

Thoughts from the Journey: inner change

Volume 1

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Introduction

Just as it's called, *Thoughts from the Journey* is a collection of comforting thoughts, insights and guidance that have blessed me deeply as I've walked with the Lord through the years. This volume deals with the matter of *change*. I hope that the thoughts will bless and comfort you as they have blessed me. As the Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthian church:

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.” 2 Cor. 1:3-4 [New King James Version (NKJV)]

Thoughts from the Journey won't flow like a story☺ but I hope that you can link the discussions to familiar experiences in your own life. This volume reflects some of the thoughts that have helped me while experiencing major transformation in my Christian life.

Our shared experiences have a way of teaching us lessons that bond us together, even though we may be miles apart. I hope that the discussions are general enough to relate to your concerns, yet specific enough to really minister. Happily, Jesus Christ, the Author and Finisher of our faith can deeply relate to each of our experiences. We have a Friend for the journey; a loving Friend Who has successfully completed *every step of the way*.

Who knows? As I walk on with Jesus, I may very well have similar experiences and learn more about the issues raised in this volume. One thing I'm sure of, as long as He is with me, I can expect

even greater refreshment from His heart to
mine, with more *Thoughts from the Journey*.

Beginnings...

Funnily enough, the beginning of my friendship with the Lord has become much clearer now that I look back. It has taken me a long time to realize that my relationship with God finds its very genesis in the fact that I have been born of God. Does that sound odd to you? We often talk of being born again, don't we? Yet, is there anybody else like me who has struggled for a long time before realizing that the Christian walk does not start with human effort but rather through God's gracious gift of *genuinely new life*?

Where does it begin? It begins with God's deep love for me, His planting the seed of divine life in me through the Holy Spirit. I now understand the importance of the new life within me – this is not an aimless journey of self-effort and religious works. It is a purposeful walk that's going somewhere. My progress flows from God's life – divine DNA. Realizing where it all begins means that I have the *real assurance* of a successful run

and a happy ending. My journey began with divine love and supernatural power – I will reach my destination by the very same things!

The seed

“Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.” 1 John 3:9 [King James Bible (KJV)]

“Those who have been born into God’s family do not make a practice of sinning, because God’s life is in them. So they can’t keep on sinning, because they are children of God.” 1 John 3:9 [New Living Translation (NLT)]

We are re-created through God’s seed – His very nature and life principle - when we are born again. This should be a source of awesome comfort for us: God has not left us to our own ability to become reformed or conformed to

religious behaviours. No, His own life has become the very source of our being.

The power of the Holy Spirit displaces the hold of the sinfulness and death that we inherited from Adam and opens up a fountain of new life – with new convictions, motives, desires and new strength – in us.

If we look at being ‘born again’ from a human perspective, we will miss the miracle that God has worked deep in our hearts and forget how it all started. It is very tempting to forget God’s power and to instead focus on human efforts at achieving behavior change.

We need to remind ourselves very often that we are saved by God’s gracious gift of new life. Remembering this will put us in a good position to experience the continued working of His Spirit in sanctifying and changing us. If we continue to acknowledge His power in our birth, we will be able to trust His power for our growth.

Nourishing new life

As with any seed, the born-again children of God will need roots to support their spiritual development. Sadly, many of us bask in the initial experience of God's saving power but do not cooperate with Him as far as growth and development are concerned. Two of the mistakes that we tend to make are:

1. *Neglect.* We feel 'alright'. Having been relieved of the guilt of our past sins and been welcomed into a church fellowship, we lose interest in pursuing what really matters – a deep relationship with the Almighty.
2. *Humanistic self-effort.* Somehow, we get led away on the same path that Paul reproved the Galatians for taking: we become consumed with following religious templates and formulas instead of leaning on God's Spirit to transform us.

I've had quite a struggle with 'templates and formulas' but that's a different story! The point now is this: we should focus on progressing and developing in our walk with God. The transformation of our inner selves to be like Jesus is our priority. It is the Spirit of God that accomplishes this change in us and we have a responsibility to embrace the things that nourish our relationship with Him.

What are some of the critical things that nurture and support our relationship with God? Prayer, the word of God and the fellowship of God's children are some of those nourishing things that help to strengthen us and facilitate the unfolding of God's life in us. They are like roots that help to establish us in our relationship with God. Let's look at these three things for a moment:

Prayer

Our friendship with God requires that we talk to Him often. If we see prayer as an expression of our love to God rather than a religious ritual it

will be easier to pray. An awesome breakthrough comes when we begin to consistently enjoy prayer! Of course, the devil will fight hard against the establishment of consistent prayer in our lives but let's keep at it. Those roots are going deep, deep down into the soil of God's love and touching the live-giving water of His Spirit!

We'll talk some more about prayer in the section *Praying for Change*.

The Word of God

Quality time reading and thinking about God's word are 'must dos' if we want to change and grow up in God. Look at it this way, reading and thinking about what God has said gives us insight into His heart, helping to make our prayers much more meaningful and our understanding of His will for our lives much clearer.

It is tempting to limit our interaction with God's word to just reading it. More and more I'm realizing that actively thinking about God's word

brings a comfort and peace like nothing else can. David said in Psalm 119 verse 11:

“Thy word have I hid in my heart that I might not sin against thee”. (KJV)

That sounds like more than reading a Scripture a day. That sounds like the psalmist thoughtfully stored what God had said deep in his inner being – a treasure to be taken out and considered carefully. Truth be told, much of Psalm 119 teaches an active engagement with God’s word that goes much further than reading it. God desires us to think deeply *and frequently* about what He has said, and to lovingly store it deep in our hearts.

Now, the Spirit of God uses God’s word to teach us. He is our Great Teacher for every aspect of life and the Word is His textbook. Skillfully and through various means, He causes us to understand the Scriptures and to apply them correctly to life’s circumstances. How sensible is it to deprive God of His great teaching aid by

failing to study and think about the Scriptures? If we neglect the study material, we will fail the exams.

Fellowship with other Christians

One of the beautiful things about Christian life is that each of us is at a different point on the journey. Even though we share many experiences, when these are mixed in with our very distinct personalities and contexts, we can have a rich blend that truly, truly blesses each of us. I'm feeling a little sad even as I write this, though, because real fellowship isn't easy in these times. Most of us accept that we should attend church regularly (and we definitely should) but we often struggle to find Christ-centered fellowship.

Have you ever walked into a room filled with professing Christians and realized that everybody is fully consumed with the things of this world? Have you felt the uncomfortable pause that results when somebody introduces a

topic about Jesus or His word in such a group? Have you ever felt an aching shallowness in your interaction with many other Christians? Maybe you have struggled to find godly examples and wondered who you could really expose your wounds and questions to. I guess this is a common problem, my friends. But if we can find a few people that we feel the sweetness of Jesus in, we should make time for them.

The people who God uses to bless us most may not be in our peer group but when we experience the warmth of God's love in anybody, we should value them. We need to ensure that we interact with genuinely godly people as often as possible (even if we have to pray for the right friends). They will feed us and we will feed them.

It may be easier to say 'ouch' instead of 'amen' to some of the issues discussed. We have a tendency to fall short on prayer, the Word and fellowship, don't we? Still, these are the things that will help us along our journey like nothing

else can. *God uses these things in powerful ways to nourish His life in us.*

If we make good use of the things that God has provided to strengthen us, we will certainly see the results of His seed in our lives.

