by fleeing from temptation.

This incident is a helpful illustration of the principle of fleeing immorality Paul emphasises in 1 Corinthians 6:18.

1 Corinthians 6:18

Flee immorality. Every other sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body.

Joseph chose to be morally upright; he chose to be faithful to God rather than to indulge in fleshly pleasures. He said: “How then could I do this great evil and sin against God?” Although Joseph knew he would be betraying his master’s trust if he were to give in to the advances of his master’s wife, he was more conscious about not sinning against God than not sinning against his master.

Often, what stops us from sinning is the fear of punishment, of sanctions from others, of damage to our reputation, and of the adverse consequences and pain that may come upon us. But these were not Joseph’s primary concerns. He was more concerned about the moral meaning of his conduct, his obedience to God and his bearing a good testimony for God before men.

b. Joseph did not seek his own glory but the glory of God.

While Joseph was in prison, Pharaoh had a dream which no one could interpret. When he heard that Joseph could, he told Joseph his dream.

Genesis 41:15-16

15 Pharaoh said to Joseph, “I have had a dream, but no one can interpret it; and I have heard it said about you, that when you hear a dream you can interpret it.”

16 Joseph then answered Pharaoh, saying, “It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer.”

Pharaoh told him: “I have heard it said about you, that when you hear a dream you can interpret it”. Notice the emphasis on “you” – “you can interpret it”. This would have been a great opportunity for Joseph to impress Pharaoh. Perhaps, he could win Pharaoh’s favour and obtain his release from prison.

While Pharaoh focused on Joseph’s ability to interpret dreams, Joseph directed Pharaoh’s attention to God instead, saying: “It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favourable answer”. He wanted Pharaoh to have the correct understanding and focus and he wanted the glory to go to God, not to himself. He exalted the Lord, not himself, in full view of others.

Joseph again drew Pharaoh’s attention to God in verses 25 and 32.

Genesis 41:25

Now Joseph said to Pharaoh, “Pharaoh’s dreams are one and the same; God has told to Pharaoh what He is about to do.

Genesis 41:32

“Now as for the repeating of the dream to Pharaoh twice, it means that the matter is determined by God, and God will quickly bring it about.

Again and again, instead of projecting himself, Joseph honoured, exalted and glorified God.

Two years before Pharaoh’s dream, when Joseph was talking to the cupbearer and the baker who were imprisoned together with him, Joseph manifested this same attitude.

Genesis 40:8

Then they said to him, “We have had a dream and there is no one to interpret it.” Then Joseph said to them, “Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell it to me, please.”

He started with “Do not interpretations belong to God?” before proceeding further. In saying this, he glorified the Lord instead of glorifying himself.

When Joseph later became ruler over Egypt, he recounted before his brothers what he had gone through.

Genesis 45:4-8

4 Then Joseph said to his brothers, “Please come closer to me.” And they came closer. And he said, “I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt.

5 “Now do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life.

6 “For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are still five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvesting.

7 “God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant in the earth, and to keep you alive by a great deliverance.

8 “Now, therefore, it was not you who sent me here, but God; and He has made me a father to Pharaoh and lord of all his

household and ruler over all the land of Egypt.

In his account of what he had gone through, Joseph did not claim any credit for himself. Nothing was mentioned about his ability to interpret dreams and how it led to recognition from Pharaoh. Instead, he referred to the sovereignty of God and God's purposes at work. He emphasised that God was the One who made him a father to Pharaoh and lord of all his household and ruler over all the land of Egypt.

So we see that at all times, whether in prison or before Pharaoh, or when exalted as ruler over Egypt, his attitude and approach was not to exalt himself, but to live for God's glory.

c. Joseph was not revengeful or vindictive but was forgiving, kind and caring.

Genesis 45:1-3

1 Then Joseph could not control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried, "Have everyone go out from me." So there was no man with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers.

2 He wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard of it.

3 Then Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph! Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, for they were dismayed at his presence.

This was Joseph, the exalted ruler over Egypt, before his frightened brothers. They were dismayed. But what was Joseph's attitude towards his brothers who had been cruel to him and had sold him as a slave to Egypt? When the tide turned and they were at his mercy, how did he treat them?

In Genesis 45:4-8, which we referred to in point 2b, we see that far from being retaliatory, Joseph showed kindness in words and actions towards his brothers. He forgave them and showed them love and care. He spoke tenderly to them, saying: "Please come closer to me", and "I am your brother Joseph". However, he did not condone their actions. He reminded them of their wrongdoing in

selling him into Egypt. And then he comforted them: “Do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life”.

Joseph wanted them to see that something meaningful was taking place: He was sent to preserve the descendants of Jacob, to keep them alive during the famine. He was made ruler over Egypt so he could take care of them.

Genesis 45:10-11

10 “You shall live in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children’s children and your flocks and your herds and all that you have.

11 “There I will also provide for you, for there are still five years of famine to come, and you and your household and all that you have would be impoverished.” ’

Joseph showed practical concern by arranging for his brothers to live near him. He not only forgave them, but also returned good for evil, showing kindness and gentleness, concern and care to those who had ill-treated him.

He responded to his brothers in like manner after his father’s death.

Genesis 50:15-17

15 When Joseph’s brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, “What if Joseph bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong which we did to him!”

