

Guarding the Heart

Barney Coombs

Salt and Light Ministries

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Foreword

“What is hidden in the roots will be revealed in the shoots.”

This has been one of the lifelong principles by which I have sought to live and build. Experience tells us that what the roots of the plant are like, and what they feed on, determines what sort of fruit grows; where the foundations of a building are shaky, time and disaster will reveal it; where the most simple flaws are not spotted, dreadful disasters can follow.

So it is with people. What we believe in our hearts will eventually determine how we live, how we build and what we end up with.

This “Roots and Shoots” series is not so much an attempt to define the distinctives of our family of churches, but rather to ensure that all our beliefs and practices are firmly rooted in the Scriptures.

Many people have asked us over the years: “Who are you and what do you believe?” While our structure may appear to be somewhat nebulous, nevertheless the understanding of our common beliefs needs to be clear and unambiguous.

We are a family of churches that believe we are to be “sons of the kingdom” sown into God’s earth. The key that transforms “the word of the kingdom” into “sons of the kingdom” is *understanding* (Matthew 13:23). In the Lord’s first parable of the kingdom (the Sower), the ‘word’ of the kingdom – the seed – when properly received and understood produces fruit. In the second parable of the kingdom (the Weeds), we discover that the fruit has become the seed, and that the seed is “the sons of the kingdom”. The word, bearing fruit, producing seed as sons of the kingdom, planted in the world! That is our prayer for this series of books.

Barney Coombs

Introduction

A couple of years ago, my doctor warned me that because of diabetes and rising levels of cholesterol, I was becoming increasingly vulnerable to cardio-vascular problems. After carefully explaining to me the risk factors, he strongly advised me to take preventative measures to safeguard my heart.

In the following pages, I want to address three potential problems (you might want to call them symptoms) which, if left unattended, will seriously damage your spiritual health. In fact, you may already be in trouble. If this is the case, I hope to offer you spiritual counsel from God's Word that will help restore you to spiritual vitality and strength. We have a Living God who is able and willing to create clean hearts, renew within us a right spirit and restore to us the joy of his salvation. Therefore I can boldly say that there is hope for us all!

This 'Roots and Shoots' book was born out of several tragic, moral breakdowns that came to light in 2000. The most serious failure was an adulterous relationship that had existed for a number of years. All of these people carried significant responsibility in our spiritual family and were personal friends of mine. The burden of all of this weighed heavy on my mind. How could these brothers and sisters get themselves into such trouble? What were the underlying reasons?

After spending time with each person, I came to the conclusion that in each case there had existed serious character flaws. Like a time bomb ticking away, and with certain conditions and circumstances in place, the bomb had exploded, resulting in much pain and heartache.

Some years ago, I was impacted by some words on a plaque in a pastor's office: "What a man takes years to build out of his gifting can be destroyed in a moment because of his character." I have often thought of

those words, especially during the uncovering of the above-mentioned stories.

When God created Adam, He made him sinless, perfect in every way. It was natural for him to be humble, obedient, serving, yielding, and dependent on his Creator. But right from the beginning God also gave him the ability to make moral choices. He was free to choose, if he so wanted, to be proud, disobedient, stubborn and independent. But because of the Fall, this ability to choose evil transmuted into ugly dimensions. It was no longer an ability, but a driving force. It became completely normal to make the wrong choice; it was now second nature. You often hear people saying, “I’m a bit of a rebel” or “I’m a stubborn old critter”; and what is so incredulous is that they actually view this as a virtue, like a war medal, something of which to be really proud. This fallen-ness made itself so much ‘at home’ within us that we were hardly aware of its presence. Pride, disobedience and independence are like bad breath; the person who has it doesn’t even know it. Man was now tainted with a fatal flaw.

The evidence of this flaw is a major theme throughout Scripture. The Bible is filled with hundreds of examples. Why this emphasis? Why so many long, drawn-out illustrations? Could it be that God wants to get our attention? Is He telling us that this malady has constantly tripped up the godliest and noblest of his servants and that this is the number one hindrance to the fulfilment of the Father’s ultimate purpose?

The Bible is a book that tells ‘the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth’. There is no anonymity for sinners. God has deliberately given us the un-sanitised version of events, so that we might learn from them.

For instance, take King Jehoram. Here was a nasty bit of work if ever I saw one. As soon as he became king and was securely settled in, he killed all his brothers with the sword and a few of the Israelite rulers as well (2 Chronicles 21:4). God responded by instructing Elijah to send him a letter informing him that because of all his evil deeds, God was going to strike him and his family with a great calamity. Ouch! The record says:

“After all this, the LORD afflicted Jehoram with an incurable disease of the bowels. In the course of time, at the end of the second year, his bowels came out because of the disease, and he died in great pain. His people made no fire in his honour, as they had for his fathers. Jehoram was

thirty-two years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem eight years. He passed away, to no one's regret, and was buried in the City of David, but not in the tombs of the kings." (2 Chronicles 21:18-20)

Neither does the Bible cover up the failures of its heroes. It not only records the exploits of the heroes of faith but also the cowards of unbelief; and sometimes these opposite traits are found in the same person. Take, for example, Abraham. God promised that through his seed all the nations of the earth would be blessed and that his seed would be as the stars of heaven and as the sand on the seashore in numbers. All of this was going to happen through him and his old, but beautiful, wife Sarah. The Bible says that Abraham "believed the LORD and he credited it to him as righteousness" (Genesis 15:6). It also makes a number of very affirming comments about Abraham. For example,

"By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith Abraham, even though he was past age – and Sarah herself was barren – was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise. And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore." (Hebrews 11:8-12)

But there is an altogether different side to Abraham, one that is not so flattering. It's his Achilles heel, his fatal flaw, his man-made 'good ideas' side. We see one example in Genesis 16:1-4. (Remember that he was still called 'Abram' at this stage.)

"Now Sarai, Abram's wife had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian maidservant named Hagar; so she said to Abram, 'The LORD has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my maidservant; perhaps I can build a family through her.' Abram agreed to what Sarai said. So after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian maidservant Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife. He slept with

Hagar, and she conceived. When she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress.”

God had made a promise to Abram. But instead of waiting and trusting, Sarai became anxious and conjured up what to her was an excellent idea: why not have the promise fulfilled through my maid? It was an idea deftly picked from the tree of knowledge of good and of evil. It was a case of ‘déjà vu’: the ‘garden of Eden’ repeated.

And what about that great man Moses? In the wilderness, God said to him, “Speak to the rock” (Numbers 20:8), but Moses lost his cool with the murmuring Israelites and instead of obeying the LORD’s instructions, he shouted at the gathered assembly: “ ‘Listen, you rebels; must we bring you water out of this rock?’ Then Moses raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his staff. Water gushed out, and the community and their livestock drank. But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, ‘Because you did not trust in me enough to honour me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them’ ” (Numbers 20:10-12). Notice the irony of Moses accusing his countrymen of rebellion! By striking the rock instead of speaking to it, as God had commanded him, he was as guilty of rebellion as they were! And the judgment was severe: his rebellion cost him his destiny.

And then there’s David. In 1 Chronicles 21 we read of his numbering the people. Whether this was an issue of David needing to re-assure himself of the nation’s combat strength or whether it was a matter of pride, both reasons were wrong, and David knew it. Although Joab, his trusted army captain, pleaded with him not to do it, he still went ahead, with disastrous consequences. The nation of Israel was robbed of 70,000 of its finest men.

David also had a major problem with lust, a character flaw that incited him to commit adultery with a married woman whose husband was away from home fighting for his king and country. No one would discover his nasty, little secret, he had thought. But he didn’t bargain on Bathsheba becoming pregnant. And when all his schemes to get her husband Uriah to sleep with her to cover up the incident failed, he tried to solve his dilemma by arranging for the unfortunate man to be killed in battle (2 Samuel 11).

All of these stories had their origin in *the heart*. Which is why Bible has a lot to say about the heart. It talks about the heart being hard, deceitful,

bitter, evil, proud, stubborn, obstinate, grudging, despairing, fearful, terror-filled, despising, sad, faint, guilty, anguished, blighted, withered, conniving, lustful, perverse, foolish, anxious, hope-deferred-sick, raging, envious, abominable, hasty, arrogant, corrupt, afflicted, deluded, rebellious, avenging, uncircumcised, deceitful, haughty, fearful, pierced, stony, idolatrous, malicious, slow, adulterous, unforgiving. That's quite a list!