The strength and maturity that support productivity will be the natural outgrowth of the nourished seed, like the trunk and branches of a healthy plant. Then, fruit - good wholesome fruit - that satisfies God and blesses others will be evidenced in our lives. Our attitudes, actions and the impact we have on others will show that we have God's seed in us: that we have been born of Him and really come from Him.

The seeds of weeds: facing Adam

There is some ‘tough stuff’ that we will have to deal with if we really want a changed life. Genuine Christian growth requires us to confront the ugly things inside us that we inherited from Adam. In the face of our new life through Christ and the development of good roots, the weeds and thorns of our broken humanity will still want to overrun our lives.

It is so important to run our fingers over the contours of our souls and feel the rough edges that have resulted from our inherited nature and experiences. The combination of our natural negative tendencies and the life experiences that reinforce them often becomes a stronghold that satan repeatedly uses to his advantage.

Adam’s seed, in all its imperfection is formidable. Couple that with the learned ways of thinking that nurture the negatives within us and we have an enemy that can only be ousted by the sheer power of the Holy Spirit!

We may never understand why we continue to fail in some areas until we know and recognize where the seeds of weakness have been sown into our personalities. Some things are simply inherent but we do need to recognize that the lessons we learn (especially in childhood) good or bad, can have deep and lasting impacts on our souls. Jesus longs and loves to heal us of these our most deeply-seated flaws.

For some of us, being the obvious favourite of our parents has sown pride, self-importance and selfishness deep in our souls. For others of us, rejection and harshness have pierced our souls with fear and hate. Or maybe excessive guilt in our childhood results in perfectionism and the desire to control others. Whatever it is, we tend to battle with the fruits of these things into our adult years.

Furthermore, I think the devil is well aware of the weaknesses in our family trees - those genetic predispositions that make us vulnerable to some

problems. I do believe that he tries to structure events and experiences to bring out the worst in us. I am grateful that we have a powerful God Who is so much wiser and greater than our enemy.

It is not so easy to link our difficulties like insecurity or an excessively high opinion of ourselves to inherent weakness or the seeds sown early in life but I'm realizing that if we really want to change, and to become like Jesus then we must be willing to go through the process of identifying the source of our recurring failures. Some sinful tendencies may be more easily overcome than others. Some require us to dig deep!

I confess, the greatest, longest battles of my life to date have been the ones fought deep within. Even when external circumstances appear to be the problem, I have often found that my internal responses to those circumstances have pointed to some of the ugly things we don't like to talk

about: bitter anger, pride, jealousy, resentment, fear, irrational guilt, crippling uncertainty...should I go on? Yes, these very things have confronted me in my own heart as a Christian.

By God's grace, looking beyond *how* I feel and act in an effort to understand *why* I think and act in those ways has taken me to some of the most productive places on the journey.

Real change requires honesty about what's already inside us. Could it be, though, that many of us as Christians are so alarmed by the depth of sinfulness in our hearts that we simply suppress our negatives or call them some other name to justify their place in us? We don't have to be afraid. We can be honest and up-front with the Lord. He already knows what is in our hearts. He wants to make us like Him – not to reject us!

By God's help, let us look beyond the 'fruits' - the obvious weaknesses - some of which we may have mistaken for mere personality traits. Let us

seek God to show us the roots of these things: the spiritual, emotional and other structures that satan has set up to maintain their stronghold in our hearts. Most importantly, let us seek God to reveal the seeds – the ideas or thoughts that may have been introduced or reinforced early in life that constitute the beginning of some of our most troublesome flaws. Some healings take time...but with God, they are effective and well worth the fight.

Prayer and change

Prayer – talking to God and listening to Him - is, I believe, our greatest tool in the process of transformation and spiritual growth. Many things are needed for our journey, including good doctrinal instruction *and* trials ☺ but there is nothing like those ‘open’ moments in our closets when our true selves are lifted up to our Almighty Father in earnest, beseeching prayer.

For our relationship with the Lord to become deeper, it is important that we become emotionally exposed when we pray. It is meaningful when we can move beyond “God please do” and “please for” to “God, I think” and “I feel”. It is beautiful when we can say in prayer “God, I am...” You know what is more awesome than that? When we hear our Father’s tender whispers: “Child, this is how I think”, “this is how I feel” and “Child, I AM.” Within these heartfelt exchanges lies a tremendous yet mysterious

power that gets us thinking and acting more like our Father.

Interestingly, it is often through intense trials and tribulations that we learn to be more open in prayer and to pray for the most meaningful things. We are often tempted to give up praying when we face persistently hard times or crushing blows but I'm learning that the best response to those persistent or super-painful problems is to keep praying. As we painfully spin the problems from side to side in the presence of God, He is doing a great deal that we can't see.

Our Lord told the story about the persistent widow and the unjust judge in Luke 18 to illustrate the point that we should always keep praying and not give up. Even though no answer was forthcoming from the judge, the widow kept pleading her case for justice until the man, in frustration, granted her request. At the end of the story, Jesus said:

*“And shall not God avenge His own elect,
which cry day and night unto Him,
though He bear long with them?” Luke
18:7 (KJV)*

I have often wondered why the Lord takes so long to answer some prayers. I mean, I believe that I’m asking for something that He would want to give me but after months and even years of gut-wrenching prayers...I just have not gotten what I want. Do the persistent problem and the unanswered prayer mean that God is ignoring us? Guess what I’m realizing? The persistent problem has forced me to pray from different angles about the same thing. As I look back at how I used to pray in the past versus how I now pray, I realize that some maturing has happened with regards to my perception of the problem and interestingly, with my perception of God, myself and others.

Could it be that sometimes God allows us to go through the pain of persistent problems so that

we may learn how to pray with greater understanding, honesty and purpose?

Could it be that consistently praying about things (including our own personal transformation) instead of giving up brings us closer and closer to God's own perspective on life? Deep, honest conversations with the Father are critical for our souls' deliverance.

Let's keep praying until we are talking deeply with God – like friends. We are going to need a close bond with Him for every step of our journey.

Making Strides...

God allows us to participate fully in the miracle of our own transformation. Even as He changes us by His mighty power, He requires our surrender and obedience to His plans for us. He wants us to reach out and embrace His will and to pay attention to and apply His word. This is how we will make progress in our walk with God.

“As His divine power has given us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue,

By which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.

But for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge,

*To knowledge self-control, to self-control
perseverance, to perseverance godliness,*

*To godliness brotherly kindness, and to
brotherly kindness love.” 2 Pet. 1:3-7
[(NKJV); emphasis mine]*

The Apostle Peter points to God's power in this Scripture, and he also points to His awesome promises. Yet, Peter also points to the role we have to play: we must “diligently add”. *We should be careful and faithful in ensuring that we are actually experiencing spiritual growth along the right lines.* We are not to allow ourselves to become stagnant and stunted.

When we consider the matter of ‘adding’ spiritual attributes as described in 2 Peter 1, we might assume that the Apostle is suggesting moving from one to the other. You know, a bit like faith is the first step and by the time we have finished going, we should have landed on the top step of love. I think I’ve seen it that way for a long time but that view could cause us to miss the

long-term value of each attribute of which Peter writes. No, it's not about jumping though a set of steps but we might draw a better analogy with cooking a pot of soup😊.

As we 'add' ingredients to our soup pot, each new ingredient gives its own special flavour to what we already have until by the time we are finished, we have a rich, delicious blend of many flavours, colours and textures. Good soup. In the same way each new attribute of spiritual development complements the others and ultimately, all are woven into the beautiful Christ-like character that our Father wants us to have.

