

REFLECTIONS

on

Scripture



Andy Peel

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Author's Foreword

“Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful. But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and in his law he meditates day and night.”

Psa. 1:1-2

Daily life is full of problems of one sort or another that can sometimes feel overwhelming. Yet amid the daily hustle and bustle of life it can be hard to find time to recharge our spiritual batteries. David wrote about meditating upon the word of God day and night, blessed indeed is the one who strives to follow this example. Thinking about the word of God and applying it to every day life, is the only antidote to the spiritual apathy that can easily beset each and every one of us.

It is hoped these short reflections covering many different aspects of life in Christ will contribute towards providing the encouragement, guidance and comfort that is so vital to healthy spiritual growth.

The Bible is the expression of our Creator's thoughts and the word of God is as Paul writes:

“living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword... it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.”

Heb. 4:12

So profound is the effect of that Word upon the minds of sincere disciples of Jesus, that it will influence every aspect of their lives. They love the word of God so much that with David they say:

“I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways. I delight in your decrees; I will not neglect your word.”

Psa. 119:15-16

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Andy Peel, April 2005

TREES

Most people appreciate the cool, relaxing view of woodland and there is nothing nicer on a hot day than to walk in the shade of trees. The trees display vivid greens of differing hues in spring as fresh new growth appears, becoming dustier and faded as the height of summer comes. There are obviously differences between one tree and another, yet all are similar in being green and flourishing with verdant growth. Here and there, disease takes its toll and damage is seen with twisted bough and deformed leaf or fruit. But life goes on and new growth springs up, even as the old growth withers and dies.

What of man? Trees there are in a plenty of different sort, many nations each in some way or another individual and unique. Yet where ever one rests the eye, disease, disability and decay meets the perceptive gaze. A nation rises, another falls, a statesman appears and another passes off the scene, the new growth comes and the old dies. The cycle of life goes on as it has from times past. Hopes rise, plans are made, work commenced; yet the truth is that nothing really changes. Entropy always sets in, the hopes and plans will soon decay and all, every single one comes to his end. The loves, the hopes, the fears, the dreads, they all cease, they all fail, they all meet an end and decay. Where are the empires from the past, where are those who have hated and those who have loved, those who have helped and those who have oppressed, they are all gone and are now but a thing of the past. They are but a faded memory of 'what might have been'.

Each individual tree in the wood looks green and thriving yet as summer draws on and autumn approaches the green, turns to orange then yellow and brown, the leaf falls to the ground and decay sets in. The wheel goes full circle and life comes to its end. Each human life is as a tree, springing forth in hope full of fresh growth. Spring turns to summer and life is full of plans and anticipation. Yet all too soon, the autumn approaches and the promise of summer soon fades to the dust.

Entropy sets in to all human endeavour including scriptural things, indeed more so, for the spiritual takes far more effort to maintain. Yet it is only in seeking the spiritual that meaning is given to life. Think of your life, your loves and your hopes. Think of those whom

you love and with whom you have shared so much, your parent, your wife, your husband, your child and now tell what value they have in the dust. This is the reality of life, the truth of our existence, meaningless and hopeless if only for now.

Yet the trees speak of hope for not every tree is the same, some have differing attributes. Not only do they come with differing heights and strengths, some are more pleasing to the eye than others. Look at a wood in summer and all the trees are green, yet when winter comes though most are barren, here and there green is seen. There is one class of tree that remains evergreen and that speaks of hope, bringing purpose and meaning to life. David wrote:

“Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither.” Psalm 1:1-3

If we truly seek the word of Yahweh, loving His ways, putting His word into practice daily, then He has promised that we shall not wither, but shall be as the evergreen tree. The Great Creator has provided all that is needed for His trees to flourish and bear fruit, as we read

“For God so loved the World, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” John 3:16

Now Jesus spoke of trees both good and bad saying:

“a good tree does not bear bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. For every tree is known by its own fruit” Luke 6:43-44

What is hidden now will clearly be seen when the quality of our ‘fruit’ is examined. Jesus said

“this is life eternal, that they might know You the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom You have sent.” John 17:3

Shall we turn away, or become discouraged as the winter of man’s existence draws nigh? Are we ever discouraged when it appears the wicked apparently still flourish in the world about us? Many deserted Jesus when the way was not to their taste, but Peter summed up the reality:

“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” John 6:68

The time span of man comes to its nadir, the winter is here though mankind knows it not, for spiritually man is dead. Now, we are no different from any other tree save that God has seen in us something more pleasing to His eye. He has seen fit to extend His mercy towards us, not that we deserve it, but by His grace. Thus, though the heat of summer assail us, the autumn of life draw on or the hoar frost of winter diminish us, the time will come when that vital difference will be seen. The Lord will return, the dead will rise incorruptible; the evergreen tree will bud forth and be seen for what it is. All that we do is known and noted; God is just and will not forget His children. Malachi records:

“Then those who feared the LORD talked with each other, and the LORD listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the LORD and honoured his name. Yahweh’s promise to those who seek Him: “They will be mine,” says the LORD Almighty, “in the day when I make up my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as in compassion a man spares his son who serves him.”

At that time the difference shall be seen between one tree and another:

“And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not.” Mal. 3:16-18

The promise is clear and irrevocable, for the Word of our God never changes. If we remain faithful then we shall be as the evergreen tree, yielding fruit in due season, for a new class of tree shall be found in the Kingdom:

“In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.” Rev. 22:2

In that day when according to the mercy of Yahweh we enter into everlasting life, all our hope, love, fear, hardship and trial will have meaning and will have been more than worth the effort put in. Our life will have had purpose and reason.

“Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city.” Rev.22:14

Blessed indeed! What more could we ever want!

KICK THE HABIT

A leaflet was recently given to me entitled 'kick the habit'. It's about stopping smoking and as many of my patients smoke it appeared a good idea to give it out as part of encouraging living a healthier lifestyle. First it gives some facts amongst which it states: 'nicotine is an incredibly addictive drug'. Secondly it says the first step to giving it up is to admit the truth. What truth? Well that you are addicted and that it is very likely to endanger your life. Did you know that each cigarette alone contains 4000 chemicals! These include tar, ammonia, arsenic and cyanide!

The problem is, as with any addiction that people always say, tomorrow, I'll give up tomorrow. Problem is tomorrow never seems to come! The next bit of advice says: 'THINK POSITIVE'!

Think positively about what? Well the benefits of giving up smoking when going through the withdrawal symptoms. Accept that the headaches, sore throats and coughs are all signs that the body is getting rid of the poisons and rubbish inside. Don't let these things deter, simply believe that you will feel better in the end.

Now, who would pick up a lump of tar and smoke it or calmly swallow small doses of arsenic or cyanide, nobody! Where is the sense in willingly making oneself dependent upon something that overrules all of life? Yet people smoke partly out of habit and partly because of addiction. The longer and more they smoke, the more they want to smoke. This principle applies to any addiction.

The truth is however that we are all 'addicts'. We are all 'addicted' to sin and try as we might it is impossible to give up. Yet we must do our best to live a healthier lifestyle, a godly lifestyle, or else we will prematurely die. Sin kills, it has a 100% mortality rate unless we find the cure. But putting the 'cure' into practice is very hard, takes a lot of effort and we will always have the potential to relapse. Like the addict, it is very tempting to say tomorrow, I'll do it tomorrow.

With any addiction comes denial, the expression "that is not a problem for me I can give it up anytime" being frequently heard. John writes:

"If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." 1 John 1:8

The advice for turning away from sin is the same, THINK POSITIVE!
We have every reason to be positive for John continues:

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

However the downside is that turning away from sin in the short term means giving up things that deep inside we would rather do. Human nature tends to try and stray too near the edge, to push boundaries, to justify what really is wrong. Sin is born out of desire and James writes:

“..after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.” James 1:15

A good question to always ask ourselves is, ‘would I find Christ doing this or saying that?’ If hand on heart the answer is no, don’t do it or say it! Again the question: ‘Would what I do or say cause offence to Christ or one of his little ones?’ If hand on heart the answer is yes, don’t do it or say it! What do we read, James is blunt and to the point:

“Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn’t do it, sins.” James 4:17

Rather take to heart the words of Paul:

“encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.” Heb. 3:13

Sin deceives, thus there is a great need to always look forward, to think positively. The smoker is often motivated to give up out of love for spouse or children. Are we motivated to forsake sin out of love for God and love for the Lord Jesus Christ?

Turning away from sin is hard and takes effort, life long effort. If we give way to sin then it becomes easier each time, if we resist sin then it becomes easier to resist. Learning honesty and humility is the key: Scripture says:

“God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”
Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.” James 4:6-8

If people were honest, the deep down reason why they do not give up an addiction is either because it is seen as being too hard, they do not have sufficient motive, it takes too much effort or they don’t really want to give up.

So, is sin too hard to give up? Is there too much pleasure derived from what must be given up? Deep down do we really want to make changes? Is it too hard to be humble and put aside self?

Sin kills, so kick the habit while there is still time!

The faithful of old were commended because they forsook present gain for the reason that in their hearts Yahweh reigned supreme. They believed and valued His Word, His promises, His salvation. They wanted above everything, to be part of His purpose. Of Moses we read:

“He chose to be ill-treated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time.”
Hebrews 11:25

What a great and wonderful example for us to follow! If only we could always remember that life is really very short and that what now is seen as permanent is but fleeting, an illusion.

Ok, so we all fail, for none are perfect, but we must keep on trying, keep persevering to ‘kick the habit’. There is no need for despondency; in Christ we have the promise of redemption:

“Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people”.

More than this, positive thinking will always remember that:

“..he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.” Hebrews 9:28

So I say again, show your love and appreciation and ‘kick the habit’!

CALM AFTER THE STORM

I guess we all have experienced storms at some time or other in our lives. It is not so bad if one is indoors, warm and dry, but it is quite different if for example one is out driving amid pouring rain and high winds. The wind howls, the car shudders as the wind hits it and the driver can find it hard to keep the car on the road. Visibility is poor with rain lashing at the windscreen and lights from other cars sparkle and reflect upon the wet screen.

A few years ago I can recall driving to Eastern Europe and on the return journey coming down through Lithuania a major storm developed. This storm continued down into Poland, then on into Germany. Rain and high winds started in Lithuania, grew more severe as we drove through Poland and then into torrential rain and gales in Germany. For several hours visibility was severely reduced and the car felt as if it was going over a river not a road! The winds blew us all over the place and as we were driving through the night, tiredness became an additional enemy to contend with.

Gradually as the night wore on the wind gradually dropped, the rain slowed and as the murky dawn light grew ever brighter a sense of relief came over us and despite tiredness, a feeling of nearing the journey's end gave increasing optimism of making it home safely. A brief stop for breakfast refreshed us and by that evening we had passed through the rest of Europe and were on the ferry looking at the white cliffs of Dover looming before us. We were home at last! The worries of the night before soon vanished, the storm was quickly forgotten and the short three-hour journey from Dover to home passed quickly.

Life is full of storms. Our journey through life to the Kingdom is beset by many 'spiritual' storms and the constant battle against sin is tiring, sapping our will. We travel through a spiritual night that appears pitch black at times and the road ahead is far from clear. The godless in the world about us are described by Isaiah saying:

“the wicked are like the troubled sea, when it cannot rest,
whose waters cast up mire and dirt.” Isa. 57:20

How often do we worry that the journey's end will not come, that the Kingdom is far off, or that we will be swept off the road of life by the winds of life's adversities. But, the storms of life will pass, the clouds

will disperse, and the sun will outpour its healing warmth. The Lord Jesus will return and calm the raging storms of life. Before we know it the Kingdom will appear ahead of us and the last few miles into the Kingdom age will be but a brief journey.

Our real home will be before us, life as we have never known it before, eternal life spent with all of God's children. The anxieties will fade and soon pass, the storms of life will be long forgotten. The earth will be at rest under the wise, benevolent and just rule of the Lord Jesus, the 'Prince of peace'.

So as we draw towards the journey's end, the words of the well known hymn come to mind expressing confidence in our Lord: 'With Christ in the vessel we smile at the storm' and his promise also comes to mind,

"surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."
Matt. 28:20

PERSEVERE!

Persevere! Don't give up. There is still a 'today'

Our Creator is omnipotent, great and powerful beyond our understanding. He created us for a purpose, namely to reflect His glory. The earth shall be full of His glory as the waters cover the sea and we are privileged to be called out ones. Yet because of sin, we are frail and mortal, our thoughts are not pure. James speaks of the tongue being a world of evil and he comments:

“If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain.” James 1:26

If we are honest in self-examination we must agree with how true this statement is! It is true to say that what we speak and of course write, is an expression of the inner person. The way we behave is born out of what we think, feel and value. What we are is determined by what we associate ourselves with and fill our minds with. What we associate with is determined by what is important to us.

It would follow then that if we value the Truth, if we honestly desire to please our Creator, if we love Yahweh and His ways, if we love the Lord Jesus and appreciate all that he has done for us, then our minds and actions will be always in accord with these things. We will fill our minds daily with the Word, we will strive to put that Word into practice in our lives and our sole focus will be upon the coming Kingdom.

Well this is the ideal, but sadly, though we desire it to be so, not the reality. How many times even in the week between the memorial meetings, do we forget? How many times does that ill thought and unkind word spring from our lips? How many times have we felt it hard to follow the way set before us? How hard have we found it to change our characteristics? How many times and for how long have we felt the fear of not being 'good enough'?

If you are like me then I guess the answer to all those questions is 'yes I have frequently!' If we ask, 'am I good enough'? The honest answer before Yahweh has to be NO!

That being the case we have three choices:

We can give up, stop going to meetings, shun the company of brethren and sisters and think that we have been so bad that it is no good continuing.

We can conclude that we are unable to change; human nature will always tend towards evil and change is impossible. Thus life must continue as it is and we will hope that Jesus will understand at the judgement seat.

We can make the decision that the situation described is indeed true, accept our failings BUT openly, honestly admit those failings before our Creator and then trust in His mercy and then strive to make changes despite the setbacks. We each must decide which is the scriptural and better way.

Maybe there are times when we fear not being 'good enough' but the way is opened through Jesus Christ our Lord. [John 14:1-4] Jesus is a merciful High Priest, he knows our weaknesses and failings. Jesus was tempted in all the points that we are – yet without sin. If we honestly strive to follow his example, we shall ultimately become Christ like. It is in that honest realisation and acceptance that we are not 'good enough', that we find the path to life. Humble confession of our sin and our need in prayer is acceptable to God.

Jesus is the way, the truth and the life and only through him can we find salvation. We have a High Priest of the order of Melchizedek, a High Priest by virtue of indestructible life, one fully able and willing to intercede on our behalf. One who has shown his love for us in that he laid down his life, greater love has no man than this. Shall we reject his sacrifice and love by giving up!

Jesus is and has shown the way. The way is not easy; it was never promised that it would be. The way takes effort, it takes self-sacrifice and it takes perseverance. Now God saw that we had the potential for this when He called us. God did not call us to fail. Nay, He has provided all that is needed; the only source of failure then is ourselves.

Soon we must stand before the judgment seat of Christ, what will he think of our words and deeds? We shall bend the knee before him, we shall confess our life, we shall all need his mercy. There will be no room for any pride, only thankfulness for some humble abiding place. But then what cause for great joy. The past will appear but a

passing dream compared to the realities of the Kingdom before us. Surely, with David we say “a day in your courts is better than a thousand. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God, than dwell in the tents of wickedness.” God has said

“This is the one that I esteem: He who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word”. Isaiah 66:2

The wheel has come full circle. The way we behave is born out of what we think, feel and value. What we are is determined by what we associate ourselves with and fill our minds with. What we associate with is determined by what is important to us.

Humility, contriteness of heart and trembling at God’s Word is what will fill our minds and influence our behaviour, if that is what we really value. Maybe it would help to consider that it is not all about personally ‘getting it right’ all the time and as it were ‘beating ourselves up’ over failure. It is more about an attitude of mind, a determination to strive to be Christ like despite our failures, a determination to obey the commandments of Christ despite our weaknesses. If that is what we value, over time, according to the mercy of God that is what we will be like. So we say,

“Yes Lord walking in the way of your laws we wait for you. Your name and renown are the desire of our hearts. My soul yearns for you in the night, in the morning my spirit longs for you”. Isaiah 26:8

THE JUDGMENT SEAT OF CHRIST

Stop what you are doing. Now, imagine one day as you go about your daily business, at work, shopping, daily household chores, parties, watching TV, whatever, a man approaches. He comes directly to you, you have never seen him before, but something about him makes you feel apprehensive. The man says firmly and simply: 'it is time, the Master awaits'. Like Lot so many years ago, you hesitate, is this real? Who is this man? Is this a joke? The man repeats the message, answering your thought, 'no this is real, the Master awaits, you must come now'.

You suddenly find yourself elsewhere – but where? This is nothing like you have ever experienced before, nothing like you have imagined. The man leads you forward, before you is a great light and you perceive two groups ahead. One group is very large, one smaller. In the middle, between the two groups is a great throne and before it a vast book lying opened. One great and terrible sits upon that throne, dressed in dazzling white raiment, his face ablaze with resplendent light.

One before that throne objects to life history told, with pride a voice saying, but I preached in your name, you taught in my street, you know me Lord! But stern voice rebukes and bids him pass to the left; he joins the larger group, tears in his eyes.

With loud trumpet blast, your name is called. You have no strength, you fall to the ground, you cannot raise yourself up. Yes, you are before the Lord Jesus Christ; your thoughts in turmoil. O what of my life? O why was I called from being there! O how I wish that this or that had not been left undone. The summation of your life is recounted from the open book

Fear such as you have never known fills you, with trembling voice, weak and feeble you mouth the words 'I am unworthy Lord'.

But then a voice says 'do not fear', a voice so full of life and compassion. You obeyed my commands, you tried your best, you showed your love, visited me in prison, you fed and clothed me, when I was sick you came. When Lord? You ask. When you did it for these my brethren on my right: 'well done thou good and faithful

servant, enter into the joy of your Master'. Your heart pounds; tears well up, the love and joy in your heart overflows in words of praise and worship. You are invited to join that small group at the Master's right hand....

Sorrow and weeping now gone, sorrow, sacrifices, trials and tribulation paled into insignificance, your real life begins. O how thankful you are that you did persevere, that you did try to show your love for Christ despite your imperfection, that you did strive to obey his commandments.

Now you are privileged to share in your Lord's joy. Now you are privileged to talk to the many faithful you had only ever been able to read about. Now you are one of those 'heaven sent guides and governors' given the privilege of teaching the nations of God's ways.

May this imagined scene be the end of all who are faithful now. Therefore 'hold fast to that which is good' and: 'Pray for the peace of Jerusalem they shall prosper that love thee.'

CRAB APPLES

Like many people I enjoy walking around the countryside and have got to know where different varieties of wild fruit bushes and trees are. Having come across them, the next challenge was to find out what, if anything, the fruit could be used for. Now sloe berries are a very nice looking deep purple when ripe, but I thought apart from adding to Gin not a lot of use, though many may think sloe Gin a good enough reason to gather them. Blackberries, yes, they have many uses all equally tasty! But what about crab apples, what use could they be? There are several trees along the paths I take, but as the summer drew on into autumn, although some began to look red and inviting they were small and some very sour to the taste. However I noted those trees more open to the sun and less crowded by other shrubbery had produced the better fruit.

All the apples are small and not much use on their own, some apples are indeed 'crabby' to look at, uninviting but sweet to the taste inside. Others looked red and outwardly pleasing to eat, yet of these some were sour to taste and some were full of worms. You know I gathered enough to fill a small rucksack, enough for pounds of jam I thought, yet after sorting them out only just a few, a small remnant, were fit for use. But those few made 5 jars of great crab apple jelly!

So what lessons, if any, could be drawn from this experience and applied to life in Christ? Well I guess in God's sight we are all 'crabby' to look at and not very appealing in our human nature. We can all be 'crabby' in temperament at times, crabby of course meaning to be grumpy, irritable, bad-tempered, or short-tempered.

We were wild by nature and uncultivated when first called to know the Truth. We are nothing special to look at and certainly not much use on our own. Many would maybe consider us to be a poor choice, surely there must be better fruit fitted for the Lord our God to use. Yet Yahweh saw something in each one of us that might yield something useful and gathered us, just as I gathered from the trees that fruit I thought would be possibly fit to use. Some of my fruit was indeed good when gathered, but it swiftly became bruised and battered on the journey home, or proved to have hidden worms. Sadly that is how many who are called become, we all know the parable of the seed that was sown on the wayside and was eaten

up, or stony ground and failed to mature, or became choked by weeds. Only some of the seed grew and yielded a harvest. Now we judge by what we hear, see and think, but Yahweh knows the heart, He knows the inner man. We all have crotchets and quavers, pet ideas, likes and dislikes that distract from the true perspective. The time is soon coming when the harvest shall be gathered in and the fruit examined. That which is pleasing to our eye may not in the end be acceptable, being full of worms, unfit for use. What did Jesus say of the Pharisees? He did not hesitate in condemning them saying:

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men’s bones and everything unclean.” Matt. 23:27

Those who sow to please human nature will be of this type. The outward show maybe respectable, but the heart is not right before God. The one who seeks an easy life, who puts little effort in or whose character is not modelled upon the Lord Jesus, will not be fit for use. What does Paul say?

“Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.” 2 Cor. 9:6

Those who sow to please Yahweh will be of this generous type. The outward show maybe crabby at times, but the inner man is meek and contrite. The one who sows generously knows that giving is not just about money, they give of themselves, giving freely of time and effort in response to all that has been done for them.

Those who are warmed by the light of the word and are nourished in fertile soil may look a bit care worn and battered on the outside by the cares and trials of life, but on the inside will have yielded fruit fit for use. Small and insignificant maybe on their own, they will when brought together with other similar fruits be productive, fit for use. So what fruit is Yahweh looking for? What fruit should we bear and what fruit are we bearing? Paul wrote:

“the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

How will the righteous bear this fruit? Paul continues:

“Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.” Gal. 5:22-24.

They have put aside self! Now of those nine fruits listed the greatest is love, but love is not something abstract, not merely an emotional response, for love can often be used as a justification for what is wrong. No love (Greek - agape) is practical, as a review of 1 Corinthians 13:4-8 will show. Yahweh is the epitome, the embodiment of that active divine love.

Love for Yahweh and His ways must come above all else and such a love will be demonstrated in an active way. All the other fruit will arise from love. Again, sound advice from Paul:

Honour one another above yourselves.
Never be lacking in zeal serving the Lord.
Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.
Share with God's people who are in need.
Practise hospitality.
Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.
Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.
Live in harmony with one another.
Do not be proud.
Do not be conceited.
Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.
Rom 12:10-21 (Selected verses NIV)

So how do we obtain these fruits? David wrote:

"Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Psa. 1:1-3

Verse two sums it up, delight in the law of Yahweh and meditate upon it, let it be the fulcrum of your life! Indeed we read:

"Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on."
"Yes," says the Spirit, "they will rest from their labour, for their deeds will follow them." Rev. 14:13

All that we do and think is known, so:

Don't judge from the outside appearance
What looks nice may be sour inside
What looks crabby may be sweet inside

God alone knows the heart.

Now, my big pile of crab apples upon examination swiftly became a small pile of useful fruit. What did Jesus say, "Many are called, but few are chosen"; or to use another metaphor he will separate the wheat from the chaff.

God sees the heart, what are we inside? Will He find the sour taste of self-justification, excuses as to why we did not do this or that? Will He find we have done less than our best or sought for ease now rather than faced discomfort and difficulties along the way?

Alternatively, will Yahweh find the sweet fruits of the spirit, an acceptable attitude of serving him faithfully to the best of our abilities? Will He find the sweet fruit of a contrite and humble disposition, the sweet fruit of a sincere and abiding love for His Word? Did not Jesus say:

"Abide in my love. IF you obey my commandments you will abide in my love."

In the end, it is our characters that will show how fit or not we are for life in the glorious Kingdom to come. Thus, it is our characters that we should be watching and preparing for the Lord's return. If we diligently strive to prepare, then our 'crabbiness' will be overlooked and we shall find abundant mercy, our faith being counted as righteousness.

THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD

I had a client once whose husband was a shepherd. He worked for a farmer but also had his own flock. They lived about 2 miles from the nearest village and as farmers, life was sometimes quite isolated. My client was depressed and found life quite difficult at times particularly as her husband spent many hours out in the fields looking after the sheep. She had three children and one by one they had grown up and attended school and now for most of the day she was alone. One day I found her opening the door in somewhat of a rush, she invited me in, but apologised for the fact that she was distracted and asked if I minded animals. My answer was of course not at all, thinking she had maybe bought a cat or dog for company.

She led me into the kitchen where in a corner was a little new born lamb. I cannot remember now why she had become its surrogate mother, but she was feeding it regularly. What really amused me was that by the next time I visited wherever she went the lamb went. I also noticed that caring for the lamb was having a positive effect upon her depression. She was enjoying walking out in the fields, a little white shadow following her! This lady attended church quite regularly and read the Bible often, one day she told me that having the little lamb had made her think of Psalm 23 and realise how God had been her shepherd all along, it was just that she had gone from his side.

That trust of a little lamb following close to it's 'mother' is an example to us as to what our relationship with the Lord our God should be like. He has provided one to shepherd His flock. Jesus is the 'good shepherd', the one who knows his sheep and guides them into 'green pastures'. The sheep know the shepherd and will not heed the voice of a stranger. Now Scripture says that we all like sheep have gone astray and so we do for it is not in the way of man to guide his own footsteps. Our role is to heed the shepherd's voice and if we do, we shall indeed be led into 'green pastures' and besides 'still waters'. We will be led in the paths of righteousness and shall find that we are restored indeed. If we truly strive to obey the shepherd's commandments then like David we will most assuredly say "goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life".

Jesus of course as well as being the good shepherd is himself the 'lamb of God'. The concept of Jesus as our shepherd and we as the sheep is but a reflection of that greater relationship between Father and son. The Lamb of God always heard and obeyed his Father's voice. God as the 'shepherd' of Jesus truly led him besides the still waters. Indeed that Psalm 23 surely is an expression of the thoughts and trust of Jesus, just as it was for David.

The example of the implicit trust Jesus had in his Father is an example that we as his 'sheep' must follow. Can we say in the depth of our hearts we follow and truly believe the expression:

"The Lord is my Shepherd I shall not want"

EXPECTING THE UNEXPECTED

Well the big freeze came upon all in the UK and the roads ground to a halt. Other countries more used to such weather would have carried on regardless and I well remember one journey travelling to E. Europe by car. From Berlin onwards it snowed very heavily with blizzard conditions at times, yet albeit slowly, the journey continued and Latvia was reached without too much trouble. At that time the car was prepared for such eventualities, tyres slightly under inflated, plenty of spare water, food, blankets, plenty of warm clothing in the car and a means of making a hot drink if needed. Oh and of course a means of digging out of snow if required.

So how many drivers in the UK were ready for the bad weather? There had been plenty of warning, plus reminders for people to make sure they had enough fuel and resources just in case. One memorable winter on a particular motorway, people were stranded for up to 22 hours! So how many people were prepared for the bad weather and for a slow journey? That really will remain unknown, but the journey was slow, it took Lee, my son in law, 5½ hours for a ¾ hour journey and took me 3½ hours for a 35 minute journey. It was interesting to note how many cars skidded and were hard to control because people were not skilled in driving on snow, whereas a gentle application of power in a higher gear and knowledge of how to control a skid would have made life much easier. I noted several cars in ditches or piled up together after a crash! Yet despite all this, the police and ambulances still got through, why? Simple, they were prepared.

So plenty of fuel, a means of keeping warm, knowing the route, having the right driving skills and making slow steady progress, would have made the journey a lot easier and safer for many people.