But the Bible also talks about a different sort of heart: a heart that is rejoicing, faithful, discerning, wise, full of integrity, responsive, devoted, seeking after God, upright, singing, happy, joyful, cheerful, glad, strong, righteous, blameless, pure, contrite, broken, steadfast, undivided, secure, obedient, free, trembling, heart-of-flesh, tender, noble-and-good, sincere, encouraged, and refreshed. What a much better list!

In the following chapters, we are going to examine what the Scriptures have to say about four different types of 'heart problem': lust, unforgiveness, fear, and bitterness.

Chapter 1

Guarding our Heart from Lust

In a 1991 survey of pastors in North America conducted by Fuller Institute of Church Growth, 37% of pastors had at some time or other engaged in inappropriate sexual behaviour with someone in their congregation. In the year 2000, at our European Leaders' Conference, George Verwer of Operation Mobilisation told us that viewing pornography on the Internet was the single most-confessed sin by missionaries.

Viewing pornography is a cursed thing! It is addictive and has become an epidemic. It turns a well of clean water into a cesspool of filth. No wonder Solomon exhorts his son, "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life" (Proverbs 4:23).

Solomon was deeply concerned for his sons. He was well aware that outward conformity would never be an effective antidote to all the snares and temptations they would face as they grew older. Indeed, as it proved to be for Solomon himself, the older he got, the more seductive were the temptations that he faced and greater was his fall. So he pleads, "*Above all else, guard your heart.*" Elsewhere he emotionally cried out, "My son, give me your heart" (Proverbs 23:26). Solomon knew that if he had his son's heart, he effectively had his son. Solomon understood that the heart, as the Living Bible puts it, "influences everything else" in a person's life.

And so it is with God. He wants our heart *first*, and *then* our obedience. Obedience that does not come from the heart is mere conformity.

Before we seek to answer the question, 'How can we guard the heart?', let us first remember that there is no answer outside of *the grace of God*

working in our lives. If we do not understand that the grace that saved us is the same grace that keeps us, then we are doomed to failure before we begin.

As we continue to read this book, it is possible that we could easily become discouraged and end up thinking, “So what’s the use? I’m going to fail whatever ever I do!” Not so! We need to focus on God’s grace and on his great promise that He “is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy” (Jude v24). God is saying that He is able to keep us from sinning *now* and that, one day, because we are justified through Christ Jesus, we will indeed be presented before God as faultless.

Keeping Sexually Pure

Donald Scott, a friend of mine in New Zealand, once asked me, “Barney, is it accountability that keeps you from sin?” I said that, whilst accountability was a part of the answer, it was by no means the main answer. I went on to share with him some of the keys that we are about to consider.

1. Remember that it can happen to me!

All of us need to face the fact that we are all quite capable of falling into sin. Paul wrote: “So if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall!” (1 Corinthians 10:12)

John Owen, the seventeenth century Puritan, said words to the affect, “If I think it couldn’t happen to me, then that is the first sign of deception.”

When I was a police officer many years ago and was dealing with a burglary or car theft, I never once heard a victim say, “I was expecting this to happen!” On the contrary, they would inevitably whine, “You hear of it happening to others, but you never think it would ever happen to you.”

In this matter of sin, *all* of us need to recognise that it could most surely happen to *me*!

2. Remember God’s omniscience and omnipresence

We need to cultivate on a daily basis the wonder of a transcendent God who is everywhere and who knows everything and sees everything.

David wrote a song about the amazing ability of an all-seeing, everywhere-existing God.

“O LORD, you have searched me
and you know me.
You know when I sit and when I rise;
you perceive my thoughts from afar.
You discern my going out and my lying down;
you are familiar with all my ways.
Before a word is on my tongue
you know it completely, O LORD.
You hem me in – behind and before;
you have laid your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
too lofty for me to attain.
Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?”

(Psalm 139:1-7)

Imagine going out to dinner at the home of a wealthy friend. At the table you notice the beautiful, antique silver condiment set. Suddenly, a wave of covetousness washes over you. It would be so easy to pop them into your pocket or purse. In any case, your friend has loads of money. He can afford to lose a couple of salt and pepper pots. But sitting immediately opposite you is your host. Now, tell me: why wouldn't you help yourself? Of course, the answer is obvious: he would see everything!

But today, millions of Christians around the world will do and say sinful things without the slightest sense that God is watching our every step and our every action. Job said, “Does he not see my ways and count my every step?” (Job 31:4).

Sad to say, there seems to be an alarming failure among Christians to foster an awareness of God's presence. This awareness is what is known in the Bible as “the fear of the Lord.” I would say, without the slightest hesitation, that this issue is the greatest spiritual need in my life. I suspect this is true for many others!

3. Be obedient to God's commands

Never separate obedience to God's commands from a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus. If we truly love Jesus, then we will obey the Father, just like He did. Paul expressed this love and commitment to obedience in strong terms: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).

Of course, it is absolutely impossible to obey the Lord's commands without the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. This is especially true in the light of Jesus' upgrading of the act of adultery to include even looking at a woman with the purpose of lusting after her (Matthew 5:27-28). Therefore we should seek to be constantly filled with the Holy Spirit, not so that we might have a happy time, but so that we might be obedient to His ways.

4. Seek to have a heart where Christ can be 'at home'

Paul wrote: "I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith" (Ephesians 3:16-17).

What did he mean when he prayed that prayer? The exposition of these two verses is worth a whole book, but space does not permit that. However, let us note two things.

Firstly, these Ephesian believers were already born again, they had already received Christ, and had already been sealed with the Holy Spirit. So what Paul is asking God to do has nothing to do with their being born again. Dr Martyn Lloyd Jones in his commentary on Ephesians, quoting from John 14:23 ("We will come unto him and make our abode with him") says this: "The word abiding is characteristic of John's Gospel. It conveys this same idea of 'settling down', 'taking up residence', not just occasionally being present, but being there permanently ... Paul's desire is that Christ may also dwell in their affections, that Christ may dwell in their will, that Christ may be the dominating factor in the whole of their life, controlling it and directing it. Christ is to be the very heart of their hearts, He is to be at the very centre of their lives."

Secondly, for Christ to live in their hearts, they need to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in the inner man. Only that which is produced by God the Holy Spirit will make my body, soul and spirit a comfortable place for Christ to feel ‘at home’. So what I watch on television or in films, what I read in books or magazines, what conversations I engage in, what thoughts I allow to linger in my mind, what places I visit for personal pleasure, if they are unholy, then my heart becomes an uncomfortable place for Christ to dwell.

5. Make a covenant with your eyes

Right in the middle of Job’s calamities, he finds himself needing to defend his integrity. He makes this strong assertion: “I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a girl” (Job 31:1).

We have all made ‘New Year’ resolutions that have lasted less than a week. However, a covenant is something much stronger and far more serious than turning over a new sheet. By dealing with this temptation within the context of covenant, Job is saying, ‘I am responsible for what I allow my eyes to gaze at, and I am aware of the serious consequences of breaking this covenant.’ He is employing every means available to him to call himself up to a high standard of heart purity.

If Job were alive today, I am convinced there would be very few films that he would, with all good conscience, be able to see. In recent years, I have come to the conclusion that many Christians, especially young people, do not make covenants with themselves whereby they say, “By God’s grace, I will not watch a film that has scenes in it that I could not fellowship with Jesus about.” Or, in a courting relationship, “I will not participate in any behaviour that would cast a shadow on my relationship with Christ, nor place myself in any situation of temptation.”

Now, some situations are so obviously ungodly that we would pull back immediately. But there are other times when it is not quite so easy to make a godly evaluation. But Paul gives a promise that says: “And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:7). In Colossians 3:15 he puts it this way: “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.” That word

‘rule’ can equally mean ‘act as an arbiter or umpire’. In other words, let Christ’s peace determine what is right and wrong; let Christ’s peace be the umpire that says, ‘This is within the line – and that is outside of it!’

To return to Philippians he writes these words: “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” (Philippians 4:8). In other words, seek to fill your heart with noble, pure, and righteous thoughts.

6. Think consequentially

Christians who sin seldom think they will be discovered. But God has said, “You may be sure that your sin will find you out” (Numbers 32:23).