16 So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, “Your father charged before he died, saying,

17 ‘Thus you shall say to Joseph, “Please forgive, I beg you, the transgression of your brothers and their sin, for they did you wrong.” ’ And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father.” And Joseph wept when they spoke to him.

Joseph’s brothers were still apprehensive that Joseph might do them harm now that their father had passed away. Joseph wept when he heard the words of his brothers. The verses that follow and other scriptural passages (e.g. Gen. 45:1-8) suggest that the tears expressed his compassion, understanding and tender feelings towards his

brothers. There could also be a tinge of sadness over how his brothers felt about him, their fear of him and their failure to understand his attitude towards them.

Genesis 50:18-21

18 Then his brothers also came and fell down before him and said, “Behold, we are your servants.”

19 But Joseph said to them, “Do not be afraid, for am I in God’s place?”

20 “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive.

21 “So therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones.” So he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

In verse 19, Joseph said to them: “Do not be afraid, for am I in God’s place?” He would not judge his brothers but would leave the judgement of his brothers’ actions to God.

Although he did not condone his brothers’ sins, he was not revengeful. There was no bitterness towards them, but appreciation of God and His sovereignty. God had brought about good (from the unkind deeds of his brothers) when He led Joseph to be ruler of Egypt so as to preserve many lives, including those of Jacob’s descendants.

Joseph again comforted them and assured them that he had forgiven them. He even promised to provide for them and their children (v. 21). We see manifested here the positive qualities of love and kindness in the heart of Joseph.

d. Joseph was able to perceive God’s hand at work.

Genesis 45:4-5

4 Then Joseph said to his brothers, “Please come closer to me.” And they came closer. And he said, “I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt.

5 “Now do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life.

Genesis 45:8

“Now, therefore, it was not you who sent me here, but God...

Joseph could perceive the spiritual reality beyond the outward circumstances. As Joseph focused on God, he could see the ultimate meaning behind what he was going through. Although his brothers sold him into Egypt, he knew that God was at work behind the scene, using him to preserve many lives.

Here is an important principle: We should continually seek to understand what God is doing in our lives beyond the visible and the obvious. Instead of allowing ourselves to be negatively affected by difficult and adverse circumstances, we should concentrate on what God is doing and learn the lessons God desires to teach us in the situations of life.

Because Joseph focused on God, he was able to help his brothers recognise the hand of God at work. Joseph was also sensitive to God's presence and His hand at work when he responded to Pharaoh regarding his dreams.

Genesis 41:16

...“It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer.”

Genesis 41:25

Now Joseph said to Pharaoh, “Pharaoh's dreams are one and the same; God has told to Pharaoh what He is about to do.

Although he was a mere prisoner appearing before a mighty ruler of the world, he remained spiritually focused – on what God had to say and on His intentions in the situation. He knew that God would give Pharaoh the answer to his dreams.

These passages show us that Joseph walked closely with God and was seeking to discern God's will and God's hand in all that he was going through, so that he could fulfil the part God desired of him.

If we are to go through situations well, we need to walk close to God, have the correct perspective, and be spiritually sensitive to Him.

e. Joseph exercised faith in God.

Genesis 50:24-26

24 Joseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die, but God will surely take care of you and bring you up from this land to the land which He promised on oath to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob."

25 Then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, "God will surely take care of you, and you shall carry my bones up from here."

26 So Joseph died at the age of one hundred and ten years; and he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt.

When Joseph came to the end of his life, what was uppermost in his mind? What instructions did he give his brothers? What were his main concerns? What attitude did he reflect?

Although he was the exalted ruler of Egypt, he was not preoccupied with material things or his position in life. Instead he said: "I am about to die, but God will surely take care of you and bring you up from this land to the land which He promised on oath to Abraham".

His brothers might have been fearful of a future without Joseph. But Joseph wanted them to trust God and His promises. He reminded them of God's promise and expressed confidence in its fulfilment since God had said so.

Joseph also gave instruction about his bones (v. 25). Although stated in a matter-of-fact way, his instruction to his brothers about his bones shows his great faith in God. It is interesting to note that when the writer to the Hebrews referred to Joseph as a man of faith, it was this aspect of Joseph's life that was highlighted.

Hebrews 11:22

By faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the exodus of the sons of Israel, and gave orders concerning his bones.

Why was Joseph's instruction about his bones an act of faith? It shows that Joseph believed God would do as He had promised, long before its fulfilment. He believed that God would bring them out of

Egypt into the Promised Land. He knew that he had a part in God's plan and he pointed his brothers to it so that they too could have a part in it.

We see here, Joseph, a man of faith, focusing on God's purposes and promises and on what counts in eternity, instead of focusing on the glory of this world.

Similarly, we know that God has promised the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus. This will certainly come to pass. Do we then live our lives consistent with this truth?

True faith is not simply acknowledging what God has said is true, but also faithfully living out a life consistent with the implications of the truths we have come to understand.

God Himself was faithful. He brought the Israelites into the Promised Land, just as He had promised. All that Joseph told his brothers about God bringing the Israelites out of Egypt into the Promised Land and the carrying of his bones to Canaan came to pass.

Joshua 24:32

Now they buried the bones of Joseph, which the sons of Israel brought up from Egypt, at Shechem, in the piece of ground which Jacob had bought from the sons of Hamor the father of Shechem for one hundred pieces of money; and they became the inheritance of Joseph's sons.

f. Joseph was deeply conscious of God.