'Adding virtue' does not mean that we should cease to nourish faith, which is the fundamental reliance on and trust in God that should characterize every Christian. A progressive experience of God's life in us will allow us to find ongoing fulfillment in each aspect of Christian

living, even while new realms are opened up to us.

I'm remembering a little about development from Biology class. A baby will undergo some awesome changes in the womb. From its beginnings as a tiny zygote formed from Daddy and Mommy's cells, it will develop all sorts of different types of cells which form the tissues, organs and structures that it will need to function outside the womb.

Even so, as we faithfully develop in our walk with the Lord, we will experience the maturity and readiness we need for effective ministry and for life beyond this earth. As Peter wrote in verse 8 of 2 Peter 1:

“For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.”
(NKJV)

Faith and growth

Peter begins the list of spiritual attributes with faith. It is critical for us to remember that we can only experience genuine change in our lives through God's power. *Faith* is reliance on God. *Faith* is trusting God. *Faith* is humbly leaning ourselves on the Most High, trusting that His character and His word will not fail us. Faith allows us to receive God's life and God's help. Real faith moves us to obey God's words. Without faith, we stand on our own and will vainly struggle to be good by trying to follow rules and religious formulas.

Faith is truly such a key ingredient to our relationship with the Father and so crucial for our growth. Guess what though? We are very, very often tempted to stop relying on God. I have often found myself feeling spiritually dry, ineffective and emotionally stressed only for God to cause me to see that I have turned from trusting Him. Often, the case is that I have begun

to doubt His love and so I don't lean on His promises as I should. When I talk to Him and ask Him to clear my mind of the things that are bothering me and hindering my faith, I begin to experience His grace. His warm life begins to comfort me. The mountains don't discourage me as they did. Faith.

Moment by moment, we need this 'faith connection' to our God. It allows us to cling to the truth of His very self and to tap into the "exceedingly great and precious promises" of which Peter writes. (2 Pet. 1:4)

Virtue

The New Living Translation (NLT) Bible translates the word rendered as 'virtue' in the King James Version (KJV) as 'moral excellence'. Certainly, our trust in God will move us to new standards of living. It is important that we examine our attitudes and behavior to see whether we are living in a way that glorifies and honours God. A genuine reliance on God is not compatible with

unbridled and immoral behavior. As a matter of fact, changes in our outward behavior indicates whether our faith is genuine or not.

The truth is, we all have areas of failure in our lives but the more we learn to lean on God, the greater will be our understanding of His will for our external conduct and the greater will be our enablement to walk in His will.

Growing in knowing

Peter encourages us to add knowledge to faith and moral excellence. Why? Isn't faith and moral excellence a pretty good combination already? God longs for us to have far more than a pretty good combination of attributes. He wants us to glow in the image of His Dear Son. He wants our relationship with Him to be deep, beautiful, rich and unbreakable. We need to grow in knowledge through *experience* as well as *revelation* for this to become a reality.

Accurate knowledge of God must fully permeate our lives and become the basis for our understanding of ourselves and others.

It is critical to note, too, that true knowledge of God is one of our greatest defenses against the errors that will stifle our growth. One of the things I have realized is that there are few things as crippling or as damaging to our spiritual development as faulty religious ideas. Apostle Peter recommended that instead of falling prey to erroneous ideas and losing our steadfastness, we should "grow in grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 3:18).

Looking back over my life, I realize that the guilt and fear that were associated with my concept of God robbed me of so many opportunities to experience His deep, tender love for me. Of course, that severely weakened my faith and made it very difficult for me to be effective.

Even if we have the best religious intentions, it is the strategy of the enemy to warp and twist our

concept of God and of fundamental biblical truths to undermine the foundations of our faith. Personally, an inadequate understanding of God's love made me particularly vulnerable to issues of doubt and fear. Sadly, many Christians experience this.

Sometimes in the midst of numerous religious activities and high moral standards, our knowledge of God can be so impaired by people's opinions and deceiving spirits that we have little motivation to trust Him as He *seems* to be. True knowledge is a must for true love.

I am personally very grateful to God for challenging my fearful concepts with His truth. He is delivering me from faulty, erroneous ideas and teaching me more about Himself - a God Who loves me with unfathomably deep and perfect love. I am now learning to expose my heart to Him - to open up every single concept that I struggle with to His Spirit and to just allow Him to lead me into truth.

Certainly, it is the Holy Spirit, dwelling deeply in our hearts that consistently preserves us from becoming penetrated by wrong ideas. The awesome thing is that this not only applies to religious ideas but He is that consistent, living Principle of Truth in us that weeds out *every* false idea. We cooperate with the Spirit of God by paying attention to His written and spoken words and by cherishing them in our hearts and minds.

Our growing, maturing knowledge of God will continually form the foundation for our knowledge of everything else. As the Holy Spirit leads us into truth, we will find that our perception of life changes. The Spirit of God will progressively penetrate all our thinking as we surrender our thoughts and concepts to Him.

Staying on track

It doesn't stop with knowledge. Peter goes on to recommend the addition of self-control and then perseverance. Self-control doesn't seem like a big issue does it? The lack of it can lead to big problems, though. Have you ever over-eaten because you liked the food and there was lots of it? Have you ever been in the company of someone who talked too much? Have you ever seen a fashionable outfit made ridiculous by excess? I'm sure you get the point😊

An important aspect of self-control is that it helps us to balance properly. Balance is critical to success. A well-cooked meal with the flavours nicely balanced is often more enjoyable than one with sharp flavours sticking out here and there. This brings me to another important point: one of the enemy's tactics is to push us to extremes in some area or another. It is sad but sometimes earnest, fervent Christians become caught in extremes in one or more areas of religious life.

Avoiding extremes

I can't confess that I understand all of the factors that drive people to excesses but I do know that misguided zeal and emotionalism (for example, a tendency towards intense guilt) can topple a person over from the path of faith in God to the stressful quicksand of religious extremism.

Extremism often shows up as religious attitudes and behaviours that go beyond the requirements of the Bible and/or are based on incorrect biblical interpretations. We may find that people struggling with religious extremism are unhappy, tense, and afraid. They may emphasize biblical interpretations that are not in line with the context and meaning of Scripture and may even be controlled by the opinions of a spiritual leader.

Have you ever heard people speak of 'zeal without knowledge'? Great zeal towards religion seems good, doesn't it? Still, when this is applied outside of humble submission to God's authority

and the right interpretation of Scripture, there is bound to be trouble. To put it simply: when we try to get spiritual things done through our own abilities, we miss God's true requirements and end up with empty, painful religion. It's kind of like a pilot trying to land on a really foggy day while ignoring instructions from the control tower. Overshoot the runway?

The best sacrifices and service to God are made in humble submission to His desires and in dependence on His strength.

Emotionalism is another culprit. When our emotions are out of control, our attitudes and behaviours will be out of control too. I can personally attest to the fact that things like irrational guilt, intense uncertainty and fear can make religion seem tormenting and push us to extremes as we try to avoid these 'feelings'.

When religion is about avoiding the pain of negative emotions and encouraging positive

ones and not based on the true Word and the Spirit's leading, we will go to extremes.