One man I knew well, who was a national advocate for morality, had a phone call intercepted by a newspaper reporter. The call was from a woman with whom he was having an affair. The lady was calling him to say that their adulterous affair had been discovered. The next day it was on the national TV news and was headline news in all the national papers. Jesus said: “Whatever they have said in the dark shall be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in the inner rooms shall be broadcast from the housetops for all to hear!” (Luke 12:3, *The Living Bible*).

Extra-marital affairs, whether actual physical relationships or pornography on the Internet, both amount to a betrayal of trust. In addition to this, loved ones will suffer humiliation and deep emotional trauma.

I remember sitting with a woman whose husband had been discovered in an adulterous relationship that had lasted many years. I will never forget the anguish of heart and mental torture that I witnessed that morning. Wringing her hands, grasping her knees, clutching her shoulders, pulling her hair, her face contorted, at times gasping for air, she continued to sob out her story until I could handle it no longer. I broke down and wept with her.

And what about the children? Imagine their pain and shame. How are they going to cope with the new reality? Their friends at school, college or the workplace will learn what has happened. News travels fast, especially scandals! The parent they were so proud of is now the subject of demeaning

jokes, and they have become the objects of pity. They pay a heavy price for your freedom to sin.

And then what do you say to your grandchildren? You are their hero! You can do no wrong! Think about the moment you have to meet them, and you see that look in their eyes that says, “Tell me it’s not true, Granddad.” A sacred trust shattered! A role model destroyed! A future confidant for a wayward teenager, disqualified because of sin.

And then there are the heartbroken parents, who will carry the sorrow and shame you caused them to their grave. Brothers, sisters, grandparents – all suffer. You can safely say: “Things will never be the same again.” For sin always pays its wages!

Of course there are your brothers and sisters in Christ to consider too. A few years ago I was travelling from England to North America, stopping to preach to Niagara Community Church, before moving on to a conference in Dallas. From Dallas I was flying to Winnipeg, after which I was returning to the UK via Toronto. While in Dallas I received a phone call from Peter Wynn, the Senior Leader of Niagara Community Church, saying that I had left a pair of shoes at his home and offering to give them back to me when I landed at Toronto Airport on my return journey to England. I thanked him for his thoughtfulness but made it clear that I had several other pairs of shoes, and that therefore his three hour journey to return them to me was unnecessary. Besides, I wasn’t even going to come out into the main terminal because I would only have twenty-five minutes to change planes. Thereafter, I duly forgot all about the phone call.

When I got to Toronto, the flight to England was delayed an hour. So I went to the newsagent in the departure hall to buy a book that I had been told was ‘safe reading’. Immediately beside the books was a prominent display of pornographic material. Suddenly, I felt an almost irresistible urge to pick up one of the magazines and browse through it. By God’s grace and a quick ‘S.O.S.’ prayer for help, I won the victory. I then quickly picked up the book I was looking for and turned to walk to the pay desk. Standing less than eight feet away was Peter with a plastic bag containing my shoes. What a shock! I felt shivers run up and down my spine. I told Peter what had just happened and added, “Peter, I know you would have forgiven me;

but if I had picked up that magazine I would always know that you had seen your pastor fall into sin.”

You might also want to consider that, for those of us who are leaders, serious damage to our credibility would be incurred and, depending on the severity of our sin and manner in which it was discovered, it could permanently disqualify us from leading God’s people.

Of course the worse part of all would be the dishonouring of the Name of the Lord Jesus.

7. Sow to please the Spirit

Let’s take a look at three of the ways we can sow to the Spirit.

a) Being an unselfish giver

People who sow to please the Spirit are givers, whereas selfish people are absorbed with themselves. They love themselves. They please themselves. They grab, they grasp, they hoard. Their god is their appetite. They are the centre of their world. E Stanley Jones, in his book ‘Christian Maturity’, referring to their ministry to people with psychiatric problems, wrote: “Note that the real purpose of the process is to get the patient to the point where he can get himself off his own hands into the hands of God. For as long as he is self-centred he is a sick immature personality.” He also goes on to quote Karl Menninger, of the famous Menninger Clinic: “It will probably astonish many, therefore, when I say that the great problem in every well-conducted sanatorium is how to get the patients to do anything, especially for others, for they are not interested in others; they are interested solely in themselves – that’s why they are there.”

In Galatians 6:8 Paul writes: “The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction.” This is in stark contrast to the one who sows to please the Spirit. “The one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.” Now, the context of this verse is established by two sections, the first being Galatians 6:6, “Anyone who receives instruction in the word must share all good things with his instructor”; and then verses nine and ten, “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we

have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.”

I have used a capital “S” for Spirit because that is how the Bible translators have presented it; but it would be inconceivable to think that my sowing to please the Spirit would not at the same time be a sowing to *my* spirit, thereby causing me to grow in spirit, and be strong in spirit, as I respond to God’s Spirit. In the same way that drinking of the Spirit produces rivers of living water flowing out of my innermost being (John 7:38), so sowing to the Spirit by acts of selfless giving and bearing one another’s burdens, strengthens me in the inner man. The key question is: who am I doing this for? And why am I doing it? And am I doing it in the strength that God supplies? Clearly, it is God’s heart for his people to walk in love, and that this love should be expressed in practical ways. As Paul emphasises in Ephesians 2:10, “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

b) Meditating on God’s Word

Meditating on the Word of God will also sow to my spirit and strengthen me in the inner man, as Psalm 119 makes clear: “How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word ... I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.” (Psalm 119:9,11)

The New American Bible translates it like this: “Thy Word have I treasured in my heart.”

Of course the classic Scripture on Bible meditation is Psalm 1:1-3.

“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.”

Notice that the one who meditates on God's Word is being nourished from God's streams and so yields fruit which does not dry up and wither. In other words, this is a healthy, fruitful tree.

c) Cultivating a listening ear

Jesus was an excellent listener and disciple. Isaiah, prophesying of Him seven hundred years earlier, wrote: "The Sovereign LORD has given me an instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary. He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being taught. The Sovereign LORD has opened my ears, and I have not been rebellious; I have not drawn back." (Isaiah 50:4-5)

When in a crisis, it is much easier to ask God for wisdom, because we are focused and strongly motivated. But to sit in a chair, remain silent whilst turning our hearts to listen, is not so easy.

8. Deal with idols

What is an idol? I would suggest that it is anything that is valued more than God and that vies with his ownership of my time, plans, money and talents.

King David wrote: "I will set no worthless thing before my eyes" (Psalm 101:3).

I have enjoyed doing crosswords and word games for over fifty years, particularly the game of 'Scrabble'. One day I was in a computer outlet when I noticed that 'Scrabble' was now available in a computer version. The price was right, so I purchased it. I wasn't going to play it at home, but I thought of the times when I travel that a game of 'Scrabble' would be a nice way to relax my mind after a busy day of ministry.

And so it was that I took the CD with me each time I went on a ministry trip. At first I would play a single game and then switch off. But after a while, it would be two games, then three. It only took the pressing of a key and you were into a new game. Instead of helping to settle my mind, I found myself being 'wired'. Not only that, but precious hours of sleep were being lost and, with it, a certain lethargy was coming the next

day. It never occurred to me that I was becoming addicted to ‘Scrabble’ or that this game had become an idol in my life.

One day while at a conference, I became convicted as we sang a line of a song that said, “I will serve no foreign gods nor any other treasure; you are my heart’s desire, Spirit without measure.” I suddenly saw that ‘Scrabble’ had become my heart’s desire and was replacing Jesus as the centre of my life. Immediately after the meeting, I went to my room and destroyed the CD.

9. Be accountable

Much is spoken about these days concerning the need to be accountable to others. Sometimes it is practised one to one, sometimes in a group setting. Chuck Swindoll refers to a group that he meets with regularly. Each time they come together they ask one another a list of questions concerning their behaviour and then follow up with a final challenge: “Have you just been lying to us?”

All of this is very commendable; but in my experience it doesn’t seem to touch the person who is habitually sinning and whose conscience is seared. That is why accountability is not ‘number one’ on my list. However, I do practise it, and do recommend it.

The Scriptures tell us to confess our faults to each other and pray for each other (James 5:16). Over the years I have travelled to many countries, have preached in numerous conferences and have listened to hundreds of confessions. I have come to the conclusion that a sizeable proportion are simply wanting to clear their conscience in the presence of a stranger, rather than humble themselves before their fellow believers.