We observe deep consciousness of God in Joseph's life. When faced with temptation, he was conscious that he must not sin against God. When he appeared before Pharaoh to interpret his dreams, he pointed Pharaoh to God instead of claiming credit for himself, for he recognised the hand of God in that situation and God's message for Pharaoh. When he spoke to his brothers in their fear and dismay, he comforted them and directed them to God and His purposes. He pronounced God's sovereignty and the great things God was doing through his life. Even on his deathbed, we see this same consciousness of God when he pointed his brothers to the promises of God for Israel and expressed his confidence that God would fulfil what He had promised.

We have considered the two major points: (1) The Lord being with Joseph and (2) Joseph's positive response. These two major points bear a positive relationship with and reinforce each other. The Lord being with Joseph encouraged and enabled him to respond well morally and spiritually, and in turn, his positive response strengthened the quality and meaning of the Lord being with him. The Lord being with Joseph and his positive response, together with what he could learn from the situations he went through, formed part of the total picture of the fulfilment of God's purposes in and through his life.

Concluding remarks

In this message, we saw how Joseph as a slave and prisoner seemed to be a miserable victim of circumstances. His situation appeared meaningless and discouraging. But in reality, Joseph was not a helpless victim. The Lord was with him, helping him and granting him success. No one could do anything to him without God's permission. Although Joseph might not have fully understood or appreciated all that had happened when he was going through them, he trusted God and found meaning and purpose in his life. There is much that we can learn from Joseph as an outstanding man of faith.

Joseph responded to life's situations positively. He was careful about his moral conduct and viewed things from the spiritual perspective. When faced with temptations, he did not entertain them. When given a chance to raise his personal profile, he gave honour and glory to God instead. When others tried to harm him, he returned good for evil instead of seeking revenge. When faced with adversity, he exercised faith, recognising God's sovereignty and mighty hand at work.

Joseph's character was marked by deep consciousness of God. He had good moral and spiritual values. How others treated him was of secondary importance. To him, what was more important was to maintain moral purity and to be true to God. Because of that, God was pleased to be with him and to help him. And that changed the whole complexion of things. The reality of what Joseph went through was thus vastly different from what appeared to be. He was neither a victim of circumstances nor in a miserable state. He was faring well and very much in God's will.

Likewise, what we should be concerned about is the Lord's

approval of our lives and His presence with us. Whether the situations we go through are easy or difficult, or whether others are for or against us, all these should be of secondary importance.

Let us make sure that our lives are right before God and that He is pleased with us. Let us draw our confidence from the fact that God cares for us and is undertaking for our lives because He is our heavenly Father and we are His children. As we respond positively to Him, our lives will have meaning, purpose and direction. We will not be victims of circumstances, and we need not feel helpless or hopeless.

Let us learn from Joseph's example and reflect over our own lives. Are we preoccupied with what is happening to us, with the situation we are going through, or are we concentrating on what God is doing in the situation and what He wants us to learn? What is our attitude and conduct? Do we take a stand on moral issues, or do we shrink back out of self-preservation? Are we men and women of faith? Do we live by sight or by faith? Do we choose based on that which is temporal and fleeting, or on that which endures through eternity?

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What tests of faith did Joseph have to go through as a slave and a prisoner? What can we learn from the way Joseph went through this difficult period in his life?
2. In what ways does the reality differ from what Joseph appeared to be going through?
3. What are the two major factors that ensure a person will fare well under all circumstances? What practical steps can you take so that these two factors can reinforce each other in your life?

The Fire That Burns Within

This is one of the early messages that I preached – 29 years ago. It covers a vital area close to my heart. The fire that burns within is a trait that stands out in Christians whose lives truly count for God and His kingdom. This is the mark of a man of faith and the kind of life God desires for all His children. It is thus crucial for God's children to see clearly the importance of a heart on fire – what it means, how it comes about and how it grows in intensity and meaning.

God desires us to become conformed to the image of His Son. It is therefore helpful for us to constantly reflect on the life and conduct of our Lord Jesus and learn from Him.

I wish to consider with you an incident in the life of the Lord Jesus recorded in John 2:13-17.

John 2:13-17

13 The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

14 And He found in the temple those who were selling oxen and sheep and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables.

15 And He made a scourge of cords, and drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen; and He poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables;

16 and to those who were selling the doves He said, "Take these things away; stop making My Father's house a place of business."

17 His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for Your house will consume me."

This incident reveals something unusual in the life of the Lord

Jesus. In contrast to many other incidents portraying Him as gentle and caring, we see here the anger of the Lord Jesus vividly displayed. Some people in the temple were showing a lack of reverence for the holiness and glory of God by making the temple a place of business. This displeased the Lord Jesus greatly and He drove them out of the temple.

There are some who find this passage troubling. I remember reading the works of the philosopher Bertrand Russell in my younger days. He listed this incident as one of the reasons why he could not believe in Jesus as God. To him, a perfect God would not lose His temper. If Jesus were indeed God, He would not have behaved the way He did in the temple. So, Bertrand Russell concluded that Jesus could not be God.

Although this passage may have troubled some, if we ponder carefully over it, we will find that it is actually very rich in meaning, and many helpful principles can be drawn from it.

This passage can be viewed from many angles. In this message, I will be looking at it from the angle of zeal for the Lord. We will concentrate on verse 17: His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for Your house will consume me." I see this as the key verse in this passage. John uses this verse to explain the unusual and puzzling conduct of the Lord Jesus.