Are there any spiritual lessons that can be drawn from this event?
Well four questions come to mind:

Are we prepared to live in a time such as in the days of Noah or the time of Sodom and Gomorrah?

Are we prepared for a long journey on the road to life?

Are we prepared for trials and a time of trouble such as never was?

Will prophecy work out exactly as we think?

I guess the answer is that nobody will be 100% prepared. But we must make the effort! Jesus clearly said:

“As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man.” Matt 24:37-39

Noah had preached for 120 years, he had built the ark, the warning was plain for all around him to hear and see, yet only eight were saved, Noah and his immediate family. The rest of mankind got on with their lives, no doubt ridiculing Noah and thus were unprepared for the unexpected. The same with Sodom and Gomorrah, life went on as usual till one fine morning the unexpected happened and all life ceased. The world around us goes on from one day to the next, until like the time of Noah all will be swept away. We know not the hour, are we prepared for the unexpected?

We have been warned, we have no excuse not to be prepared. Jesus warned and exhorted many times that this disciples should watch! The exact time is unknown save to Yahweh, who has set the time when He shall judge the world by His own authority. Jesus said:

“of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but my Father only.” Matt 24:36

Jesus therefore clearly warned:

“Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.” Matt 24:42

Are you listening to that warning!

We know exactly what to expect, we know the time of the end will come, indeed it is closer than five minutes to the hour. So are we filling up with the oil of the Word, for this is far more vital to us than fuel is for a car! Without the Word, we have no means of keeping going and the parable of the ten virgins is a stark warning for all.

So, have you mentally prepared yourself for the rigours of the journey that you may face? Make no mistake, those who truly seek Christ will have their share of troubles, they will face a final testing of faith, that their faith may be proved and refined as ‘pure gold’. Again words of warning from the Lord Jesus Christ:

“For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be. And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect’s sake those days will be shortened.” Matt. 24:21-22

So the faithful today, will like Noah experience a great time of testing, but like Noah they will be saved if they remain faithful. ‘If’ is such a small word, yet is one that is vitally important not to overlook. Jesus commanded

“..abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and abide in His love.” John 15:9-10

One of his commandments is that we prepare, we have only ourselves to blame if the unexpected overtakes us!

So are you trying to develop skills that will help you to ‘rightly divide the word of truth’? It is only by knowing the Word and developing knowledge, that it will be possible to resist the error and false teaching that can lead the unwary astray from the right path. Only by knowing the Truth will we be able to resist sin. Jesus resisted temptation each time by saying ‘it is written’. It is only by knowing the Scriptures that we will be able to have a clear idea of the route ahead, despite our spiritual vision sometimes being obscured.

Believe me when I say it was lovely to pull onto my drive, then walk into a warm house and relax after such a difficult journey. Just think how wonderful and joyous it will be, if you are welcomed by the Lord Jesus into His Kingdom at the end of your journey through life. The hardships and trials will be forgotten and what joy, peace and unsurpassed fellowship you will be privileged to inherit. Home at last!

Like Job, we live in full expectation of this hope. Job despite his trials spoke confidently of his future saying:

“I know that my Redeemer lives, and He shall stand at last on the earth; And after my skin is destroyed, this I know, that in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!” Job 19:27

Such was the confidence and faith of Job, there was no question in his mind for he confidently asserts, ‘I know!’

We know and also believe, therefore let all who truly love their Lord prepare and with joyful confidence keep ever in the forefront of their minds the thought that Jesus “shall stand at last upon the earth”.

Does your heart yearn within you for that wonderful day? It should!

SNOW FLAKES AND ICE

Yes it finally snowed, for days the snow had skirted round us and all we got was rain! But finally it snowed, not a lot, but enough to at least say that it was snow and not heavy frost. There they were, big flakes of snow gently falling, drifting to the ground and then as more flakes fell slowly merging into one. As the snow falls it all looks pretty much the same, yet each flake is unique and no two flakes are exactly the same. Each flake is full of symmetry and has a beauty all of its own.

Frost is similar. Ice forming on car windscreens, windows or settling on blade and leaf is composed of individual crystals and if you have seen a slow motion picture of ice spreading across a window or looked closely at a frozen stretch of water, often beautiful patterns are seen in the ice. Yet how easily those flakes of snow or crystals of ice are damaged, they are beautiful but fragile.

Sometimes snow flakes may fall onto warm ground and so they quickly melt away. In our day and age snow is often contaminated by pollution, it becomes dirty and loses its brilliant white appearance. Once settled on the ground snow is easily crushed and tracks are easily seen in its surface where people or animals walk.

Now, as human beings we all have similar physical characteristics, and yet for all the millions of people no matter how similar in features all have some individual characteristic that makes them unique. When it comes to character, then those differences become more marked and no two people display exactly the same traits of character, emotions, feelings and behaviour.

Now Adam was asked to name all animals and as they were brought before him, he did so according to their kind and the name given to them was the name by which they became known. (Gen 2:19-20) That name given was descriptive of the creature, yet no companion was found suitable for him. Thus, it was that God produced a companion from out of Adams side, one fit to be his partner in life. Eve was unique, just as Adam was.

Since that time, an innumerable number of human beings have lived and died. All are polluted to one degree or another and all have

some sort of flaw. The majority like snow falling onto warm ground have simply just vanished away. All human beings are fragile, easily damaged and crushed. Like snow and frost sooner or later the warming sun will make them vanish away as if they had never been.

But the more positive lessons from snow and ice speak of a hidden beauty. Some snow still falls unsullied by pollution in the more remote parts of the globe. Now God has seen something in those whom He calls that is worth developing and preserving, yet how easily our nature is tarnished by the pollution of life.

Snow and ice crystals grow slowly, the right conditions forming the beautiful patterns seen in each undamaged flake. Our characters are being formed now in the crucible of life. Each aspect of our character developed and added to by the right response to the Word and the grace shown to us by Yahweh. The scriptural description is that of a jewel. Unlovely in its natural state, careful cutting and polishing brings out the innate beauty of the gem crystal which is formed in similar ways to that of ice. All crystals grow, just as we must. What does the Proverb say?

“There is gold, and a multitude of rubies: but the lips of knowledge are a precious jewel.” Prov. 20:15

Therefore, our goal must be to grow in knowledge and understanding. Job asked: “where shall wisdom be found? and where is the place of understanding?”

The answer:

“Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding.” Job 28:28

Now just as the falling snow flakes merge together to form one carpet of snow, so the righteous will fuse together to form the bride of Christ. Each element of the body unique and having an individual beauty, yet having an even greater wonder and beauty when joined together as the collective ‘bride’ of Christ. At baptism like snow, we are cleansed, our sins forgiven, but despite our best efforts, pollution soon removes that pristine whiteness and our conscience is no longer pure.

It is there that the analogy falls down, for snow cannot be cleansed and have the pollution removed, unless of course it be melted back to water and heated. The water evaporates leaving the pollution

behind – another avenue of meditation maybe! Snow will one day melt and be no more, or will it? The reality is that ice merely changes form, the water still remains. To be fully cleansed we must be similarly be changed and this polluted human nature left behind.

We are impure, but Yahweh is exceedingly merciful, He has promised that faith will be counted as righteousness, if we hold fast to the end. Yahweh will refine and purify us, but we must play our part, there can be no compromise of the high calling and standards set out in scripture, no watering down of the Truth. Yahweh will not compromise His glory or His honour. The purpose of salvation is not life for its own sake, but that we might be part of the His purpose, His Name.

If we are polluted by the world, if we compromise the Truth we shall be as the polluted snow, impossible to cleanse. This is what James writes:

“Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” James 1:27

If we have faith, if we strive to remain unpolluted then we shall be changed:

“In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.” 1 Cor. 15:52-53

Yes, it takes effort. Yes, we must put aside self and self seeking. Yes, all of us fail in some measure despite our best intentions, but Paul rejoices saying:

“thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” 1 Cor. 15:57

MUD

Rain, rain, rain, that's all it did, time off work and opportunity to go walking and the weather was determined not to allow me to go. Anyway inclement weather or not in the end I decided to go out and get some fresh air. Now near where we live the fields have been ploughed and seed sown, but due to lack of rain nothing much has grown. Some of the pathways have been ploughed over and are thus are not so easy to walk over, but with decent boots the going is not so bad and some nice woodland lies beyond making the trek worthwhile. Have you ever walked across fields in heavy rain? If you have then you know exactly what it was like. Off I set and wondered why my feet suddenly felt so heavy, you've guessed mud! Thick clods of it sticking like glue to my boots, after a short distance I was already an inch or so taller. Well once back on a decent path by the side of the field I found a stick and scraped the mud off, only to find a short distance further on more had attached itself. But at least by sticking to the path it minimised the amount of mud encountered.

Now, I want you to imagine the scene of somebody walking along and every so often either dragging their feet through wet grass or stopping to scrape off the mud, water cascading off their hat. The question asked by any curious onlooker would be why? Why make life hard walking in rain through muddy fields when it would have been far easier to stay at home and keep warm and dry. Indeed walking is so much harder and tiring when carrying a great weight of mud on the boots and it gets very tempting to give up and turn back. But I had a goal in mind and to me the fresh air, the exercise, the countryside and the woodland made it all worthwhile. However, as with so many events that happen in life, thoughts can turn to what spiritual lessons may be gained from the experience. As the Scriptures say, first the natural then the spiritual and the Bible uses so many examples from day to day life to teach lessons that if we heed them will help our characters to grow.

That trek for a few miles over the wet soggy landscape is a bit like our walk through life to the Kingdom of God. We set off clean and dry enough, with a clear goal ahead of us and the enthusiasm to get there. Somehow though burdens become attached and make the journey harder. The path is not easy, sometimes a bit like a ploughed

field and as Jesus warned it is a narrow path that leads to life and few find it. That narrow path is not easy to follow and difficulties will inevitably be encountered, but at least if we stick to the path we avoid many of the troubles that would impede or even stop our progress.

Paul speaks of our struggle to make headway sometimes, he writes of that tendency to sin which like the mud sticks and entangles, weighing us down, slowing our progress. Sin that appears to almost stick to us like glue, no matter how hard we try! But what does Paul say that we must do? He writes:

“Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us” Heb. 12:1.

Ok we need endurance not to give up, but how do we lay aside the weight? Well, in a sense I guess like the mud we need to make sure we scrape it off and lessen the burden that we carry. Scraping sin off though is not so easy, for starters it is something we cannot accomplish on our own and how can we clean it off? Well first of all we can try to avoid sin in the first place by staying on the clearly defined path. Thus John writes:

“But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanses us from all sin.” 1John 1:7

This brings us on to the cleansing from sin. We can never do this ourselves, the mud that attaches itself to our feet as we walk through life, is there to stay, unless removed by another. Unlike my solitary walk through the fields we have a constant companion to help us. Our companion knows the path well, he can and will guide us, but we must stay with him for he will not do it for us. If we stray from the path then he will not follow us, for we must always follow him! If we walk according to the light of God’s Word then through the Lord Jesus we can be cleansed of that mud, the sin that so easily ensnares.

Is there anything else that we can do to keep on the narrow path and to reduce our burdens? Yes of course we can. One of the greatest sources of support comes from regularly meeting together, remembering the Lord Jesus and encouraging one another.

Paul writes about:

“Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more, as you see the day approaching.” Heb. 10:25

That great day is speedily approaching and there is need for diligent preparation. We can reduce the burden that we carry by committing 100% of our life to Yahweh, which indeed is ‘our reasonable service’, recognising that we cannot ever remove that burden of sin, and humbly trusting Yahweh to provide. Indeed to whom else could we turn! So do we commit all things to Yahweh in prayer? What does Paul exhort? He writes that we should be:

“Rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; continuing steadfastly in prayer.” Rom. 12:12

and

“Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints;” Eph. 6:18

Prayer is a privilege never to be neglected. If the question was asked how often do you pray and in what circumstances, what would you answer? But prayer is not just about our own needs, for Paul includes prayer for others. By doing so we recognise that we all need help and demonstrate a genuine concern that our fellow pilgrims should also arrive at the journey’s end. But noticing the ‘mud’ on another’s feet is not just about trying to help ease that burden and help them back onto the path if need be, for many times that is not in our hands. Indeed it is of vital importance that we do not add to the weight that others carry, by thoughtless action or inaction. Our sole goal must be to:

“bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ.”
Gal 6:2

The one thing that is possible for all of us to do, is to pray on behalf of our brethren and sisters. Again consider some words of Paul:

“If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin which does not lead to death, he will ask, and he will give him life for those who commit sin not leading to death. There is a sin leading to death. I do not say that he should pray about that.” 1John 5:16

Often our deepest concern and greatest love for our brethren and sisters finds expression through earnest prayer to the one who sees all and for whom all things are possible.

Going back to our walk, when the rain pours down and it's muddy, the going gets tough and tiredness sets in. At this point it is tempting to think back to the warmth of home and turn back, forgetting the reason why the journey was begun in the first place. Remembering the goal of the walk will provide incentive to continue. On our journey through life, it is of vital importance to remember the reasons for taking that narrow path and the objective ahead, because if we turn back we shall never achieve it and indeed we do not have a permanent home to return to! The journey along that path of life must be followed, for it will enable us to get to our home! There is no other way!

Baptism was the start of that journey, a time when we were thoroughly cleansed of all the mud that once covered not only our feet, but our whole body. Peter writes of baptism being the answer of a good conscience towards God and Paul says:

“...but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God.” 1 Cor. 6:11

WALKING THROUGH FOG

Have you ever walked in mist or fog? Walking the other day in quite thick mist reminded me of when I was a young boy coming home on the bus in one of those 'pea soup' type fogs, those as old or older will know what I mean, the type where it was hard to see your hand in front of your face. The journey to a young boy took hours! Then when finally the conductor told me it was my stop (young children could travel alone safely in those days – O I sound old, I'm not really) I got off and with some trepidation looked across the road for my house. Nowhere to be seen! In fact I could not see the other side of the road, but feeling brave I struck out, found that the other side of the road did still exist and followed the line of hedges to my home.

Another incident a few years ago when we were on holiday up on the moors also came to mind. It was very foggy and Jan stayed in the cottage whilst I went off on a hike in the mist, confident that with map and compass the fog could be overcome. After walking for a few miles I found myself walking over rock formations that suggested that I had arrived at the site I was aiming for and sure enough 10 minutes of carefully circumnavigating the area got me to the ancient burial mounds that I had been seeking. Getting back, no problem I thought! Off I set having taken a cursory look at the map and a compass reading. The map had been closely observed on the outward journey and the compass frequently consulted, but on the return journey with me feeling more confident, the map was looked at less frequently and less intently, I could remember it, so I thought. An hour later the cottage still had not come into view and the surroundings, what I could see of them, did not look familiar. I eventually came to a railway line, a landmark it was impossible to miss, but consulting the map showed me I was at least two miles off course. Maybe looking at the map a bit more closely instead of thinking I knew it all, would have saved me time and effort!

Anyway, back to my walk in the mist. There is a certain beauty about fields and hedge rows in mist, things are known to be there but are unseen until gradually they emerge faintly through the mist, a familiar tree here and stile there. At this time of year when all the trees have shed their leaves, as one gets closer the stark outlines of trees and hedge rows loom up out of the mist, wood and dead foliage glistening with moisture.

Life in the Truth is a bit like walking in fog and mist. Our early life is characterised by sometimes finding it hard to see the way, the way ahead is a bit like the 'pea souper'. But like the young child I once was trusting the conductor to tell me it was time to get off the bus and taking his advice on how to get home, we must trust the Word to guide our way. We come into the Truth because we believed in and trusted the scriptures. We cannot see the Kingdom of God, nor have we met the Lord Jesus Christ, but we know home is somewhere beyond the fog of life. So we set out full of conviction, full of trust and full of enthusiasm. We follow the example of the faithful of old who have trod the path before.

As we journey through life, as I did when walking over the moors, we consult the map and frequently check the compass to see if we are on the right path. As time goes on however is there a tendency towards overconfidence or just forgetfulness? Can we reach the stage where the map is consulted less often because we think it is known and there is no need for the constant reminding about the basic path to take?

In spiritual terms, maybe this equates to thinking that we know the basic principles of the Gospel message, that we know what Yahweh expects of us, that we are living life at least reasonably acceptably and that we do not need constant reminding about these things. Yet Scripture plainly says:

"I know, O LORD, that a man's life is not his own; it is not for man to direct his steps." Jer. 10:23

There is a great need to be constantly reminded about the right path to take and humility of mind will recognise the need for learning and relearning the Gospel message, for as David writes:

"Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path."
Psa. 119:105

As our journey through life goes on and hopefully we become more experienced, more spiritually mature, maybe our journey becomes like the walk in the mist. The path is known to us, but although at times it is not easily discerned, we seek for familiar land marks and see them looming out of the mist along our path. During our journey along the path of salvation, the way is rarely clear but there are landmarks in a plenty, fulfilled prophecy here, the reassurance of Yahweh's guiding hand there. So many directions and signs in

Scripture saying in effect ‘this is the way, walk in it, whenever you turn to the right hand, or whenever you turn to the left.’”

The weekly remembrance of the Lord Jesus Christ by taking the bread and wine as he commanded, remembering all he accomplished and our total reliance upon his saving name. The weekly self examination against his high example and the realigning our lives upon him is the equivalent of the compass. How closely are we aligned on the Lord Jesus Christ? How closely are we following his commandments? These are fundamental questions that must be answered and then the appropriate course corrections made to our path.

If we follow the Scriptures closely, if we follow the Lamb of God wherever he leads, then the promise is certain, we will reach the journey’s end. We will find a home in the wonderful, glorious Kingdom so soon to come. God has said through His inspired Word that He is
“not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.” 2 Peter 3:9

There is no doubt that the Lord Jesus will return and the way shall be made plain. Though we now see “as if through a glass, darkly” the time will come when we will see “face to face”. Paul wrote
“now I know in part; but then I shall know just as I also am known. 1 Cor. 13:12

Do you long for that divine family union, when the faithful from all ages will be brought together in that great consummation of Yahweh’s promises? Such was the longing of David for his true home that he wrote:

“How lovely is your Tabernacle, O LORD of Hosts! My soul longs, yes, even faints, for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God. Even the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young—Even Your altars, O LORD of Hosts, my King and my God. Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they will still be praising you. Selah. Blessed is the man whose strength is in you, whose heart is set on pilgrimage. Psalm 84:1-5

THE HEART

Recently the cardiac rehabilitation unit at the local general hospital contacted me to ask if there was anything that could be offered from a mental health point of view to patients attending the rehabilitation course that they run. For years cardiac rehabilitation has concentrated very much on the physical aspects of heart disease, but experience plus more recent research has shown that despite education many people still do not recover to their full potential. It is also evident that many people suffer from depression to one degree or another. So in view of this and recent national guidelines, the department decided that it was a good idea to have some input looking at recovery from a more cognitive viewpoint. I hasten to say that I am no expert on heart disease, nor had previous experience working in this way, indeed there is little in the way of previous work in this area. However, I do have clinical skills that can be adapted to this area and so it will be a situation for me to learn in as well, plus maybe provide opportunity for some interesting research.

There is in this maybe an application for our life in Christ. Don't think that if something new such as a preaching opportunity or some other work in the Truth, comes along that you are unable to do it. See it as a chance to learn more, for we all need continual education and training in the Lord's service.

Anyway I digress. Following major illness even though the cause may be removed or significant recovery have taken place, often people take on an 'invalid' role. They see themselves as incapable of living life as it was before; they become fearful, resentful, prone to negative thinking and depression. Some people despite knowing that if they do not make changes a heart attack could recur and that it could be fatal, refuse to heed advice and change their lifestyle and habits. If they did but take the advice given, then life could be much richer and fulfilling for them. It would also be longer!

Changing the way people think, feel and perceive themselves and illness can have a big effect upon quality and length of life. The art is to change the pattern of negative thought and negative lifestyle, by trying to be more positive and live a healthier lifestyle. The trouble is people often have to give up things that they enjoy and make an effort to change. Effort and change are two things guaranteed to put most human beings off!

However, although maybe one must live within constraints, rather than chafe about what cannot be done, it is far, far better, to look towards what can still be enjoyed. I can still recall a lady referred to me as being depressed a year or so ago who had a major illness, not heart disease, but something more permanently disabling. One day she suddenly realised that having such an illness had given her more time, so she started painting again, something that an active career had stopped her doing. Since then she has turned out some quite skilled artwork and is actually contented and happy! For her life has turned around purely by getting a new perspective on her life. A new heart as Scripture puts it.

This world of ours is suffering from chronic heart disease and all the 'rehabilitation' in the world provided by man will not help. The disease will continue to take its course and death will come sooner rather than later. Unlike heart disease, the 'human condition' can be cured and life prolonged indefinitely by addressing cognitions, changing the human perspective. What mankind needs, what each and every one of us needs, is a completely new perspective, a new attitude and a new lifestyle. What does Jeremiah say?

“The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked; who can know it?” Jer. 17:9

Indeed who can truly know the inner man, for man is exceptionally good at deceiving himself and others. The heart disease within man is endemic and will result in certain death. God pleaded with Israel: “Repent and turn from all your transgressions; so that iniquity will not be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions which you have committed and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. For why should you die?.. For I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies, says the Lord God. Therefore turn and live.” Eze. 18:30-31

Yahweh takes no pleasure in the death of anybody, but the onus is upon us to turn, to change our lives and thus live.

Now, what causes heart disease? Well factors such as wrong diet, lack of exercise, smoking and other abuse of the body. It can also have a genetic predisposition. Spiritual 'heart' disease has the same root causes, for example:

Wrong diet can have its equal of being filled with the thoughts, ideas and teachings of man and not eating a balanced diet of the scriptures. Remember Jesus taught that “man does not live by bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

Lack of exercise can have the equivalent of being less than zealous to put the word into practice in our lives, a sort of spiritual couch potato.

Smoking and abuse of our bodies can have the equivalent of engaging in activities that are not conducive to sound spiritual growth. In other words being overly engrossed in worldly activities and neglecting attending fraternal gatherings, bible study and all the many things that build up the spiritual body, both our own and the body of Christ as a whole.

Genetically predisposed? Well we all inherit Adam's nature! Now God promised Israel that He would indeed cure them of heart disease:

"I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within them; and take the stony heart out of their flesh, and give them a heart of flesh". Eze. 11:19

See how renewal is linked with change of attitude or spirit of mind. So what state is our heart and our spirit in?

Is our heart hard and stony, unwilling to listen to advice and correction about life style?

Is our heart prone to negative thinking?

Are we a spiritual couch potato?

Is our life style likely to cause spiritual heart disease by damaging our body

Are we eating the wrong diet or an unhealthy diet?

On the other hand are we willing to listen and put into action the strong sound advice from Scripture? Are we changing our life style, being spiritually active, being healthy living and eating a good balanced diet of the bread of life?

We are so diseased that our only hope is to have a transplant of a new heart, to turn to Yahweh with all our heart, to love Him above all. He sees all and is well able to save us. Trust and a right spirit within us will say with David:

"Have mercy on me, O LORD; for I am weak: O LORD, heal me; for my bones are troubled." Psalm 6:2

or with Jeremiah:

Heal me O Lord and I shall be healed, save me and I shall be saved." Jer. 17:14

God is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. So let's all work at changing our lifestyles now, before it is too late. The promise is that not only will you have a 'new heart, but a completely new body! You will renew your strength, run and not grow weary, walk and not grow faint. You will soar as the eagle, leap as the hart, you will neither know cold nor heat, pain nor sorrow. You will see the earth renewed, waters break out in the desert and the desert blossom as the rose. The law will go forth from Zion and death itself will never be a threat again. Eternal life, life as we were intended to live it right from the beginning shall be yours. All you have to do is change your way of life now, and do some healthy living which surely is good for you and no hardship at all.

Just think of how that change of heart brings with it new and far greater possibilities, the greatest life of all, peace with Yahweh, your Creator.

AS A THIEF

It is fascinating to watch the behaviour of birds when feeding. Small birds alert for danger quickly pecking off a morsel of food and eating in haste, watching all around for danger. Larger birds pecking off a quantity letting it fall to the ground then eating it at their leisure. Their only concern is that a passing cat or fox may pose a danger, but give little heed to smaller birds, relying upon size and strength to frighten off would be rivals. One day I noted a big crow eating scattered grain; it had chased away starlings and the other birds that then looked on not daring to come closer. Suddenly one little bird swooping down from a bush grabbed the food from under the crows nose and flew off. The crow was too slow to even begin to stop the little bird and almost looked bemused as to how such a small bird could have dared to run off with the crow's food.

Now on a more tragic note maybe we can recall an earthquake that hit a city in Iran flattening it completely. One minute those people were fast asleep or just awakening to a new day, then suddenly without warning their world turned up side down. The ground shook, the walls collapsed and they were powerless to stop it.

Now Jesus warned that his return would be unexpected, saying:

“..know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into. Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.” Matt. 24:43

And Paul writes:

“..you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night.” 1Thess. 5:2

Jesus will come unannounced and unexpectedly, there will be no prior warning no time for last minute preparation, Jesus will be here and we will be taken before him for judgement.

Now the world is certainly not looking for him, let alone expecting his return and sadly his return will be equally unexpected to many who claim to be his disciples. But for faithful brethren and sisters Jesus will not arrive as an unwelcome intruder, but rather as a long looked for saviour.

Be not deceived, it is quite possible to convince oneself that you are indeed a stalwart brother or sister in Christ, that salvation is indeed your lot, when in truth word and deed say entirely the opposite. Jesus warned:

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in your name, cast out demons in your name and done many wonders in your name?’” Matt. 7:21-22

and

“We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.” Luke 13:26

The answer will come:

“I tell you I do not know you, where you are from. Depart from me, all you workers of iniquity.” Luke 13:27

Human nature is such that it is quite possible to be convinced that what is done is right, to look at the outward show, the works that appear acceptable but in reality are not doing the will of God. Honest self-examination will show the truth of the matter, if we did but dare to look inwardly with our eyes open. Yet how many look inwardly with eyes closed, lest they see things that may be less than flattering to their ego.

Yet all may be assured of this, for the world in general and for his brethren and sisters one thing is certain, Jesus return will be as cataclysmic as an earthquake. For the one group cataclysmic in the sense of overthrowing the world as it is, destroying all the flimsy pretensions of man and all that is evil, how mankind will howl and wail at the loss of all their ‘human rights’. For the other group those cataclysmic changes will be something longed for. They will rejoice in the new world order that will arise from the dust and ashes of man’s misrule.

The attitude of faithful brethren and sisters at this prospect will be one of exited anticipation, a longing to see the Lord Jesus. They do not know the day or hour of his return. They do not know exactly what will occur. They do believe whole-heartedly the prophecies that Jesus will return and are assured that he will come. They do know that so many signs in world events show that the time of Jesus return is near. Their attitude of mind is one of wanting to be ready, of

wanting to please him, of wanting to see him resplendent in all his glory. Their whole desire is to be with Jesus in his Kingdom and to have a part in the 'restoration of all things.'

So are your thoughts centred upon the return of Jesus or will that day overtake you just as surely as an earthquake. Will you awaken out of slumber one fine morning to find your house disintegrating around you?

Are you ready to welcome Jesus with joy, even if tinged with fear at the prospect of recounting your life to him? Despite their trepidation the faithful will remember that they have a High Priest tempted in all points just as they are, yet without sin. They will remember that:

“Therefore in all things he had to be made like his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.” Heb.2:17

So then may the words of Jesus motivate faithful brethren and sisters to diligently work wholeheartedly in his service, longing for and looking for his return.