I have also observed at least five ways in which people respond after falling into sin.

a) Silence or Stalling

King David had discovered that, “When I kept silent [about my sin], my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long” (Psalm 32:3). The Scriptures repeat the same thought in Proverbs 28:13-14: “He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds

mercy. Blessed is the man who always fear the LORD, but he who hardens his heart falls into trouble.”

In other words, unconfessed sin produces a miserable state of mind. And the accuser of the brethren – the devil – makes certain that this misery is greatly intensified. Bob Mumford has said: “When Satan is tempting us, he minimises the offence; but after we fall into sin, he then maximises it.” Satan starts by suggesting that the picture of that unclothed person is simply an art form; but after you yield to the temptation, you have now become a lecherous beast.

b) Creating a smoke screen

In Proverbs 18:1 (RSV) we read: “He who is estranged seeks pretexts [= ‘excuses’] ...” My observation is that this is mostly done unconsciously, at least initially. But people who are walking in sin usually start finding fault with other Christians, and especially with church leaders.

One Sunday, following the morning meeting, and with most of the congregation having left, I noticed a couple waiting at the door and went over to them to say goodbye. The look on their faces told me something was wrong, so I asked them, “Is everything OK?” “No it is not!” was their sharp response. “So what’s wrong?” I asked. “You!” they retorted and went on to say, “Before you came to this church there was such love here, but now it has all changed.” I suddenly found myself asking them, out of the blue, whether they were living together. They said they were. I then asked, “And are you already married to other spouses?” “Yes,” they replied. I then unzipped my Bible intending to point them to what God had to say about their relationship, but the lady angrily stabbed her finger towards my Bible and reacted with: “We know what’s in there!” To which I replied, “Well then, there’s nothing else that I can say.”

It is not uncommon to discover that unusually vocal, legalistic people are themselves often walking in serious sin.

One of the thermometers that measures my spiritual temperature is how I view others. Am I becoming critical of others? When I notice this happening, it is usually time to take stock of my own walk with God.

c) Selective confession

This is where the person who has sinned picks out one or two minor sins for confession, but deliberately leaves out the major failures. This is easily done in accountability groups, because every one knows that no one is perfect. The confession of a minor sin proves you are being vulnerable, but keeps the rest of the group from suspecting anything more serious. Deception is an ugly thing! Selective confession is, in effect, an inoculation against the real thing. The Bible says:

“The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jeremiah 17:9, NASB)

d) Presenting a sanitised version

Almost everyone who decides to confess a sin will be tempted to retain some fragment of dignity. So, instead of telling it like it is, they will start by saying, “It was late at night and I was tired”; or “Things have not been good in our marriage”; or “I was dozing off when this film came on ... and I know I should have switched the TV off ... ”

When asked the question, “And how many times has this happened?” the answer is usually, “Oh, just couple of times I suppose.” On one occasion I asked a man how many times he had committed a particular sin, and he responded by saying, “I suppose you would say, ‘a few times.’” I reminded him that it wasn’t me who knew the answer. Finally, he acknowledged that it was many times over a period of many years.

I have often wondered why God rejected Saul but not David. Saul never committed murder; Saul never sent an innocent, loyal man to his death. But I think part of the answer is that Saul made excuses and blamed others. Look at the record in 1 Sam 15:24-31:

“Then Saul said to Samuel, ‘I have sinned. I violated the LORD’s command and your instructions. I was afraid of the people and so I gave in to them. Now I beg you, forgive my sin and come back with me, so that I may worship the LORD.’ But Samuel said to him, ‘I will not go back with you. You have rejected the word of the LORD, and the LORD has rejected you as king over Israel!’ As Samuel turned to leave, Saul caught hold of the hem of his robe, and it tore. Samuel said to him, ‘The LORD has torn the kingdom of

Israel from you today and has given it to one of your neighbours – to one better than you. He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a man, that he should change his mind.’ Saul replied, ‘I have sinned. But please honour me before the elders of my people and before Israel; come back with me, so that I may worship the LORD your God.’ ”

It seems that Saul was more concerned with how he was viewed by people than by his grievous sin against a holy God. His need to ‘look good’ was bigger to him than losing the kingdom.

e) A broken spirit and a contrite heart

Now compare David’s response to being confronted with his sin to that of Saul:

“Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge. Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place. Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice. Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me” (Psalm 51:1-12).

David knew that a “broken spirit and a contrite heart” would not be despised by a God who again and again had shown himself to be merciful.

Secrecy, to the devil, is like darkness to the burglar. I have found that the only way I can deal with Satan’s accusations is to humble myself, go to my pastor or, if he is not available, to another brother who is my peer, and confess my sin. In his book ‘Christian Maturity’ E. Stanley Jones said: “It is a sign of immaturity to act as if one had no faults. It is a sign of maturity to confess them and to ask help in changing them.”

I have personally invited David Bornman, who leads West Coast Christian Fellowship in Vancouver, to carry out random checks on my computer to make sure I am not being ensnared through the Internet.

10. Live by the Spirit

Let the positive take care of the negative. The New Covenant is not a life of living by do's and don'ts. It is not a set of rules. It is a relationship with the Living God! It is obedience to God's Word in the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. It is the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus! Paul writing to the Galatians says: "So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh" (Galatians 5:16).

One aspect of living by the Spirit is to use "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Ephesians 6:17). The sword of the Spirit is much more than paper and ink, however. The Bible only becomes a sword when it is spoken out in faith.

How did Jesus deal with Satan's temptations? He didn't say, "Who do you think you are, you scum bag? On your way!" He neither reviled Satan nor did he rely on his own strength; but he said, again and again, "It is written" (Matthew 4:4,7,10). The sword of the Spirit is God's word, God's truth, treasured in the heart, coming forth out of the mouth.

One of my oft-used verses is Romans 6:14: "Sin shall not be your master." When tempted I will say, "It is written, and in the power and name of Jesus I declare, that sin shall not have mastery over me."

By the way, never place yourself between Satan and Jesus. Always make sure that Jesus Christ and his Word is between you and the evil one. As a little girl once said, "When Satan comes knocking at my heart's door, I let Jesus answer it."

'But I'm afraid of the consequences!'

Of course, what often keeps a person from confessing their sin is fearing the consequences that may follow, such as fear of rejection by one's spouse, or the thought of exposing one's loved ones to shame, or (in the case of a pastor, elder or cell group leader) the thought of losing one's

leadership position and, with that for some, the loss of income. These are all real possibilities; but as we have seen, God warns us that: “He who conceals his sins does not prosper.” But this warning is immediately followed by a wonderful promise: “But whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy” (Proverbs 28:13).

I never cease to be amazed at how merciful and gracious our God shows himself to be to those who humble themselves. Take, for example, King Manasseh of Judah. We read in 2 Chronicles 33 that he turned from God and worshipped the stars. He built altars in the two courts of the temple for all the host of heaven. He sacrificed his sons as burnt offerings. He practised sorcery, witchcraft, and was involved with mediums and spiritists. Because of all this, God caused the King of Assyria to capture Manasseh with hooks, bind him with bronze chains and remove him to Babylon. Surely this evil king was beyond redemption. Well, if we had come to that conclusion, we would have been completely wrong! For we read that “in his distress he sought the favour of the LORD his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers. And when he prayed to him, the LORD was moved by his entreaty and listened to his plea; so he brought him back to Jerusalem and to his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the LORD is God.” (2 Chronicles 33:12-13). We might have wiped our hands of him; but our gracious Father restored him.

Space does not permit, but I could tell of quite a number of leaders, personal friends of mine, who – sadly – fell into sin. But after repenting and walking through a period of restoration, they are now back in ministry, effective and fruitful for God once again. They are a living proof that “God gives grace to the humble”! I know of marriages that were once loveless, joyless, plagued with mistrust and suspicion due to one of the spouses engaging in a secret affair, but which today, following the humble confession of sin, are now vibrant, joyful and powerful testimonies to God’s grace.

We have a God who delights in ‘restoring the years the locusts have eaten’. Let us not allow fear and pride to rob us of receiving this wonderful grace of God.

In Conclusion

So, how to conclude this chapter? Well, living a pure, godly life is no accident. It doesn't fall out the sky. In one sense, there are no 'saints'. We all are faced with temptation and the same remedy applies to all alike.

David Ravenhill said: "The Word of God teaches that the gifts of the Spirit along with blessing and even authority can be bestowed by the laying on of hands. However there is not one single verse either in the Old Testament or the New that says character can be imparted through the laying on of hands. Character can be forged in our lives only on the anvil of experience and with the hammer of obedience to God and his Word."