The Presence of God is not a mere feeling. It is the unchangeable God. The word of God is not subjective or fluctuating. It is true. The Holy Spirit does not push us here and there with conflicting compulsions and feelings. He fills our hearts and lovingly guides us according to the infallible word of God.

Sadly, extremism does not facilitate a sustained, developing friendship with the Lord. Honestly, how long can we stand on one leg with our arms raised? It is the plan of the enemy to push us to a place where religion seems so difficult and stressful that we resent it and turn away or, we remain trapped in misguided zeal.

Self-control is critical in helping us to avoid the misguided zeal and emotionalism that can lead to extremes. Of course, true self-control does not come from rigid human control. True self-control comes as we allow the Holy Spirit to give

us wisdom about where our limits in life are so that we don't go 'over the top'. We will also be better able to identify when our feelings are out of control and seek God's help to temper them so that we can avoid excessive behavior.

Apathy: 'don't wanna move'

Self-control also gives us that strength to say 'no' to our tendencies towards laziness and quitting. The truth is, while some of us struggle with the temptation to go 'over the top', many of us struggle with the temptation not to go at all! Apathy or disinterest is one of the biggest culprits behind ineffectiveness.

The person affected by apathy will find the narrow road of God's will too challenging. You see, there are boundaries along that path of true relationship with the Father. The road requires sacrifice, passion, energy and faithfulness. Apathy or disinterest will prevent us from making the sacrifices that are necessary for us to grow on that path of friendship with God.

Does the sleepy rolling over at prayer time sound familiar? For some of us, it happens every day – until prayer time becomes permanently rolled into sleep time.

Believe it or not, some Christians are unable to pull themselves away from watching, touching, tapping and swiping screens long enough to have a meaningful conversation with the Lord. Does it sound harsh to say that relationship with God does not matter enough to many of us? Do some of us want the ultimate spiritual experience yet routinely fail to make sacrifices to get to know God?

It is important for us to know that the results of spiritual apathy will show up at crucial times in our lives. When the time comes to make critical decisions, the person who has not taken the time to know God may find themselves floundering around to figure out what the voice of God sounds like. His or her responses to suffering,

trouble or crisis will likely show that he/she doesn't know the Lord very well.

The lazy soul may decide to follow Jesus, begin to take a new approach to life and take some steps. Sadly, though, laziness will keep us on the look-out for short-cuts to God's purpose. Laziness will make us avoid the genuine demands of true relationship with the Father in an effort to have an easier journey. We need self-control to help us to push with creaking bones and tired muscles and tell ourselves: **Go!**

Perseverance – that ability to stick to the task – will come easier for someone who has learned to be balanced and self-controlled. Extremists quickly burn out and those who are apathetic quickly give up. Let us pray that God will help us to 'stick to it'. As He lovingly develops our character along the right lines, may He grant us that inner 'gut power' to remain faithful and committed to His process for change.

Godliness

Godliness is a beautiful word. It makes us think of God. Even so, genuine advances in Christian character will cause others to think of God when they experience us. While we have already considered moral excellence, godliness brings to mind attitudes of the heart and a level of spirituality that makes us look like our Father.

How do we define godliness? I'm sure that there are several ways of looking at the word but let's just split it into its main parts and think about them for a while: *God /ly*. We are learning who God is, aren't we? Well 'ly' is a suffix which is attached to a noun to form an adverb that describes something. If I add 'ly' to 'slow' – you have the word 'slowly' and you will have a mental picture of what is happening with the traffic ☺ So, a godly person is *godlike*. That is, God's ways and attitudes are manifested in a godly person. It would be helpful for us to talk a bit about attitudes.

Attitudes

‘Attitude’ has to do with how we have positioned ourselves mentally and emotionally. Yes, it’s very much about ‘us on the inside’.

We may remember that earlier in our discussion we noted that the Apostle Peter encouraged us to add virtue or moral excellence to faith. Moral excellence is largely concerned with outward behavior. A genuinely godly, *godlike* person is one who not only exhibits changes in their behavior but who is experiencing a change of the thoughts and attitudes of their hearts.

The book of Proverbs tells us that if we walk with the wise, we will become wise (Pr. 13:20 a). It is certain then, that god-likeness or godliness demands an ongoing relationship with our Father in which we are influenced and transformed by Him.

Can you think of anyone who says that he or she is a Christian but their disposition and actions

don't look anything like Jesus Christ? One of the truest tests of our relationship with God is how much we resemble Him in our thoughts and ways.

Did it ever come home to you that inner sins are often harder to identify and repent of than the outer ones? We may quickly recognize if we told a lie and of course, acts of sexual immorality would be obviously wrong but things like jealousy, unforgiveness, resentment and pride (oh pride!) often have terrible strongholds on our spirits that go unrecognized and unrepented. We have to be very serious about our walk with God in order to face and fight the sinful attitudes of our inner heart.

The tragedy is that when we are a part of religious systems that emphasize merely moral behavior but do not push for growth in our relationship with Christ we may fail to experience true godliness.

It is the work of the Spirit of God in our hearts (with all its thoughts, emotions, desires etc.) that produces genuine god-likeness in us. Let's talk about some 'heart-matters' a little.

Emotions

Now, we aren't in a psychology class ☺ but let's think about emotions (or feelings) and thoughts. You'll remember that earlier on it was noted that God's ways and attitudes are manifested in a godly person. Later on, we mentioned that attitudes relate to our mental and emotional positioning – our thoughts and feelings. Really, our thoughts and feelings form the bedrock of our attitudes.

We have a range of emotions as humans. We inherited quite a mix from Grandfather Adam with sadness, guilt, joy, anger to name a few. Apart from our natural feelings, our life experiences have taught us powerful lessons in how to 'feel'. For example, negative experiences may have taught us to feel fearful or

apprehensive in certain situations or positive experiences may have programmed us to feel excited or happy about other things.

The truth is that we are faulty people in a broken world. Neither our natural feelings from Grandpa nor our programmed emotional responses based on experiences are perfect. Despite their imperfection, emotions are powerful. There is quite a relationship between them and our thoughts, which is complex and beyond the scope of this book. Suffice it to say, emotions affect how we think and how we think affects our emotional state.

The critical question that we want to raise at this time is *what happens to the Christian who is driven by his/her feelings?* What happens to the Christian who is largely controlled by natural emotions? Anger may quickly flame into rage, fear may become a crippling influence and the list goes on. Why? Adam's sin corrupted the emotional well-being of his progeny. The very

same reason behind death, sickness and destruction underpins the broken, unwholesome emotions that challenge us as humans. These unhealthy emotions help to create settled ways of thinking and feeling that produce ungodly attitudes.

When we rely on feelings as a guide to our beliefs and actions, we become pretty vulnerable to temptation. Do any of the following scenarios sound familiar?

1. *I feel guilty because I failed in some way. The sense of shame and condemnation becomes so great that I begin to think that God does not love me. Fear and worry begin to take over my thoughts.*
2. *I feel a lack of connection with God, perhaps because I have not been praying regularly. I begin to think that He has rejected me.*

3. I feel afraid because something bad happened to someone I know. Nagging, gnawing worry begins to torment me. I don't feel safe. I begin to think that God's protection isn't real.

The list goes on. The truth is, how we feel can have a very, very powerful impact on how we perceive God, ourselves, others and our circumstances. How can we possibly not be dominated by our feelings? How can we not be slaves to fear, tormented by worry, constantly changing positions because of doubt...?