Bertrand Russell wrongly concluded that the Lord Jesus lost His temper. Losing one's temper involves loss of self-control. The Lord Jesus did not lose His temper on this or any other occasion. Here, it was an expression of righteous anger against those who were irreverent towards God and who misused His temple. It was a manifestation of zeal for God and for the things of God's kingdom. The issues involved are significant in the eyes of the Lord.

"Zeal for Your house will consume me". This is a characteristic of an effective servant of God. Whether in the Scriptures or in church history, we will find this to be the distinguishing mark of those whose lives counted for God. They have this intensity in their lives, this fire that burns within them. Often, we hear of people obeying God hesitantly and reluctantly. Not so with those who have a burning desire to do the will of God. And this is what we see portrayed in

the life of the Lord Jesus, not just on this occasion, but throughout His earthly life.

Burden for the Lord's work

From time to time, God raises up individuals to shake and revive a sleepy church. These are men who have a deep burden for God's work. A strong fire burns within them, a fire that comes from God Himself. Through them, God accomplishes much.

John Wesley was a man on fire for God. Through his life and service, he shook the whole of England and left an indelible mark in the history of the church. It was he who said, "Give me one hundred men who fear nothing but sin, and desire nothing but God, and I will shake the world." By these words, he was expressing the critical need for men totally on fire for God, men totally committed to God.

But God's kingdom cannot be advanced by zeal alone. Zeal must go together with true knowledge, with an understanding of God's purposes. We need to know what is in God's heart, how He wants things to be accomplished. And this zeal must be sustained, not one that fades away quickly or over time.

The Lord Jesus was not zealous for minor or trivial things but for what truly matters. He was zealous for the house of God – not for the temple as a physical building, but for what the temple signifies, the spiritual house of God, the kingdom of God. He had a consuming love and passion for God's glory and for His kingdom. This is at the heart of the meaning of the fire that burns within.

The apostle Paul

The apostle Paul is a very good example of a man consumed by zeal for God and the Lord's work. You can see much evidence of this in the Book of Acts and in his letters. If you read through the epistles of Paul, you will find, again and again, that he writes with a burning heart.

Let us first look at Acts 20, where Paul expressed to the elders of the church in Ephesus the primary motivation of his life.

Acts 20:24

"But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself,

so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God.

After Paul understood what was in God's heart and the role God had for him, all that mattered to him was to finish his course. He no longer considered his life to be his own. It had been totally given over to God and to the ministry God had entrusted to him. All that mattered to him now was "to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God".

In verse 19, Paul talks about "serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews". Why was he serving with tears? It was because of the deep burden in his heart for the people and the state that they were in. He toiled for them despite the many trials which came upon him. He did not shrink from declaring to them anything that was profitable, teaching them publicly and from house to house (v. 20).

Again the same spirit comes through in verses 22 and 23:

Acts 20:22-23

22 "And now, behold, bound in spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there,
23 except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me.

Paul was bound in spirit and making his way to Jerusalem. He did not know what would happen to him there. But in every city, the Holy Spirit had testified to Paul that bonds and afflictions, imprisonment and sufferings would come upon him. Paul was not perturbed by how they would come about or how severe these would be. All these did not deter or distract him. His only concern, which he expressed in verse 24, was that he might finish his course and the ministry he had received.

Paul's heart did not fluctuate. His whole life was centred on and consumed by the purposes of God. From his innermost being flowed forth rivers of living water (John 7:38). The Holy Spirit who indwelt Paul enabled him to live consistently and steadfastly in the direction God desired and to continually minister life to others.

Sense of mission

A person with zeal for God will have a clear sense of mission and a strong sense of urgency. He sees the need to be ready and equipped at all times. Paul had this spirit and attitude within him. In 2 Timothy 4:1-3, he urged Timothy in the same direction.

2 Timothy 4:1-3

1 I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom:

2 preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction.

3 For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires,

Paul told Timothy: "I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus..." This conveys to us the seriousness with which Paul regarded the work of God. There was a sense of urgency, a sense of the importance of the task. He exhorted Timothy: "Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction". Whatever the circumstances, God's true servants should be ready to continue serving and ministering as God desires of them.

As Paul told Timothy, a time will come when people will not endure sound doctrine. None of us knows what the future may hold, and whether opportunities will again present themselves. So, while we have the opportunity, let us labour for the Lord.

A Christ-centred life and fruitful labour

A heart on fire for God is a Christ-centred life and one with fruitful labour. In Philippians 1, Paul, writing from prison, expresses this spirit and reality in his life:

Philippians 1:19-25

19 for I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayers and the provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ,

20 according to my earnest expectation and hope, that I will not be put to shame in anything, but that with all boldness, Christ will even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.

21 For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

22 But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose.

23 But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better;

24 yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake.

25 Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith,

Paul had come to know the gospel and the love of God. To him, nothing in this world could compare with the joy of being in the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Even though it would be a wonderful thing to depart from this world and be with the Lord Jesus, Paul knew the Lord wanted him to remain on earth and engage in fruitful labour for the sake of the brethren, for their progress in the faith (vs. 22, 24, 25).