It is for such forging that I plead with all of us to lay our lives on his anvil.

Chapter 2

Guarding our Heart from Unforgiveness: Avoiding ‘Scandal’

Our word ‘scandal’ traces its roots back to the Greek word *skandalon*, which came from a verb meaning ‘to cause to stumble’ or ‘to offend’. When English-speaking people use the word ‘offend’, it usually carries the sense of being annoyed or feeling upset because of someone or something; in some instances it may even be used to describe someone taking serious umbrage or showing momentary outrage. But very rarely would the word be used to portray long-term anger and permanent severance of a relationship. The Bible, however, uses this word far more seriously; in fact, it is probably better translated ‘scandalised’ and conveys the concept of being trapped, just like a bird being caught in a snare.

Until modern times hunters would capture birds by propping up a net with a stick. Attached to the bottom of the stick would be an enticing piece of food which the birds would find irresistible. As soon as the bird took the bait, the stick would collapse, trapping the bird under the net. This ‘spring-trap’ was called a ‘skandalon’.

Recently, a person who refused to forgive another leader after fifteen years of being scandalised said to me, “I will never forgive him. To the day I die, I will never forgive him.” This person went on to reinforce their resolve, by adding, “I know what God has to say about that, but I will just have to live with the consequences.” I trembled inside and can remember thinking, “This is scary! Even the thought of standing before God and having to confess that they had wilfully defied his command to forgive makes no difference.”

No one simply drifts into a state of being ‘scandalised’. We get there by *making choices*, even though we may not recognise we are exercising a choice at the time. This highlights the danger of making impulsive, emotional responses when hurt. In the heat of the moment we can make decisions or say things that commit us to entrenched positions, which can then be almost impossible to get out of. The problem is that we feel compelled to say or to do something. After yielding to the temptation we often experience remorse; but it is now too late; the die is cast.

But if it were choices that got us into the trouble, it will also be choices that get us out of it. With that in mind I would like to offer the following steps as a means of doing that.

Step 1

The first step to freedom is to *make a clear decision to bring the situation before Jesus and place it under his Lordship*. By so doing, we humble ourselves, which in turn puts us under the promised blessing of God’s grace. In I Peter 5:5-7 we read:

“ ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.’ Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.”

Step 2

The second step is to *treat the situation as extremely serious by resolving that you will do whatever is necessary to extricate yourself from the chains that bind you to the offence*. Radical action is urgently required! Jesus said in Matthew 18:8-9: “If your hand or your foot causes you to sin (Greek: ‘to be scandalised’), cut it off and throw it away ... if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away.”

Settle the issue now that, no matter how long it takes, you will pursue with dogged persistence the cleansing of your heart from this offence. Also, recognise that to continue to carry an offence is an act of disobedience the fruit of which is self-destruction and inner torment. The Psalmist described it like this in Psalm 73:21-22: “When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you.”

Step 3

The third step is to *accept the sovereignty of God*. Psalm 115:3 reads, “Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him.”

Sometimes, I feel somewhat overwhelmed with the weight of responsibilities resting on my shoulders. At such times, I find it helpful to look up into the night sky and contemplate on the scientists’ reports that there are over one hundred billion, billion stars, as well as one hundred billion galaxies, and that they estimate that our local galaxy contains one trillion moons. Such awesome reality has a marvellous way of reducing my little concerns into proper perspective! It helps me realise that, ultimately, *God* is in control; that *Jesus* has all authority in heaven and on earth; that *He* is the one who has the keys of death and of Hades; and that *nothing* ever happens to the child of God by mistake.

Thomas Brooks in his treatise entitled *Under the Smarting Rod* wrote this: “Men that see not God in an affliction are easily cast into a feverish fit, they will quickly be in a flame, and when their passions are up, and their hearts on fire, they will begin to be saucy, and make no bones of telling God to his teeth that they do well to be angry. Such as will not acknowledge God to be the author of all their afflictions will be ready enough to fall in with that mad principle of the Manichees, who maintained the devil to be the author of all calamities; as if there could be any evil of affliction in the city and the Lord have no hand in it. Such as can see the ordering hand of God in all their afflictions will, with David, lay their hands upon their mouths, when the rod of God is laid upon their backs. If God’s hand be not seen in the affliction, the heart will do nothing but fret and rage under affliction.”

If God had not pulled back the curtains of heaven and allowed us to see the other half of the story regarding Job’s trials and sufferings, we would have concluded that it was the wicked Sabeans who had stolen the oxen and donkeys as well as murdering Job’s servants with the sword; that it was a fireball falling from the sky that had consumed all of Job’s sheep together with their shepherds, and that it was the evil Chaldeans who had stolen all of his camels and killed the remaining servants. Then, when we read the account of how a tornado had struck the house in which all his sons and daughters were having a party, causing the house to collapse on

top of them, killing everyone, we would probably have remarked, “How unlucky can you get?” And his boils we would have put down to some virus that was going around at the time and assumed that Job’s generally poor emotional state made him highly susceptible to the infection.

However, we know from Scripture that all of this began by God initiating a conversation with Satan when He asked him, “Have you considered my servant Job?” (Job 1:8). It was also God who twice gave permission for Satan to attack Job. But Job’s companions all misinterpreted the calamities.

We need to settle the issue that, because of God’s love and sovereignty, *everything* always works for our good! As Paul puts it in Romans 8:28, “We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” Or, in the words of another translation, “God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose.”

Every outward negative experience has a blessing hidden within. Thomas Brooks put it this way: “As there is a curse wrapped up in the best things he gives the wicked, so there is a blessing wrapped up in the worst things he brings upon his own; as there is a curse wrapped up in a wicked man’s health, so there is a blessing wrapped up in a godly man’s sickness; as there is a curse wrapped up in a wicked man’s strength, so there is a blessing wrapped up in a godly man’s weakness; as there is a curse wrapped up in a wicked man’s wealth, so there is a blessing wrapped up in a godly man’s wants; as there is a curse wrapped up in a wicked man’s honour, so there is a blessing wrapped up in a godly man’s reproach; as there is a curse wrapped up in all a wicked man’s mercies, so there is a blessing wrapped up in all a godly man’s crosses, losses and changes.”

Once we are able to accept by faith that God is sovereign and therefore in control of *all things*, then a dramatic change takes place in how we view and respond to life’s painful episodes. I’m sure this is why Joseph was able to say to his brothers at the end of all his varied experiences, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives” (Genesis 50:20).

Among those whose life was preserved was Judah, from whose tribe the promised Messiah was to come. Joseph suffered nineteen long years of

rejection, false accusation and wrongful imprisonment in order to preserve Judah's life. Joseph was able, with limited understanding, to see a small part of the reason for his sufferings; but the fact was, God had Golgotha in mind and the whole world in his heart when He allowed Joseph to pass through what must have been many dark nights of the soul.

Paul was in prison as a result of being persecuted by the Jews; and it was the Roman authorities who were holding him in jail. Yet neither of these were the reason Paul gives for his imprisonment! In Ephesians 3:1 he describes himself as "Paul, *the prisoner of Christ Jesus.*" He was not the prisoner of the Jews or of the Roman Empire, but the prisoner of Jesus Christ. When we can see the hand of Jesus, it changes everything.

So here is a testing question: if I were participating in "the sufferings of Christ", as Paul saw himself doing (2 Corinthians 1:5), would I actually be aware of it? Or would I blame the devil or some unkind human?

A close friend of mine has been going through two years of what he describes as 'a living hell'. Three people had caused him great offence, and without question he had been dealt with unjustly. Recently, he was in a meeting during which someone gave him a personal prophecy, the gist of which stated that he had been badly bruised; but that the perception that he was being disciplined by God was inaccurate. The truth was, he had been participating in the sufferings of Christ. My friend immediately dissolved into tears of relief and comfort. He left that meeting a new man, free to forgive and able to release those who had wronged him.

Step 4

The fourth step is to *resist self-pity*. We cannot afford the luxury of self-pity. We need to be hard on ourselves when we find we are asking ourselves questions such as, "But why me?" and "What have I done to deserve this?" Sympathising friends are no friends at all at such times! When we are in the process of being scandalised, we need friends who will find a way of reaching deep down inside us and who will call us up in God.