You know what? Jesus said that we shall know the truth and the truth shall set us free (John 8:32). His word is the truth that sets us free from the dominion of subjective and unreliable thoughts and feelings. He described His words in John 6:63 as 'spirit and life'. The spiritual nature of the Word of God allows it to get deep within our hearts. It helps us to process our emotions

appropriately and to anchor our beliefs in His truth.

So you know what? Even though I *feel* things deeply and these feelings will come and go based on my perception and experiences, *I don't have to be controlled by how I feel*. God's truth is more powerful than our feelings. As Apostle John put it in 1 John 3:20 "Even if we feel guilty, **God is greater than our feelings**, and He knows everything". (NLT, emphasis added).

As we learn to rely less on how we feel as a basis for beliefs and action and more on God's word – His written word and His spoken words to our hearts – then we will experience maturity.

Truth be told, the more we accept and believe the word of God in our day to day lives is the better equipped we will be to deal with things like fear, anger, sadness and hatred. No, we won't push them under the mat in panic, as we tend to do in our immaturity but we will face them and allow the Holy Spirit to help us to

wisely process the situations that trigger these feelings.

Through God's grace, we will find that we experience His peace in situations that used to stir panic; have self-control and work through situations that make us angry. Yes, and we will find the grace to love even when we would be stirred to just hate somebody because of what they've done. God can do that.

What greater proof do we need to know that God can break the power of emotions in our lives than this Scripture in 1 John 4: 17-18a:

"And as we live in God, our love grows more perfect. So we will not be afraid on the day of judgment, but we can face him with confidence because we live like Jesus here in this world. Such love has no fear because perfect love expels all fear." (NLT)

Although fear is one of the most powerful and potentially destructive human emotions, the

love of God releases us from its power – so much so that we can face the *day of judgment* with confident trust in God.

It is significant that love conquers the fear of condemnation. Our fear of being rejected by God undergirds many negative feelings and thoughts that plague us as Christians. *Fear* is one of the key motives behind works-based, ritualistic religion. That looming sense that ‘something bad is going to happen’, that inner torment regarding our failure as Christians and that anxious effort to compensate for our wrongs by doing religious things are linked to the fear of condemnation.

Isn’t it sad but true? Even though we have trusted in Jesus to save us many of us still struggle deep inside with the terrifying thought that maybe we just aren’t His and we will be condemned. As John put it:

“If we are afraid, it is for fear of punishment, and this shows that we have not fully experienced His perfect love” 1 John 4:18 b. (NLT)

I'm glad that it doesn't end right there though. The Apostle went on to say that *perfect love casts out fear*. Even though, right now, I struggle with fear I am confident that God's love – His very own nature within me – will expel it from my life. I believe that He will not only cast out my fear but heal *all my broken attitudes*.

Thoughts

Our thoughts are ideas or opinions that are formed within our minds or that may suddenly occur to us¹. Thinking is as natural as breathing, isn't it? Similar to how oxygen fuels our body processes, our thoughts underpin our behavior. They are at the centre of who we really are.

I think it might be helpful to note right here that as human beings, our outer behavior may not *always* concur with our inner ideas or opinions. It is often easy for us to go along with what people expect of us rather than do as we believe

¹ Derived from online Dictionary (powered by Oxford Languages and Bing Translator)

– especially when our ideas run contrary to the group! Despite this, our true thoughts will eventually surface in our behavior. God, through time, has a way of uncovering the ideas and opinions of every man.

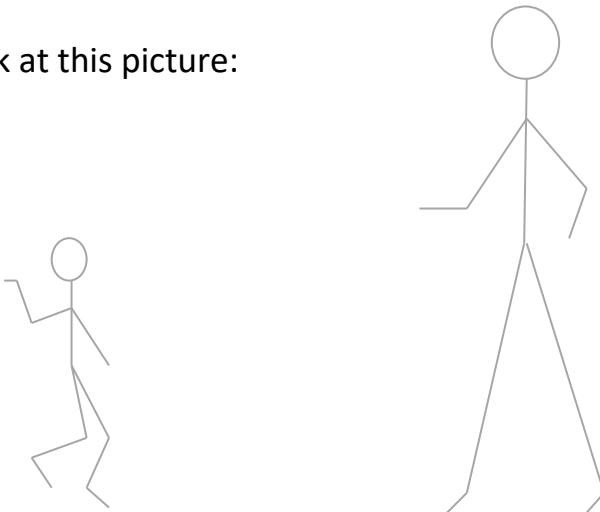
Generally speaking, though, we can agree that thoughts guide behavior. Like emotions, they exert a powerful force which affects us far more deeply than we often realize. Still, if we should briefly examine our thoughts in the light of God's word, we are likely to notice that many of them are not necessarily holy or healthy. For us to really experience spiritual transformation, we need God to change how we think.

Now, I know that we have been on this subject of godliness and 'inner issues' for a while now – this is probably the longest section of the book but you know what? Much of our fight as Christians, much of our struggle for wholeness and 'whoness' in Christ plays out right here – in the midst of our thoughts and emotions. Let us

just talk for a little more on the matter of thoughts.

While perception, experience and personality contribute a great deal to human reasoning, God has called His children to allow relationship with Him to change how we think.

Look at this picture:



This is supposed to be a picture of David and Goliath ☺. What are some of the things that you think David could have thought?

What are some of the logical, *human* conclusions that could have been drawn from what David saw? His eyes and ears may have told him: Goliath is very big, armed, experienced and full of rage. Logical reasoning could have said: I am small and no soldier – he wouldn't have to strike me two times. I'm safer tending sheep, goodbye!

Instead, David did not rely on his eyes or ears to form an idea or an opinion about the situation. He rocked back on the warm knowledge of a God who made Heaven and earth. He drew from the intimacy of true relationship with God the astounding conclusion that it was the giant – *not him – who would die that day.*

David saw victory in such an unlikely situation because God had trained him to think differently from what mere perception told him. *As sons of God our thoughts must not rest in human perception. Victory comes through faith in God and reliance on His word.*

Here are some of the things that we tend to base our thoughts on:

- Past experiences
- People's opinions
- Comparison with other situations
- Our observations and personal assessment
- Our feelings

All of the above will not necessarily line us up for God's best. We may instead find ourselves with attitudes of fear, discouragement, mediocrity and the list goes on. We, like the rest of Israel's warriors, will hide from the giant. We will murmur at the Red Seas of our lives and we will walk through tests and trials with hostility towards God as most of Israel did in the wilderness.

Our ideas and opinions must rest on God. While we can't prevent thoughts from coming our way, we must choose what we believe. A true knowledge of who God really is and an intimate

understanding of His word must form the basis - the seedbed - of our thoughts.

As our ideas and opinions are progressively framed by God's word – His ideas and opinions – we will experience true godliness.

I have experienced inner brokenness for a long time. I have struggled deeply with my thoughts and feelings. But regardless of the length and intensity of my struggles, *Jesus is Lord*. My brokenness, my helplessness, my settled ways of thinking and feeling are not beyond His redeeming love and strong right hand. ‘Heart-change’ is the hardest change. No human being can accomplish it on his or her own. But believe me, when as little children, we open our hearts to Jesus Christ *the deep, transforming change of heart that we need will happen*. It may take a lifetime but it will happen.

The Seed Grows Up

The last two attributes that Peter wrote of in his teaching on Christian growth in 2 Peter 1 are brotherly kindness and love. It is a beautiful truth that genuine growth in our relationship with God will lead us straight to the heart of true love. Let's look at brotherly kindness first.