Verse 21 is the key verse in this passage. In a few words, Paul conveys powerfully and clearly his whole approach to life and what consumes him: “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain”. It tells us that Christ is the very heart and centre of Paul’s life. Christ is the foundation and basis of his life. Christ means everything to him. Thus Paul sought continually to deepen in his knowledge of the Lord Jesus and in his relationship with Him. To Paul, this was what life is all about. He was ever conscious of Christ – always living in deep fellowship with Him and by His guidance and power.

He says: “I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2). So Paul concentrated on the Lord Jesus Christ, not only for his own life, but also in his ministry. He devoted his life to helping people to come to know Christ as Saviour and Lord and helping believers to grow in Him.

What Paul says in verse 20 is part of the expression of this approach to life: “Christ will even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death”. The exaltation of Christ was what preoccupied him. He was not distracted by what the world

could offer. He would exalt Christ “now, as always”, all the time, whatever the circumstances, whether as a free man or imprisoned. He would exalt Christ “whether by life or by death” – whatever might happen to him, even unto death.

Paul’s heart was not inward-looking. It looked upwards to the Lord Jesus Christ, to the glory of God. It also looked outwards to the needs of the brethren. Within Paul’s heart, a true fire burned. In him, we see no trace of self-centred living. If there were, the fire within would have been dimmed.

We see this same spirit and approach to life reflected in Philippians 3.

That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings

Philippians 3:8-14

8 More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ,

9 and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith,

10 that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death;

11 in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.

12 Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus.

13 Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead,

14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Paul says in verse 8: “I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord”. “All things” would include all that this world has to offer – reputation, status,

worldly accomplishments. It would include Paul's Jewish heritage and works of the Law, things which he once valued highly. All these were no longer important to him (vs. 4-9). He discarded them because of the "surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus".

Knowing the Lord Jesus is not a one-time event that takes place at conversion. It is a process. We should seek to know Him more and more. Paul gave up all that he once held dear so that he could grow in his knowledge of Christ. He says in verses 10 and 11: "That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead".

A person who has a burning heart will seek, above all things, to know Christ. Not only that, he will also seek to know the power of His resurrection, which is the power of the Holy Spirit who raised Christ from the dead. Being filled and empowered by the Holy Spirit is an integral part of such a life and enables one to be ready to enter into the fellowship of Christ's sufferings. One who longs to know the fellowship of Christ's sufferings will nurture a heart that identifies with the burdens in the heart of Christ, the Man of sorrows. He is prepared to suffer for God's kingdom and for the sake of the brethren according to the will of God. This spirit was supremely manifested by Christ at the Cross.

Paul continues: "Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on..." Never feeling satisfied, never thinking he has attained to perfection of Christ, always pressing on towards the upward call of God, always thirsting and hungering to deepen in his fellowship with God and to grow in spiritual maturity – this is the characteristic of one whose heart is on fire for God.

Earnest desire to do the will of God

We often have to coax believers to do the will of God. We have to persuade them and impress on them why doing the will of God is really good for them, and why it would be tragic for them if they do otherwise. In the lives of many believers, we often find a reluctant and hesitant kind of willingness to follow God when difficulties and uncertainties are involved. They may express to the Lord, "I am willing to obey You, Lord, if You show me Your will." There may be

some degree of sincerity in these words, but often the spirit of it is deficient. There is a tinge of reluctance and unwillingness. They may in fact be saying, "Since I have committed myself, since I have promised, I should keep my part of the bargain. Therefore I will do it. It's difficult for me, it's unpleasant to me, but I will do it." Actually, they would rather not do it. When the will of God is contrary to their personal inclination, they would rather not know the will of God so that they need not obey it. This is not the kind of attitude that delights the heart of God.

You will not find such reluctance in the person who has the fire burning within. You do not have to coax him. He earnestly desires to know the will of God. And when he recognises the will of God, he will do it, whatever the cost. Such is the case with Paul. He would press on and obey God "whether by life or by death", whatever might be awaiting him, be it bonds or afflictions. He sought to know the will of God for his whole life as well as at each stage of his life, in the specific situation that he was in, so that he could fulfil it.

It is true that doing the will of God can be very painful. But knowing that His will is perfect and good, our whole approach to life should be one in which we intensely desire to know and do the will of God, whatever it may be.

Intense concern for spiritual growth of believers

One who has the fire burning within will have an intense concern for the spiritual growth of believers.

Again, the apostle Paul is a good example. We see in his letters many expressions of deep burden for the growth of believers. In his letter to the Galatians, he says: "My children, with whom I am again in labor until Christ is formed in you" (Gal. 4:19). The word "labour" is the same word used for a woman going through childbirth. Mothers would have a better idea of what it means to be in labour. The pain can be agonising, almost unbearable. Paul uses this word to express his intense desire for the spiritual development and transformation in the lives of believers. It took a lot out of him, but he was prepared to go through whatever was needful for the growth of believers. He desired to present every man complete in Christ. He strove and laboured according to the power of God that worked in him

(Col. 1:28-29). He told the Corinthian believers: “I will most gladly spend and be expended for your souls” (2 Cor. 12:15).

The whole being on fire for God

It is clear that this kind of zeal is not something emotional. Although emotion is involved, it is not primarily of the emotions. If such zeal were merely emotional, it would not last. It would come and go. But this zeal that we are talking about is one that lasts, one that consumes the whole life.

This kind of zeal is also not merely of the mind or of the will. Some people think if the mind understands and the will is determined, then zeal for God is present. This is not the case. Some Christians have good attitudes. They know the will of God and are determined to do it. Yet there is no fire burning within.