Some years ago I fell quite seriously ill while in Zimbabwe and had to go to a medical centre for tests. As I was leaving, the doctor said, "By the way, Mr Coombs, I suggest you see your doctor immediately you arrive

back in England so that he can give you a thorough examination.” There was a serious note to his voice, which made me feel a little nervous. “Why would that be necessary?” I asked. “Because,” he said, “I found a lump on your liver, and that could turn out to be serious!” I knew immediately what he was hinting at. “I don’t think I’m going to sleep too well tonight with that information swirling around in my mind,” I commented, trying to sound casual. I will never forget his response. He looked me straight in the eye and asked, “Are you a man of faith or not?” He was brilliant; it was just the shot in the arm I needed. “You’re right,” I responded, “you’re absolutely right.”

Anxiety and self-pity provide the ideal atmosphere for Satan to work. Sometimes well-meaning friends unwittingly serve the devil’s purposes, as did Peter after Jesus told the disciples that He was going up to Jerusalem to suffer and be crucified; but Jesus had to put him firmly in his place.

“Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ‘Never, Lord!’ he said. ‘This shall never happen to you!’ Jesus turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men’” (Matthew 16:22-23).

Step 5

The fifth step is to *receive firm counsel*. An old proverb says: “Birds of a feather flock together.” Don’t go seeking counsel from those who you know will be empathetic because they themselves are already scandalised. All they will do is to reinforce your prejudices. Remember, Step 1 was to cast our care on to Jesus our Wonderful Counsellor. If further help is still required, then seek it from some reliable person who you know is not pragmatic or economical with the truth, but who is principled and biblical in their counsel, and who will love you enough to tell you the truth.

Step 6

The sixth step is to *love God’s law*. Psalm 119:165 says, “Great peace have they who love your law, and nothing can make them stumble.”

Jesus once said, “Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the

rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock” (Matthew 7:24-25).

Those floods and winds could well be interpreted as abuse, rejection, disloyalty, financial failure, slander and divorce; all are potential causes of offence. Yet Jesus promised that all who do what He says, all who obey his word, will remain secure in the midst of life’s storms. Moses summed it up like this: “Man lives ... on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD God” (Deuteronomy 8:3).

Of course, as well as being preventative medicine, God’s Word also has miraculous restorative qualities. David points this out in Psalm 19:7 where he writes, “The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul.”

Step 7

The seventh step is to *avoid thinking presumptuously*. In Psalm 19:13 David asks God to keep him from “presumptuous sins” (NASB and NKJV). In fact he goes on to say, “May they not rule over me.” James exhorts his readers as follows: “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. Instead, you ought to say, ‘If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.’ ” (James 4:13-15)

He then goes on to describe such talk as ‘boasting’ and ‘evil’ (verse 16).

Presumption is very similar to having false expectations. In my book ‘Snakes and Ladders’, I list false expectations as one of the root causes for being scandalised.

Step 8

The eighth step is to *keep a balanced overview*. Never measure God by one single incident! In Psalm 13 we see David struggling with his current circumstances. He asks, “How long, O LORD? Will you forget me for ever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart?” (v1-2)

Clearly David is not a very happy man at this stage in his life. We can also detect a little self-pity creeping in. However, at the end of the psalm he makes a choice that will save his soul from being scandalised: “But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing to the LORD, for he has been good to me.”

There are always two sides to a cloud. Although Joseph was in prison for thirteen and a half years, he reigned as prime minister of Egypt for eighty years. Although David was on the run from Saul for some ten years, he reigned over all Israel for forty years. And of Job we read this:

“After Job had prayed for his friends, the LORD made him prosperous again and gave him twice as much as he had before ... The LORD blessed the latter part of Job’s life more than the first. He had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen and a thousand donkeys. And he also had seven sons and three daughters ... After this, Job lived a hundred and forty years; he saw his children and their children to the fourth generation. And so he died, old and full of years” (Job 42:10, 12-13, 16-17).

Step 9

The ninth step is to *choose to forgive the person or persons who have caused us so much hurt.*

The idea behind the Greek word for ‘forgiveness’ means ‘to let go and send away’. It is an act of the will; it does not require great feeling and emotion – although, where there have been deep wounds, especially from childhood, the relief of giving up and letting the whole thing go often results in a huge release of emotion.

Forgiveness is very important to God. Jesus warned us of the consequences if we do not forgive those who sin against us. Having taught the Lord’s Prayer, He then made this startling statement: “But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins” (Matthew 6:15). Later He told the story of the unmerciful servant who, though he had been forgiven an impossible debt of millions, refused to forgive his fellow slave who only owed him a paltry sum. The slave’s master, on discovering the servant’s unforgiving response, is moved with anger and hands him over to the torturers (who are probably demons) until he should

repay all that was owed him. Then, in verse 35, Jesus gives this solemn warning:

“This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart” (Matthew 18:35).

Someone has said, “Forgiveness is the key that unlocks the door of resentment and the handcuffs of hate. It is a power that breaks the chains of bitterness and the shackles of selfishness.”

Step 10

The tenth step is to *verbalise the forgiveness*. It is not enough to just make an internal decision to forgive; the forgiveness needs to be spoken out. If we don't, it becomes all too easy to take it all back. I speak from personal experience. Of course, even when we do speak out our forgiveness, it does not mean that we won't be tempted to resurrect the whole matter once again. However, it is much easier to stand by a decision already made and confessed than it is to bring one's self to make a decision in the first place.

The longer you leave it the harder it becomes! That is one of the reasons the Bible tells us not to let the sun go down on our anger (Ephesians 4:26). Many times over my years as a pastor, grown-up children have expressed their great regret at not getting reconciled with their parents before their death. Even husbands and wives whose partner had died suddenly have, on occasions, told me that the biggest mistake they made was not to have kept current accounts in clearing past offences.

During the time that I was the pastor of Basingstoke Baptist Church I received a phone call from a sixty year old lady asking if I would conduct her husband's funeral. Although they weren't part of our fellowship, they were 'Baptists' and she wanted a Baptist service. When I visited her home to comfort her and discuss the funeral service, she told me a most touching story about what happened the day her loved one passed away.

That particular morning they had got caught up in a most horrendous argument before the husband left for work. As is usually the case, it had been 'a storm in a teacup' that had got completely out of control. She said to me, “Pastor, we said things to each other that were so hateful; I can't believe we could talk to each other like that, but we did. It was a nightmare.

“I was in the kitchen when he eventually left for work; there were no goodbye kisses. I watched him through the kitchen window as he walked down the garden path; his head was down and his shoulders stooped over. There was no looking back as he opened the gate and began to walk along the pavement; he looked so heavy-hearted. I could stand it no longer and rushed to the back door and called out, ‘Honey, come back’. He immediately turned round and came back, and I could see his eyes were full of tears. We met at the gate and fell into each other’s arms whispering our apologies and forgivenesses, and off to work he went.

“That night, I was standing at the kitchen sink when I saw him walking towards our gate. I was wiping my hands before going to the door to greet him when, just as he reached the gate, he suddenly clutched his chest and fell to the ground. I rushed to his side, but it was too late; he was gone. Pastor, he died at the very spot where we had made up our quarrel in the morning.”

At this point she began to sob uncontrollably. “Pastor,” she said, “I don’t know what I would have done if we hadn’t kissed and made up.”

Jesus made it very clear that not only are we to forgive, but we are to do so from the heart. As He put it, “For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart” (Matthew 12:34).

Concluding Comments

I would like to close this chapter with three simple things that I myself have found helpful when facing the possibility of being ‘scandalised’.

First, I take the decision that I am going to forgive. This amounts to an act of obedience; I may not want to do it; I may not feel like doing it, but I know I have got to do it.

Second, I ask the Lord Jesus to make this a reality in my heart. Only Jesus can change my heart and bring me to the place where I actually want to do it.

Third, once it has become a reality, I wait for the Holy Spirit to show me the right moment to express my forgiveness. Once I take the decision to offer forgiveness, I have taken the first step of the journey out of my trap. I dare you to take that risk for yourself!

Chapter 3

Guarding our Heart from Fear

“Fear is generated by unbelief, and unbelief strengthened by fear. Nothing can cure us of fear till God cures us of unbelief” (Francis Burkitt).