Brotherly Kindness

At the crux of this phrase is the matter of *relationship*. It is important to note that the matter of brotherly kindness has come up nearing the end of a list of several attributes of personal spiritual growth. Development in our personal, inner lives will lead to us having *better relationships with others*. Truth be told, bad relationships with other people is often an indicator that we need to grow in our walk with God.

Now, we could rush into a discussion of how we need to love everybody as Christians but there is

the uncomfortable truth that many of us have not even learned to treat our own families well or have healthy relationships with those with whom we relate regularly. Sometimes, we can get excited about spiritual truths without appreciating their practical application in our everyday lives!

We have to be really honest at this point. It is ok, in fact, it is *right* to admit that we have faults – even bad ones. *It is the only way that we will get rid of them.* We have to accept that we have issues and ask God to help us.

As it relates to how we treat each other, I think it would be helpful for us to consider the impact of two emotions: anger and fear.

Anger

Anger is one of the most familiar human emotions. We have all experienced it and know the surges of heat, tension and hostility that rise in our minds and bodies when we are upset. We

also know how we feel when somebody else gets angry at us. We may feel ashamed, afraid, inadequate, rejected or angry ourselves. Just describing these emotions evokes mental impressions of the painful, negative scenes that make many of us cringe. You see, anger by its very nature can be pretty destructive.

Let us look at what Jesus said about anger in Matthew 5:21-22.

"You have heard that our ancestors were told, 'You must not murder. If you commit murder, you are subject to judgement', But I say, if you are even angry with someone, you are subject to judgement! If you call someone an idiot, you are in danger of being brought before the court. And if you curse someone, you are in danger of the fires of hell. (Matthew 5:21-22, NLT)

"You have heard that it was said to the men of old, 'YOU SHALL NOT MURDER', and 'Whoever murders shall be guilty before the court'. But I say unto you that everyone who continues to be

angry with his brother or harbors malice against him shall be guilty before the court; and whoever speaks [contemptuously and insultingly] to his brother, 'Raca (You empty-headed idiot)! Shall be guilty before the supreme court (Sanhedrin); and whoever says, 'You fool! Shall be in danger of the fiery hell. (Matthew 5:21-22, Amplified Bible)

These words of Jesus show the linkages among inner hostility, derisive, unkind speech and harsh verbal abuse. In a way, you can see the progression from the Scripture, can't you? Hostility...derision...abuse...These things are all linked with the spirit of murder, which is the physical destruction of another human being. Jesus shows us that long before the physical assault (and even in its absence) anger against others is murderous.

Now, I have read these words of Jesus in Matthew 5: 21-22, and I confess, I have thought "Really, Lord? I mean seriously, You compare anger with *murder*? That's rough..." I used to feel

that way, until I discovered up front what anger can do to a human being. Before I get to that though, let's note a few things:

Jesus speaks of us being angry with our brother. The context suggests a continued state of anger. My understanding is that the Lord is not depriving us of the right to feel hurt or angry but He is showing us that holding grudges (nourishing hostility, unforgiveness and negative feelings) is sinful. This is in keeping with Paul's advice to 'not let the sun go down while we are still angry'. Through God's grace, as Christians, we must learn the difficult lesson of letting go of offenses, annoyances and frustrations with others.

Also, I note that the Lord is speaking of anger against another person. Sometimes, making an effort to understand the circumstances that trigger our anger can help to diffuse the hostility we feel towards people themselves. We can back up a bit, take a wider view of the situation and,

with God's help; work out healthier ways of managing our frustrations rather than concentrating our anger on individuals.

That said, regardless of how understanding we try to be, some people are definitely and painfully offensive to us. Even then, God doesn't want us to hold on to negative feelings and hurt others because we are hurting.

I hope I've successfully made the point that as human beings we will get angry but as children of God, we must not allow anger to live in our hearts and to motivate us to hurt others.

Now, how have I begun to understand the destructive nature of anger? Well, I had to deal with lots of it directed at me. Within the context of a close relationship, I faced deep anger and hostility that I couldn't understand and couldn't seem to escape – no matter what I did. Now look at this carefully: this situation never came to the point where I was called '*Raca*,' and derision was often implied rather than said outright. Still,

there was frequent criticism and often deep hostility. Would you believe what happened to me? I became so afraid and ashamed that I couldn't function properly.

Eventually, I began to have physical symptoms linked to my emotional distress. My hands shook in the person's presence. I got headaches and felt sick. My feelings ranged from deep anger to guilt, to fear and almost constant worry. My most distinct feelings in that experience, though, were simply *fear* and *shame*. These were the results of sustained, unjustified anger against me, personally. I suspect that I'm not alone.

How does the anger of another person make *you* feel? Perhaps we could count on our fingers the few people who act constructively when they are angry with us. Sad, isn't it? God's righteous anger is constructive and the anger of His children should also be constructive. For many of us; however, our anger damages hearts, disrupts relationships and gives the devil access in so

many different ways. It is an enemy of brotherly love.

Just for a moment, let us think about the following scenarios. Let your heart feel these situations and let us try to understand the danger of sustained, unjustified or uncontrolled anger.

- 1. The child of a deeply critical, short-tempered parent.*
- 2. The wife of a harsh, easily angered man.*
- 3. The husband of a sarcastic, fault finding woman.*

I'd love us to reflect on three things in relation to those situations:

- The emotional health of the victim
- The future of the relationship
- The impact on the victim's relationship with God.

I believe that there are many people today who feel badly about themselves and are emotionally

broken just because of the sustained anger directed at them by other people.

Painful patterns of hostility and aggression play out in many, many different ways – sometimes so subtly but all influenced by the murderous spirit of anger. It's there in racial prejudice, it's there in misogynist treatment of women and it's there in hostile work relationships and so on. In its path are anxious people, depressed people and, very, very critically, *people who struggle terribly to believe that they are in the care of a loving God.*

Let's face it: murder is the ultimate rejection of a person. It is saying "I have absolutely no need for you and I don't believe that you are worthy of life". Oh my God. Guess what, my friends? Hostility, rudeness and aggression communicate rejection along that same spectrum which has murder as its ultimate value. The crushing of a person's self-worth and impairment of their

peace of mind over time are slow poisons, you know.

As Christians, we need to accept that God's view of wrongdoing extends beyond the external wickedness that we indignantly call 'sin'. He goes to the very spirit behind the thought and exposes its destructiveness. That's what He did in Matthew 5. We preach it but do we believe it? If we did, we would inflict far less damage to others as Christians! If we believed, we would be better at showing brotherly love instead of fostering hurts, hostilities and the low-grade irritability that often plagues us.

As we finish up looking on anger and its implications for brotherly love, I want to encourage you.

Do you struggle with deep irritation with yourself and others? Do you find it difficult to be gentle and find it easy to express criticism and hostility? Hey, don't give up on yourself. Don't think you are not going to make it as a Christian. By the

grace of God, you must learn to love yourself - deeply, appreciatively and fully. Many times we struggle with resentment and impatience with others simply because we have never learned to accept and cherish our own selves. This also points to us not really understanding how much God Himself loves us.

It may have been the harsh and emotionally distant parent, the merciless relative or even being bullied at school that taught us to not love ourselves. Maybe a proud focus on the externals distracted us from inner value but whatever it was; true self-acceptance through the power of the Holy Spirit will help us to cut others some slack too.