A person with fire burning within will have zeal that involves the whole being, not just the emotions, the mind, or the will. *The whole being is on fire for God, especially the inner man.* There is a deep burden within.

Different manifestations of this kind of zeal

As we consider this issue of the fire that burns within, let us be mindful that there can be different manifestations. People have different personalities. We should not be quick to conclude from outward expressions that one person is on fire for God and another is not, or that one has a stronger fire within than another.

A person may appear to be on fire for God, but it may be primarily an emotional experience without much positive spiritual meaning and reality. He may declare: “I am willing to do anything for God, even to die for Him”. But before long, his “fire” may die out and he may no longer be earnest for the things of God.

Another person may come across as quiet and without much fire. We may think that he is not very spiritual. Yet, he can be full of spiritual energy and vitality and truly on fire for God.

Because we are different, there will be different outward manifestations of the fire that burns within. Some of us are more expressive; others less so. Our gifts are different, so are our roles. Whatever our personalities, whatever our gifts and roles, the same

fire must burn within. The same kind of attitude and intensity must be present in all of us.

How does this kind of zeal and fire come about?

There are two aspects to this: the work of the Holy Spirit and man's response. Both are important and both must be present.

The reality of this principle at work comes through clearly in the life of the apostle Paul. As considered in Message 6, Paul testifies to this reality in 1 Corinthians 15:10.

1 Corinthians 15:10

But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me.

On the one hand, it is only by the grace of God and the work of the Holy Spirit that we can have this fire within. On the other hand, there is also the need for deep response on man's part. Paul says: "His grace toward me did not prove vain".

The Holy Spirit desires to fill us, empower us, and help us to be on fire for God. Very often, however, we do not respond properly. We do not remove the obstacles in our life, thus hindering the working of the Spirit of God in us.

Paul knew the importance of man's response. He says: "I laboured even more than all of them". Responding to God involves labour. We have to work hard at it. But then, Paul also says: "Yet not I, but the grace of God with me". He knew that he could not respond or labour on his own, but he had to do so according to God's gracious working in his life.

So, the two must go together. We cannot just wait for the fire to ignite spontaneously. Nor can we just strive to ignite it on our own. We need to look to the Lord for a deeper experience of the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. At the same time, we must commit ourselves to working out God's purposes and cooperating with Him. Beyond mere words or thoughts that others may share with us, there needs to be an inward revelation from God, a spiritual insight brought about by the Holy Spirit. It is only with God's

revelation that we can have the vision from above and the fire that burns within – one that is genuine and long-lasting.

In Galatians 1, we see an illustration of this principle of man responding to God's revelation.

Galatians 1:11-12

11 For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man.

12 For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

Paul said that the gospel he preached did not come from men, but he received it directly from God, through a revelation of Jesus Christ. He had met the Lord Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus and from then on, God opened up to him the mysteries, the deep things of God. There was a revelation in his heart, in the inner man. He caught the inward revelation. That is what spurred him on to commit his whole life to God and to the work God entrusted to him. This led Paul to say:

Galatians 2:20

“I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.

Having caught the revelation, his whole life now centred on the Lord Jesus. Recognising that the Lord Jesus loved him and delivered Himself up for him, as a response of faith, Paul lived totally for the Lord by the power of the risen Christ. It was no longer Paul who lived, but Christ lived in him. He actively cooperated with the Lord Jesus so that the Lord could have the freedom to work in and through him.

We may not receive revelation from God the way Paul did. Revelation from God can come to us in different ways. God can reveal the truth to our hearts as we read the Scriptures, as we pray, as we hear the truth being preached or taught by others, or through the sharing of the brethren, or even through the lives of others. Ultimately, for there to be a deep reality, there must be definite revelation of

truth to the heart. It is not just the mind grasping the truth. The heart must also see it – its beauty, its glory and its importance. And as we respond to this revelation from God, the burden grows, the fire grows. It is then that we can enter into God's heart, into the fellowship of His burden for His kingdom and for His people.

Zeal for God can be cultivated

The fire that burns within can be cultivated, and it is important that we cultivate it continually. How can we do so?

The fire grows as we deepen in our appreciation of God's greatness and goodness and all that this implies. It grows when we recognise more and more the terribleness of sin, the corruption of man, and the hopelessness and plight of man. It grows as we see the tremendous hope and riches to be found in the Lord Jesus Christ. It grows as we see more clearly what is in the heart of God, how we can have a part in the fulfilment of His glorious purposes, and how lives that are transformed can make a difference that endures to eternity.

The fire can grow when we spend time with the Lord. We are often distracted by daily chores and work responsibilities. If we can be less distracted and more earnest in our time with God, we can enter into a deeper fellowship with Him and learn to see things the way He does, and be concerned about the things He is concerned about.

When our hearts are open, God will continually impress upon us His truths, even those we have understood, so that there can be an increasing depth of appreciation. We will see more and more clearly the glory of God and the hopelessness of the man without God in this world of darkness. We will then be deeply convicted that a life lived solely for God is the only life worth living. Such a conviction will then drive our whole life, giving it a clear sense of purpose and direction.

True fire is stable, unceasing

True fire must come from the Lord. It is the work of the Holy Spirit within our hearts. Acts 2:3 uses the word "fire" to describe the ministry of the Holy Spirit. On the Day of Pentecost, tongues of fire rested on the people, and they were filled with the Holy Spirit.