To fear God is good! This fear is that awesome respect for his majesty and power that inspires us to bow our hearts in worship and our wills in submission. This fear is the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 9:10) or, as Derek Kidner puts it, “the first and controlling principle of wisdom” (‘Proverbs’, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries). It is something to delight in. Isaiah, prophesying the coming of the Messiah, wrote, “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” (Isaiah 11:3). Thomas Watson wrote in his book ‘Sifted Silver’: “The fear of God promotes spiritual joy; it is the morning star that ushers in the sunlight of comfort.”

But there is a different sort of fear; the fear that comes in times of acute danger and causes adrenaline to be pumped through our bodies, preparing us to take swift action that may save our life or the lives of others. There are also fears that are cruel, tormenting and paralysing. Some of these are symptoms of a mental illness; others, the evidence of demonic oppression. However, there are also a great number of fears that can only be described as cowardliness, as well as inordinate anxiety, and which can indicate rebellion.

One of my biggest surprises as I studied God’s Word was the discovery that heading the list of those condemned to the lake of fire was “the cowardly” followed by “the unbelieving” (Revelation 21:8). The list also includes

murderers, sorcerers and idolaters. I had never thought to include “the cowardly” alongside murderers! So, why is fear so obnoxious to God? It is because the implication of fear and worry is: “I cannot really trust you, God, although I know you’re the Creator of the universe. I can’t trust you to concern yourself with me. Perhaps you do care for me, but it isn’t adequate. You need help from me, my worry, my anxiety, my fear.” I remember the first time I went up in an aeroplane. My anxieties were of no help to the pilot then, and neither are my fears of any assistance to Almighty God now!

Fear Incites us to Misjudge Others

Jesus and his disciples came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to Him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what He was saying. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations for supper. She came to Jesus asking Him to rebuke Mary for helping with the preparations for his meal. Jesus, however, gently spoke to Martha’s distracted worry and praised Mary for having “chosen what is better” (Luke 10:38-42).

Some of our frantic serving is a cover-up for our inner worries or tensions. Martha was making sure everything was just right; but she was perhaps more concerned with what people would think if the meal were not perfect. She probably wanted to make a good impression, and the fear of what Jesus might think drove her on.

Such fear never gets satisfied; and, moreover, as with Martha, it leads us to put pressure on others.

Man: One of the Biggest Objects of Fear

Many years ago an elderly lady by the name of Doris Stevens, a ‘bundle of anxiety’, wanted to be baptised. “But what will they say?” she asked. I said, “Who are ‘they’? Your next-door neighbours?” “No, I’m very friendly with my neighbours ...” “Well,” I said, “is it the other folk in the village?” “Oh No!” “Well then,” I enquired, “who is it?” Looking bewildered, she replied with a plaintive, drawn out sigh, “I don’t know!” Illogical, yes; but her fear brought confusion and was not of God.

Doris did eventually get baptised and found the courage to speak to the congregation for over ten minutes. She was so relaxed that everyone was held spell-bound as she told us of how she had come to personal faith in Christ. You could have heard a pin drop!

Proverbs 29:25 tells us that “fear of man will prove to be a snare.” It is a trap that grip-clamps on to our heart and mind. It is a snare that prevents many Christians from venturing forth in faith and accepting new challenges. It prevents God’s people from obeying the promptings of the Holy Spirit. It paralyses us into silence when we ought to have brought a prophetic word, shared a personal testimony or prayed out our thanksgiving. As in the case of Doris, it is a simple matter of being afraid of what others might think.

Early in their married life, Abraham and Sarah needed to travel down to Egypt and live there for a while because of severe famine in Canaan. Just before they crossed the border, Abraham, the scoundrel and coward, sweet-talked his extremely attractive and trusting wife. “Honey, I know what a beautiful woman you are: you’re a knockout! Any man can see that. However, do you realise that your beauty is a major liability? You know what these Egyptians are like; one look at you and I’m a dead man. You wouldn’t want that to happen to me now, would you? You could say that you’re my sister and because of your beauty they will deal favourably with me.”

Another good idea straight from the Garden! The good news is that God graciously delivered both Abraham and Sarah from what could have been a very unpleasant outcome. (Read the story in Genesis 12:10-20.)

But what a pathetic example of manhood! What woman would want this specimen for a husband? But through Adam, as well as our own sinful behaviour, we can act just as cowardly as Abraham did. Through Christ however, we are Abraham’s offspring, and we can have the same capacity to be people of faith just as he was.

I still cringe with shame when I look back to an incident that happened when I was seventeen years old and a Police Cadet in London, England. My friend Ian Cook had travelled home for the weekend and, without his permission, I borrowed his bicycle to ride to the local swimming pool. I parked it against a wall, but failed to secure it. It was a gift to any would-be thief! When I returned to the bike after my swim, I found to my dismay that someone had stolen it. I spent the rest of the weekend in utter misery. How

could I face Ian? What would I say? What would he think of me? I chose to take the coward's way out. I wrote him a letter explaining what had happened and left it on his bed!

Late on Sunday evening, Ian returned to the 'Police section house', home to a hundred single officers and cadets. Ian lived four rooms further down the corridor from my room. I retired to bed early in order to avoid bumping in to him, and had even carefully locked my door. But sleep escaped me. Eventually I heard his footsteps coming down the corridor. He knocked on my door as he went past, but I didn't respond. I could hear him open his door, and then silence. Fear had me by the throat! I felt an absolute coward and wimp. A few minutes passed and then the sound of his footsteps. Knock, knock. No answer. I shall never forget the words that followed: "Come on Coombsy. I know you're in there; stop pretending you're asleep." I still didn't respond. The truth was, I was afraid and I hid myself. (Does that sound familiar?) Ian was kind enough to forgive me and later was Best Man at my wedding. Today, we can laugh about it together, but at the time it was my worst nightmare come true.

It was a strange paradox really. When it came to sharing my faith with Ian and the other cadets, I was fearless. I even had the privilege of seeing nine of them make a commitment to Christ, including Ian himself. But my fearful response to Ian's bicycle being stolen revealed a dark side of me. A side that went all the way back to the garden of Eden, where tormenting fear came into the human race through Adam. It is a destructive, inhibiting disease, a curse on the whole of society.

Franklin Roosevelt once said: "The only thing we have to fear, is fear itself." There is a lot of truth in this statement, probably more than the great man intended, because fear is a fruit of rebellion. Fear is inseparably linked with the fatal flaw.

Fear Provokes Disobedience

Fear is a major factor in disobedience. In Numbers 13:17-33 we read of the incident where the Israelites sent spies to report on the land they were about to enter. Moses picked twelve men. Ten came back with frightening reports of giants and impregnable walled cities, fearful that

“we seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them” (verse 33).

Only Caleb and Joshua were positive about what faced them. They saw the same land, but reported, not on its negatives, but on its beauty and agricultural wealth. They believed that with God’s help and strength, they could overcome the enemies in the land.

The people chose to listen to the pessimistic report and responded out of the fear that had gripped their hearts. Ultimately that whole fearful generation of people had to live out their lives wandering in the wilderness. Only Caleb and Joshua went in, leading the succeeding generation.

The people had taken their eyes off God. They had ignored the fact that God had so recently miraculously delivered them out of Egypt and wiped out their enemies on that occasion. God had faithfully led them in the desert, by day and by night, but still they refused to trust God.

Fear Insults God’s Character

Fear is also an insult to the very character of God. In 1 Kings 18:7-12 we read:

“As Obadiah was walking along, Elijah met him. Obadiah recognised him, bowed down to the ground, and said, ‘Is it really you, my lord Elijah?’ ‘Yes,’ he replied. ‘Go tell your master, “Elijah is here.”’ ‘What have I done wrong,’ asked Obadiah, ‘that you are handing your servant over to Ahab to be put to death? As surely as the LORD your God lives, there is not a nation or kingdom where my master has not sent someone to look for you. And whenever a nation or kingdom claimed you were not there, he made them swear they could not find you. But now you tell me to go to my master and say, “Elijah is here.” I don’t know where the Spirit of the Lord may carry you when I leave you. If I go and tell Ahab and he doesn’t find you, he will kill me. Yet I your servant have worshipped the LORD since my youth.’”

Obadiah was a good man, but he was overcome with fear, a fear that drove him to refuse Elijah’s request, which was an insult to both the integrity of God and Elijah, God’s special messenger.