The truth is, we can't continue excusing our frequent or chronic anger by pointing to the failures of others. We have to be open and honest and admit that this is something that *we* need healing from. It hurts God when we hurt His children with our hostility, coldness and our

unkind speech. Being the loving, kind Father He is, though, He will help us to overcome the destructive power of anger in our lives and enable us to act constructively in the lives of His children.

If you, on the other hand have been on the receiving end of sustained or unjustified anger I imagine that you are nursing painful wounds in your heart. God knows the impact of emotional pain on each of us. You don't need to shield your feelings from Him and pretend to have it all together. You can be real to the fullest extent of your suffering. It is important for us to admit how hurt we are so that we may be healed. I'm emphasizing this because I believe that when people are constantly faced with anger and criticism, they sometimes 'fold up' inside. They may begin to feel so badly about themselves that they do not take up the space that God has given them and live as mere shadows of what they really should be. It happened to me.

It's not necessarily easy for us to gain a healthy self-concept after being rejected and hurt in relationships. But it is necessary. One of the most important things for healing is to begin to love yourself and to believe in your potential as God's child.

For me, the journey to healing rests on a right concept of God. How so? Well, I found that the most painful and difficult relationships in my life caused me to create images of God which were tinged with the characteristics of those who hurt me over an extended period of time. Yes, this is what happened to me. So, I developed a view of a god who was distant and unloving with harsh expectations and ready condemnation. I found it difficult to relate to this god. I was afraid of him. There were times when shafts of love and light from the true and living God would pierce my shadows but when I was at my lowest points of emotional turmoil and fear, the image of the angry god pushed me more and more into unbelief.

Do you recall what I mentioned about the impact of anger on the victim's view of God? My friends, we need to take the teachings of Jesus seriously – no matter how counter-cultural they seem. Anger is dangerous.

So, I have had to pray to God to smash the idols in my mind – the false beliefs about Him that I have drawn from how I've been treated and from my own fears. As I prayed one day, it dawned on me that I will only have a right *self-concept* when I see God for who He is. The real Jesus that the Bible teaches and that the Holy Spirit reveals is the only image of the invisible God. He is not the image portrayed by unloving men and women – however much they may profess to know Him.

To truly understand my value to God and my significance as a person, I need to believe in who He is. Why? He is my Father. I am made in His image through Jesus Christ.

Now, let's move on to one other big enemy of brotherly kindness: fear.

Fear

Four letters but oh, what a stumbling block to healthy relationships: *fear*. We looked at fear a bit when we talked about emotions earlier but let's look at some of the ways it may impact on our relationships. It may be helpful to consider some formal definitions of fear at this point:

“An unpleasant often strong emotion caused by anticipation or awareness of danger.” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2019)

“Fear is the unpleasant feeling you have when you think that you are in danger”. (Collins English Dictionary, 2021)

Both definitions have the word ‘unpleasant’ in common. At least two of the other definitions that I considered also referred to the unpleasant nature of fear. Yes, the emotion isn’t nice to have, and chronic fear can also bring unpleasantness into our relationships with others. We’ll look at two issues related to fear: control and dependence.

Control

Let's reflect on definition one for a bit. 'Anticipation', 'awareness' and 'danger' are our key words. Now, quite naturally, the anticipation or awareness of danger will prompt us to put up our defenses. Our own bodies react to threats with a number of responses that prepare us to fight or run away – our adrenaline starts flowing like crazy and our hearts start pumping much faster etc. Our impulse is to *protect or escape*.

Fear is, in fact, an important part of nature's way of keeping us safe and alive. We need it to respond to danger appropriately. The trouble is, though, when the *perception* of danger becomes so frequent that our attitude to life becomes characterized by fear.

The proliferation of dangerous situations in recent times increases both our awareness and anticipation of danger. So too do the pressing emotional stresses that have become more and more an unwelcome part of everyday life.

However, the anticipation of danger can spiral way beyond our actual experience of real threats. I heard of a lady who was so afraid that the car she was in was going to crash that she braced herself and cried out “R-R-RADDAM!” before the car hit anything (which it didn’t).

Sometimes we are like that. Our minds become so conditioned to expect the worst that we are constantly braced for impact, our mouths often expressing deep worry. How does this affect our relationships with others? Consider these situations:

- The parent who feels deep anxiety about the well-being of her children.
- The husband who worries that his wife may cheat.
- The pastor who fears that the saints will fall into sin.

I’m sure your imagination has already developed these situations and you guessed what might be happening! Lots of control.

I can identify with the worried mother. I've struggled with fears about my children catching germs, being seriously ill, being injured, not getting saved, being negatively influenced by the culture, being emotionally damaged, causing me embarrassment, not loving me....the list goes on.

Now, I have not always examined these fears in a reasonable way or tried to split the real issues from those that I'm simply anticipating. My instinct has often been to try as hard as I can to prevent anything *bad* from happening.

Of course, this means that I have tried too hard to control situations *and my children*. Don't get me wrong. Parental control and protection are essential. Children often need decisions to be made for them, especially when they are little. They need to learn to appreciate the limits that protect them from danger. But guess what? *Fear* has a way of imposing unnecessary, burdensome limits on people. When we are afraid for ourselves, we put all kinds of buffers in place to

keep safe. When we are afraid for others, we tend to do the same to them.

The critical concern is that excessive control that arises from fear can hurt others and compromise the overall quality of our relationships. Healthy, wholesome relationships require choice.

Our efforts to control people, how they live and what happens to them may spring from a genuine desire to ensure good outcomes. But guess what? The only One with real power to ensure the best is God. Trusting Him, following His word and surrendering our desires to Him is the only way to access the best outcomes for our lives and our relationships. Here's the rub: *perhaps we don't really trust Him.* Ouch. Yep.

We have seen so much pain and tragedy around us that our minds are haunted by the question 'What if?' Interestingly, the 'what if' question is often preceded by another one: 'why?' Why do children die, why did that wonderful person get

sick, why did that couple's marriage fall apart, why do great saints turn aside from Christ – *why?*

The devil has plenty of answers to those questions: 'because God takes what we treasure the most', he says; 'because God doesn't care', he says, 'because there is really no solid hope in salvation'...and the list goes on.

Those thoughts are scary and painful and many of us may deny actually struggling with them and yet...it is these very ideas and other similar thoughts that wear away at trust and leave us afraid. That's when we desperately try to control the outcomes because we just aren't too sure *what if.*

I don't know all the answers but I am growing to understand that God loves me deeply and will fulfill His best purposes in my life. The challenge is to release the day by day struggles into His hands and expect Him to love me throughout the different shades of life. *Growing in this way will*

help me to release the people I love to live full lives for themselves.

The person who trusts God's love will relax more and in doing that, they will put less pressure on those around them.

Of course, there are a lot of apparently grey areas with this matter of control. How much is too much? Let's leave this conversation with a few points to ponder:

- When you try to restrict your loved ones because of personal, disproportionate fear, it's unhealthy.
- When you try to live through other people
 - influencing and coercing them to do things how you would - you are not allowing them to develop their own decision-making capacity.
- In order to love, we have to respect the fact that God gives people choice. Commitment under duress isn't true commitment.

Many plants need just enough shade from the elements to flourish. Expose them too much and they wither. Shade them too much and they become sallow and unhealthy. It takes wisdom to find the right balance. It is in the best interest of ourselves and our loved ones that we reflect on these issues and adjust with God's help, where necessary. Our loved ones will thank us for protecting them and *yet letting them be*.