The proverb says: “Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life.” Prov 13:12 Now our hope is delayed and our hearts may grow faint and weary but be assured the promise holds good:

“This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw him go into heaven.” Acts 1:11

So, “go eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has already accepted your works.” Eccl 9:7 Think of this on a Sunday morning!

Now is the day of opportunity, now is the day of our salvation! Our longing when fulfilled will, according to the mercy of Yahweh, be access to the 'tree of life'

ONE IN A MILLION

Most of us are 'Mr. Average', just one of the teeming masses. The population of the UK is 60 million or so. Depending on the information source, the world population is somewhere in between 6.3 to 6.9 billion!

Yet this vast number of people does not know Yahweh and grows ever more wicked, being completely ignorant of their Creator and His ways. A vast number of people more than we could ever imagine were they to be gathered together in one place and how few of that number genuinely seek Yahweh and know His ways. Just as it was in the days of Noah! Yet those few to whom we belong are privileged in a way no others are. They are "called out", that Greek word 'Kaleo' meaning a calling, a divine invitation to embrace the salvation of God. It means to be divinely selected and appointed, it means called to bear a name or title. That is US! We who are but dust have been given a wonderful calling and privilege. We do not know how many are called, how many are truly to be saved from our generation, but stretching the mathematics a little and taking the principle of when Elijah was told of 7000 who had not bowed the knee to Baal, that means we are 1 in 1 million. Just think of that, you are one out of one million, just one who has been called out! Now if that thought does not put us in our place and teach humility, then nothing will.

What are we!! I guess we must all ask why? Why me? For despite that calling we are weak, we are just 'Mr. Average'. If we look honestly into our own hearts, then that innate human frailty must surely be seen. Honesty will bring home how great a gulf there is between what is expected of us and what we are really like. How often do we read about the lives of the faithful of old and think of them as so strong in faith and deed compared to us.

In the sight of God there are but two states that a person can be in. These states are presented to us in Scripture as direct opposites, for example darkness and light, human nature and the spirit, death and life. Those who desire the ways of human nature will remain in darkness. The very things that they seek and desire, deeming them as wise and pleasing will in the end lead to death. They will be unfit for life and in the great restoration of all things it shall be as if they

had never been. Thus the unbeliever lives “according to the course of this world... according to the spirit that works in the children of disobedience... fulfilling the desires of the flesh... and are by nature the children of wrath”. If we go astray from the Truth as sadly some do, if we follow another gospel that is in reality no gospel, then we become just like the ‘children of wrath’.

This is a fact that those who desire the ways of God and seek after righteousness must accept. It is of no consequence how good or appealing in a worldly sense arguments may appear for a more general acceptance of some principles of society. It matters not how caring, merciful, non-excluding and democratic an attitude, law or principle may be. It matters not if the underpinning principles of Scripture that guide our path appear to some to be ‘narrow minded’ or being unloving towards brother, sister, family or friend. There is no license what-so-ever for compromising the righteous law of God. It matters not how loving, caring or gentle a person may be whether they are an unbeliever or a brother or sister in Christ. If they are astray from the word of God, then they are willfully disobedient and sinful. There is and never can be, any compromising the principles and practice of God’s word.

Some things are easy to discern as being wrong, others not so easy. But if we strive to ‘rightly divide the word of Truth’ our hearts and minds will be centred upon the principles of Scripture. We will rejoice in the lives of the faithful like Noah, like Abraham, like David, like Paul and so many others. We will choose the same rugged path that they trod, the narrow path to life and in no way heed the scorn, contempt and hostility that not following the principles of this world may bring our way.

Being one in a million is an immense privilege far beyond anything we deserve or merit and it brings with it great responsibility but also the promise of a future far beyond our wildest imaginings.

Paul in all his trials rejoiced in the Lord, his one desire being to please him. Indeed Paul wrote,

“I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage, so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death” Phil. 1:20

May that goal be ours also. May it be that despite the degradation around us, our own lives shine forth as beacons in a dark world. This world will soon be overturned and the folly of man exposed for what it is. In that day the righteous will shine like stars in the Kingdom of their Father, not one in a million, but one of millions. One of a number so vast they are numbered as the stars in the sky or sand upon the sea shore. A multitude derived from all ages, a few here, a few there.

May it be that in these last dark days we will remain faithful to the end and are privileged to be numbered amongst the righteous.

HELD HOSTAGE

Recently we had an incident in the town where I work in which a doctor at one of the practices was taken hostage at knifepoint. During the incident my role was to provide support for the other Health Centre staff involved who had been evacuated to a nearby church. I was available to offer supportive counseling if it was required for most of the day as the drama unfolded in the surgery across the road. Not long after the incident was resolved, without harm to the doctor, I spoke to him about the event.

The consistent feelings that everybody expressed were about the unexpected nature of the event, its unpredictability, feelings of helplessness, being out of control and that of fear. For days after, many people experienced poor sleep, lack of appetite and other associated symptoms. Had the incident not been resolved without harm to the doctor, then I have no doubt that the trauma experienced by people would have been worse.

Any of us no doubt would have shared similar feelings under those circumstances. Just imagine that you are being held hostage at knifepoint or have just escaped from such a situation, but one of your brethren or sisters had been taken. You would experience guilt and feel you had no control, just as they did.

But we do know that God overrules all things for our ultimate good. Thus despite what may or may not happen to us, we do have an anchor in whatever situation or trial that arises. The problem is that if we do not make a daily conscious effort to remember God's overruling hand in the mundane things of life, we will tend to forget in times of extreme difficulties. The constant danger will be to make the mistake of trusting in other sources of help and the help of man is fickle and weak even at the best of times!

However this incident struck me as providing a spiritual lesson to learn and maybe you also will find these thoughts of use.

Now the man holding the doctor hostage wanted to not only kill himself but also take somebody with him. The doctor was in grave danger. Now, we are all hostages! We are in the same position. We are all held hostage by sin and the threat to our life is very real. More

than this, it is a threat that is eternal in its scope. Without intervention sin will kill us!

The police negotiator spent many hours helping to free the doctor. During this time the doctor could have either helped or hindered the efforts to free him by his own actions. He needed to be sensitive to guidance from what the negotiator was doing and saying. Indeed that doctor was very grateful to the negotiator for what he had done and has spent time since talking through things with him.

What of us? Jesus has paid the ultimate price on our behalf to secure our freedom, how do we show our gratitude to him? Like the doctor we must be patient. Release from being held hostage to sin and death is not instant and the wait will be very difficult at times. These difficult times will be full of danger, such that through our own mistakes sin may yet sting us! We must follow our mediator's guidance and obey his commands. We must stay as far away from sin as possible. You see when we were helpless God provided what was needed:

“Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” (that done in the body by the hands of men) — remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.” Eph. 2:11-13

Now what of the Health Centre Staff? They had been evacuated, they were shocked, worried about what could happen, uncertain, feeling out of control, powerless and helpless. There was no instant ‘cure’ for how they felt. My role was one of being sensitive to how they were feeling and helping them both as a group and as individuals to express their fears and concerns. By doing so they were helped to be honest about how they felt and come to realise that they were not alone in what they were feeling, but rather came to appreciate that everybody experienced similar feelings.

Is that not a role we should be fulfilling for each other? If only we could get the same level of support from our brethren and sisters without fear of censure or ridicule. Support when we experience doubts, when faith wavers, when we feel guilty over what we may or

may not have done. Support in those times of fear about what is coming upon the earth, in those times when we feel unworthy and alone. Support in those times when we lose loved ones, feel depressed, anxious and fearful or lost.

Never felt any of those things? I am surprised, you must be super human! We ALL share the same human nature, the same feelings and emotions in one way or another.

So the lesson to take away from these thoughts? Maybe these quotes will help:

“Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.”
Gal. 6:2

“Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.” James 5:16

“If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him life....”
1 John 5:16

“Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord.” James 5:14

“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’ “Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ “The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’ Matt. 25:35-40

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

What a great, wonderful, immeasurably great hope we have! Let us therefore keep our eyes firmly fixed upon the coming Kingdom, when according to the mercy of God we shall finally be free from being a hostage to sin and death and be permitted to “see the King in all his beauty and view that land that stretches afar.”

HEAVY SUNSHINE

Many years ago as a child, I remember talking to my grandfather one summer's day about going out for a walk. I was fond of my grandfather and always enjoyed walking with him round the local woods and fields. This particular day it was raining and although looking forward to going out with him, I was reluctant to get wet. My grandfather encouraged me to go saying that the rain was not a problem and would soon pass; it was the walk that would be enjoyable whether it was in sunshine or rain. My grandfather was always cheerful and for him it always appeared to be that the sun was shining. So from that day on rain became known as 'heavy sunshine'. As I grew up, became a father and now have become a grandfather myself, the idea of 'heavy sunshine' has become a way of looking not just at the weather, but a way of generating enthusiasm and zeal for spiritual things. Maybe it is a phrase that you may consider 'foolish' but maybe you will come to understand what I mean.

I still enjoy walking and went out recently for a walk around the local paths and bridleways. The walk started off in sunshine and ended in rain, but I still thoroughly enjoyed the walk. But this day was different; the rain triggered off memories of my grandfather and our 'heavy sunshine' conversation and led me on to reflecting over my life whilst walking along. This is something of how my train of thought ran:

I had left the house and walked a short way to the start of the path. Being new to the area a map was needed to show me the way and having consulted it, I chose which direction to start walking in. The sun was shining and I was full of energy, the air was full of the varied delightful scents of nature, the warm smell of the grass, the dampness of the soil and the scent of the trees. Birds were singing and a gentle breeze rustling the leaves. A glorious start to the walk!

... My spiritual life began when full of the enthusiasm of youth the decision was made that beyond any shadow of doubt I believed in my Creator. The direction was plain. His Word was to be my life's map and the path of life stretched before me. Having decided that this was the way to go, it was a short step through baptism to commence along that path. The 'sun' shone brightly, the path was clear and the wonderful scent of the gospel message filled the air. What joy filled my heart! What zest for life!

After a short way the first section of the footpath ended and a short walk up a leafy country lane took me to the next section. This part did not appear to have been used for a while and the grass was long, which made it a little harder to walk and more tiring! A fallen branch blocked the way and a way round had to be carefully found so as not to damage the farmer's crop. But the sun was shining....

Life after baptism had its ups and downs. I recall about a year after baptism going to a party. My main topic of conversation would generally be something to do with biblical subjects, you see I was eager to learn and well what better topic for conversation amongst those who shared such a valuable belief. A brother there told me not to talk about the Bible because it was the wrong place! The going got tougher and life's ups and downs continued, but the warmth and light of the Word still shone.

A couple of miles further along the path and some clouds appeared. The rain came down and the path became quite wet. My walking boots picked up soil, becoming heavier and slowing me down. However from time to time a quick kick shot clods of mud off the boots! By now I was now four miles into my walk and the path passed through the middle of a field, being only discernable as a gap in the crops. Wheat was growing in the field, the heads nodding sleepily in the warm air, the birds still sang and the scenery was lovely. Woodland lay invitingly ahead and the map showed much more of interest to come. So what if it rained - just a bit of 'heavy sunshine'....

Time went on and more spiritual problems came, things to disagree with and no support to be found. The dark clouds of spiritual despondency came; the ground became clay and stuck to the feet, the path was harder to define and the weight of the clay made it harder to move. But a change of fellowship helped chase away the clouds and of course through it all, the kingdom was ahead – just a bit of 'heavy sunshine' on the way!

The sun came back out and so a bit further along I stopped for a break and a look around. A quick look at the map showed a disused railway line nearby. It lay away from the path by about half a mile, but surely it was worth a look. So the decision was made, the way easy to follow and the goal soon reached. The first part of the old line was easy, a farmer obviously used it to get to his fields, it was broad, flat

got harder, nettles and brambles began to fill the path, trees had taken root, the path that was broad now began to narrow and lose its appeal. Finally there came a point where it was too much hard work to follow and in the end led nowhere! So, it was back to the map to find the right way and work out the quickest route back to the path. It took some effort, but the closer I got to the path the easier the way became...

How many times do we become enticed by something new that comes along in life, something that surely will not bring any spiritual harm? Maybe a new career catches our interest, a new hobby, a new interest or a new friend. It happens to us all in one way or another and this new path appears broad and easy at first. But sooner or later the lesson is learned that we need the right path and we need the map – the scriptures – to guide our way back. To admit we have taken the wrong path takes humility and to find our way back will need effort, but the more we try the easier it will become.

Soon dark clouds appeared on the horizon and the wind picked up. Within a mile I was back on the path, but by now the rain was falling steadily. But what matter if it rained, I was covered up, my boots were waterproof and only my jeans got wet. The walk was still a pleasure, the scenery still nice and still much in the way of wildlife to see. By now I was walking through masses of yellow flowers and a loud buzzing noise! Bees, hundreds of them, not a bit put off by the rain, they were too busy working. So, was the walk worth it, but of course! What's more, the journey's end was much nearer, a change of clothing awaited me and I could almost smell the coffee brewing! Just more 'heavy sunshine' to enjoy on the way...

So where does this lead our thoughts. Well, intermingled with the ups and downs of life there are many joys, it's just that we can lose sight of them. Problems can become the focus and we lose sight of why we started our walk in the first place. The walk was intended to be a pleasure for me, a walk in the countryside to relax and take in the sight, sounds and smell of nature. Did the rain stop me doing that? No! When rain is not seen as a problem it becomes just a part of the overall experience. The same principle applies to life. There are many things in life to value and much to take pleasure in. Day by day the Lord our God renews His love and mercy. He has allowed us each new day of life, that life is His gift. He has fed us, He has clothed us and more than this our Creator has shown us the path to

eternal life. What is a bit of 'rain' compared to this! Beyond the trials and sorrows of life, lies the sunshine of the Kingdom and a true and lasting rest.

The problem we face day by day is that the storm clouds of life can make us lose sight of the path. We forget the present blessings and lose sight of the joys to come. But we do have a map and it should always be to hand. It is not in the way of man to guide his own footsteps; we need to follow the Word.

As we look at and memorise God's route map to the Kingdom, we will be guided along the right path and encouraged by the things to come. We will find happiness on the way if we but look for it. We will enjoy the company of those with whom we share our precious faith, we will appreciate acts of kindness, and we will take pleasure in offering our help where we can. We will have the greatest joy of all, that of knowing we are part of God's family. As we study the Scriptures to direct our way, our eyes will be directed to the journey's end, our true home so soon to come – the Kingdom of God.

So what if there are trials on the way – they are just a bit of 'heavy sunshine'!

COMPANIONSHIP

We all need companionship. One of the curses particularly of western society is loneliness. Modern society is more mobile, people move to seek education, to seek employment or maybe because they see another area as a desirable place to live. Yet this trend leads towards a colder, insular and socially isolated society. By moving many people leave families behind and by doing so either end up single and alone, or become a single family unit in isolation of their extended family. People are thus away from parents, grandparents, siblings and friends.

Loneliness can lead to feeling isolated, it can trigger depression and even lead to suicide. Some people are able to establish new friendships, but for others forming friendships is more difficult. For most people finding close friends that they can trust and confide in can be difficult.

Brethren and sisters in Christ are no different. Often families can be far away and we all need companionship. But for them knowledge of the gospel message of hope, brings, or should bring, a totally different perspective. You see no matter what our circumstances, we are never alone!

If the Word is truly within our hearts, our life will never be hollow. If the Word is the primary focus of our lives, as indeed it should be, then the companionship of Yahweh and His Word, the knowledge that the angel of the Lord encamps around those that fear Him and the knowledge that we belong to a vast divine family spanning the ages, will provide the companionship and stability that is so lacking in secular life.

If we have this knowledge ever in the forefront of our minds, then loneliness will not assail us to the point of despair. Even if physically on our own, we know most surely that the Lord our God sees all, knows all and is present in all avenues of life. The Lord our God is only a prayer away!

Our primary relationship is with God, He is our Father and if we live according to the light of His word, then we have fellowship with Him. Fellowship with others who share the same precious faith comes as a product of fellowship with God.

But equally so, the companionship of fellow pilgrims is desirable. How else can we be encouraged and built up in our most holy faith. Does not the proverb say:

“As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.” Prov. 27:17

Thus it is not good for one to seek isolation from those who share the same precious faith. But there are many who live in isolation through circumstance beyond their control, or who go into isolation because circumstances dictate that they must. Those in that position need the support and encouragement of all the other members of the body.

But if we dwell alone then we still have the sure knowledge that Yahweh is ever mindful of His children. We can all read books about the Truth, read magazines, read exhortations, listen to tapes and do many other things that help to make us feel part of the one body. A husband and wife can support each other, but if the companionship of other brethren and sisters is present, then this is a great blessing from God.

If we do have the companionship of brethren and sisters, then let us be grateful for it and make the most of our time with each other. Let the focus be upon building each other up and encouraging each other while we can. May we never fall into the trap of taking this benefit for granted or neglect meeting together. Strive to be a giver and not a taker, a worker and not a hinderer, a supporter and not a complainer. Always be grateful to Yahweh for companionship, yet content if need be to dwell alone. Though in truth we are never truly alone, for He is always with us.

When the opportunity arises to meet together with brethren and sisters, be available to all, but with a view to help them not to unburden yourself. Neither expect nor overly seek help and let each one make few demands upon others. Paul writes: “every man shall bear his own burden” Gal 6:5. Yet at the same time Paul exhorts:

“Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.” Gal. 6:2

To bear the burdens of another involves actively seeking out what is amiss, ways to help and ways to support. It involves not getting wrapped up in our own feelings, but rather being sensitive to another’s needs and feelings. You know if we all did that, then we should not need to make our own needs known, for as we helped others, they would be seeking to help us!

Everybody has their own problems in life and one of the best ways to not become bogged down with your own problems, is to forget self and to help others. Indeed the Proverb says:

“The heart knows its own bitterness; and a stranger does not share its joy.” Prov. 14:10

The truth is that we can never fully appreciate another’s feelings; all we can do is just be present and attentive. As another Proverb says:

“Anxiety in the heart of man causes depression, but a good word makes it glad. “ Prov. 12:25

Each one will have their own trials and troubles, but knowing that our God is an ever present companion and grateful acceptance of our lot whatever it may be, will bring great peace of mind. If this is our attitude of mind and if we prepare ourselves to be alert for the needs of others, then we are becoming truly ‘Christ like’.

Jesus never put himself first, but became as a servant. Whenever he was weary, whenever he was troubled, he still healed the sick and never turned away one in need. Surely:

“Godliness with contentment is great gain”!

CHANGE

Do you ever think back to what your childhood was like? Looking back it always seemed that school holidays went on forever, chewing gum never lost its flavour and when going on a long journey the destination never quite seemed to come fast enough! Parents always got exasperated with comments like 'I'm bored!' 'How much further?' 'Are we there yet?' One could never quite understand why parents got so fed up with putting their hands on age old chewing gum stuck to chairs and bed heads, after all it was still good for chewing! Childhood just went on and on, but imperceptibly we grew and matured until finally the day came when the first tentative steps were taken to live alone. It may have been when going to college or university or just wanting to have our independence, but sooner or later we left home and the first major change occurred in our lives. Sadly, there are children who through tragedy experience life changes and insecurity at earlier ages, but by and large, our awareness of change comes as we reach young adult hood. But even as the moves towards independence come and changes occur, somehow they are made with the knowledge [even if not admitted] that not so far away the stability of home is still there.

Our seventy years of life is very brief and as we grow older, changes come with increasing rapidity. The passage of time is marked by changes in life both good and bad; marriage, birth of our own children, kindnesses and loving care from others bring joy. Yet that joy is tainted by sorrow as we lose through death the company of those whom we love. The unexpected always happens and we sometimes hit a physical or spiritual brick wall, in the sense that illness, disease, disability or the unkind and ill thought actions of others take their toll. We come to know our own weakening and ageing. Old age comes to all and we realise all too quickly our own mortality.

In a well know hymn we sing that "change is our portion now." How true this statement is. Some changes come with alarming rapidity, others come imperceptibly. Just like the second and minute hands on a clock, the rising and setting of the sun and the changing of the seasons are marks on the clock of life signalling the passage of time and change. But at the same time, it is possible to stare at the hour hand of a clock and not see it move. It does, but that movement is

slow and imperceptible to our eye. In the same way, many life changes occur imperceptibly. The changes we need to watch are the spiritual changes and such changes can be both for good and for ill. Life has many paths and crossroads always come. The path we choose is not always of necessity right or wrong, but the choices will lead to different outcomes and those outcomes will have an effect for good or ill upon our spiritual well being.

We are constantly changing even if we cannot see it. We react to stressors in life and the changes that occur can gradually debilitate or strengthen faith. Those changes are happening and constantly will happen. What we need to do is to make sure that we are changing in the right direction.

So how do we measure spiritual change? Well, just ask yourself some questions. Such as,

- Do I know more about the Scriptures now than say last year?
- Do I read the Bible more or read less frequently than a year ago?
- What have I learned over the past few months?
- Do I attend the meetings and meet with my brethren and sisters as often as last year?
- How often do I pray?

These things are a sort of spiritual barometer of change. If the mercury falls then we read less often, learn less, become less motivated and apathy sets in. If we read more and take in what we read, then we will learn. The more knowledge increases the more our zeal and enthusiasm will grow and the barometer goes up. Change occurs in the right direction and faith is stronger.

Similarly, we need to review the circumstances that trigger prayer. Ask yourself, does prayer come only when I am in need or do I actively seek contact with Yahweh through prayer in times of joy? Do I seek through prayer not only to express thanksgiving, but also to commune and meditate upon the wonderful, glorious characteristics and purpose of Yahweh?

Life is in a constant flux of change and much of that change is beyond our control, but we do have control over how we respond to change. We also have a measure of control over what changes we initiate ourselves. Response to change will be governed by faith and by our mental characteristics. That hymn rightly states 'change is our portion

now' but equally as correctly says: 'Faithful is Yahweh's Word, I will be with thee saith the Lord'. The words of Scripture are truth indeed and are unchanging. If God be for us who can be against us!

We maybe recall King Asa was told, "Listen to me, Asa and all Judah and Benjamin. The LORD is with you when you are with him. If you seek him, he will be found by you, but if you forsake him, he will forsake you." Equally so, Paul's words of exhortation and encouragement come ringing through the years:

"The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armour of light." Rom. 13:11-12

So let us resolve today, NOW, to seek God while He may be found. Let us resolve to make changes that are likely to enhance and strengthen faith. Let us resolve to respond to changes in a way that will please Yahweh and follow the principles of His word day by day.

REASONABLE SERVICE

Paul wrote “I beseech you therefore brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, which is your reasonable service” Rom. 12:1

We would do well to constantly keep in mind those words of encouragement and exhortation. That word reasonable means rational. Based upon what we know, based upon the hope set before us, based upon the ultimate sacrifice that was made on our behalf, to live our lives, as a living sacrifice is indeed the rational outcome. We are no longer our own, we have been purchased at a great price - the death of the Lord Jesus Christ. More than this, we were dead and are now alive in Christ. Our past life should be gone, the old man must be crucified, the new man growing in the image of Christ.

Paul was uncompromising in what he wrote. There are no ifs and buts, no could or might, but a definite ‘this is what you must do!’ Paul makes a very clear declaration as to what our correct attitude of mind must be, expanding upon the idea of lives being living sacrifices:

‘Be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind’. Rom. 12:2

Now ‘conformed’ indicates to be in harmony with, or be in submission to something. Now that is something that we plainly cannot be. Yahweh’s children cannot be in harmony or in submission to the world and its ways. There are no halfway measures, no compromise. Yet conformity and compromise is what we naturally tend towards. Our human nature tends towards the world and its ways, for such things are natural to us.

On the other hand, our minds need to be transformed, changed and remodelled. This is a process that can only come about as Paul states by the renewing of our minds. The antagonism between what is natural and this renewal process is the inner battle that we all face daily. Paul wrote eloquently of that inner dialogue in Romans 7:

I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Rom .7:14-19

O, how we can all echo those sentiments! What we know to be right, what we want to do, we do not do. What we know to be wrong, what we desire not to do, those things we do.

Wretched indeed is our state, unless we offer our lives as a living sacrifice, unless we are transformed in our thinking and attitude.

There is no mystery as to how we do this; there is no mystical way it will happen. The manner of our renewal is perfectly clear, put on the mind of Christ! Trust him, obey his commandments, and follow his example. To do this takes effort. As we read the Scriptures, as we understand and learn, as we grow in love for our Master, that transforming process will take place.

On the other hand if we conform to the thinking and ways of the world, we shall be 'still born'. The transformation will not take place and our lives will have been lived in vanity. The principles of God are directly opposite to conformity to human nature. Paul writes:

"I say (through the grace given unto me) to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think." Rom. 12:3

Now conformity to the world teaches self-elevation, ambition, self-assertion, self-reliance and self-confidence. The transformation by taking on the mind of Christ teaches, humility, trust, faith, self-effacement and service. It is an attitude of mind that carries out honest self-examination and weighs self against the example of Christ. Nevertheless, this is only the beginning of the process, for self-examination must then lead to action by making the necessary adjustments to change our disposition to be more Christ like.

In other words we must "think soberly, according as God has dealt to every man the measure of faith." No matter what we consider to be our abilities, skills, knowledge or status in a worldly sense, we have come to Christ and a measure of faith in spite of these, not because of them. Further, in a spiritual sense, we have no abilities, skills, knowledge, or duty that has not been given to us! What we most certainly do not have is status!

It is well within the capacity of every single brother or sister, no matter what his or her abilities, to keep the Truth bright, alive and shining in their lives. It lies within the capacity of all to have a living

faith. That living faith will be an example to those about them, both within the Truth and without. A living faith manifested by giving that 'reasonable service' Paul speaks about will be demonstrated by the works of faith. James states quite plainly that faith without works is dead!

Yahweh is just; He has not called us to failure, but rather to inherit eternal life. He has seen fit to extend His mercy towards us, to call us out to have a part in His purpose. He will not test us beyond that which we can bear, He is not willing that any should perish. The only source of failure is us! Yet we all have the potential to be transformed from something ignoble, into a vessel fit for use.

Now we need to be clear that to live a life as a 'living sacrifice' does not imply a disregard for temporal things, for indeed diligence in daily life is part of our reasonable service. Indeed Paul tells us "to provide things honest in the sight of all men." We need to provide for families, for work in the Truth and for all the many things needed in service to the Lord. But we do these things recognising that ultimately it is God that provides and in all things giving thanks unto Him. In all that we undertake, we must act as 'ambassadors' of the Truth setting an example for those about us, but at the same time maintaining a distance from conformity to the world.

If we daily contemplate the mercy and blessings that our Creator has graciously bestowed upon us, being thankful for each new day of life and opportunity, then that transformation of mind will gradually take place. Our perspectives will change, our values will change and our aspirations will change. We will live each day of our lives as 'living sacrifices' to the Lord our God.

The effort required now, will pale into insignificance when compared to the eternal joy of being invited to take a place in that glorious Kingdom to come. When we are permitted to see the Master's smiling face and "to see the King in all his beauty and view that land that stretches afar" it will be all worthwhile.