The work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer is also pictured as “rivers of living water” flowing unceasingly.

John 7:38-39

38 “He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, ‘From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.’ ”

39 But this He spoke of the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were to receive; for the Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

This picture conveys the truth that the Spirit will energise the believer to live the abundant life in Christ, one that is stable, consistent and steadfast. Difficulties and obstacles may come his way, others may seek to discourage him, but if the fire is burning strongly within him, it will not be easily snuffed out. He will not be easily shaken or distracted, but will be able to carry on in the ways of God and grow unto maturity.

True fire spreads, giving life to others

Like the living water that gives life to others, true fire will spread and bring light and warmth to others, impacting them in a positive way.

When the Lord Jesus spoke to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, they felt a fire burning within them (Luke 24:32). In other words, the fire of the Lord Jesus spread to them and it burned within their hearts. This kind of fire brings light and life. This is what we see in the ministry of the apostle Paul, as he went about strengthening the disciples. The fire within the heart of Paul encouraged other believers and helped them in their faith.

True fire must be maintained and fed

Even when the fire that burns within is generally stable and is able to spread to others, it can still die out if not constantly fed. It is sad if all that a believer can say is, “Once upon a time, I had a wonderful experience that changed my life completely.” But because he had not fed the fire, it has now been extinguished. All he has left are past experiences.

We must not become complacent after having experienced the reality of the fire burning within. We have to feed it so that it may

grow stronger and brighter. This takes place as we feed on the word of God, as we nurture our relationship with God and fellowship with His people, as we engage in prayer and labours of love and other spiritual exercises, and as we obey the injunctions in the Scriptures. As we continue to grow healthily, the fire will grow. This kind of life must be nurtured. It cannot remain static. It will either grow or die off. Either we respond positively to God and make progress or we do not respond positively and go downhill.

So, when we talk about the fire that burns within, it is not just a question of whether we have it or we do not. There is the issue of the intensity of the fire, the brightness of the fire, the quality of the fire. And this can vary from person to person, and within the same person at different phases in his life.

Elijah's fluctuating experience

We see in the experience of Elijah an example of varying intensity of fire at different points in his life. 1 Kings 18 records an incident in which Elijah demonstrated much faith and confidence in God. We can see clearly the fire burning within him.

At this point in time, Elijah was being hunted by Ahab, a powerful and evil king of Israel.

1 Kings 18:17

When Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said to him, "Is this you, you troubler of Israel?"

But Elijah was unafraid. See how he responded to Ahab.

1 Kings 18:18

He said, "I have not troubled Israel, but you and your father's house have, because you have forsaken the commandments of the Lord and you have followed the Baals.

Elijah told King Ahab to his face that the king and his ancestors were the ones who brought trouble to Israel. From the human point of view, Elijah's life was in Ahab's hands. As the king of Israel, Ahab could easily have ordered Elijah killed. Yet, Elijah went on to say:

1 Kings 18:19

“Now then send and gather to me all Israel at Mount Carmel, together with 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of the Asherah, who eat at Jezebel’s table.”

Normally, one would expect the subject to listen to the king’s command. In this instance, Elijah had the audacity to instruct the king to gather all Israel and the prophets of Baal and Asherah before him at Mount Carmel. As you read on, you will see Elijah showing great confidence in God. He called on God to answer his prayer by fire and put to shame all the false prophets.

What we have here is a dramatic demonstration of the power of God over the prophets of Baal. However, soon after this confrontation at Mount Carmel, we see Elijah entering a low point in his life.

After the confrontation on Mount Carmel, Ahab told his wife Jezebel all that Elijah had done and how Elijah had all the prophets of Baal killed with the sword (1 Kings 19:1). Jezebel then sent a messenger after Elijah threatening to take his life. On receiving this threat, Elijah became “afraid and arose and ran for his life” (v. 3). Not only did he run for his life, he even requested that he might die, saying: “It is enough; now, O Lord, take my life” (v. 4).

Elijah had on the earlier occasion demonstrated much zeal and power and great confidence in God, but on the latter occasion, he showed great fear and discouragement. When threatened by Jezebel, he was discouraged to the point of wishing he were dead. We see then that a person can be zealous for God in one moment and fail to maintain that zeal in the next.

God desires us to be on fire for Him not just for an occasion. He wants us to continue to maintain at all times the fire, the intensity, the confidence in Him. Even a person of such spiritual stature and fiery zeal as Elijah can falter in this area! This episode in the life of Elijah has been recorded in the Scriptures for our learning. How important it is then to be prayerful and vigilant at all times!

In the case of Elijah, we need to understand that he had just fought an intense spiritual battle with the prophets of Baal. It is likely the forces of darkness were stirred up against him. It was a time of great spiritual pressure. In addition, Jezebel was no ordinary

woman, but the vicious and wicked wife of the king of Israel, over whom she wielded much influence. And she wanted Elijah dead. Elijah was also under the wrong impression that all Israel had forsaken the Lord's covenant and all the Lord's prophets had been killed and he alone was left (1 Kings 19:10). Under such circumstances, he was vulnerable to the fiery darts of the evil one. He crumbled under the pressure and became alarmed and dejected. He failed to maintain his faith and confidence in the Lord.