Dependence

We'll just talk a wee bit about over-dependence and our relationships now. Overly controlling folk unreasonably restrict the choices of their loved ones but what about those people who don't exercise choice or 'go out to bat' themselves?

Both behaviours may seem very different but we can't deny that they are related: controlling men and women tend to breed dependence in others. Sometimes too, *a person's heavy dependence can be a subtle means of controlling others*. In

any case, either control or dependence can burden our relationships when they are out of proportion.

I don't know all the answers regarding how and why some people become over-dependent but I have seen and felt the effects of it as I've walked along. It may show up in the shy, awkward child who wants you to only be *their* friend. Perhaps in the adult woman who desperately needs those around her to assure her that she is OK or even the grown man whose wife must spread his napkin and lift the fork... (ok I'm stretching it ☺ but you get the point?).

The fact is, another person's reluctance to make choices that they should, think for themselves or do what they can will strain those who love them. But you know what? Some of us actually get a kick out of people 'needing' us excessively. Instead of weaning them and allowing them to develop better life-skills, we feed their

dependency and carry them along. This doesn't help them or us.

Encouraging over-dependency in others will not help Mom, Dad, Pastor or Big Brother. It may be helpful to look at this from the perspective of pastor and saints.

I fully believe that God has given some people the job of pastoring to nurture His people until He returns. I also believe that effective pastoring results in men, women and children who are learning to live fulfilled, God-centered lives. Sadly, I have seen so many people who depend so much on their pastor's opinion, advice and approval that they have not learned to be sensitive to God Himself.

Sometimes over-dependence on others springs from fear. We may feel that we are inadequate and incapable of making good choices. We may fear the disapproval of others or feel that we can't stand on our own feet. But what does the Word of God tell us? Does God encourage us to

timidly rely on people or to develop a deep trust in Himself. Psalm 118: 8-9 tells us:

“It is better to trust in the LORD than to put confidence in man. It is better to trust in the LORD than to put confidence in princes” (KJV).

True trust and dependence on God gives the confidence we need to make godly choices. Trust in God gives us the strength to fulfill our calling and the enthusiasm to enjoy the life He has given us. If, on the other hand, we depend too much on others, we may fall without their support or, in some sad cases, *fall with them*.

We need each other. Still, our relationships must rest on Christ for us to experience the brotherly kindness that relationship has to offer. We need His grace and power to root out all the anger, fear and other hurtful things that compromise togetherness. Then, we can better help each other on the journey to be like Jesus.

Love

Finally, let us consider the capstone in Peter's description of spiritual growth. Love. What is it?

'Love' is a well-used word and I always felt that I knew what it meant. About twenty-plus years into my walk with Jesus, I made the concerning discovery – no, I didn't truly understand what love was about. I had grasped some but not enough of love's true meaning. And guess what my other discovery was? Love is the hallmark and defining characteristic of genuine Christianity.

So, what is love? That's a big question. I'm still learning the answer as I walk with the Lord. Perhaps one of the most graphic descriptions I can think of, though, is that last meal the Lord had with His disciples before He was crucified. Walk with me into the upper room and let us explore the beautiful picture the Lord has placed on my heart.

Enter a room of ordinary-looking people, at suppertime. John 13: 4-5 tells us that Jesus got up from the table, took off His robe, wrapped a towel around His waist, poured water into a basin and proceeded to wash the feet of His disciples.

There is something startling, even emotionally jarring about that picture. Even in a human body, Christ's authority, power and purity were unmistakable. He was in charge. He was Lord, Rabbi, Messiah and so much more to them. My mind imagines my Jesus, the very God in flesh doing these things:

- Putting aside His outer clothes because they would have been an inconvenience to Him in doing what He planned to do.
- Providing Himself with a basin of water – getting exactly what He needed to serve.
- Walking to each of His disciples and *bending down before them.*

- Grasping the rough, chafed feet of hard-working men with strong, tender hands and washing the dust, the dirt and the grime from those feet.

Oh my God. Oh my God. One day the Holy Spirit opened my mind to some things about that picture. The actions of Jesus in this situation were not intended to give a sentimental scene or to merely inspire ritual foot-washing. God said to my heart that His actions told His disciples that they were 'worth it'. He inspired a deep sense of preciousness, a deep sense of being valued, a deep sense of being loved. Each man looked on his Maker ministering to His most lowly need.

Guys, do you get this?

When we truly love others, we inspire them with a sense of being deeply valued and cherished. That is the essence of agape.

Does this mean that we do everything we can to make people feel good and be happy? No, that

‘quick and easy’ formula won’t do much except, perhaps, breed some shallow relationships. But what does it mean? Look at Jesus. Look at His actions and attitudes throughout the Gospel story. Look at a Man, who reined in His glorious power, put aside His status in order to serve people where they needed it most. Observe Him – He was committed to pleasing God even though it cost Him His life. Take Him in, every fibre of His being, every facet of His life is a revelation of God’s heart. He is love.

His attitude to women and children communicated to them that they were precious. His treatment of people from all walks of life demonstrated a lack of prejudice and a deep regard for all humanity. His anger against hypocrisy demonstrated the value He places on people being themselves. His anger against oppression showed that He doesn’t buy any of the trumped-up reasons humans devise for mistreating others.

Jesus Christ Himself gives us the answer to what Christian love is. The comfortable in-dwelling of His Spirit in the human heart is the only thing that will allow us to love. It is not experienced through man-centered religion, it cannot be produced through human emotion, it cannot be contrived through human intelligence. It can only be experienced through surrender. As we open our hearts to Jesus Christ in our day to day lives and surrender to the wise instruction of His Holy Spirit; as we surrender the bad attitudes we have and make more room in our hearts for Him, we'll learn to love. Why? Because He is gaining control of us and He is love.

“Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God” 1 John 4:7 (KJV)

Conclusion

How can we sum it all up? Christianity is a journey of growing to know God and to become like Him. The experiences we have in this life - the people we meet, the trials we face, the triumphs we know – all are intended to build our trust in God and to increase our knowledge of Him.

Let us not forget why we started out. Many people have missed the purpose of religion and have become stuck along the journey. Some become satisfied with the things that this life has to offer, some become cold in the rituals of formal, human-centered religion, some become overwhelmed by their own thoughts and feelings or the hurts they have experienced and the list goes on.

Some, though, grow from spiritual infancy and develop character, wisdom and insight in the nature of God. They progressively lose their old,

sinful attitudes and their minds become strong and pure as the word of God breaks the strongholds of the enemy in their thoughts. They become friends with God. Through His loving care and life-changing power, they become like Him.

Remember Enoch who walked with God, Noah who found grace and Abraham, God's friend? Believe it, your name and mine can be added to the list of men and women who were dearly loved by God, who knew Him in the midst of life's struggles and ultimately prevailed.

Most of all, remember Jesus Christ – God in flesh. His feet walked on dusty roads. He knew tiredness, pain, rejection and sorrow but above all, He clearly portrayed an intimacy with the Father that characterized Him every single day – situation by situation. It manifested in His discernment and wise answers, in His zeal and commitment to God. It was demonstrated in the sheer power of His ministry and in His holy

authority. Most of all though, it was manifested in His *absolute obedience* to God and the value He placed on each and every human being. His oneness with the Father was clearly, unequivocally demonstrated in true love.

Our journey is successful when, through God's grace, we share in the nature of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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