Therefore, despite human frailty and weakness hold fast, continue instant in prayer and strive to be faithful in all things. Great indeed is the life promised. Life as it was meant to be. Life in harmony with the Great Creator, life in harmony with His great purpose, life in harmony with His creation. When we consider how undeserving we are, O how we are moved to say with Paul:

“O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and His ways past finding out! For who has known the mind of the Lord? or who has become his counsellor? Or who has first given to Him, and it shall be repaid to him? For of Him, and through Him, and to Him, are all things, to whom be glory for ever. Amen.” Rom. 11:33-36

A LEGACY

36,793,000 is your legacy. How will you use it? 28,678,500 must go on essentials in that you have no choice and the rest must last a lifetime. How will you use it? The figure is the number of minutes of your life. On average 12,264,000 you will spend asleep, 9,516,000 will be spent engaged working and travelling, 6,898,500 you will spend eating and taking care of your personal needs. Do you have a hobby? Do you go visiting friends and do all the myriads of other things we find to fill our lives? On average that can take up about 6,132,000 leaving 1,981,500 minutes. This is spare time for God. Just 5.38% of your time for the one who is your life! However, the reality can be that we give even less time for reading, for prayer and for study. Paul exhorts us to redeem the time saying:

“See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil”. Eph. 5:15-16

How do you spend your time? Look at the world, there are so many signs that Christ and the prophets spoke about coming to pass before our very eyes. So many unmistakable signs that should stir the heart to prepare for the Lord's return. Do they? Or have they lost impact through familiarity? John Thomas, Robert Roberts and all the early pioneers would have been jumping up and down with excitement (if you can imagine Victorian brethren leaping up and down!) at the things they saw through the eye of faith, becoming a reality. Compare our life style of comparative ease with only 40 years ago, let alone 120 years or so ago when such brethren were alive and we can see how easy it is to become complacent and spiritually asleep. Peter warned about the dangers of losing zeal:

“First of all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, “Where is this ‘coming’ he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.” 2 Peter 3:3-4

Peter does not speak about those in the world, but speaks about those in the ecclesias who will cease to look forward, feeling at spiritual ease and safety. Watch! The time is short your precious minutes are ticking away, evaporating as precious water in a desert. “What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and

then vanishes.” [James 4:14] Jesus warned us to be prepared, saying:

“Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.”

Watching is about preparing character, putting faith into action, striving to emulate the Lord Jesus. Every one of his disciples will face many trials in these last dark days and they will grow worse. We need to be, and indeed must be prepared. The warning is clear:

“those will be days of distress unequalled from the beginning, when God created the world, until now—and never to be equalled again. If the Lord had not cut short those days, no-one would survive”. Mark 13:19

Yet great comfort is given for Christ continues:

“But for the sake of the elect, whom he has chosen, he has shortened them.”

Not ‘will’ shorten, but God already has shortened them. We have the sublime promise, “in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

It is an immense privilege to be amongst those called out ones, those heirs of immeasurably great and precious promises. Time ticks away, how do we show our appreciation of our calling? How do we spend our time? James writes “is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise” James 5:13

Our first thought in all aspects of life, should be about God and His requirements, turning to Him in both times of trouble and times of joy. It is true to say that we become like, and associate with, the things that we value in life. Do we fill our minds with the things of this world? In which case we will become like the world and squander our time. On the other hand we can redeem our time and heed these words of Paul:

“finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.” Phil. 4:8

Of course, our Master is the ultimate, shining example of all these attributes.

The cry will soon come “here is the Bridegroom”. The angels will go forth and gather the elect. How will we react, we will be on our own then. Shall we go with thoughts of this life or go with fear and trembling, yet joyful anticipation of seeing our Lord at last.

Our final minutes come, our probation is over. Our Master stands at the door, there is time no more. What will you think before the judgement seat? Will you reflect upon time well spent and upon time redeemed? On the other hand will you regret time wasted, opportunities lost, words unspoken, tasks undone.

Are you spending your legacy wisely?

COPING STRATEGIES

One thing that has struck me in all my dealings by way of assessing mental health state or providing treatment for people who suffer from mental illness, is how often the situation is made worse by use of inappropriate coping strategies. Whether people suffer from depression or anxiety they so often engage in behaviours or modes of thought that are self-defeating. They experience life events that are often traumatic, yet persist in behaviour that creates the very situations they find hard to cope with. This is not the whole story, but it will serve to illustrate a line of thought that struck me the other day. A Proverb sums up part of this train of thought:

“Every wise women buildeth her house, but the foolish plucketh it up with her hands” Prov. 14:1

At times we fall into both camps, we experience times of folly, yet also times when the wisdom of scripture prevails. If only we could always appreciate that God overrules all things, that His purpose shall stand and that “in Him we live and move and have our being”.

The ‘bride of Christ’ is engaged in a great work, this woman should be wise in building up the household in faith and love. Yet how many times as members of this body of people, do we ‘pluck it up’ by ill thought out behaviours and attitudes of mind? How often do we hear the lament that we grow fewer in number, that attendance at meetings is poor and the general level of activity decreases? How often do we hear the complaint that nobody attends public lectures thus it is pointless continuing and anyway nobody wants to listen when we proclaim the Gospel message? How often do we hear observations made that the faith, zeal and love for the Truth of some appears to grow cold?

Why does this happen? Maybe there is some truth in these comments, but they are not the real problem. They are symptoms! We have many illustrations in scripture to guide us in finding the real cause and just as importantly the correct response to problems when they do arise. For example we have David who so wanted to bring the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. He rejoiced at being able to do so and no doubt placed it very carefully upon that ox cart. Uzzah no doubt rejoiced with David and carefully observed the Ark on its journey. The cart slipped, the Ark moved, and what a calamity

it would be if the Ark of the Covenant fell, so out went the hand to steady the Ark. Uzzah fell dead!

Peter did not want his Lord to die, and tried to dissuade Jesus from his ministry. "Get thee behind me satan" was the reply.

Were the behaviours wrong in these cases? Were the motives wrong? Why did these things happen? Well the events were not the cause, they were the symptoms. What was the cause? Well, Uzzah perished because the Ark should never have been on the ox cart in the first place. Peter was rebuked because he should not have had the thought of dissuading Jesus in the first place. Had both these events started from the right thoughts and behaviour they would not have occurred. David would have consulted the law first and the Levites would have carried the Ark, just as they did at a later date. Peter would have known from Scripture that Jesus had to go to Jerusalem and so fulfill his ministry.

It is all really down to developing the right perspective, because we are all prone to making those errors of judgment and not seeing the true perspective on things. David had the humility to recognize his mistake and ensure he did things the right way. Peter came to realise that his Lord must suffer and rejoiced at the resurrection of his Master. We can all get it wrong in some way or another. However, humility coupled with constant reading and application of the scriptures will help us find the cause of the problem. It will help us not to get bogged down with the symptoms and miss the cause.

When life is difficult and problems arise, when we feel inadequate or burdened with guilt, when we feel lost and uncertain, at such times we need the Truth more. Yet how often do brethren and sisters resort to an inappropriate coping strategy, such as withdrawing from each other, not breaking bread, complaining and finding fault, finding someone to blame etc etc.

The real answer lies with each individual brother and sister to look internally and say 'What can I do more!' 'How can I change'? 'What difference can I make'? Scriptural coping strategies are to pray, to read, to write, to talk, to encourage, meeting together more often, building up and strengthening what remains. Real fellowship is not just meeting together at 'official meetings', it's phoning each other, enjoying each others company, getting to know each other in all the myriad ways that human beings can interact.

If nobody attends lectures or listens when we preach is that a calamity? No, for we are doing what is right and pleasing to our Lord, we are obeying his commandment and that is all that matters. The self-defeating behaviour is to lament about it, rather than having joyful hearts that we have the privilege of doing it!

Life is about having the right perspective. We can be predominantly negative in outlook, which saps our own and other peoples strength, dispelling joy and contentment. We can have a predominantly positive outlook that looks for something good in whatever happens, which promotes zeal, joy and contentment.

My counseling focuses on working with peoples cognitions. One small thing I use is the following example of self-talk, which reflects attitudes of mind. Think of something that you would say could complete the following sentence:

'I can't

An example could be 'I can't attend Bible Class meetings'

No don't try to justify it by saying because.....

Now say exactly the same thing, but change one word. Change 'can't' to 'will not'. So our sentence would be:

'I will not attend Bible Class meetings'

It's getting a bit personal now. We suddenly have some personal responsibility in the matter. 'Can't ' is an indefinite word. It implies circumstance out of our control, yet is a phrase we all frequently use. 'Will not' makes it within our sphere of control and if we are honest is a truer expression. A decision is made not to attend Bible Class because of maybe having little time, a hard day at work, or whatever reason we give ourselves to justify the decision.

Now lets go again. Say the same sentence and change the words. Change 'will not' to 'could'. So the sentence becomes:

'I could attend Bible Class meetings'

Better, more positive, but phrasing it this way gives the possibility but still leaves an escape route! Try one more time changing a word:

'I will attend Bible Class meetings'

Now be honest, how does that feel? A more positive statement? A commitment? Try the sequence of words with a subject that is personal to you.

It is just a small illustration of how we talk to others and ourselves. The way we phrase our thoughts and the way in which we express our thoughts, can significantly affect our outlook and attitude.

So next time you experience or see a problem, don't focus on the symptom find the cause. Then change it!

"The word of God is powerful and active...it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart'

DIFFICULT TIMES

There is no doubt that we are living in the last days before Christ's return and the age of Gentile dominion fast draws to a close. Many of the faithful living in past ages have lived in difficult times, but the times in which we live grow ever more evil. This age is materialistic and centred around self and self seeking. The solid foundations of the Truth are questioned in some quarters and zeal is considered to be somewhat archaic. The words of Paul to Timothy come to mind:

“But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God — having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them.” 2 Tim. 3:1-5

Now if we had stayed with verses 1-4 the description is very apt for the world in general but verse 5 applies it to those who are nominally disciples of Christ but who in reality merely have a ‘form of godliness’. In other words having the outward appearance of godliness, but not having a true desire within the heart to seek the Truth. Of this ilk are those who will say:

“Where is the promise of his coming? for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation.”

Under these circumstances what can those who seek to be righteous do?

The answer to this question applies equally as much to those from any age who sincerely desire to love the Lord their God. They must hold fast to the solid foundation of Scripture, neither adding to it, nor taking from it and rightly dividing the Word of Truth. There is a great need to be very clear in ones mind about what is to be believed and what is to be rejected. This is exactly what the faithful of old did; basing all their beliefs solely upon Scripture and this is exactly what we must do in our day and age.

There is a need to be definite and uncompromising in ones stand for the Truth and sound doctrine. Do not follow the crowd, but be willing to stand up for what is right just as Daniel did in his day.

But how should we speak of the true gospel message and the sound teaching of Scripture? Well, by speaking the words of scripture, not embellishing scripture overly with personal feelings and experiences, but speaking the Truth in its purity and simplicity. Proverbs says:

“In the multitude of words there wanteth not sin: but he that refraineth his lips is wise.” Prov. 10:19

And Ecclesiastes:

“The more the words, the less the meaning, and how does that profit anyone?” Eccl. 6:11

These thoughts apply to all that we do, be it proclaiming the Truth, giving an exhortation or giving a Bible Class address. The whole objective must be to speak the words of God, not propound our own ‘crotchets and quavers.’

How can we then prepare ourselves for speaking the sound words of Scripture? Well only by knowing the word of God! Do not be content with the elementary things of the Truth but rather try to understand some of the deeper things. Bible study is essential, but not all are for example inclined towards wanting to study the meanings of Hebrew and Greek words, understanding the ‘signs of the times’, working out the relationships between scriptural characters, knowing the history of the nations and kings or gaining a deep understanding of the furnishings and ritual of the Tabernacle or Temple.

These things undoubtedly have their place, but we each have different interests and abilities. Equally of interest and of great importance is to study the life of Christ, comprehend his teachings, understand and develop the fruit of the spirit that Paul speaks about, learn the proverbs and how to apply them in our lives or study the profound subject of prayer. Whatever our level of knowledge, interest, or ability every single one of us will benefit from reading the Scriptures daily by following the Bible Companion or other method that ensures we read the totality of the Bible regularly. There is no substitute for regular reading, yet not just merely reading, but also thinking about what we read and then putting it into practice. These two aspects cannot be emphasized enough, think and put into practice.

Who would go to college or course from work to learn more about their job and not then use what they had learned? Nobody would go

to that effort and not make use of knowledge gained. How then can the Truth be any different? Nay we should the more so act upon it.

Finally, there is a need for maintaining a balance in all that we do, think and say. Do not discourage by thinking only upon the hardships of the way, but consider also the joys that lie ahead.

The hardships are there, the need for warning always present because of our human nature, but we also very much need the encouragement to persevere and there is indeed great joy ahead. There are promises from God so wondrous in their scope that they are beyond our full comprehension and appreciation. Paul writes that we shall be made to be like the Lord Jesus Christ:

“If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection.” Rom. 6:5

“...who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.” Phi.I 3:21

By way of encouragement mediate upon these words penned by John:

“How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.” 1 John 3:2

What manner of love Yahweh has indeed shown to us, that we who are but dust have been called to be His children. Should we be discouraged by the need for separation and hardship along the way? Should we be discouraged when we fail and come short? No, not at all! These things that befall the faithful are cause for perseverance, joy and encouragement. The trials confirm that we are called of God, that He treats us as His children and that He is merciful. This is the response of faith:

“Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure. “ 1 John 3:3

EARLY WARNING SIGNS

One thing that can often help people who suffer from mental illness is to be able to recognise their personal early warning signs and symptoms of relapse and illness. It is often helpful to try and identify stressors and triggers that contribute to illness. It is equally helpful to identify not only weaknesses, but also strengths that can be called upon to help in time of need. Having recognised what these signs and symptoms are the next stage is to create a relapse plan, a sort of forward planning on what to do when things go wrong.

The relapse plan first identifies general early warning signs and then other more specific signs that come along later. One aspect of creating a relapse plan is to look at one specific early warning sign then look at something that helps overcome it. For example, somebody may identify that one of their signs is to lose weight because they miss out meals during the day. So the plan to help may be to buy favourite foods and easy to prepare meals, setting aside time to eat regularly. Another aspect of creating a relapse plan is to identify people:

That can be turned to for information

Whose opinion and advice you value

To share ideas with

Who make you think

That you can trust and confide in

It may be that just one person or several people fulfil these roles.

The objective of the exercise is twofold. Firstly, to enable people become more aware of their problems and feel more in control. Secondly, to start dealing with the problem sooner rather than later, is far better than leaving things until a crisis point is reached. Early intervention means a better prognosis.

Now before these thoughts continue it also needs to be noted that mental 'illness' can and does happen to everyone to one degree or another. It is not an all or nothing situation. Mental health is on a continuum and we all move up and down that continuum according to the nature and number of problems and stresses that we face. To feel low, depressed, anxious, worried or any of all the other emotions that beset us, is a normal response to life events. For most of us, mental ill health does not become a clinical problem, but for 1 in 4 of the population it does.

So how can this relate to life in the Truth? Well we all suffer from sin and we all experience highs and lows of faith, confidence or commitment from day to day. This could be termed spiritual ill health. Sadly, there are times when those peaks and troughs become more acute and a gradual drift away from the path of salvation takes place, sin starts gaining the upper hand, the situation becomes harder to retrieve and a sort of clinical spiritual ill health sets in.

What if we could be more aware of our 'early warning signs' maybe that would help to avoid some pitfalls or at least minimise their impact. If we had a pre-prepared plan of action maybe that would help us get back onto the right path. In a very real sense, early intervention means a far better prognosis for us! However it is always hard to go it alone, so what if we could identify people to turn to in a given situation, people to support, advise and guide. Not only this, each one of us having experienced sin and the problems with temptation, surely we should be more appreciative of the difficulties faced by others.

So what are your early warning signs? Some possible ones that come to mind are:

Reduced frequency of reading the scriptures

Reading quickly to 'get the reading done' with no time given for thoughtful contemplation.

Withdrawing from the company of other brethren and sisters

Less time spent in prayer

Attending meetings less frequently

Spending time worrying about the future and becoming disheartened

Spending more time on career, hobbies and other interests

Becoming spiritually more tired and sleepy

Add your own to the list!

What could a relapse plan be? Well first of all identify your personal warning signs, for an example we could take less frequent attending of meetings. Now the thought may run along these lines: 'I am busy, I have a lot of problems and pressures in my life and I just cannot get to the meetings.'

Now turn it on its head. There are a lot of problems that are difficult to deal with, true. Does worrying about the problems make them go away? No. Does having extra support make the problem go away, no, but it can make them easier to bear. We read:

“If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no-one to help him up! ... Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.” Eccl 4:10-12

Does Bible study help? Yes of course, for we can always find guidance and advice in Scripture to cover any given situation. Again we read:

“Every purpose is established by counsel: and with good advice make war. “ Prov. 12:18

Does this apply only to war against a physical enemy or does it not equally apply to war against sin, our greatest and strongest enemy.

So the plan to overcome could be to make a commitment to go to meetings, even if it is difficult. It may also help to talk to a fellow brother or sister about finding it hard to attend; a problem brought out into the open often makes it less of a problem. Does not scripture say “bear one another’s burdens and so fulfil the law of Christ.” Gal 6:2 Any plan of course must also include prayer:

“Trust in the LORD with all your heart; and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct your paths.” Prov. 3:5-6

No matter what our circumstances we always have the comfort of a High Priest who is fully aware of our needs. All we need to do is follow his example!

So, select from your list of ‘early warning signs’ of sin something that is in the world that you find hard to overcome, then think of a plan of what you can do about it. Ask yourself the question ‘who can I turn to for help?’

A good plan is first to make the problem a matter of prayer, daily prayer. Then think of a quote that you can use to remind yourself that you are trying to change that particular thing. Whenever it occurs, repeat the quote to yourself and then change what you do. Thought and action must go together.

Jesus in a sense gave us an example of this action plan. Remember when he was tempted he countered all temptation with ‘it is written’. So now put your sin relapse plan into action!

GLORY AND HONOUR BELONG TO GOD

Referring to Yahweh, Bro Roberts writes:

‘All flesh before Him is as nothing, he will not allow the flesh to glory in His sight. Adam was banished from Eden for casting dishonour on Him by disobedience. Moses was punished for taking to himself the credit of the miracle of the rock of Meribah. David fell into the hands of God, in three days of plague, for exalting the numbers of his army. Mighty and arrogant Nebuchadnezzar was sent to herd among the beasts till he learnt that ‘the heavens do rule.’”

We have the examples of these people and many others in Scripture to teach us that to God alone belong glory and honour, power and dominion are His. He is eternal and reigns supreme, sustaining all of creation, providing for His people. How often do we fail to remember our total dependency upon Him? We read in the Psalms:

“The length of our days is seventy years—or eighty, if we have the strength; yet their span is but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away. Who knows the power of your anger? For your wrath is as great as the fear that is due to you. Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.” Psa. 90:10-12

Our days are fleeting and limited indeed, what is 70 or 80 years of life in the context of eternity? They are indeed but a brief moment of existence all too easily snuffed out as a candle in the winds of time. Yet if we consider well our utter, total reliance upon the Lord our God then we shall learn to number our days for “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the holy is understanding.”

Do you have possessions, homes, goods, career or any of the many things that this world has to offer? Do you feel able to understand the scriptures, able to teach, to speak, to write, to preach or do any of the many things that are to be done in the Truth? These are not your possessions, these are not your skills, it is not your knowledge, for we have nothing that has not been given to us.

We are made from the dust, our days are limited to a mere 70 years and in the sight of God the eldest of us is but a child. Let us therefore

be wary of ever rejoicing or glorying in the flesh, glorying in personal achievements, glorying in human endeavour, all of which will fade back to the dust from which they came.

Give Yahweh the glory, express thanksgiving to Him for what you have and use all you have, be it time, material possessions or intellect, in His service. Give of yourself willingly, freely giving back to God, with joy and gratitude for your life.

Yahweh says:

“...on this one will I look: On him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at my word.” Isa. 66:2

GOD IS IN CONTROL

Maybe because of my profession I tend to be a bit of a people watcher. Human nature and behaviour is fascinating. Very often, the mouth says one thing and the actions and behaviour say quite the opposite! It may sound cynical, but I find all too frequently that the presented motive is not the one to watch, it is the hidden agendas and motives that are the real driving force behind a person's behaviour. In my professional life, often part of the art of psychiatric assessment is about trying to determine what the real reasons and motives are behind the things people say and do. So, where is this leading?

Well, it was indeed fascinating to watch the nations preparing for the war in Iraq. Most nations allied themselves with those who were against a war and who stated that there was not enough evidence or good enough reason to attack Iraq. But behind the scenes, there were good financial, political or strategic reasons for not opposing Iraq, which were the true motives.

Yet two nations stood out against the crowd and despite all opposition claimed to have enough justification to attack Iraq. The primary reason given was that weapons of mass destruction were being harboured by Iraq and would be used eventually against either the surrounding nations or could fall into the hands of terrorists and be used against the Western nations. But again, there were hidden motives for pursuing the war. Initially it appeared that there was great pressure put upon England and America to avoid war at all costs and humanly speaking the great divisions being wrought within the United Nations would tend towards these two nations finding an alternative solution. What were the real motives? Maybe we shall never fully know that, but most certainly, there remains a great silence as yet regarding the whereabouts of weapons of mass destruction. What we do know, is that the heart of man his full of wickedness and as Jeremiah records it is not in the way of man to guide his own footsteps. Whatever the reason presented in public by those both for and against war, we can be sure the hidden reasons were for more selfish and self-seeking motives.

However, there is one thing that we can be utterly certain of and take great confidence from, Daniel testified that "the Most High God rules in the kingdom of men, and appoints over it whomever He chooses" (Daniel 5:21). Now one thing that we can be totally and utterly certain of, is that He has not changed since the time of Daniel. He remains as displeased

with the wickedness of man now as He was then. Our God is not an indifferent spectator of the ways of nations, though it may appear to be the case because of nearly 2000 years of silence. In the time of Daniel, Babylon was weighed in the balance and found wanting (Daniel 5). The hand that wrote on the wall and so frightened the King, spoke of how the nation had been weighed and found wanting and therefore the kingdom was to be divided and given to the Medes and Persians. The events that took place in fulfillment of this prophecy occurred with swiftness and finality. The mighty Babylonian empire was swept away in one night! The overthrow of Babylon appeared to be brought about by events, which apparently took place by the natural ambitions of Darius and Cyrus.

If nothing else, the events that have recently taken place in Iraq demonstrate to those who have the eye of faith to see it that the Great Creator is indeed in complete control of the world's affairs. Though Yahweh may appear silent and there is no 'open prophecy', nonetheless the words of Scripture shout out loud regarding what will come upon the earth. Yahweh's almighty hand is guiding the nations to achieve His purpose and we in our day are privileged to see it. What a great encouragement and inspiration for our faith! Though the nations have no conception that Yahweh is guiding and overruling their actions nonetheless, they will do His bidding.

Daniel in his day had to live through a very turbulent time in history, yet he held firm to his faith in the prophecy of Jeremiah regarding the 70 years captivity of Israel. At the due time, Daniel prayed most earnestly that God's promise would be fulfilled and Israel would return from captivity into their land. As we see the world events unfolding before our very eyes in fulfillment of God's promises and bringing about His purpose, surely we should pray most fervently as never before, that the Lord Jesus will at last return just as prophesied.

Surely, our hearts cannot fail to be moved by what we see in the world about us. Surely, our hearts are filled with the excitement of knowing that Yahweh is in complete control. We know that His Kingdom will at last be established. We know that His name shall be glorified. O yes, the nations will resist, but in vain:

“He who sits in the heavens shall laugh; The Lord shall hold them in derision. Then he shall speak to them in his wrath, and distress them in his deep displeasure. Yet I have set my king on my holy hill of Zion.” Psa. 2:4-6

HOLINESS

Paul writes that

“without holiness no-one will see the Lord.” Heb. 12:14

Now holiness means: consecration, purification, being sanctified and the sanctification of heart and life. It means to be set apart and to be undefiled by sin, being free from wickedness. God clearly states

“I am the LORD your God: you shall therefore sanctify yourselves, and you shall be holy; for I am holy” Lev. 11:44

Thus, His children are called to holiness, to be a people separated out to God. Now that word holiness is very expressive and comprehensive in its scope. It is not for us as His children to decide what constitutes being holy and what does not. That which God commands is right, that which He forbids is wrong. Holiness is therefore a state of cleanness in the sight of God. Such cleanness consists of being free from all that is indicated as being morally polluting by the word of God.

God is holy, He is supreme above all and His word is law. The things He calls clean are holy and set apart for Him, that which He calls unclean will not enter His presence. Truly, it is not for us to decide standards of right and wrong, of what is acceptable and what is not, of what is truth and what is falsehood. There is but one standard and one standard alone, the Word of God. Isaiah records:

“To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.” Isa. 8:20

We never can be completely holy, because we all fail in some way to fully obey the principles and law of God. We are all weak and we all have a tendency to sin. Yet all God asks of us is that we have faith, that we trust in Him, that we believe His word and that we persevere despite our weaknesses. Separation is an attitude of mind, directed by the emotions of the heart being focused towards God. We must turn to Him, love Him above all else and obey His word. The wisdom of this world with all its research, all its philosophies and all its science and sophistries, is but foolishness in the sight of God. Thus it is Paul who writes:

“But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the

strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no-one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. 1Cor. 1:27-30

There is nothing in the world that can bring about salvation, man cannot change his own nature. Salvation has been wrought by God in the Lord Jesus Christ. Through Christ alone can we be made holy unto our Creator. Those who truly seek the ways of their Creator will heed the exhortation of Paul:

“Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.” 2 Cor. 6:17-18

What an immense privilege that we who are but dust, should be called out to be sons of the living God! What more could we want! Therefore, let us be separate and undefiled by this world, diligently preparing for that day, so soon to come, when the Lord Jesus shall at last return.

KEEPING AWAKE

I guess for most of us there have been times in our lives when we have wanted to stay awake all night. It might have been because we wanted to read or study, maybe because we were excited about something happening the next day or because we were on a long journey and travelling at night was more convenient. It may have been because we had to work. Whatever the reason, it was sufficiently necessary or interesting to keep us wake. Yet as the night draws on, tiredness sets in and often we awaken in the morning with a book fallen to the floor. When driving over night often ones eyes grow heavy and it is essential to pull over and sleep. I have not worked or travelled at night very often, but have found that the hardest time was 3-4 am when my eyes wanted to close and concentration was at its worst.

I am sure we all remember the parable Jesus told about the 10 virgins, five of whom were wise and five who were foolish. All of them fell asleep waiting for the bridegroom to arrive. Though they all fell asleep the wise had at least prepared for the bridegroom coming, they had tried to remain alert and watchful before sleep overwhelmed them.

Our primary goal in life must be to keep our eyes firmly fixed upon God's Kingdom and the things that we so dearly believe in. Indeed the cry will very soon come, as in the parable of the 10 virgins, "Here is the bridegroom come out to meet him!" Now Jesus said that upon his return, the angels would go out to gather the elect from the four corners of the earth. What will our reaction be then? Will we be alert and prepared? Will we have thoughts of this life and what we are leaving behind, or will we go with fear, yet joyful anticipation at the prospect of seeing our Lord at last.

The antidote to spiritual slumber is to fix the eyes upon his coming Kingdom, for it will generate zeal to stay alert. It will generate a willingness to make the effort to develop a character pleasing to the Lord Jesus. It has been a long night, the 'bridegroom' has tarried long and it is now almost dawn. It is well worth considering and meditating upon what is to come, for it will help us remain awake. Our Master will come, our hope is certain; as we read "Your eyes will see the King in his beauty and view a land that stretches far" Isaiah 33:17.

At that time when the earth is ruled by a righteous King, there shall at last be true and lasting peace. God's righteous and just law shall go forth from Jerusalem, indeed we read that:

"In the last days the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and peoples will stream to it. Many nations will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths." The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He will judge between many peoples and will settle disputes for strong nations far and wide. They will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war any more. Every man will sit under his own vine and under his own fig-tree, and no-one will make them afraid, for the LORD Almighty has spoken. All the nations may walk in the name of their gods; we will walk in the name of the LORD our God for ever and ever." Micah 4:1-5.