As we desire to be serious for God, we must be prepared for times of intense spiritual pressure, especially after an important event or a great victory that the Lord has accomplished through us. Significant testing of our faith may follow soon after. A life of deep burden for the Lord's work is not an easy life. It is a life in which we will encounter many difficulties. But we can be assured that the Lord understands and He is always seeking to help us attain to greater heights in the process.

We can see this in the way God reached out to Elijah, His wounded servant, to help him and lift him up. Elijah responded well and carried on faithfully till he was taken up into heaven. Likewise, when we falter, we must look to God humbly as He seeks to help us. If we respond well, we can bounce back and continue to grow and serve the Lord well. What we have gone through can even be a helpful part of our total learning experience. But if we do not respond well, we may go downhill and may never recover.

“I want nothing for myself. I want everything for the Lord.”

Throughout church history, there have arisen men and women of God who have this kind of spirit and attitude. We see such an attitude in Watchman Nee. He had this as the motto of his life: “I want nothing for myself. I want everything for the Lord”.

When we really learn how to live with this kind of attitude, we will find increasing freedom from many of the problems that trouble us – struggles and difficulties associated with various things we want for ourselves. Of course, we will still face various kinds of struggles in the path of a faithful walk with God. But they will not be like the negative kinds that now beset us, that hinder us in our effectiveness for God. Instead, what we go through will contribute to our total

development and service.

Those who do not have this kind of spirit and attitude cannot go far in their walk with God and service for Him. Many of the things that hinder us have to do with things that we want for ourselves. We want comfort, pleasures, material wealth, a successful career, recognition and appreciation from others. These things may not be wrong in themselves. But if we seek them for ourselves, outside the framework of the Lord's will and provision for our lives, we become easy prey for the evil one. Such desires within us give grounds for the devil to attack, distract and destroy us. If left unchecked, these desires can grow and become very detrimental to our own lives and to the Lord's work.

However, if we live with the attitude of not wanting anything for ourselves, but everything for the Lord, the Spirit of God will then be able to work effectively in our lives.

The attitude of not wanting anything for ourselves but everything for the Lord does not mean we do not care about our own lives. It means we are fully committed to the Lord and His will in all things, including His will for our lives. We are fully contented in the Lord and our earnest desire is that His will be done. We do not want anything for ourselves apart from the will of God and what He deems best for us.

This is the paradox of the Christian life: When we give up all things to God and we do not cling to anything, the Lord can then freely and richly bless us with all things, that is, all things that are good for us. Ultimately, this is what God desires. And this is what Paul tells us in Romans 8:32: "He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?"

All too often, we hold on to or clamour for things that are not truly good for us. As a result, the rich blessings of God cannot fully come upon us.

Other examples in church history

Throughout church history, there are men of faith who have this fire burning within them. They have accomplished much for God. Some of them are well-known, others are not. We can be truly inspired

when we read their life stories. If you read the life of Charles Finney, you will find that he lived for God at a very intense level. There were many manifestations of the tremendous power of God in and through his life. Likewise, we see manifestations of spiritual power in the life and ministry of John Wesley. It has been said that he rode on horseback all over England, sleeping only four hours each night. With fiery zeal, he turned England upside down and left behind a rich legacy. And then we have John Sung of China, who was reputed to have served the Lord with great power and effectiveness, preaching with burning zeal and exerting every ounce of energy he had. Many were converted through his ministry.

Here again, I would like to sound a note of caution. We are all different. We have different personalities. We should not expect God to work in our lives in the same way He works in others. God works differently in different people – whether it is Stephen, Anna, Paul, Finney, Wesley or John Sung. The fire that burns within is often expressed differently in different people.

All of us can aspire to be effective for God, to have the steadfast quality that we see in the lives of faithful brethren who have gone before us. This is God's desire for all His children. If so much can be accomplished through a few individuals, how much more can be achieved if the whole congregation is on fire for God! What great and wondrous things can then be accomplished for God's kingdom!

If we desire to see the work of the Lord in our midst grow from strength to strength and from glory to glory, there must be in each one of us this fire, this deep burden for the Lord's work.

Concluding remarks

Let us be mindful that zeal must go together with knowledge. Zeal without knowledge is not only useless, but also dangerous. So let us learn to cultivate both zeal and knowledge. Knowledge will help us channel our zeal in truth and wisdom. Knowledge will also feed the fire, and the fire will in turn help us acquire more knowledge. We need to keep both in a healthy balance at all times.

Proper conduct that manifests the true fire that burns within may not always be understood or appreciated by others, including Christians. We must, however, be careful not to mistake fleshly zeal

for the fire that burns within. Fleshly zeal is zeal and emotion that originate from the natural man. It is promoted by the evil one. The true fire that burns within is the appropriate response to the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts.

Our perfect example

In closing, let us reflect again on the life of the Lord Jesus, our supreme example. He had a definite sense of mission. He was steadfast and faithful. He was obedient to the point of death on the Cross. Hanging there on the cross, He was able to say: “It is finished”. That was His whole attitude – always resolute, never deviating from what God the Father had entrusted to Him. He is a Man with a burning heart. May we also be men and women who have the same fire burning within.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What is the meaning of “the fire that burns within”?
2. What are the characteristics of a man whose heart is on fire for God?
3. What are the factors that can positively or negatively affect the fire that burns within?
4. How is Paul a good example of a man consumed by zeal for God and the Lord’s work?