With this wonderful vision of the Kingdom to come, a time when the nations will be ruled by God's just law, is your resolve to "walk in the name of the Lord your God"? We have been called to know the one true God, our Creator, what an immense privilege! This calling is something we do not deserve and certainly do not merit. It is a calling based upon the great mercy of our Father in heaven. So, how much does that coming Kingdom mean to you? Is it valuable enough that it is considered worth staying awake for? Jesus frequently tells us throughout the gospel records to be watching and if we truly value and love our Lord and Master, we will obey this command.

But surely this obedience is not something we would find onerous. It is for our ultimate good, it is a command born out of love. It should be a joy to follow the Lord Jesus and his example. To encourage His children Yahweh has given a glorious view in the Scriptures of the earth in the Kingdom age. In Isaiah, we have many word pictures of the Kingdom age, for example:

"Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, "Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you." Isaiah 35:4

That is our trust, that is our hope, God will indeed save us. Therefore let us be strong, let us hold fast to the end, for Yahweh's words will

never fail! The chapter continues

“Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs.” Isaiah 35:5-7

No need for a national health service, no need to fear disability. No more will the earth be desolate and famine strike. But apply this to spiritual matters and the vision becomes even more thrilling. No more will mankind stumble around, groping as a blind man to find some meaning to life, limping along striving to make some sense out of the world and the many troubles that beset us all. No, the eyes of the spiritually blind will be open; the knowledge of God’s ways will set man truly free. The tongue shall be full of praise for our Creator and joy will fill the heart. Sorrow and sighing will flee away and this spiritually parched desert of life will be full of bubbling fresh springs of the water of life.

“Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. But be glad and rejoice for ever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more. “Never again will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years; he who dies at a hundred will be thought a mere youth; he who fails to reach a hundred will be considered accursed.” Isaiah 65:17-20

Such will be the contrast between the peace of the Kingdom age and life now, that our trials and sorrows will be but as a bad dream that vanishes when we awaken, vanishing like the morning mist as the sun rises. It will be a time of renewal, a time of refreshing and we will indeed sing for joy at the wonder of the new creation. Once again, the difference will be seen between the righteous and the unrighteous, the godly and the ungodly. God always hears the prayer of faith; He will bring peace and salvation.

“...they will be a people blessed by the LORD, they and their descendants with them. Before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, but dust will be the serpent’s food. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain,” says the LORD.” Isaiah 65:23-25

No, there shall be no harm in that glorious age for sorrow and sighing shall flee away. The great Prince of Peace will rule in righteousness and the faithful will be with him! Regarding the wisdom and righteousness of Christ Isaiah records:

“A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD— and he will delight in the fear of the LORD. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked. Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash round his waist.

Creation itself shall be at peace and at rest:

The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper’s nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.” Isaiah 11:1-9

Peace will only come when the earth is full of the knowledge of the Lord our God and mankind obeys His righteous and just law. His name alone will be honoured.

We have been called according to God’s mercy to be part of that nation of kings and priests, to honour Him and reflect His glory. Of that city we are destined by God’s grace to inherit, we read:

“You have come to mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the first born, who’s names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant” Heb. 12:22

Thus we shall be privileged to join in with that mighty throng singing “The song of Moses, the servant of God and the song of the Lamb” Rev. 15:3.

There is so much encouragement in Scripture to keep us awake and striving to please our heavenly Father. We deserve nothing, yet have been offered everything! Surely as the scripture say’s

“Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb” Rev. 19:9.

This life is full of much sorrow and much sadness. But, and it’s a big BUT, we have so much to look forward too. We are called, as the scriptures say to be FIRST BORN SONS of the LIVING GOD! What a privilege, what a hope!

It is our Lord who has made all these things possible, the one who has redeemed us by his own great sacrifice. John writes

“This is how God showed his love among us, he sent his one and only son into the world that we might live through him”. John 4:9

Of Jesus it is written “Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends”. If we obey his commandments, we remain his friends.

Therefore, keep AWAKE! For if God loved us while we were yet sinners, how much more will we not be loved now that we are reconciled to Him through Jesus Christ. So in response to His love diligently watch and pray for the Lord’s return, confess your sins before him resolving to do his will. Strive to always keep in the mind’s eye that wonderful and exhilarating view of the Kingdom age, for it will spur us on, keeping us spiritually alert and filled with the oil of the word of our heavenly Father.

PEACE

NOISE! The curse of our age. Music and TV blaring out both inside and out, noise from traffic, noise from machinery, noise from aircraft, noise from people, this world is anything but quiet.

STRESS! Another curse of our age. Stress from pressure in education to achieve learning objectives and to pass exams. Stress from pressure at work to achieve targets and deadlines. Stress from pressure in our families to do this or that. Pressure from within ourselves, 'I must do this', 'I must do that', 'I must go here' or 'I must go there'. No time! No time!

PEACE, or rather lack of it, the third curse of our age. We are beset by trouble and strife from within and from without. From without come war, crime, disease and division. From within comes our own internal fretting and worrying.

Have you ever felt like finding the brake and slowing down your life, but somehow the brakes just don't work. Maybe they need relining! There just seems to be no escape from stress, no peace of mind, no rest, no way of slowing life down.

Paul wrote to the Thessalonians encouraging them saying "study to be quiet". That word quiet comes from the Greek – 'hsuczaw hesuchazo' which means to rest, to cease from labour, to lead a quiet life. It is said of those who are not running hither and thither, but who stay at home and mind their business.

Now Paul says that they must study to attain being quiet. Studying for something implies having to work at attaining it. Thus we have to learn how to be quiet and at rest, it is not our natural state. Finding peace is something we must strive for and a peaceful attitude of mind is something that Yahweh values. Peter writes that true beauty in the sight of God is not an external attractiveness, but rather a quite and peaceful mind, "the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God is of great price." 1 Peter 3:4

So how can we develop this meek and quiet spirit, to 'reline our brakes' as it were and slow life down? Well I guess by emulating the

godly attributes that the faithful from past ages possessed. Their times were maybe less stressful in terms of noise and the pace of life, yet they still sought peaceful solitude and restoration. David points us in the direction of finding the right attitude of mind:

“Surely I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with his mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me.” Psalm 131:2

So David, the man after God’s own heart, learned to be at peace within himself and this is a path we also must tread.

Have you ever listened to a crying baby that no matter what you do never seems to stop? Have you brought up a child? For months they appear to do nothing but make demands to be fed, be changed, be put to sleep and no matter how much we love them, it can get wearing. I wonder are we ever like that before God? In His eyes in many ways I am sure at times we all are.

O how Yahweh is very patient with us. To Him we are all as little children. No matter how great our age in human terms, those years are but a fleeting shadow in the eternal perspective of things.

So how do we restore perspective? How do we quieten our frame of mind? How can we become like a weaned child? Well most of what we fret about concerns the future and be honest, are the things you worry about ever as bad as you think it will be? Jesus exhorted:

“Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.”
Matt. 6:34

If only we could heed, take to heart and learn the wisdom of those words!

Think of those from previous generations, Isaac went out to meditate in the field in the evening. David says:

“I remember You on my bed, I meditate on You in the night watches.” Psalm 63:6

and

“My eyes are awake through the night watches, that I may meditate on Your word.” Psalm 119:148

Of Daniel we read that with his windows open towards Jerusalem he: “kneeled upon his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God”.

These men are stalwarts of faith and examples for us to emulate. They learned to find inner peace through meditation upon the things of God and through prayer. Can we follow any other path? What of the one who is the greatest example of all? Well, we know that Jesus often sought solitude for prayer, indeed on one occasion we read “he went out into a mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God.”

So, what lessons can we take from these thoughts.

Well first of all the need for honest self-examination and a closer look at our characteristics. Do thoughts whirl and race around? Do we dwell upon slights and perceived grievances? Are our internal thoughts and emotions peaceful, or do our thoughts tend towards anxiety, worry and striving over this or that? Martha fretted and complained about Mary not helping, what did Jesus reply?

“Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things, but one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her.” Luke 10:41

All the fretting and worrying in the world changes nothing and like Martha we worry and are troubled over ‘many things’, but in reality only one thing is really needed, “seek first the Kingdom of God”!

So then let us learn how to quieten our souls like a weaned child. Let all the squalling and demanding be gone, to be replaced by a contented appreciation that Yahweh will always provide, when the time is right.

In the hustle and bustle of your daily life how often do you make time for prayer? Whilst driving is the radio always on or do you use journey time for listening to tapes of exhortations, Bible studies or hymns. Are your thoughts filled with the music you like or do you make some time to have melody in your heart to God. Do you spend time reading and meditating about the Truth in bed before sleep. In those restless moments when sleep eludes, do you fret or do you use the time for thought and prayer.

So what of those three modern evils?

Noise: well we can do little about noise for it fills the world in one way or another, but we can reduce the ‘noise’ in our heads.

Stress: well our attitude of mind will reduce stress. Prayer and meditation upon the things of God and the Kingdom so soon to come, will bring a greater peace of mind.

Peace: well in this life we shall find peace of mind by being content with our lot and not fretting about what we do not have. Rather peace of mind as a weaned child will come by learning trust, a complete trust in God and humble obedience to His word. Paul exhorts us to live “peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.”

If we do these things then in the ultimate sense we shall find true and lasting peace – reconciliation and peace with our Creator for Isaiah writes:

“the work of righteousness shall be peace; and the effect of righteousness quietness and assurance for ever” Isaiah 32:17

PERCEPTIONS

A man in medieval times was walking out through the gate of his castle. He was a foot soldier, not noted for being given to thinking overmuch and who tended to take things as they happened, expecting life to plod along just as it always did. So this particular bright day, after a hard battle the day before, he is off to guard the outer wall and being of a nervous disposition it is not a job that he enjoys. Now, others have the job of repairing the walls from the previous days damage and as he walks out of the gate a brick drops and hits him on the head. Now that did not particularly hurt him, his nice shiny helmet saving his head, but it did make the helmet ring like a cracked iron pot! The sharp knock and ringing in his ears made him jump and he immediately jumped to the perceptive thought that this was out of the ordinary and there must be some dire reason for it happening! He shouted out the warning 'beware, the sky is falling'!

Well, the builder laughed and called down 'the sky can't fall'. The soldier pondered this for a moment knowing that it was of course correct. But still there was a reason for the calamity that had struck him and for the ringing in his ears, if the sky could not fall, then, eureka! That's it, 'the earth is rising, the earth is rising' was his next shout!

The builder came down and retrieving his brick simply said 'sorry'. The soldier eyed the brick, then slowly coming to the conclusion that maybe the earth did not rise after all and that the ringing in his ears might have another explanation realised his mistake and feeling just a little bit embarrassed offered to remove the builder's head, but that is another story!

One thing I have noticed in my counseling work is that human beings are very good at jumping to conclusions based upon minimal evidence and believing them. That includes me! Often also people look for a 'scapegoat', blaming and taking out feelings on somebody else. If we stopped and thought about it, if we weighed the evidence that underpins our thoughts and feelings, we would see how ill founded or illogical they are sometimes. The problem is, be honest, how often do you stop to think?

There you are walking down the road of life and the metaphorical brick hits you upon the head. Life has already had its problems and

now yet one more problem has come along. Well that's it comes the thought, I must have done something to deserve it. Really? Well ok, maybe I'm not being singled out, but it must be that God has somehow overlooked my needs. Is that true?

The question we really need to ask ourselves is are we taking the stresses of life personally, rather than accepting that time and chance happen to all? On the other hand do we ever see trials as something that should never happen to us?

So stop and think, what could an alternative explanation be? Paul has an answer:

“whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom he receives.” Heb. 12:6

Paul is quoting from the Proverb which says

“whom the LORD loves He corrects, just as a father the son in whom He delights.” Prov. 3:12

So those trials and troubles of one sort or another that we daily go through are a sign that Yahweh cares, that He loves us! That He delights in us! Now that is a totally different and correct perspective. Yahweh knows exactly what is needed in our lives to mould our particular characteristics into what He wants. Note that! It is not what we want or think we need, but what He knows we need to be prepared for what Paul calls “an eternal weight of glory”. Indeed Paul puts our daily trials into perspective calling them “our light affliction, which is but for a moment” 2 Cor 4:17. Thus the exhortation comes from Solomon

“My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD, nor detest His correction”. Prov. 3:11

So why do we go through so many trials and sorrows? Paul gives the answer:

“God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness.” Heb 12:10 (NIV)

By pushing us out of our 'comfort zone' Yahweh is trying to teach us to think and get the right perception! We must learn to trust in Him, rely upon Him and in some small measure become like Him. We are called to godliness, to be holy and to reflect the glory of our Creator. If this is the case, can life be any different?

Developing the right perspective will give us joy when we realise that we are indeed loved by Yahweh as His dear children. With this realisation trials will feel less sharp, sorrows will be more easily borne and life will have a greater meaning. Indeed Solomon sums up the right perspective in a few well chosen words:

“hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.” Eccl. 12:13

WORRY

Worry is the bane of many peoples lives. People worry about what has happened, what is happening and what may happen in the future. However, the truth of the matter is that the past you cannot change and the future you do not know. The present and the present only is where you have a little influence. We can certainly learn from past mistakes to help us avoid making new mistakes in the present, but no one can guarantee what they may, or may not do in the future.

Some level of planning for the future is needed and some future events are inevitable, but the truth is that time and chance happen to everybody and we have little influence over what the outcome of events will or will not be. But one thing is certain, whatever the outcomes of events whether for good or ill, worry will change nothing!

Yet so often human beings find themselves ruminating about past events that were depressing or anxiety provoking at the time they happened, or thinking about future events that 'may be' depressing or anxiety-provoking. Human beings are very good at having "if only" thoughts. You know the ones that go along the lines of, 'if only this or that had gone differently or if only I had done this or that things would be different now.'

However, the reality is that the event has already happened; it is in the past and unchangeable. You may be able to influence the consequences, but you cannot change the event. It is impossible to time travel and go back to change our lives. But the worry goes on...

Human beings are also very good at having thoughts of "what if..." What if this or that happens? The mind worries about possible future life events that will cause distress or harm in some way. How often do these fears and worries actually happen? Very few times! But the worry goes on...

Be honest does worry change anything? The answer is an emphatic no! Yet we all spend time and effort on worry and become disheartened and miserable as a result. The prophet Isaiah wrote:

"You will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You." Isa. 26:3

Peace is the antithesis of worry. An incident in the life of the apostle Peter gives a graphic example of the lesson in trust that all must learn, before finding true peace of mind. Matthew records the incident when Jesus had sent the disciples ahead whilst he went up on a mountain to pray (Matt 14:22-33). The disciples rowed throughout the night into a strong headwind, the boat being tossed about by the waves. (Life can often feel like we are constantly heading into the wind and getting nowhere) Just imagine them cold, exhausted and rowing hard, and then suddenly out of the darkness Jesus appeared walking across the stormy water. The narrative says simply that the disciples were troubled “and cried out for fear”. Jesus reassured them saying “It is I; do not be afraid.” Peter replied: “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water”. Jesus simply said “Come”. So Peter climbed out of the boat and walked out upon the water toward Jesus.

Peter at this point, his worries and concerns put aside, demonstrated his faith and trust in the Lord. The problem came when he looked around, saw the waves and felt the strength of wind. Worry and concern set in. Peter thought about the potential dangers, thus his faith wavered and he began to sink.

This situation can happen to any one of us. Life goes along with its usual day to day concerns then suddenly a storm hits, the wind blows against us and the waves get rough. This is the time of testing, the time when worry sets in. Maybe we strive to put faith into action, we pray about it and for a time walk on the troubled waters of life. But we are all frail and weak, even the best of us, sooner or later as the storm continues faith has moments when it wavers, the storms of life threaten to overwhelm us and we begin to sink.

Peter immediately cried out to Jesus: “Lord, save me!” Jesus immediate response was to stretch out his hand and catch him, Peter was that close! So close, yet his faith wavered. Help in times of trouble is that close to us. Just because storms arise does not mean that providence does not work in our lives. Help is only a faithful prayer away!

Worry comes because all of us are vulnerable. We are mortal and physically, emotionally and spiritually vulnerable. Like Peter, we are capable of drowning in the sea of life. So when confronted with our vulnerability, there is a choice, sink or recognise our own inabilities and trust Yahweh to care for us.

Jesus chided Peter saying: “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?” When the time comes to review our lives, what will Jesus say to us?

There is no need to worry and worry really does not solve anything. Peter exhorts:

“Humble yourself under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you.” John 14:27

“He cares for you”! What love, what care Yahweh has already showered upon us His children by proving the means of our salvation. If He has already shown such great mercy and love, how can we doubt that He will not continue to love and care for us?

Just as we bring up our children to learn independence by not always instantly making things right when problems arise, but rather let our children learn from adversity, so Yahweh teaches His children. Therefore, strive to see every problem as a means of developing trust and faith, a means by which your Father in Heaven is teaching you, His child, spiritual lessons. That way rather than worry about problems, they will be seen as opportunities to show Yahweh how much we love and trust Him!

Jesus encouraged his disciples saying:

“I say to you, do not be worried about your life, as to what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? “Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they? “And who of you by being worried can add a single hour to his life? “And why are you worried about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin, yet I say to you that not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these. “But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more clothe you? You of little faith! “Do not worry then, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear for clothing?’” “For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. “But seek first His kingdom and His

righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. “So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” Matt. 6:25-34

So do not lose heart when the waves get rough and the wind blows hard, for Jesus has promised:

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

TRUSTING IN GOD

Now it is time for reminiscing! Watching my grandchildren play and observing the level of trust that they place in parents and grandparents, reminded me of an incident many years ago when I was about 7 or 8. Near to where my grandparents lived are some lovely woods. My grandfather spent most days walking along the various paths, his favourite spot being the bird sanctuary. Often I would go walking with him and I loved climbing trees! Not being particularly tall at this age climbing some trees was more wishful thinking than reality. One tree in particular was a perpetual challenge, its trunk was quite large and it grew taller than most of the surrounding trees. It had one huge branch fairly low down but probably about three times my height at that age from the ground. Smaller branches grew lower down but were not particularly strong. Well I could get nearly half way to that thick bough that almost appeared to cry out for me to sit upon it. One day I asked my grandfather how long he thought it would be before I could reach it. His answer? Something along the lines of: 'As long as it takes, it depends how much you want to reach it!'

Well I thought about that, decided I really did want to reach it and not long after worked out a way it might be done. So a week or so leaving my grandfather recording bird songs on his portable tape recorder (his old reel to reel tape recorder was classified as portable because it ran on batteries, but weighed a ton!) I ran on ahead determined to scale that tree. Well I will not go into how I did it, but suffice it to say that a couple of broken branches and a few cuts later I was sitting on that branch and looking down at the path which all of a sudden was a long way below. Looking up the branch did not appear so high; it was funny how it had suddenly moved higher up the tree! I was stuck!

Eventually along came my grandfather and his solution was simple, 'hang down from the branch and I will catch you. Well the hanging bit was not too bad, I straddled the branch, hung my arms over one side and legs over the other then gradually slipped down until my hands grasped smaller side branches and I was hanging. The slight problem was that after this my hands somehow refused to let go!

I knew Granddad would catch me, wouldn't he, but looking down it was a long way...What if he missed me? Isn't there some other

easier way I asked? No just let go, came the answer. Well a lot of persuasion later I did let go and he did catch me. Once back on the ground the branch really was much lower down again.

Do you trust Yahweh? At first, the joyful sound of the gospel message is heard and accepted with joy. In spiritual terms we are young children full of enthusiasm to speak to others about the wonders of the gospel message. After baptism, no obstacle was too great to overcome, no task too hard. The gospel message is so clear we felt that surely others must believe, we only had to tell them. We had brethren and sisters who would help us. The Lord Jesus would soon return and the Kingdom was within our grasp. A sincere childlike desire to please the Lord our God filled our heart and mind and we did believe and trust in His Word.

Then maybe our attempts to preach to others met stony ground. Brethren and sisters were found to be less than perfect. The Lord Jesus appeared and still maybe appears to delay his return and the world grows ever more oppressive. So we sit on a branch stuck!

Somehow, we have to let go and trust in God. First must come an acknowledgement that we cannot do it alone, we cannot trust in our own abilities. Paul had to learn this lesson and maybe we can recall from Scripture where he says 'when I am weak then am I strong'. Paul was speaking about his 'thorn in the flesh'; a weakness that Paul probably felt was hindering him preaching the gospel message. Thus, he prayed for its removal. But the answer came back 'my strength is made perfect in weakness'.

No matter what we do in His service, Yahweh does not need our strength, but we do need His strength! "For in Him we live and move and have our being", we are reliant upon Him for everything. Wherever we go Yahweh is there, David writes:

"You know my sitting down and my rising up; You understand my thought afar off. You comprehend my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. For there is not a word on my tongue, but behold, O LORD, You know it altogether." Psa. 139:2-4

The Lord our God is acquainted with all our ways, He knows our every need and will provide, if we but trust Him. No matter what the problem we face, we have the utmost assurance that "The angel of

the Lord encamps all around those that fear Him and delivers them". Psa 34:7 What greater assurance could we want? Yet we need to truly believe that promise. We must put our faith in His word and we must trust Him. A double minded man will receive nothing for as James warns:

"He that doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways." James 1:6-8

The problem for most people is that somehow they find it hard to let go of their safety zone, that comfort zone that presents little challenge to faith and trust. If our trust is never exercised, the depth of trust will never grow. It's a bit like learning to walk, once a child has let go of the parents hands or side of a piece of furniture that they use for stability and have taken the first faltering steps, it gets easier and soon they are running about without fear.

We are adopted children, God is our father, he treats us as His children, He will not allow anything untoward to happen to us, if we do but trust in Him. Yahweh will provide, for He knows what we need before we even ask! Thus, Paul exhorts:

"Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, I will never leave you, nor forsake you. So we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, I will not fear. What can man do to me? Heb. 13:5-6

So let go of your branch, leave your comfort zone and the Lord will uphold you. As David wrote:

"O taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the man who trusts in Him!" Psalm 34:8

WHAT IS YOUR LIFE?

Having become a grandfather I find once again that seeing a young child grow and develop is fascinating. From an early age, their character begins to be seen and a young child has mannerisms and expressions that are endearing. But they also exhibit not so pleasant characteristics and need to learn discipline and be brought up to learn how to control and overcome 'bad behaviour'. We have all been through that stage of life and become adults. Yet in the sight of God, we still are but children. There is a great need to learn the discipline of the scriptures to overcome human nature and sin. Just imagine the scene when a young child approaches their grandfather and asks the question 'What have you done with your life Grandad?'

Looking back over your life, what would you answer? For most people, life has been generally mundane. There have been no great achievements; we have not risen to high renown as statesman, actor, athlete, or written great literary works. History will not remember us, nor do many in this life know of us. Our achievements have only been for ourselves. If honesty wins out many of the cares, worries, strife and achievements were really insignificant and gained nothing lasting. They were at best transient success and all joy from achievement turned into something commonplace.

What has one's life been all about? What has its furious pace, its sorrows and joys achieved? Where have those years gone, from joy at birth, to watching growth of children, to their marriage and now to this young child asking 'What have you done with your life? What would you answer?'

Consider what James wrote:

"Now listen, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.' Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes." James 4:13-14

What is your life? It is but a mist that when the wind blows it passes away. O how easy it is to plan our lives, to strive for security and plan for old age, yet nothing is certain and our lives can be snuffed out at anytime. James puts it into perspective saying:

“Instead, you ought to say, “If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.” James 4:15

‘If it is the Lord’s will’; that should be our overriding thought in all things, His will, His Kingdom, His glory. Regarding our reliance upon Yahweh Paul comments that ‘in Him we live and move and have our being’ Acts 17:28. We are totally and utterly dependant upon Yahweh who supplies all that is needful. So in answer to the question ‘what is your life’ the answer is: life is not my own, it belongs to Yahweh who gave it.

We have no claim to life, no right to live; each only lives because of Yahweh’s will, mercy and love. Each has only one purpose for which to use that life as Ecclesiastes tells us: Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.”

With this perspective in mind then, far from a life in which Yahweh takes second place to the cares of life, our Creator will take first place. The more we read the Scriptures and learn of His ways, the more our love will grow for the Truth and the more we will be zealous to live a life pleasing to Him.

There can never be any artificial divide between the principles of the Truth and the practice of the Truth; the two aspects are inextricably entwined. David prayed that God would teach him to number his days aright that he might gain a heart of wisdom. [Psa 90:12] That lesson of numbering our days aright is one that we also must learn. We came into the world with nothing and we leave with nothing. So what is our life?

Jesus expounded a basic truth in the phrase “whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel’s, the same shall save it.” Mark 8:35 It was Jesus who also said “if any man will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” Luke 9:23-24.

God gives each day of our life. With this in mind as we awaken to each new day, surely our hearts will be filled with thankfulness for that new day of life. Each new day is a gift from God. Thus, each day presents a clear decision, take up the cross, deny self and follow that narrow path to life. Jesus described himself as ‘the way the truth and the life’. He literally denied himself, he literally took up the cross, and he literally laid down his life. Two paths of life lie before

us, the broad path that is easy to follow, that gives pleasure now and satisfies present desire. The other path is narrow, hard to follow and involves giving up many things now. However, the first path leads to certain death, the second path to life. The one who seeks to save his present life will ultimately lose life. The one who is willing to forgo the desires of human nature and put Yahweh first will ultimately find the vista of eternal life opening out in front of them.

So what is your life? Paul was certain of his life:

“For me to live is Christ” Phil. 1:21

“I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live; yet not I but Christ liveth in me.” Gal. 2:20

“They which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them and rose again.” 2 Cor. 5:14-15

Paul’s motivation was appreciation of divine principles and love for Yahweh and the Lord Jesus. If Yahweh had given His only begotten son that whosoever should believe in Him might have life and if Christ had laid down his life, if Paul had been shown mercy when he deserved death, how could he not respond? If a choice was to be made, Paul chose what Christ would want. If there were places to go, Paul chose such places, as Christ would walk. Where people were to be met, Paul chose the words of Christ to speak to them. Whatever the situation, whatever the burden, whatever the trial, Paul chose to fellowship the sufferings of Christ and to go outside the camp with him.

The satisfaction from self-fulfilment will fade, achievements will pass and desire fail. Ambition, status, work, achievement, pursuit of pleasure will fill the mind and warm the heart for a season. But they will long pass away and be forgotten, mouldering back into dust. So what is your life? It is a gift from Yahweh. It is a time of grace in which opportunity exists to seek Him who is your life. Life is a short period of time in which to “know the Lord your God and Jesus Christ whom He has sent”, through whom you can find real life.

So then, what answer would you give to your grandchild when they ask, ‘what have you done with your life?’ May it be that a moment of reflection will give the answer:

‘I have learned to know God. I have learned what pleases Him. I have always tried to obey Him. I have fought the good fight and I long for that crown of life promised to those who diligently seek Him.’

WE ALL LIKE SHEEP...

Spring is a lovely time of year, trees start showing leaves, flowers appear and the barren winter landscape gradually bursts forth into new life. What is particularly pleasant to see this year are the sheep and lambs back in the fields. After an absence because of foot and mouth disease, once again it is pleasant to walk through the fields and watch the sheep grazing and lambs playing. In England we rarely see a shepherd with his sheep. The sheep scatter over the fields and the shepherd works with his dog to round them up again when required. In other words the sheep are driven to wherever they are required to go. To an observer the scene is one of much activity and expended energy, tiring for the shepherd, his dog and the sheep.

This scene is very different from years gone by or from the scene in other countries. Some years ago I watched a shepherd with his sheep in Greece. There was no dog in sight, just a shepherd and a small flock of sheep. The shepherd was playing some pipes as he was walking down the track and the sheep were following him. Every now and again he would turn to call back a straggler from the flock and slow the others down whilst the straggler caught up. A peaceful and tranquil scene, the shepherd looked at ease and the sheep appeared to be calm and content to follow the shepherd.

As I looked at the field of sheep the other day and pondered about the contrast, it brought to mind the scriptural description of ourselves as being like sheep, David writes:

“For He is our God, and we are the people of His pasture and the sheep of His hand. Today if you will hear his voice: Do not harden your hearts...” Psalm 95:7-8

And

“I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek Your servant; for I do not forget Your commandments.” Psalm 119:176

The characteristics of sheep are used in many ways throughout the scripture to bring to life some of the aspects of human characteristics and behaviour in relation to the things of God. This idea of going astray and needing to be led like sheep back to the good pasture of God's word is picked up by Isaiah. He writes:

“All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity

of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; he was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.” Isaiah 53:6-7

God has provided the means by which those who have faith can be brought back to Him and again the symbolism of sheep is used. This time we have the analogy of a lamb, led unresisting to the slaughter. A lamb by nature is defenseless, harmless, an innocent young creature. Thus the Lord Jesus is set before us as one cruelly oppressed and afflicted, innocent of any wrong doing, yet condemned. But like a lamb led to the slaughter, he did not protest and kept quiet against the malicious charges laid against him.

There are two aspects to the Lord Jesus. The first aspect of Jesus in scripture is as the Lamb of God. He knew his Father’s voice; he followed His Father willingly and obediently. Jesus became the sacrificial Lamb of God in complete trust that his Father would provide for him and protect him. He was indeed raised back to life and is now at his Father’s side, which brings us on to the second aspect of Jesus.

This second aspect is that of being the ‘good shepherd’ caring for his sheep. Jesus knows his sheep and they know him. There is no harsh driving of the flock by the Lord Jesus, but his sheep know his voice and follow him. He leads them to good pasture and by still waters. He feeds his flock and provides for them. Yet as all sheep will, often the sheep go astray. Then the good shepherd seeks them out and tries to bring them back. If the sheep have not learned to recognise his voice, they will get lost.

These two aspects of Jesus firstly as the perfect Lamb of God, secondly as the good shepherd of his sheep, speak so eloquently of the means of our salvation. Those who have diligently heeded the Good Shepherd’s voice will find that he will lead them to green and verdant pastures and they will be able to drink abundantly from the water of life. This simile is continued to the description of the judgment. The sheep are those permitted to stand at Christ’s right hand amongst those acceptable to him, whilst the goats are condemned to the left as rejected by him. The sheep had followed the Good Shepherd and heeded his voice; they had exhibited ‘lamb’ like characteristics of meekness, obedience, trust, and sacrifice. We read Jesus will say to them:

“Come, you blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For I was hungry, and you gave me food: I was thirsty, and you gave me drink: I was a stranger, and you took me in: I was naked, and you clothed me: I was sick, and you visited me: I was in prison, and you came to me.” Matt. 25:34-36

Let us therefore do likewise, that we also might inherit a blessing.

TRUST

Simple isn't it, you are hungry so you buy a tin of beans, open it up and lo and behold beans are in the tin. You need to travel so you go out to the bus stop at the right time and lo and behold more or less on time the bus arrives. If you want to communicate, you write then post a letter and generally give no second thought about it arriving to the recipient. We just accept that these things in our lives will by and large happen as expected. The label says beans, so beans will be in the can, the bus time table says that the bus will arrive, so you expect it to do so, post a letter and as usual you expect it to be delivered.

Why don't we question these things? Well simply because experience shows us that by and large these things are reliable and we get a bit upset if the bus fails to arrive or a letter goes astray. Just think how you would feel if instead of beans you found a chocolate pudding inside the tin. Well in those circumstances some of us might just enjoy the pud! But we trust our daily lives to the extent that if a new product or service is offered and we buy it, we expect that it will provide exactly what it advertises. We turn on a switch and expect light, we turn on electrical appliances and expect that they will work, we start our cars, we pick up phones, we go to the shops and expect to buy what we need. In other words we place a high level of trust in our day to day-to-day lives and the things we use in the world about us. Yet there are times when these things do not work, times when the unexpected happens, yet we do not give up on them do we? We still use and trust the possessions and services of the world. Such a high level of trust in frail man!

Now try another tack, watch the sun go down in the evening and you do not give it a second thought that in the morning the sun will rise once again. You don't worry that as you step out of your house that suddenly you will shoot upwards because gravity has gone wrong. Have you ever looked up at night and spotted a blank spot in the sky because all data relating to those stars was accidentally erased!

One day all that we trust in and rely upon in this world will fail. A day will come when all the work that we do day by day in our lives will be of no account. Jesus spoke the parable about the rich man with many goods who wanted to build bigger barns. The stark warning came:

'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?'
Luke 12:20

It is not wrong to have possessions, but woe betide those who make them a priority and neglect service to God. Unlike the things of man the things of God never fail. God promised that seed time and harvest would not cease. The perceptive eye will see abundant evidence of the hand of God, be it the evidence of creation, the evidence of the flood in the world about us, the evidence of God's overruling hand in world events and the evidence of so many other things. The perceptive will look deeply at their own lives and in matters great and small see the hand of God at work. So how come we always have faith and trust in the things in our day to day lives, yet waver sometimes, losing faith and trust in spiritual things. It is true that we have never been given the promises directly from God, we have never knowingly seen an angel, never met the faithful of old, never seen the Lord Jesus Christ and have never walked through the kingdom of God. Yet the evidence for the Truth is overwhelming. Truly as Paul writes: "faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." Heb. 11:1

Yet do not think this to be a blind faith, a blind trusting in something unseen. Rather faith is something based upon the evidence of our day-to-day lives and the evidence of scripture. We learn by experience and the experiences of life should teach us to trust the Lord our God. Yet if we trust, if we have faith, then that should be evident in our manner of life. It should underpin and motivate all aspects of day to day life.

Now faith is proved by its works, for as James writes, "faith without works is dead". The Jews asked Jesus "what shall we do, that we might work the works of God?" The answer? "This is the work of God, that you believe on him whom he has sent." John 6:28-29 If we believe in him. If we truly love him as he loved us, then we will obey his commandments, we will strive to be diligent in his service.

The world of man can and will fail. The kingdoms of man will moulder into dust, so now is the time to live faithful productive lives in Yahweh's service, knowing that our labour is not in vain. That service is gradual in its development; Yahweh asks nothing of us that we are not capable of giving.

We do not go straight into a responsible job from school, but we learn, we gain experience and gradually become capable of increased responsibility and confidence. The pattern is the same also in the service of Yahweh. The young in the truth will only learn if they make the effort to do so and if the older, and hopefully wiser, will teach and encourage. The experienced should encourage by example and the less experienced be willing to learn. The right attitudes will create a climate where trust and mutual building up in the one faith will occur.

But when all fail, as they will in one way or another, and when we may feel let down or hurt, then that is the time for trust. It is time for the absolute and certain trust that Yahweh knows all things and is exceedingly merciful. If we should experience the failures of this world and censure by others, it is of no matter, for they, as will we, shall pass away, but the word of our God stands firm forever. David writes:

“The counsel of the LORD stands for ever, the thoughts of His heart to all generations.” Psalm 33:11

Yahweh has promised: “My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.” Therefore stand fast and immovable in trust, faith and hope. Yahweh’s Kingdom will come, the Lord Jesus will return exactly on time, the dead in Christ will rise, the law will go forth from Jerusalem, the Isles will wait for His law, the desert will blossom as the rose and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

According to the mercy of Yahweh you will see those things with your own eyes; you will be there, if you keep your faith living, active till the end, and if you TRUST!

TO PREACH OR NOT TO PREACH...

I recall some years ago a nurse who was eager to get involved with some work that I had started setting up a support group for people who suffered from mental health problems. Getting the group had been difficult, not from lack of funds, but just getting people interested and coming on a regular basis. It had taken six months of persistence just to get a small group of regulars attending, but two years later the group was thriving and had regular newcomers. This had only come about because of persistence and not giving up. Clients attending the group for the first time continue coming because of encouragement from the 'regulars'. I was glad of the extra help and due to the interest the nurse showed I encouraged more involvement and gradually reduced my input because I was leaving the area. A few months later an ex colleague phoned me to let me know the group had folded. Why? I asked. Well came the reply, the nurse who took over decided the responsibility of long-term commitment was too much, they were overworked and apart from the regulars nobody new was now interested. They thus felt that the group did not need much support and could run by itself. The regular attendees became discouraged and so the group had gradually wound up through lack of commitment.

Entropy sets in to any human endeavor and this principle applies equally as much to life in the Truth. How many times do we hear comments when speaking about preaching along the lines of:

Nobody listens!

I have got too much to do!

I am over worked and do enough anyway!

I cannot speak to people!

There is a lion in the way!

Life is busy and I am sure in varied ways we all have many things to do, families to care for, working to provide for day to day needs, time to relax and so on. All these are valid occupations that all take up our time. Equally so they can also become an excuse, a reason to not undertake work in the service of the Lord Jesus. Think of this, if somebody had not made the effort to witness to us, would we have heard the joyful sound of the gospel message?

What are our responsibilities to our Master? Well firstly we need to remember that our lives are not our own, a great price has been

paid for us. Secondly we must realise that each day that we live is a gift from God. The attitude of mind of willing disciples is not one of working out of a sense of duty or obligation; rather their very lives are a living witness. Life is not artificially divided into work, rest, play and the Truth! Preaching the word must not be an intermittent light in our lives, it should, nay must be, a consistent beacon. Any work that comes our way will be seen as a God given opportunity and pursued to the best of our abilities. Each will have their talents, some to speak, some to organize, some to support, some to undertake pastoral work. Whatever the work that comes to hand, all parts of the body are needed. Entropy and disillusionment must be fought at all costs, the Lord is at hand!

“Preach the word in season and out of season” wrote Paul. Witnessing to the Truth is not just about the one off efforts valuable and commendable as these are, it is about consistency and effort in our day-to-day lives. It lies in the small everyday things, the quiet word spoken to a colleague, a family member, a friend. The leaflet left in a strategic place, a book donated to a library, our private letter headings, our e-mail signatures and whatever way may come to hand to proclaim the gospel message. If the one off efforts cannot take place it is no great cause for regret, the daily effort is the thing to maintain at all costs, for should that fail then great indeed would be the calamity.

We can encourage each other by word and deed. We can support by prayer. We can write to, or visit those alone. So much can be done daily that shows our love for the Lord and the impact of the Truth in our lives. It is that daily commitment that is the antidote for entropy. It is that daily commitment that is an active witness to a living faith. It is that daily commitment that preaches the gospel message most effectively of all.

So take a lesson from the nurse, don't start off full of enthusiasm for whatever you do in the service of Yahweh, and then decide it's too much commitment. Don't think somebody else will do it. Don't think that the work will look after itself.

Though our effort be small, though our light flicker and shimmer as a candle in the wind, if we scatter the seed, Yahweh will make it grow if it is His will. Who knows when it will grow, some seeds are slow to germinate and germination will occur only when the conditions are right. Often seed can lie dormant until the warmth of the sun and

moisture trigger rapid growth. Who knows if those who hear now, will not be those who suddenly burst into growth when the Lord Jesus returns and light of the Kingdom age shines upon them.

We read:

“You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvellous light” 1Peter 2:9

So let us let that light shine forth daily, holding fast to that which is good and patiently persevering in our Lord’s service. May it be that having been faithful in small things, we might enter into greater things, hearing those words that surely we all long to hear:

“Well done, good and faithful servant; thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord”. Matt. 25:23

Thus we shall join that joyful throng, that cloud of faithful witnesses from all ages who will be privileged to enter into service for eternity!

POLLUTION

The rabbit population of the UK has increased considerably in recent years following the devastation to the population caused by disease and changes in farming methods. But whether you think rabbits a pest or like to see them as part of the rich pageant of the English country side, they are hard to miss. No doubt most of you have seen rabbit warrens in hedgerows, fields, parks and a myriad other places. Now whilst out on one of my customary walks recently, I passed by one particularly extensive warren. Not being the quietest of walkers, the rabbits quickly scattered and disappeared down the nearest available hole at my approach. One in particular shot down a rather large hole, which caught my attention because the holes are not usually that large. So being curious, I took a closer look, from about 1 foot down (0.3 metre) the hole was studded with assorted bits of rubbish, broken brick, bottles, plastic bags, jars etc. The rabbits had widened the hole in an attempt to dislodge the rubbish, but instead had ended up having to negotiate an obstacle course of rubbish in order to enter or exit the warren and hence why the mouth of the hole was so large. The hole was testimony to the amount of rubbish carelessly discarded in hedgerows for many years.

Again, whilst out on a walk along a disused canal it was very easy to note the foam on the surface of the water where land drains emitted the run off from fields. The foam is caused by excessive nitrates and other pollutants in the water. Walking on a beach one year, I trod on what looked like a ripple in the sand, only to find my foot covered in black tar like oil. Our environment is a delicate balance of nature which mankind is polluting with disastrous results. Pollution is responsible for the destruction of plant and animal life, global warming and disease. There are vast swaths of land fill sites vomiting methane gas and other forms of pollution into the soil. Rivers become so polluted that fish die, there is a rise in asthma and other diseases because of atmospheric pollution, the list could go on. The point is that the beauty and delicate balance of nature is destroyed because of mankind's mismanagement of his environment.

But for all this, there is a far greater danger that is ever present for each and every one of us, something that might be termed 'mind pollution'.

Our minds are constantly bombarded with the noise and clamour of the world in one way or another, yet we willingly add to this cacophony! We mismanage our minds! I met a man recently who quite openly said that he always had a radio, TV or CD on so that he was never alone with his own thoughts. How sad!

Little time is set aside for thoughtful contemplation and self examination. Yet we all have a great need to redress the balance. Like nature, the good fertile soil of our minds will become totally unproductive in the Truth, if we are constantly filling it with rubbish. Or like the poor rabbit having to dig around all the discarded junk, our thoughts about the Scriptures will become equally hard to negotiate if we have to constantly dig out the junk to make headway. It is bad enough when we must do this for reasons beyond our control, let alone inflicting it upon ourselves. The problem is that human nature is so good at mindlessly creating rubbish.

Just imagine that your mind is like a fertile hedge row and Yahweh takes a close look, seeking to find something that He can take pleasure in. What will be seen? Will He find a mind cluttered up with the discarded litter of humanistic thought, the latest gossip, and the day to day trivia that pervades everyday life? On the other hand, will he find healthy growth, balance and harmony, a peaceful environment in harmony with its Creator? Will He find a small reflection of His Divine characteristics within our minds? It will in the best of us be but a pale reflection, but non-the-less it should be present.

So what does the Scripture say that we should do?

“Is any among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms.” James 5:13

There is no other way of preventing ‘mind pollution’ other than to fill the mind with the things of God. Think of His way when in need and pray. Think of His goodness when happy and sing praise. Think of His Word when in need of guidance and obey it.

Here are some more words that we do well to meditate upon and practice:

“Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.” Phil. 4:8

In other words, fill your minds with the Word of God day by day. Meditate upon His wisdom, His mercy, His love. Think carefully about the examples of the 'great cloud of witnesses' that Paul describes in Hebrews 11. Think of the great Apostle Paul himself, as an example to follow:

“Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.” Phil. 4:9

Meditate daily about the Lord Jesus Christ, the one who is altogether pure, lovely, praiseworthy, admirable and noble. Do this and we are promised that Yahweh will be with us.

Such thoughts will drive out and purge away the pollution of humanistic thought:

“If a man therefore purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honour, sanctified, and meet for the master’s use, and prepared unto every good work.” 2 Tim. 2:21

What sort of mind do you have?

PERSPECTIVE

It is surprising how different conditions can make the same situation feel totally different and affect how events are viewed. Not so far away is Salcey Forest, it may well have been a forest at one time, but nowadays it is not so big. Anyway there are some lovely walks and it is one of our favourite haunts when time permits. Well last year I went quite a long walk on my own through the forest and on a hot summer's day with the birds singing, the wind rustling in the trees and the day ahead of me; it was a pleasant and relaxing walk.

Now just imagine the scene the other day when we both set off for a walk around the forest. The day was cloudy and it began to drizzle, it was getting late in the afternoon and the daylight would soon begin to fade. However, we thought that an hours walk would be good for us and set off wandering though Salcey Forest. We did not have the map but upon finding a path we had not trodden before, we set off not too worried about finding our way. Now I will not impute blame, but we got a bit lost and the return path did not materialise where I thought it would. So we set off in the direction I thought was the right one, now I still maintain it was the right direction, but that is another story. Suffice it to say that it took longer to get back than anticipated, it began to get dark and guess what, it rained harder!

Eventually we came across a broad path that looked familiar and in the distance I could see a building at the end. Now I knew that path reasonably well, but in the twilight it is surprising how dim light can alter the appearance of things subtly and I was not completely sure. However it turned out to be correct and we eventually found our way back. The interesting thing for me though was that because we knew the park would close, plus it was raining and we were temporarily disorientated, the walk ceased to be so enjoyable and took on a sense of urgency to find the correct path back to the car before it got totally dark and the gates were closed.

Changed circumstances had the affect of changing our perspective on the situation. Now our life in Christ is a bit like that journey through the woods.

For those of us baptised 30 or so years or more ago the world had its problems, but compared to now the world was not quite as bad.

Prophecies were read and maybe an acknowledgement made that we would in many ways face trials. But I wonder how much the reality of the time of trouble that is approaching hit home? It was largely a future event and maybe even something that we thought would never have to be fully faced by ourselves. It may be the case that we will not face the full force of what is to come before the Lord returns, but we will most certainly face some form of tribulation. When Jesus spoke of a time of trouble such as had never been, he meant it. Jesus warned:

“For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be. And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect’s sake those days will be shortened.” Matt. 24:21-22

The perspective will not see just the words ‘tribulation’ and become apprehensive, but will rather focus more upon the words ‘for the elects sake’ and recall the mercy of God.

Likewise, when we are warned about the world being as in the days of Noah, and being overtaken by sudden destruction, Scripture means just that. However, the right perspective will remember that Noah a righteous man in his generation, was saved in the ark. Yahweh is well able to save us!

When Scripture speaks of those who will say ‘where is the promise of his coming’ it means it. When Jesus spoke the parable of the ten virgins and how they all slept and five did not even have oil for their lamps, the right perspective will note that the warning applies to our day and age. The right perspective will take heed and believe that Jesus will return, ensuring that the oil of the Word is ready to hand in the heart and mind. When Jesus asked the question will the Son of Man find (the) faith on the earth’, the implied answer is that he would find very little faith. May it be that each one of us is numbered amongst the faithful.

So what is your perspective of life? Does the world appear to be not so bad after all? Is complacency setting in and drowsiness coming on? Maybe the thought arises that yes, there are problems, but they do not and will not affect us directly. On the other hand do you realise that the world is not such a rosy place and grows ever more corrupt? Does this lead to becoming apprehensive, struggling to find the right path, losing confidence and becoming unsure of the way?

The journey through life is a bit like walking through the forest in the rain and getting a little disorientated. But if we maintain the right perspective the journey's end will soon be in sight. The right perspective will see that it is not a matter of if we arrive, but rather when. David had the right perspective. For him life has been full of troubles, pursued by Saul for many years his life under constant threat, then in later years his throne was not secure even from his own family and Absalom rose up against him. Yet David no matter what happened always sought the Lord his God. He had the right perspective on life praying:

“Cause me to hear Your loving kindness in the morning, for in You do I trust; cause me to know the way in which I should walk, for I lift up my soul to You.” Psalm 143:8

So maybe our own perspective will be helped by always remembering that Jesus said:

“Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Luke 12:32

OBESITY

There was in the news today the tragic account of a three year old child who died of obesity. At the time of her death, she was three times what should have been her normal weight. A news item reported:

‘Two-thirds of England’s population are overweight or obese and government attempts to tackle the issue are inadequate, threatening future generations with shorter life expectancy.’

Some blame for obesity was attached to the National Health Service, some to the individuals themselves. It is notable that the more affluent the society the greedier it becomes. I know several health centres that try to encourage people to live a healthy life style and to lose weight. But despite health warnings, few people take any action. Some people make an attempt at dieting but fail to lose weight. Often they insist that their diet has changed, that they are eating healthier meals and smaller amounts but closer questioning reveals that in between meal ‘snacks’ actually contain more calories than their meals and that the most exercise gained has been out buying food at the local supermarket!

The problem is that people lack self discipline and do not teach self discipline to their children. To diet takes self control and self restraint, it takes sustained effort to change life style and overcome bad dietary and life style habits.

Sadly, many who profess to be Christian have this attitude, their ‘religion’ is ok as long as it does not interfere overmuch with their lives. The Scriptures warn brethren and sisters in Christ about the dangers of ‘spiritual obesity’ that is indulging human nature and not adhering to a strict healthy diet of the Word. The Scriptures teach us how to live a healthy ‘spiritual lifestyle’, one that is based upon the daily exercise of putting the Word into practice in all aspects of our lives. To eat this regular healthy spiritual diet and have a good spiritual workout takes self discipline. Paul writes:

“Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.” Col. 3:5

That word greed means avarice, materialism a greedy desire to have more. Paul equates this greed with idolatry and indeed anything that takes precedence in a person’s life over putting Yahweh first, is an idol

to that person. To say that we have faith is easy, but the value of faith is proved by its works. As James says faith without works is dead! Indulging 'earthly nature' will give rise to 'spiritual obesity' and will ultimately lead to a dead faith and like physical obesity bring about premature death. Now Paul warned:

“Mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God — having a form of godliness but denying its power.” 2 Tim. 3:1-5

This is not speaking of unbelievers but those who have a 'form' or outward show of godliness, but do not make any effort to change. Such lack self control, self discipline and self restraint. It is no good eating a healthy diet of the Word then stuffing ourselves with spiritual 'junk food' in between meals. A form of godliness will not save!

So what is your diet like and how much exercise are you getting? Honest self examination is not easy; admitting to being overweight and flabby is not flattering to human ego. However, it is far better to develop self discipline and restraint now than be shown to be over indulged, fat and unfit for work in the Kingdom age.

Our life should be seen to be different now because we are in Christ. I well remember the comment of one of my patients who having seen a dietician after I had recommended them to get dietary advise, commenting 'she can talk, look how fat she is'. In other words the dietician, to put it tactfully, needed to take her own advice!

Our life should be different, we must practice what we preach or be rightly shown up as hypocrites. If we are spiritually obese and not living a healthy spiritual lifestyle ourselves how can we preach to others? If this is the case then Christ is not in our lives and we only have ourselves to blame! Paul writes: “Physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.” So work hard at becoming spiritually healthy and developing godliness in your life that you may be spiritually fit and healthy! Remember lifestyle change takes sustained effort.

May it be that the Lord will find each of us in a healthy spiritual condition, having run the race, reached the finishing line and fit to receive the crown of life promised to those who remain faithful to the end.

THE BUTTERFLY

Having visited a butterfly farm it was forcibly brought home to me the many differing species of this beautiful creature. There they were freely flying about, so many bejewelled examples of this insect that is but one of so many wonders in creation. Adjacent to the main glasshouse that housed the controlled environment where the butterflies were, was a smaller room where the caterpillars and chrysalises were kept. The caterpillars were often well camouflaged and certainly not particularly pretty to look at. The chrysalises were from the outside apparently dry husks, dead and uninviting, or else shrouded in a cocoon of silky threads.

There were some chrysalises that had not matured and a butterfly never emerged from the casing. Some butterflies emerged and fell to the ground damaged, but tender care by the keeper soon deposited them back onto a branch and they quickly recovered. Others emerged weak and bedraggled, but soon the wings expanded and they appeared in all their resplendent glory.

Poor nourishment or the wrong environment before the chrysalis stage would mean death and that the change to becoming a butterfly would never take place. A change in the environment or damage during the chrysalis stage will mean that the butterfly will not emerge. The right nourishment, the right environment and protection from harm resulted in a wonderful change taking place, a new creature emerging from an apparently dead chrysalis.

Now as human beings in our natural state, we are nothing particularly pleasing to look at now from Yahweh's perspective. He sees a creature marred by sin, ugly from a spiritual perspective and one whose sole aim in life appears to be to voraciously eat all that it can find. Thus, mankind labours long and hard to satisfy his desires, but gives little heed to what is truly important. John has this to say:

“all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he that does the will of God abides forever.” 1 John 2:16-17

If we eat the wrong 'food' and are living in an environment not conducive to healthy spiritual growth, then we will live and die as

caterpillars, we will never change. So the Lord Jesus exhorts us to seek out the right food if that change is to take place:

“Labour not for the food that perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of man will give you”. John 6:27

That spiritual food is of course the word of God, thus we read “As newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word that you may grow thereby.” 1Peter 2:2. That ‘pure milk of the word’ and maintaining the right environment will help the transformation process to take place. Both light and warmth is required to maintain the correct environment for healthy growth and Paul reminds us to keep separate from darkness saying, “have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them,” for “You are all sons of light, and sons of the day. We are not of the night, nor of darkness”. Eph. 5:11 & 1Thess. 5:5

Moths may love the night, but butterflies are creatures of the light and day. Yahweh in His infinite wisdom and mercy “has delivered us from the power of darkness, and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, in whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins” Col. 1:13

Therefore, if we want to change from our ugly caterpillar state and become a beautiful butterfly we must go through a transformation. The transformation must begin now; we must “grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.” 2 Peter 3:18

Then though we enter into a chrysalis state and from the outward appearance are apparently dead, in the mercy of God a transformation will take place, miraculous, wonderful and beyond our full comprehension now. We can no more conceive the change that shall take place than could a caterpillar, were it able, to perceive that one day it should fly. We may be damaged by the vagaries of life and we are certainly spiritually weak, but the Lord our God is compassionate and full of tender mercies. If we but do our best, He will make up what is lacking, for in the end:

“we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.” 1Cor. 15:51-52

Thus the 'butterfly' shall emerge from its cocoon, no more ugly, no more weak, no more prone to sin, but be arrayed in fine linen, the righteousness bestowed by Yahweh upon those who truly are His children.

So rejoice, hold fast to what is good, eat the right spiritual food, and maintain the right environment conducive to healthy spiritual growth for:

“you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light” 1 Peter 2:9

BIND WEED

Have you ever, walking along a pathway through fields during the summer and before long, noticed that your clothing is covered with small round furry seeds? A close inspection of the hedgerows alongside the path and the crops in the field can often show a thin stemmed plant that appears to bind all the other growth together – bind weed. It grows prolifically and can often be found in gardens as well, resisting being pulled out tenaciously. Left long enough it will take over and smother other growth. Last autumn it was noticeable that a large section of one field nearby was left and not harvested, the grain being smothered by a prolific growth of bind weed and other similar weeds.

Ponds also suffer from a similar problem from another type of weed, blanket weed. This pernicious plant grows rapidly and fills the water with a blanket of weed that covers and eventually kills other plants, usually the ones that are wanted! No matter how hard I try blanket weed keeps coming back despite the most vigorous attempts to eradicate it. Hand weeding, chemicals, natural remedies have all been tried to no avail, it appears to thrive on harsh treatment!

This type of pernicious weed made me think about the passage where Paul writes about the ‘sin that so easily entangles’. I guess like me you get periods of enthusiasm where it appears a sudden insight makes one aware of shortcomings in a certain area of one’s life. This may come for example when doing the daily readings, listening to an exhortation, reading a book or whatever helps us to reflect upon life looking inward and reviewing the hidden recesses of our characters. Having identified a particular flaw to our character or a ‘hidden fault as David calls it, a sincere desire to change comes over us. Thus we repent and set out to change what is amiss.

The problem is that whilst we concentrate on that area of our inner ‘garden’, somewhere else sin rears its ugly head. Woe to us if we neglect reading the scriptures daily, woe to us if we cease to diligently watch over our characters, woe to us if we neglect attending meetings, for sin like blanket weed will quickly take over. Then as Paul warned our state will be worse than before:

“It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the

Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.” Hebrews 6:4-6

Yet try as we might, keeping that weed at bay is an ongoing problem. I guess we can all relate very closely with what Paul wrote. He put so succinctly about how we must all feel at times saying:

We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. . . . I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.” Romans 7:14-15; 18-19

The only thing we can do is to persevere and strive to follow ever more closely the great example of the Lord Jesus. Remember his supreme sufferings and complete obedience. Through him alone can we find salvation, indeed only to him can we look and find inspiration to overcome. Paul writes:

“Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.”

To fix our eyes upon Jesus means to direct our gaze to him and not look in any other direction. Jesus has led the way, setting the example to follow and is the one who will perfect our faith. No matter how hard we battle against sin it is rarely to the extent that we resist to the point of losing our life, yet Jesus did. However we do need to remember that we are called on to lose our life, which means giving up the things in this present world that would lead to sin. There is no room for complacency, sin like bindweed will grow up rapidly if we allow it to do so. Constant weeding out of all that is amiss in our lives is needed. For those who do persevere David has this to say:

“Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.” Psalm 32:1

That is the crux of the matter is it not, 'the man in whom there is no deceit'. The one who is open and honest before Yahweh, the one who does not try to hide sin no matter how it hurts to admit the truth, this one will be blessed indeed.

Great indeed is the love and mercy of God, that He is willing to count our little faith as righteousness, if we hold fast to the end.

TIME FOR A REVIEW?

Well a new year is once again upon us, a time when our contemporaries make resolutions about what they will, or will not do, during the New Year. Such resolutions are usually quickly made and often equally as quickly forgotten. Now resolutions to make changes in one's life are not a bad thing and some people genuinely do want to make changes to overcome what they see as personal shortcomings or problems in their lives. A new year is associated with having the opportunity for a new start, a chance to begin anew and put behind the past year's difficulties and disappointments. However, nobody can foresee what will happen in the future and changing personal attributes is a difficult thing to do, all too easily, people slip back into ingrained patterns of thought and behaviour. Now as brethren and sisters in Christ, we should be examining ourselves each week, not merely yearly. But maybe a new year can also be a suitable time for reviewing the past year, examining ourselves honestly and reviewing our life in Christ.

I suppose we could ask questions such as for example:

Have I put God first in my life?

Have I tried faithfully to obey His word?

How often have I missed going to the meetings?

Have I tried to follow the readings daily and understand what I read?

Do I pay attention to the exhortations, Bible class subjects etc?

Have I supported to the best of my ability the various ecclesial activities during the past year?

What has my attitude been to other brethren and sisters?

Have I tried to be constructive and helpful in my relationships with brethren and sisters?

Is the coming Kingdom the most important thing to me?

Will this year bring the return of our Master?

Will I be found watching, waiting and ready?

For those in isolation participation in ecclesial life may not be possible, but there are ways of keeping in touch, writing, phoning, e-mail and visiting. But whatever our circumstances each of us needs to remember at all times, that we are totally dependent upon God. Indeed as Paul said, "in him we live and move and have our being." Yahweh must come first! He is calling out a people to serve him,

preparing them to reflect His glory and we have been given the privilege of having been called to know the true Gospel message. In view of that wonderful privilege, there is a great need to separate from the world and from those who turn away from sound doctrine. Indeed Paul wrote:

“Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?” 2 Cor. 6:14

The class of people who are in darkness are those who know not the Scriptures or who neglect to ‘practice what they preach’. Yet the act of separation should never be through any sense of pride, or belief that we are more pure in some way, but only out of sincere desire to serve the Lord our God and Jesus our Saviour. It is born out of self examination, not examination and judgement of others. Love for God is demonstrated by a willingness to love him above all else, to put Him and His principles first.

Throughout Scripture we are exhorted to be united, that we are one body. There cannot be ‘unity’ if we all go in different directions, or if we are not all working together. Jesus was ‘one’ with his Father, speaking the words of God, perfectly doing the will of God. He was sinless. For this reason he was ‘one’ with God. How can we be one with God, with the Lord Jesus and finally with each other, if we do not hold and obey sound doctrine, putting the Word into practice in our lives? Paul writes:

“fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind.” Phil. 2:2

Further Peter writes:

“all of you be of one mind, having compassion for one another, love as brothers, be tenderhearted, be courteous.” 1 Peter 3:8

Therefore, let our resolve be to support, help, encourage, comfort and love each other, so much the more as we see the dawn light of the Kingdom age approaching. Paul exhorts:

“let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.” Phil 2:4 and “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.” Gal. 6:2

The underpinning principle lies in what Christ said to the sheep in the parable recorded in Matthew 25:40:

“Assuredly, I say to you inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.”

So, if we looked back over the past year, have our respective ecclesias been somewhere that we have looked forward to going, somewhere we have felt supported and at home? If not, then the answer is not to blame someone else, but look at how we personally can make changes to improve things.

Our attitude to life and to each other will govern how well we prepare for the return of Jesus and how strong our ecclesias are. We are commanded to “cease from anger, and forsake wrath. Do not fret, it only causes harm.” Psalm 37:8. How easy it is to take offence, complain, judge and criticise. How much harder and how slow we are to look for good, to show appreciation, to forgive, (and forget) to say thank you, to praise and all the other myriads of things that build up, strengthen and encourage each other. Jesus said “you remain in my love if you obey my commands.” So what will your resolve be, not merely once per year, but weekly as you remember the Lord Jesus?

May this year indeed see the return of the Lord Jesus and the establishment of the Kingdom that we all long and pray for.

HOW ARE YOU EMPLOYED?

Day by day most of us travel to work and are occupied with whatever tasks we must undertake in our employment. We have sought out a job because of the necessity to earn a living and if we are fortunate have found a job that we like and gain some satisfaction from our work. Whilst at work the focus is upon whatever needs to be done to achieve the aims and objectives of our role. If we are a conscientious worker then that is recognised in one way or another and at the very least, we receive a wage for our labours. If we are less than diligent and resent being at work, then time passes slowly, morale is low, standard of work is unsatisfactory and sooner or later we will lose our job.

When not at work, either during the evenings or on our days off, time is generally spent 'working' at whatever jobs need to be done for ourselves. In one way or another we are fully 'employed' in achieving whatever is needed to fulfil the varying needs, desires and objectives we have in our day to day lives. This level of work apart from the routine 'chores' is enjoyable and something we would willingly spend more time engaged in, particularly our hobbies and other interests.

Now with this in mind, how are you employed in the service of God? Are you a willing worker or a shirker? How much time do you spend in His service compared to your own service? There is not a day that should go by without some work being done for Yahweh, something that serves Him by contributing towards His aims and objectives. Moreover this time and effort should be willingly and enthusiastically given. Any lack of enthusiasm or service grudgingly given will affect not only our own morale, but also the zeal and morale of our brethren and sisters.

The Lord our God can be served by any, be they young or old, male or female, inexperienced or experienced, all He asks for is a willing attitude of mind and sincere desire to seek His ways. Acceptable service is shown by diligence in all aspects of life, but most of all by a humble willingness to put aside self and selfishness. Willing service is shown by the putting on of a Christ-like attitude of mind and displaying Christ-like characteristics in our contacts with brethren and sisters and with those in the world about us. Willing service is

shown by dedication to ecclesial activities, attendance at all the meetings and support for our brethren and sisters. Willing service is shown by putting aside our own plans, even when activities in Yahweh's service come at 'inconvenient' times.

Most of all we serve Yahweh by ensuring that we are ready for whatever duty may come. We can prepare by taking steps to make sure that we are strong in the faith, knowledgeable of His word and putting His word into action day by day. Willing acceptable service is about preparation, being reliable and diligent, being in a position to help, support and encourage our brethren and sisters and to preach the word in season and out of season.

Time must be made each day for reading, study and meditation, no matter how busy we may be. Time must be made to "seek those things which are above, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God." Therefore says Paul, "set your minds on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God." Col. 3:1-3

Now Peter said:

"I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right." Acts 10:34-35

and Paul writes:

"There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; but glory, honour and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For God does not show favouritism." Rom. 2:9

So then, strive to be a willing worker and not a shirker! Yahweh will accept those who revere Him and do what is right. The Lord our God displays no favouritism, all who seek Him will receive a just reward, a gift that only He can bestow, the promise is clear:

"When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory" Col. 3:4

GOD HAS REVEALED

I recall an interesting incident a few years ago when the Bible exhibition trailer was at a local county show. Next to the exhibition trailer was a clairvoyant who had a table and couple of chairs set up and she was, for a price, seemingly telling people what would happen in their future. She had a steady stream of visitors whilst few stopped by the exhibition trailer. Now the day had started out hot and fine, but by early afternoon clouds began to come over then within a short space of time the heavens opened and the rain poured down. The trailers side had been opened up and formed a cover which kept us all dry and soon we were joined by several people who came in out of the rain. They soon found plenty to look at whilst waiting for the rain to pass by, including booklets about prophecy. On the other hand, the local clairvoyant soon lost her customers and beat a hasty and somewhat bedraggled retreat. Somehow, her 'visions of the future' had not forewarned her to bring an umbrella! Now we read in Scripture that:

“Surely the Lord God does nothing, unless He reveals His secret to His servants the prophets.” Amos 3:7

Yahweh does this so that His people's faith might be strengthened and confirmed. He reveals His divine purpose so that in every generation His people may know and understand the times and seasons in which they live.

Knowing the 'signs of the times' in which they live enables them to know and discern beforehand what will happen. The world in general flounders, not knowing what will happen and unable to have any certainty about the future. Despite predictions based upon probability, the unexpected and unforeseen always happens. On the other hand, God's people are forewarned and rejoice to see the approach of the Kingdom of God. Thus, Peter writes:

“We have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts“ 2 Peter 1:19

Well, we certainly can see the 'signs of the times' in which we live, wars, strife, crime, violence, terrorism, famine, disease and so many other ills that beset mankind, increase with each passing year. The war on terrorism continues apace, particularly in Afghanistan and

Iraq. Is this the beginning of the end for man's dominion or is this ongoing war against terrorism another of the preparatory events along the way? Time and hindsight will tell. But once again the exhortation from these events is to be steadfast, to be watching, to be preparing to meet the Lord Jesus, to keep separate from the world and also to avoid those who wilfully stray from the Truth. But it is also equally important that we redouble our efforts, making it a priority to preach the word, in season and out of season.

What we do most certainly know, is that God has revealed His purpose through prophecy and we are very privileged to know the overall events that will take place. We know a time of trouble is coming such as has never been. People throughout the world grow ever more fearful of what may happen and indeed the point will come when the nations will, as we read, rage and roar as the tossing sea, casting up their mire and mud.

Will you lose heart as you see these things unfolding?

Will you be among those who say 'where is the promise of his coming?'

Will you be amongst those who compromise the Truth? For such have, and will, come.

No, it is not for us to dwell in darkness, for we do have the word of the prophets "and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place" The Word is sure, firm and steadfast, God has declared:

"I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please" Isaiah 46:10

No matter what mankind plans, God's purpose will indeed stand. It was fascinating to watch the UN and the European nations striving to avoid the inevitable war in Iraq. More than this, the alliances are being forged now that according to prophecy we expect to see prior to Christ's return. We do indeed live in exciting times, truly as the proverb says:

"many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the LORD's purpose that prevails." Proverbs 19:21

So, will you be as others who lose heart at the world events and stressors of life? No, let us take great comfort, for we know that God is in complete control! The day will dawn and the day-star arise. May that day indeed soon come, for in it lies all our hope and desire.

USING OUR OPPORTUNITIES

I overheard a conversation recently and the key sentence that struck a chord went along the lines of, 'well he always gets the opportunities'. Somebody I have known for a number of years as a colleague has his name attached to quite a lot of work in one way or another. The overheard conversation was along the lines of implying that he had opportunities that the complainant did not. However knowing both these people, the person who has what are seen as opportunities, just responds to opportunities that come along by saying 'yes' and having a go. The complainant is the opposite, they have opportunities but either procrastinate or decline because of the extra work involved. The viewpoint of 'I have enough to do already.'

Now overhearing this snippet of the conversation made me think about how this might apply to work in the Truth. Do brethren and sisters ever become resentful of those who appear to be on the first row so to speak doing things? Alternatively do brethren and sisters ever miss or decline opportunities because they are 'too busy' or procrastinate rather than just getting on and doing whatever needs to be done? I guess a third possibility is that work is taken on with initial enthusiasm and then over time it becomes a burden and so is discarded.

Human beings are always making plans for what they want to attain and will work hard to reach the goal envisaged. Equally the need to play our part in the service of Yahweh is essential and there is nothing wrong in planning to do one thing or another in the Truth. However, in all that is planned we must always add the proviso 'if the Lord wills'. The time honoured practice of putting 'DV' or 'God willing' on published plans of forthcoming events or programs for one event or another, has a sound scriptural basis.

It is imperative to always remember that the accomplishment of the outcome of whatever we do is all of God. He is well able to make what we do prosper or equally He can frustrate all the plans of men.

Over the past few weeks prior to preparing these thoughts I have, in my daily readings, been in the company of those two faithful men, Moses and Joshua. The experiences of both Moses and Joshua

show that God gives men opportunities and these two were called out for specific tasks. If Yahweh gives opportunities to men He expects them to perceive and diligently use them.

There are times to stand still and see the salvation wrought by God. Gideon and the three hundred with him for example come to mind, though he and they still had to play their part. Even for those who had an active role to play they could but initiate putting into action the tasks that Yahweh had given to them.

All the promises of God require on the part of the faithful active, diligent, courageous, and careful co-operation with His divine purpose. Even when in circumstances which makes this action on our part impossible and danger is faced, action is still required in the form of committing all to God in prayer. In this the example of Jeremiah comes to mind, his enemies apparently triumphant over him, cast him into the pit in the court of the prison where he sunk in the mud. His only recourse was to trust in Yahweh and he turned to prayer and patient waiting. In such circumstances where Yahweh's children are powerless this was his and indeed will be our only alternative.

Now we have all been given the wonderful opportunity of life in the Kingdom of God, eternal life not for its own sake, but eternal life given for a definite purpose. It is an immense privilege to be given the opportunity of being part of Yahweh's purpose and ultimately to reflect His glory! So the question arises have we embraced the opportunity whole heartedly or with reservations?

Now we are not called to be Moses or Joshua. Indeed a humble estimation of personal abilities would tend to the point of view that our own efforts are but feeble in comparison to such stalwarts of faith and service. Yet all the faithful who have gone before have been called, have believed, have acted upon their faith and had opportunities for service in whatever circumstances they found themselves. We have the benefits of being able to read about the lives of this great 'cloud of witnesses'. These examples should as Paul writes encourage us to "throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and... ..run with perseverance the race marked out for us." Hebrews 12:1

We have been called, we have become recipients of those immeasurably great promises and we have many opportunities that

come our way to find work to do in the service of our Master. Occupy until I come was the Lord's command, so are you?

How does our life compare with those who have gone before? Do we become weary of our work, criticise what we perceive to be another's lack of diligence, grow weary of waiting for the Lord's return and become discouraged?

Conversely do we take every opportunity that comes along to speak of our faith in season and out of season, to attend Bible Class with enthusiasm, to have lectures even if nobody comes, to encourage our brethren and sisters, to visit the sick, to comfort those who sorrow, to write to or visit those in isolation and any of all the myriad of things that are needful to maintain our ecclesias.

Jeremiah had little choice in the matter of being stuck in the mud, then and only then was he silenced and inactive until relief came in answer to prayer. Yet for us the primary danger is not being incarcerated, but rather of getting ourselves stuck in the mud and mire of despondency or the quagmire of lacking motivation.

But the solution is very clear; continue steadfastly in prayer and perseverance. What does it matter if few listen to the gospel message, that the world grows ever more troubled and the pace of life gets increasingly frenetic? What does it matter if personal abilities and resources limit what can be done. What does matter is that we each play our part to the best of our abilities, taking opportunities to work in the Lord's service, willingly persisting in what is done not giving up. By demonstrating willing, enthusiastic, loyal service we set an example and encourage our brethren and sisters.

We are not like Moses, we are not like Joshua, we are not a Paul or an Apollos, but maybe we can become like those about whom Paul wrote:

"Tychicus will tell you all the news about me. He is a dear brother, a faithful minister and fellow-servant in the Lord."....

"Onesimus, our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you"

"My fellow-prisoner Aristarchus"

"Jesus, who is called Justus, also sends greetings. These are the only Jews among my fellow-workers for the Kingdom of God, and they have proved a comfort to me.

“Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, ... I vouch for him that he is working hard for you and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis.”

Would Paul vouch for us? Would he consider us to be a fellow servant, a faithful and dear brother or sister? If Paul were to say to each of us as he wrote to Archippus:

“See to it that you complete the work you have received in the Lord.”

What work have you started that he would be telling you to complete?

Now is the day of opportunity. Now is the time to prepare for the Lords return. Now is the day to work diligently in our Master’s service. May it be that all may be described in the same terms as those faithful brethren and sisters of old and be permitted to join with them in the Kingdom so soon to come.

SONS OF GOD

I guess family life is something most of us take for granted. We all have parents and come from a family. Most of us have experienced the intimacy of having grown up in, for the most part, a loving and supportive environment. However, there are people who do not enjoy that same level of support, either through having endured abuse as a child or maybe through having lost their family because of accident or illness. In my counselling work over the years, one of the greatest difficulties faced in adulthood is coming to terms with a traumatic childhood. One of the difficulties that some people find it hard to come to terms with is being adopted. Frequently the questions arise, 'who were my real parents?' and 'why was I adopted?'

We are adopted into God's family, yet for those so adopted the question 'why was I chosen for adoption', is one born out of wonder and joy. Surely, they are glad to be taken from their natural family to become part of a far greater family. Yet that adoption brings responsibilities and the promise not of an easier life, but a more difficult life!

Why should this be? For the start of an answer, we can look at God's dealings with Israel for we read:

"Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. Your clothes did not wear out and your feet did not swell during these forty years. Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the LORD your God disciplines you." Deuteronomy 8:2-5

God treats all His children by exactly the same principles, to test them, to know what is in their heart and to teach them to trust Him. But just as Yahweh provided for Israel so also He provides all that we need, if we walk in faith and humility before Him. Paul writes:

"You have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: "My son, do not make light of the

Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son." Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined, then you are illegitimate children and not true sons." Heb. 12:5-8

Self discipline is something sadly lacking in our day and age, the so called 'modern' concept of not smacking children, in the end is actually detrimental to their well being. In this concept, man thinks he knows better than God who says:

"He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him." Proverbs 13:24.

The wise man wrote: "Discipline your son, for in that there is hope; do not be a willing party to his death." Proverbs 19:18 God will not be a willing party to our death and destruction, thus He disciplines us for our good – with the rod if need be! Again, the Proverb says:

"Foolishness [is] bound in the heart of a child; [but] the rod of correction shall drive it far from him." Proverbs 22:15

In the sight of Yahweh, we are but foolish children and He does all things for our good that we may develop characters pleasing to him. What a wonderful privilege it is to be called sons and daughters of the living God, but we have a responsibility to respond to His love, not by resenting His rebuke, but in humility amending our ways.

Paul comments that discipline and hardship is not pleasant at the time, but he encourages us to look to our Master, for if we look to the example of Christ, we will be neither discouraged nor resentful. Paul wrote:

"Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood." Hebrews 12:2-4.

Our greatest example is Christ and if we think of all that he endured for us, the great price that has been paid for us and the hope set before us, then surely that must motivate us to strive ever harder to please Yahweh. Regarding Jesus we read:

“Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered” Hebrews 5:8

His immense suffering maybe we can only dimly appreciate, but if our Lord and Master suffered, will we be any different? Of course not! There is a constant battle to be fought and won against our sinful nature and the sin that so easily besets us. Thus, discipline is for our good and we must be trained by it. Yahweh in His infinite wisdom knows what is best for each of us:

“Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.” Hebrews 12:10-11.

What a privilege beyond true comprehension that is, to be invited to share in God’s holiness! Is there anything that could possibly compare with such an invitation! No, nothing!

Maybe we do not know and never really can fully understand all that we each endure, for truly, as we read:

“Each heart knows its own bitterness, and no-one else can share its joy”. Proverbs 14:10

But we do know that we are all brethren and sisters in Christ. As part of that divine family, we must strive to bear one another’s burdens and encourage each other to hold fast to the pure faith that has been entrusted to each of us. But no matter what trials are faced there is the assurance that:

“Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret.” 2 Corinthians 7:10-11

Paul, the Apostles and so many faithful man and women of old rejoiced that they were accounted worthy by God to suffer in his service and be disciplined by Him. They looked to the Lord Jesus Christ, to the glory to come and to the enduring gift of life that Yahweh will bestow upon His children.

So what is your response to the love and mercy of God displayed in adopting you? Consider the wonderful privilege and hope set before each of us:

“For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by

him we cry, “Abba, Father.” The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.” Romans 8:15-18.

That word Abba is an Aramaic word used by a son to his father a close loving family relationship. This is the divine favour granted to us that God is willing to be our Father and for us to be his children. May the day soon come when God will indeed gather his scattered children together and these words are fulfilled:

“And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” Revelation 21:3-4

SELF EXAMINATION

Reflective practice is something that health care professionals should follow. The basic principle laying behind this concept is that during and after intervention, the practitioner should be examining all their actions and decisions against evidence based and good practice. They look at their own thoughts, feelings and behaviour to ensure that what they do is ethical, fair and equitable. This inward dialogue should ensure that intervention is in the patient's best interest and not for their personal goals, or gain, or motivated according to personal prejudices.

Of course, this reflection and internal review is based upon humanistic theories and man made wisdom. It is thus a pale reflection of the principles that we as children of God must follow. Paul writes:

“Let a man examine himself and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the wine”. 1 Corinthians 11.28.

Self examination is never easy, somehow pride gets in the way and of course, it is very hard to look outside of personal thoughts and feelings. Thus, we must examine ourselves against an external standard and that standard is clearly displayed in Christ. The only source of that standard is the Word of Yahweh. Again, Paul writes:

“Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? —unless indeed you are disqualified.” 2Cor. 13:5

Quite rightly, the time for self examination should take place each week before we take the emblems in the appointed way. But that inward reflection is also an ongoing process, one that should be as much a part of our lives as breathing and eating, a natural and necessary process. Now, Jesus told us that where our treasure is there our heart will also be. So it is maybe worthwhile to ask the questions:

Where is my heart day by day?

What motivates my actions?

Are all my decisions based upon the principles of God clearly laid out in scripture?

Is all my conduct based up what Christ would do or not do and upon his commandments?

Is Christ in me?

As always, we can take lessons for ourselves from the history of Israel. Just consider the nation of Israel, they had been brought out of slavery in Egypt and they had seen the miracles of God. They had the pillar of fire by night and the pillar of cloud by day. Their clothes did not wear out and God provided for all their needs. They ate manna, the bread of angels, they drank from the rock by the way. Yet they looked back to Egypt. They remembered the melons and cucumbers that they had enjoyed and they forgot the slavery that they had endured. Why did they forget? Why did they look back? Well, because they had no faith and because they forgot. They failed to look into their hearts and recognise that they were being exceedingly ungrateful and turning away from Yahweh who had and was still providing for them. They despised the simple healthy bread of His providing, thus Paul writes in his letter to the Hebrews:

“Now with whom was he angry 40 years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose corpses fell in the wilderness? And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who did not obey? So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief.” Hebrews 3:17-19.

We are no different from the Israelites, we share the same weak human nature, we are prone to the same mistakes. Paul therefore warns: “beware brethren, lest there be in any of you and evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God.”

So what is the relevance for us? Well, we have believed, we have put our faith in God, we have put that faith into action by accepting the waters of baptism, but we must remain in Christ! We must not look back! So, I ask again, where has your heart been for the past day, week or month? Does that internal reflection show that you have looked forward to the Kingdom, or have you look back at the world. Is faith something living and active in your life?

Our wilderness journey will soon end. The Kingdom will soon be here. According to the mercy of Yahweh, we will enter into the Promised Land. Of these things there is no doubt, yet Paul writes:

“you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as the thief in the night. For when they say, “peace and safety!” then sudden destruction comes upon them as labour pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape.:

Will it come upon us as a thief? It should not!

“But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this day should overtake you as a thief. You are all sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night, nor of darkness. Therefore, let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and the sober.” 1 Thessalonians 5:2-6.

If we have a living and active faith in our lives then we will not be found existing in darkness. Rather we will be found preparing for when the Lord returns. So:

“brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle. Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and our God and Father, who has loved us and given us everlasting consolation and good hope by grace, comfort your hearts and establish you in every good word and work.” 1 Thessalonians 2:15-17

Now I ask again, where is your heart? Is thought centred upon the things of God? Is the coming Kingdom in the forefront of your mind? Are you longing for the return of the Lord Jesus?

The objective of reflective practice is to examine procedure against a standard and what is right and ethical in the particular circumstances that prevail at the time. Reflective practice will help the practitioner make the right decisions and offer the right intervention to help their patient. Self examination for those who would be ‘Christ like’ should be at this level to the best of their abilities. Actions and decisions must be based upon having put on the ‘mind of Christ’ and against his standard. Everyday life must be based upon having internalised the fruit of the Spirit which Paul defines as:

“love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.” Galatians 5:22-23

To develop these attributes we must “have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” Therefore, self examination and making time for reflection will show if we truly are trying to “crucify the flesh”. If life is not constantly measured against Christ, how can it be known if thought and behaviour come from ones own ‘passions and desires’, or is born from the fruit of the Spirit. Now Paul writes:

“For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth), finding out what is acceptable to the Lord. ” Ephesians 5:8-10

If we are still in darkness, then we have no fellowship with Yahweh or the Lord Jesus, but if thought and behaviour are based upon His word then we are walking in the light. Personal self examination will help us find out if we are doing what is acceptable to the Lord. Indeed, there is every encouragement to examine ourselves honestly:

“for God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, that whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with him.” 1 Thessalonians 5:9-10

Therefore, let us “run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith.”

RUNNING SCARED

As often is the case, I was out walking a week or so ago and whilst passing along a hedge row there was a sudden commotion in the ditch alongside me. Up sprang a hare, shot past me and raced down the path. It had been caught completely unawares. It 'hared' off down the path a short distance, then raced across the field doubling backwards and forwards in a zigzag path that led in a huge arc round the spot where I stood until it reached the hedge line again and shot from view under the hedge row. The whole process probably lasted a good two minutes. That poor hare had been startled from sleep to see what it thought was a danger. It fled in panic, but did not bother to look back and see if it was pursued but just ran and ran till exhausted. It shot through the hedge at a fair distance from where I was at such a speed it must have nearly impaled itself upon the thick thorns of the hawthorn hedge row.

I mused about this event and it appeared to me that there are times when brethren and sisters in Christ can tend to be in danger of behaving a bit like that hare. The world grows an ever more fearful place in which to live. Terrorism is increasing; threats of violence face most societies and there are fears of biological or even nuclear weapons being used. Indeed one report recently suggested that al-Qa'eda may have procured a small nuclear device. Violence in society grows at an alarming rate and anti-Semitism throughout Europe and the eastern countries rapidly increases. Anti Israeli bias in the world's media is becoming ever more apparent and there is a growing intolerance of non main stream religions. Mankind buries itself in an increasingly hedonistic way of life, an ostrich like syndrome of pretending it will all go away. It is the attitude of eat drink and be merry for tomorrow we die.

In short, the situation that we have long believed would happen in the earth is upon us. Woe to those virgins who fall asleep! Jesus plainly warned that prior to his return men's hearts would be failing them for fear at what was coming upon the earth. The problem for us as his disciples is that we live in this miserable morass day by day and can become immune to the true impact of the wickedness and evil about us. We live in it; therefore, it loses the impact that it would once have had. Just image you lived around the early 1900's or even in the late 1950's or 1960's then were suddenly transported

to our time. Be honest, the cultural shock would generate a hare like reaction!

Consider how the days of Noah grieved the heart of Yahweh, we read:

“The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain.” Genesis 6:6

Just think of how this day and age must not only grieve, but also fill Him with anger! So do the sons of God create the same grief within Him because they become worldlier, rather than shining as lights in this very dark world! This is precisely what happened in Noah’s day, the sons of God embraced the world and turned from the straight and narrow way that leads to life.

So shall we as His children become fearful and run to hide away? Make the question more personal:

Does the state of the world have an impact upon you?
What is that impact?

Fear is a state of mind that can arise because of either a visible or a perceived danger. Further, it is a state of mind that can become fearful at an apparent present danger, but not see the real danger that lies ahead!

Now it is true that Jesus told his disciples to watch for his return, particularly as it would be ‘as a thief in the night’. However, the unexpected nature of his return will not be overcome by just trying to fathom out the times and seasons. It will not be overcome by being aware of the signs of the times, or by knowing the outworking of this prophecy or that. We are privileged to know the broad overview, we know that these are indeed the last days, ‘but no man knows the hour’

Will we be fearful of the world and what is coming upon it? The answer is probably yes. At some point, sooner or later we will grow fearful. We might respond to that fear by becoming like an ostrich and hiding away. We might suddenly wake up with the Lord at hand just as the ten virgins did, then as frightened hares we begin running hither and thither, fearful that we just do not know enough or are not ready. Beware of a view that can grow like a canker within ourselves that we say in effect ‘get on with life for tomorrow the Lord comes’!

The alternative and proper course is to seek the real danger. That danger lies not without, but within. We read:

“There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.” 1 John 4:18

Eternal life is this to know the Lord our God and Jesus Christ whom He has sent. We will never be ‘good enough’ we will never 100% overcome sin. But we can all become Christ like to the best of our abilities, using all our talents in his service willingly and wholeheartedly. If we love him, then we will desire to be like him! If we love him then we will long for him to return.

Yes, the world is a dreadful place and will become even more abysmal, but:

“If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.” Rom. 14:8

To have possessions or not have possessions, to have a house, a career, clothing and all the comforts of life we have become so accustomed to in our western civilisation, even to live or to face death, in the end is immaterial. At the end, whether you want to face this fact or not, the judgements coming upon this earth will affect each and every one of us. Do not run from the danger, there is no where to run to. Do not fear it, but rather face up to the real danger and overcome sin, for this world is passing away and fast. But if we are the Lord’s, then we live to him or die to him, but whatever happens we are the Lord’s. Then if we are the Lord’s Paul writes:

“The words “once more” indicate the removing of what can be shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain.” Hebrews 12:27

Those that belong to the Lord will be amongst that which cannot be shaken. Yahweh will never leave nor forsake His children. So:

“say to those with fearful hearts, “Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you.” Isaiah 35:4

RESURRECTION

We are all related to death, just as Adam and Eve were told “dust you are and to dust you will return” The wages of sin as Paul wrote is death, thus through Adam and Eve death came to all men. Our 70 years of life is very brief, childhood appears to stretch endlessly and time passes slowly. As we get older, time appears to fly past. The passage of time is marked by possessions wearing out, changes in life, the death of loved ones, our own weakening and ageing. Old age comes to all as we read in Ecclesiastes:

“Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, “I find no pleasure in them”— before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars grow dark, and the clouds return after the rain;” ... “Remember him—before the silver cord is severed, or the golden bowl is broken; before the pitcher is shattered at the spring, or the wheel broken at the well, and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. “Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Everything is meaningless!” Ecclesiastes 12:1-2; 6-8

When death finally comes, we know that “The dead know nothing they have no further reward and even the memory of them is forgotten, their love, their hate and their jealousy have long since vanished, never again will they have a part in anything that happens under the sun”. Ecclesiastes 9:5

That is the final end of all those in the world about us and is our own natural state. All are prone to vanity, life ultimately is meaningless. That is, unless we remember the injunction of Eccles 12:13-14. “Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.” We are no different from any other man, save for one thing, God has called us to know His word!! It does us good to remember the hopeless state from which we are called. Not to dishearten us, but rather that we continue to appreciate what we have been given, and remember the wonderful contrast with the hope that we do have. Paul writes:

“Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,” 1 Corinthians 15:1-3

Maybe we can recall that Jesus said “You remain in my love if you obey my commands”. Paul writes that we are saved “if we hold firmly to the word”, and David writes in Psalm 119:30-31 “I have chosen the way of truth; I have set my heart on your laws. I hold fast to your statutes, O LORD; do not let me be put to shame.” We shall not be put shame if we do hold fast to the word by which we are saved. Paul speaks in 1Cor Ch. 15 about the great hope of resurrection. Despite our sin and the frailty of the nature we possess, we do have a lively and living prospect ahead:

“But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.” 1 Corinthians 15:20-22.

We are called to life. But why do we want life? Eternal life is not for its own sake, but to serve God. Thus Jesus said “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.” John 17:3 Can you imagine resurrection? Yes, it is hard to imagine, but we have three examples of resurrection in the gospel records to help us understand.

1) In Luke Ch. 7 we read that Jesus approached a town called Nain, he saw a funeral procession, ‘the only son of his mother’. We read v13 “When the Lord saw her his heart went out to her and he said don’t cry”.....”He said young man I say to you get up. The dead man got up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother”.

So we see the great compassion of Jesus displayed, and he had the authority to give the son back to his mother again.

2) In Luke 8:40-56 we have the account of Jairus the synagogue ruler who had a daughter that was dying. He pleaded with Jesus to come and heal her, but she was dead

upon their arrival. Jesus told the mourners “Stop wailing, she is not dead but asleep”. The mourners laughed at him, they had no faith, but he, taking her by the hand said “maid arise. and her spirit came again, and she arose straightway”.

3) Finally we have the resurrection of Lazarus. Jesus is told “Lord the one you love is sick” John 11:3. We can imagine the urgency of those words. What would you do if the urgent summons came regarding a loved one seriously ill? Surely we would go immediately, but Jesus did not. It was not that he did not care, but rather v4 “This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the son of man might be glorified thereby”.

The love Jesus had for Martha, Mary and Lazarus is evident, and their faith, love and trust in Jesus is also evident from the account. Lazarus must have been striving to live a life of faith, and died according to that faith. For him all had ended at that point, and having been in the tomb four days corruption would have set in. Such indeed is our destiny also. But Jesus states that he was glad that he had not been there “to the intent you may believe”. Yes, this event was also for his disciples sake, and indeed also for our sake, to strengthen faith and belief in our Messiah.

Jesus finally arrived at the house of Mary and Martha. Martha went out to meet Jesus saying “Lord If you had been here my brother would not have died” In our grief do we ever feel that, Lord why? If only? So many situations in life could provoke that response. Our minds are focused upon this life, we cannot see God’s wisdom, it is hard to trust that in all that happens to us, God has our best interest at heart, even in death. We read:

“The righteous perish and no one ponders it in his heart, devout men are taken away and no one understands, that the righteous are taken away to be spared from evil. Those who walk uprightly enter into peace; they find rest as they lie in death”. Isaiah 57:1-2

God is merciful, nothing is allowed without a reason. Martha continues in words showing her faith, “But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.” John 11:22-27 Jesus assured her, “your brother will rise again.” Martha answered, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.” Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live,

even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" "Yes, Lord," she told him, "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world."

What a remarkable faith she had, if only we could always have that same level of confidence. Martha then went to fetch Mary and her words were much the same "Lord if you had been here my brother would not have died". Once again we see the great love and compassion of Jesus,

"When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. "Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. Jesus wept." John 11:33-35

How great was [and is] the compassion of our Lord, how aware he was of the futility of our existence, born to die! Surely, all is vanity. In the garden of Gethsemane did this thought strengthen Jesus? For without all that he accomplished, all his dear friends would have no hope. Jesus commanded the stone to be rolled away:

"Lord by now he stinketh, for he hath been dead four days".

"Did I not tell you if you would believe, you would see the glory of God"

"Then Jesus looked up and said, Father I thank you that you have heard me (How small is our faith compared this) I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me"... "Lazarus come out".

The dead man obeyed and came forth from the grave. According to God's mercy so shall we.

We cannot even begin to imagine the feelings of those sisters or the feelings of Lazarus himself. Jesus has said "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live". We have great comfort and hope from those words. We have believed and if we remain faithful we shall in God's mercy live. We have read of the great compassion and understanding that Jesus had of our state. Thus Paul writes:

"We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are - yet was without sin".
Hebrews 4:15-16

Jesus knew our temptations, he understood Martha and Mary's doubts and incomprehension about resurrection, he understands our lack of full understanding. Even with the hope the faithful have, death is not something to be sought, it is still a fearful thing, complete oblivion.

Jesus knew that fear, he tasted death. Yet he knew that his own resurrection would come, and his resurrection is the guarantee that we also shall be raised: "but he became a priest with an oath when God said to him: "The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: 'You are a priest for ever.'" Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant." Heb 7:21-22 We are through baptism are related to that better covenant.

Shall we will hear the great commanding voice "Come forth", be it from the grave or from among the 'dead' of this world. But the resurrection and entering the Kingdom will not be without trial or hardship. We must walk in the footsteps of our Master and the faithful who have gone before. We will know many sorrows just as he did. Jesus was well prepared for his suffering and we must prepare now for our troubles to come. We read in Daniel "There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations". Dan 12:1

We must be prepared, and be found watching and waiting. Friends in this world will be no good then, only the Master will be of help. The prophet Daniel records "Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt". Dan 12:2 Many are called but few are chosen. Why? It is not through lack of mercy or love, for God is not willing that any should perish. Rather we will perish because of our own lack of faith, hardening our hearts, preferring pleasure now, rather than seeking first the kingdom of God. All must, and will, render an account of their lives to Christ. Before him every knee shall bow.

Yet we have no need for fear or despondency if we hold fast to the gospel message. We do have a certain hope set before us, as Peter writes:

"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade — kept in heaven for you." 1 Peter 1:3-4

The day will soon be here when the things we see through the eye of faith, shall at last be turned into reality. The great day of resurrection from the dead, to life in the Kingdom of God shall come. Again, Daniel records “Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever”. Dan12:3 Daniel like so many others died in faith, certain of his hope. Those words spoken to Daniel apply also to the household of faith, “As for you go your way. You will rest, and then at the end of the days you will arise to receive your allotted inheritance”. Daniel 12:13 The ‘end of days’ is not far off, the Lord’s return is near, so let us strive the harder to make our calling and election sure. For our hope is certain! We shall rise to receive our allotted inheritance.

“Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.” John 6:54

PRUNING FOR HEALTHY GROWTH

We are just coming into the third season in our new garden and it is nice to see the garden developing along the lines that was originally planned. From the bare earth of the first year, careful preparation of the ground, selection of plants and then spending time nurturing the early growth is starting to produce vigorous and healthy growth now. It will be a few years yet before the garden matures, but already the shape of what will come can be seen.

Providing the right conditions for each plant and ensuring that they were well watered during the first two seasons has helped them to become established. However, it is surprising how much water trees can need during a long, hot, dry spell and two small shrubs planted near to the trees suffered badly and appeared to be dead. Last winter two in particular were earmarked for digging out. However, for various reasons it was early spring before the chance came to sort out the garden. A flowering red current was the first target for removal; two weeks away on holiday the previous summer and resulting lack of watering had killed off the shrub. It was about four feet high and sure enough when inspected the two main stems were dry and snapped off easily. However, a third smaller branch flexed rather than broke. I rubbed my nail down the stem revealing green wood under the bark. Ah, now I had a dilemma, remove the shrub and replace it, or give this small stem a chance. Well despite my desire for the fast growth that a new taller plant would provide, I decided to give this shrub a chance to recover. Well it has now grown back to about four feet tall and this year has rewarded me with lovely red blossom.

The other shrub that was earmarked for removal last year was completely dead, so I snapped off its branches level with the ground but left its roots in. Over the spring I never got round to planting another shrub in its place and around mid summer all of a sudden new growth appeared out of the ground. The area was well watered and the warmth of summer had encouraged fresh growth. I put fertiliser around it and last autumn it was removed from the ground, put it in a pot and left it in sheltered spot. It now looks healthy and has several short new shoots. God willing, it will find a new home elsewhere in the garden and with careful looking after should continue to thrive. Those called out to know the Gospel message are like tender plants and Yahweh cares for them, providing for all their needs.

He has selected the ground, sown the seed and provided the right conditions for healthy growth. He can see from these small beginnings what the outcome will be. My plants have needed not only caring for, but also constant vigilance to remove weeds that would soon strangle and smother the tender growth. Our Creator looks into the hearts and minds of His children and knows exactly what is needed to promote fruitful growth. He will weed and prune, but they must respond to His care.

Cutting off the dead wood on my shrubs and providing the right conditions enabled new growth to come and the one good shoot to grow more vigorously. Responding to the mercy of Yahweh requires the constant need for self examination. As part of the process of self examination two questions need to be asked, firstly 'how can I nurture healthy growth within myself' and secondly 'how can I nurture and encourage healthy growth in my brethren and sisters?

What is the answer to these questions? Well, trees are often used in Scripture to bring home a spiritual lesson and David writes in the Psalms about the man who shuns the ungodly being blessed, saying:

“Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.” Psalm 1:1-3

So, the first part of the answer lies in those words of David. Spiritual growth only comes by delighting in the law of the LORD and meditating day and night upon his law. This then will not only strengthen personal faith, but also help us to strengthen others. Rather than find fault and complain about what we think brethren and sisters should do or not do, we will have the attitude of mind that considers others better than ourselves (Phil 2:3). In other words, treat others as you would like to be treated. Indeed, we have been treated very kindly and with great mercy. How we respond to the mercy and care of Yahweh will be shown by our fruit, for we read:

“A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognise them.” Matthew 7:18-20

So what fruit are you displaying, the fruit that comes from selfishness or selflessness?

However, responding to the loving care of Yahweh does not mean that His children will get an easy life! If they do produce 'good fruit', then Yahweh will prune them that they may become even more fruitful. Jesus said:

"He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit He prunes so that it will be even more fruitful." John 15:2

This pruning process is not easy to bear and will bring grief at times. But Paul writes:

"No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it." Hebrews 12:11

The Lord God is exceedingly merciful and gracious, longsuffering and abundant in goodness. He is demonstrating His love and unwillingness that any should perish by pruning out the 'dead wood'. If we respond and show at least some sign of growth, then we will find mercy. Yahweh has provided one through whom we can find salvation, one who knows exactly what it is like to face temptation and weakness. Of the Lord Jesus we read:

"Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight... A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out, till he leads justice to victory. In his name the nations will put their hope." Matthew 12:18-21

Though our efforts are feeble, though we are bruised and battered by the trials and temptations of life, though our faith sometimes wavers, surely in Him we most certainly put our hope. Though we may be reduced even to the point of being left like my dead shrub just as roots in the ground, if there is any possibility of renewed growth, He will not dig us out. Through Him, we will gain the victory if we do but take the opportunity to repent and seek forgiveness while there is still time.

Yahweh has promised that:

"The righteous will never be uprooted, but the wicked will not remain in the land." Proverbs 10:30

OVERCOMING THE WORLD BY FAITH

Well America and the world remembered the anniversary of September 11th, the infamy of what occurred on that day has ensured it has gone down in history as a day that changed the world. I am sure we all can empathise with the tragic loss of life, in not only this event, but also in the tragedy of human life in general. All our hopes fears, loves and cares end in the grave. On September 11th, many died in an event that could not have been foreseen and the consequences of that event were equally unforeseen. Since then war has taken place in Afghanistan and Iraq. What is yet to come remains to be seen. What we do know for sure is that firstly terrorism and all the other ills that beset mankind will not be defeated by human endeavour, for the roots of such events are endemic to human nature. Secondly, we know that ultimately all war, terrorism, crime, famine or any other ill that besets mankind will soon come to an end. The era of mankind's disobedience of his Creator and mismanagement of this world will finally end, not by human endeavour, but by divine intervention.

Now more than ever do we need to be fully aware of the hope that we have and not become like the foolish virgins in the parable who fell asleep and had not prepared for the bridegroom to arrive. We are heirs to the most wonderful promises and have the supreme privilege of addressing our Creator as our Father. Not because of our personal merit, for we have none, but because of the mercy of Yahweh. So how much do those promises made by Yahweh really mean to us? Christ is at the door; the Kingdom is so very near. Are you and I prepared? Well our state of preparation is dependant I suppose upon how much those promises mean to us. Are we making an effort to please God, or do the things of this world and its worries overwhelm us. Do we give to God of our best? Do we show our appreciation for what He has done for us?

We read that it is God's good pleasure to give to us the Kingdom. He is our Creator and sustainer, we are utterly dependent upon Him, surely then in response to His mercy we should give of our best to Him. Paul wrote about our calling saying that God:

"Having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will."... v11..

“In him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the council of his will.” Ephesians 1:5.

God’s will is supreme, His word cannot fail, yet Peter warns 2 Peter 1:10 “Therefore brethren, be even more diligent to make your call and election sure.” It is so easy to become complacent!

So how do we be diligent to do this? Well through faith, for we read

“whatever is born of God overcomes the world, and this is the victory that has overcome the world - our faith.” 1John 5:4

Paul in his letter to the Hebrews defines faith saying,

“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” Hebrews 11:1

We have never seen the Lord Jesus Christ; we have never viewed the Kingdom, we have never had any direct communion with Yahweh, yet we believe in the certainty of His word. There will be many trials, many sorrows and many times of sadness in life that are to test and perfect faith, for God disciplines those called to be his sons and daughters. Yet the eye of faith will see that these things are sent out of love and are for our ultimate good, though often we cannot see it at the time.

But if we are daily

“looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” Hebrews 12:2

then we shall not lose sight of our goal.

Very often nations and individuals will prepare themselves for a long sustained effort to achieve a goal. In the case of America, it is a sustained effort to overcome terrorism, in the case of an individual it might be to overcome disability or achieve a particular ambition. These efforts are sustained for years if need be and the goal is kept in mind to motivate perseverance.

Now Jesus prayed for his disciples saying

“Sanctify them by your truth, Your Word is truth.” John 17:17

We are sanctified and set apart then according to God’s Word and faith springs from knowledge of that Truth. We are baptised according

to the Truth and must hold fast to that Truth if we are to make our calling and election sure. There is no substitute for the Scriptures - many books abound, but nothing should or indeed can substitute for the Word of God. Paul says, "Truth leads to Godliness", that is God-like-ness. We grow to be like those things with which we fill our minds. If little time is spent considering the ways of God; reading and meditating upon his Word, then insidiously we will grow away from the Truth. On the other hand, if we long for the things of God, crying out for knowledge and obeying His word, then we will have a certain hope of eternal life. If man will persevere to achieve a temporal goal, how much more should we be willing to persevere to achieve an eternal goal!

Paul writes

"We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure. ...imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised". Hebrews 6:11-12.

In thinking of those who by faith inherited promises our minds maybe turn to Abraham and David. They had their failings just like us, but they persevered, being diligent in striving to please God. They put faith into action.

Thus, like them we must be hearers and doers of the word. Faith without works is dead! We cannot earn salvation by works, none-the-less faith is proved by its works. In other words, we will show the depth of our conviction and faith by our characteristics and by how we live our lives.

In the mercy of God, we can and will overcome by love and faith, if we persevere to the end. The end is at hand the long night of waiting is nearly over, let us be found watching waiting for our Masters return. So therefore let us examine ourselves honestly that we may be zealous for Him who extended grace, mercy and peace towards us. We have the supreme privilege of being called out ones, according to God's grace, to Aionian life. What more could we ever want!

NOT OF THE WORLD

Over the winter season nature is not always at its most appealing and ponds and other bodies of water are no exception. In summer they are teeming with life, in winter the water is cold and dark, few fish are seen and little plant life grows. Last years leaves have blown into the water and gradually sunk to the bottom to join the decaying remains of other plant and animal life. Watch the surface of the water for long enough and bubbles of gas will break the surface, the product of the process of decay. Occasionally along with the gas come other substances and the surface of the water takes on an oily hue. Globules of oil break the surface and spread out in a thin layer across the surface of the water. Stir the water up and the oil will disappear for a while, but sooner or later that surface film will reappear. No matter how hard oil and water are stirred together sooner or later they will once again separate out.

The simple fact is that oil and water do not mix. The thinner the oil the more easily dispersed it is, the thicker the oil the greater the separation. I am sure we all know how following a spill of crude oil, the oil floats like a thick blanket upon the surface of seawater, needing to be broken down with detergents before it can be dispersed.

Many times Jesus spoke to his disciples about the great need for separation. This reminder to keep separate from the world and its ways can never be too often repeated. Jesus clearly said:

“If the world hates you, you know that it hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.” John 15:18-19

Now it is a cause for great joy is it not, that we are called out of the world, that we have been chosen from all the teeming millions of mankind by Yahweh. However the question must be asked, do we live our lives in such a way that recognises that fact? If we do not, then the stark fact remains that we are without hope!

But on the other hand, if we do keep ourselves separate from the world and its ways, then we have a very real and living hope. But this separation brings with it the antipathy and hostility of the world, for our very lives and our words speak out against the things that the world holds dear.

It is of vital importance that this antipathy is accepted and that there is no yielding to the temptation to hide our light, conceal our true beliefs or compromise the high standard of our calling by trying to make the message more acceptable and less challenging. This is not the way of the man of God!

Paul writes a pertinent challenge to all:

“Come out from among them and be separate says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you and you shall be My sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty”. 2Corinthians 6:17

Now, have you heard, listened to and taken to heart this exhortation? All who seek the path of righteousness must keep unspotted by the world. There is no fellowship of light with darkness. Those who live according to the word of God must keep separate from those who reject His ways and from those who corrupt His ways. James says very clearly:

“Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded.” James 4:8

How long will you halt between two opinions was the challenge Elijah threw out to Israel. There is no room for being double-minded, we either both love Yahweh and show that love by our way of life, striving to draw nigh unto Him, or we do not. There is no middle ground, no sitting on the fence. If we do not truly love Him, sooner or later we will mingle with and be submerged with the world. On the other hand James writes:

“But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty, and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.” James 1:25

Just as oil and water do not mix, those who truly seek out the ways of God will be totally separate from the world about them. The closer we grow towards God, the further away from worldly ways we will grow.

So does your way of life show that you are different? Are you seen by those about you as being part of the world, or are you ‘in the world but not of it’?

Paul writes of Abraham, Moses and all the faithful from past generations that they considered themselves to be “strangers and pilgrims on the earth”. Paul writes that:

“They desired a better, that is a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God. For He has prepared a city for them.” Hebrews 11:16

Their lives displayed a clear separation from the world of their day and a dedication to Yahweh. These children of God were faithful and obedient, like Moses they chose

“rather to suffer afflictions with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he (and they) looked to the reward.” Hebrews 11:25-26

There can be no compromise, no blurring of the boundaries. We are either for God or against Him. So I quote that great promise again:

“Come out from among them and be separate says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you and you shall be My sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty”. 2 Corinthians 6:17

JUDGMENT

I remember some years ago working on an acute admissions ward (it was further back in time than I care to remember) and learning a valuable lesson in not jumping to conclusions. There was a gentleman on the ward who suffered from schizophrenia and who had been admitted in quite a florid state, he was responding to auditory and visual hallucinations, in other words he was hearing and seeing things. For the sake of these few thoughts I will refer to him as Dave. Often in the early days of his admission Dave would sit having a conversation, that to others appeared to be with himself. From his perspective the conversation was with the voices that he heard and the shadowy images of people that he saw. To get him to hold a conversation above a few sentences with me was hard work and Dave was frequently distracted or the conversation leapt from one topic to another, knight's move thinking as we call it in the trade.

After knowing Dave for a few weeks and seeing him only slowly improve, I was then away on holiday for two weeks. Upon my return I walked back on the ward and saw Dave sitting on his own looking towards the window on the opposite side of the room. There was a good view across the fields and even from his vantage point some of the distant hillside could be seen.

As I observed him it was clear that Dave was having a conversation, he still looked straight ahead, but his lips were moving and he was emphasizing his words with descriptive hand movements. Passing through that room I went into the office and taking my coat off remarked to a colleague that nothing much had changed during my absence. The reply came that on the contrary the gentleman in question had, over the past week, shown signs of improvement, the voices were much less prevalent and he was able to hold a reasonable conversation. Having discussed the situation and disagreed, determined to prove my observation correct, I returned to the room and sure enough there was Dave still looking straight ahead and still having his conversation. This time however I turned to walk in his direction to say hello and informally assess his mental state. As I drew nearer to him I heard another voice, were auditory hallucinations catching! No, the room was L-shaped and Dave was engrossed in a conversation with his friend who was visiting him, but sitting just round the corner. Why were they looking outside?

Simply that they were discussing what shapes they could see in the clouds flying by on what was a very blustery day.

You see, I had observed an event, and jumped to a conclusion based upon previous knowledge and at that time, not very extensive clinical experience. I had made the fundamental mistake of not making the effort to find out the true facts of the matter. My conclusion was biased, being based upon what I expected to see, not upon the facts of what I actually did see.

In this episode lies a valuable lesson to learn in spiritual matters. Day by day we are constantly faced with situations where we form opinions and judgments. Now be honest, how often are your opinions and judgments wrong? I guess it is right to say more often than not! In my own work I tend to form a hypothesis, and then check it out against facts, this process serves me well. Do I do this in my personal life? You are right, no! The intent is there, but human nature always seems to get in the way.

One thing is very clear, we can never really fully know or appreciate the problems, trials, limitations, abilities, sorrows, joys and all the myriad emotions and thoughts of our brethren and sisters. It is only with the greatest of humility and care that we can form opinions and judgments either positively or negatively about our brethren and sisters in Christ.

We only view things from the outside and form opinions by what we see, by what we hear and according to our own perspective. We do not see or know the heart; therefore surely the only, and I mean only, way of forming an opinion can never be by what we think we know, but by absolute fact compared only with scriptural principle. As Jesus said:

“stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgment.” John 7:24

Thus the first part of call in judgement is to look within ourselves, Paul says ‘let a man examine himself’ and Jesus posed the question:

“How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye?” Matthew 7:4

It is inevitable that sometimes we will have to form judgments about matters affecting fellowship and life in Christ, but let us always do so in full recognition of our own humanity and weakness.

There is an inevitable time coming when we all shall be judged and that judgement will be final. Our judge however is thankfully not bound by our frailties. Jesus will show no favouritism, he will have absolute justice and mercy:

“he will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears... .. Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash round his waist.” Isaiah 11:3-5

Of Jesus we read:

“He did not need man’s testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man.” John 2:25

Let those who would follow the Lamb of God strive to be like him, treating their fellow brethren and sisters in the same manner in which they pray to be treated by their Lord. Jesus warned:

“For in the same way as you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.” Matthew 7:2

and again:

“Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.” Luke 6:37

Forgiving those who have wronged us is sometimes hard, forgetting harder still, but the promise is that we will also be forgiven. Such is that forgiveness of our great debt that David wrote:

“For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.” Psalm 103:11-12

May Yahweh be merciful to all His children in that great day of judgement when all must render an account of their lives, that they may enter into that glorious Kingdom and find true and everlasting peace.