It is similar to the fear some have about baptism in the Holy Spirit. They fail to understand that the Holy Spirit is sent to us from the loving hand

of our Heavenly Father. Why should we be fearful of accepting this precious love gift, this indispensable provision from God? People even resist speaking in tongues “in case it comes from an evil spirit.” Does our heavenly Father give serpents instead of fish, or scorpions instead of eggs? How this attitude must grieve God.

Fear is a Sign of the Times

Speaking of the approach of the end of the age, Jesus said that there would be “signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea” (Luke 21:25).

We need to be ready for these times of shaking in order to prove that we are part of that which cannot be shaken. That which cannot be shaken is the kingdom of God, which includes the immovable church of the Living God, made up of the ‘sons of the kingdom’. We are an integral part of an impregnable church, and so fear should not be a characteristic of us.

Confusion, a major cause of anxiety, often comes out of divided loyalties. We need to be a people totally committed to the kingdom of God and allow Him to deal with fears and despair which are not of that kingdom.

God Commands us to Not be Afraid

Fear is not an option for us! God speaks against all worry, anxiety and fear. In Philippians 4:6 we read: “Do not be anxious about *anything*.” That’s an all-embracing blanket statement for whatever could cause worry! So worrying and being anxious is, to put it bluntly, an act of disobedience.

I have known many who have adequate finances for the immediate future but who constantly live in dread that in the distant future they may be in need. But as someone once said, “A need is not a need until you need it.” And Jesus put it like this:

“Do not be anxious for tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own” (Matthew 6:34, NASB).

“Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? ... So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall

we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them” (Matthew 6:27, 31-32).

Jesus was saying that worry is of no help at all! Our source of provision is a God who cares for us, and whose mercies are new every morning. God has given us the ability to cope with each day at a time. Or, as someone put it, today is the tomorrow we worried about yesterday.

God’s Antidote to Fear

Let me close this chapter with four ‘spoonfuls of medicine’.

The first spoonful: “The fear of the Lord”

Or, to put it another way, carrying a sense of God’s awesome, gracious presence, at all times and in all circumstances.

Isaiah understood the importance of the fear of the LORD. He declared: “The LORD is exalted, for he dwells on high; he will fill Zion with justice and righteousness. He will be the sure foundation for your times, a rich store of salvation and wisdom and knowledge; the fear of the LORD is the key to this treasure” (Isaiah 33:5-6).

So many of the Bible’s wonderful promises begin with the phrase “the fear of the LORD”. For instance:

“The man who fears the LORD ... will abide in prosperity, and his descendants will inherit the land. The secret of the LORD is for those who fear Him and He will make them know His covenant” (Psalm 25:12-14, NASB).

“How great is your goodness, which you have stored up for those who fear you, which you bestow in the sight of men on those who take refuge in you” (Psalm 31:19).

“The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them. Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the man who takes refuge in him. Fear the LORD you his saints, for those who fear him lack nothing” (Psalm 34:7-9).

“He provides food for those who fear him; he remembers his covenant for ever” (Psalm 111:5).

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 9:10).

“The fear of the LORD adds length to life” (Proverbs 10:27).

“In the fear of the LORD there is strong confidence” (Proverbs 14:2, NASB).

“Humility and the fear of the LORD bring wealth and honour and life” (Proverbs 22:4).

Let me conclude this list with a quote from ‘The Living Bible’:

“Praise the Lord! For all who fear God and trust in him are blessed beyond expression. Yes, happy is the man who delights in doing his commands. His children shall be honoured everywhere, for good men’s sons have a special heritage. He himself shall be wealthy, and his good deeds will never be forgotten. When darkness overtakes him, light will come bursting in. He is kind and merciful – and all goes well for the generous man who conducts his business fairly. Such a man will not be overthrown by evil circumstances. God’s constant care of him will make a deep impression on all who see it. He does not fear bad news, nor live in dread of what may happen. For he is settled in his mind that Jehovah will take care of him. That is why he is not afraid, but can calmly face his foes. He gives generously to those in need. His deeds will never be forgotten. He shall have influence and honour. Evil-minded men will be infuriated when they see all this; they will gnash their teeth in anger and slink away, their hopes thwarted” (Psalm 112: 1-8).

Isn’t that good news!

The second spoonful: the peace of God

How often we miss out on the peace of God simply because we do not ask for it! Yet God promises that if we make known to Him our requests, with prayer, supplication and thanksgiving, not only will He answer our prayers, but “the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:7). Isn’t this so simple!? Even a little child can understand and do this.

The third spoonful: seek first God’s kingdom

Jesus promised that if we would “seek first his kingdom and his righteousness” that God would take care of our daily needs such as food and clothing. Jesus told his disciples: “So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we

eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own” (Matthew 6:31-34).

The fourth spoonful: God’s perfect love!

We read in 1 John 4:18, “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.”

When we are tempted to fear, we need to enjoy a good dose of God’s love! Remember that love spoken of in the Scriptures and demonstrated at the Cross; remember that love manifested in your own life on countless occasions in the past; call on the Holy Spirit to fill you with that love again.

Chapter 4

Guarding our Heart from Bitterness

I have met people for whom jealousy, or a sense of unfairness and injustice, is like a stranglehold around their throat. I have encountered people who were afflicted with terminal illness or whose loved one was suffering, and they have become embittered. They appear unreasonable. They seem to view the whole of life in negative terms. Complaints and criticism constantly pour out of them. People say of them that they have a “critical spirit”. They are certainly not ‘happy campers’!

Bitter or Better?

Listen to what the psalmist said about himself: “When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was like a brute beast before you” (Psalm 73:21-22). How did he come to find himself in this bitter state of affairs? The answer is found in verse three of the Psalm: “For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.”

On the other hand I have had the privilege of meeting people whose response to similar circumstances is a living testimony to God’s faithfulness and loving kindness. Instead of bitter words they communicated love and tenderness. Instead of anger, their eyes fairly sparkled with joy. Later in this chapter you will meet Rebecca Petrie who was initially paralysed from the neck down and suffering intense pain in the whole of her head and who felt a total loss of dignity. But Deborah, a close friend of Rebecca, could say this: “Rebecca’s heart is in such a precious place and her eyes communicate the love of the Lord to everyone who is taking care of her.”

This is another report from a lady called Denise addressed to Paul, Rebecca's husband: "Here is what happened last night. The doctor who is head of the Intensive Care Unit came to see Rebecca. After examining her he sat down and looked at her closely. 'You always have a beautiful smile', he said. Rebecca just smiled! Then he looked more intense. 'You are one of the most seriously ill patients in ICU, but *vous êtes le soleil ici* ("you are the sunshine here").' Rebecca mouthed: 'Thank you very much; that's very kind.' But the doctor insisted: 'I'm not saying this to be kind. I'm saying it because it is the truth. You are really the sunshine here.'" Denise signed off her report with the simple word, 'Wow!'

Reasons We Experience Trouble

Without appearing to be simplistic, let me offer seven reasons why a believer experiences trouble:

1. To bring us back from the brink

In Job 33:29-30 we read: "God does all these things to a man – twice, even three times – to turn back his soul from the pit, that the light of life may shine on him." In Psalm 119:67 the Psalmist testifies: "Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word."

In other words, God may bring trouble our way in order to bring us back from even greater trouble! He loves us too much just to let us keep drifting on regardless.

2. That we may share His holiness

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews says, "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).

God's discipline is for our good then: to demonstrate to us that which is wrong, but also to nudge us forward into that which is righteous and fruitful.

3. *To help us make a proper response to Him*

In Psalm 119:71 we read: “It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.”

Rather like a child being trained to respond properly by the loving discipline of its parents, so God uses troubles and circumstances to teach us how to respond correctly to Him.

4. *To prevent us from trusting in ourselves*

Probably more than any other person in the whole Bible, Paul had a healthy understanding why he experienced trouble. In 2 Corinthians 1:8-9 we get an amazing insight into what he had seen: “We, do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.”

The following is the testimony of David Marchment (former senior pastor at Basingstoke Community Church) who, at the time of writing, is still battling with leukaemia:

“For some time I had been feeling very tired, but it was finally some chest pains in October 1999 that convinced me to seek medical opinion. Initially it was discovered that I had an infected aortic valve, which could potentially break away from the heart, and was therefore life threatening. I would need a replacement valve as soon as possible. Late that night I was visited in the Coronary Care Unit by a haematology consultant who came to tell me I had a further life-threatening condition, which had become apparent through the blood tests that had been taken. Within a couple of days it was confirmed that I had acute lymphoblastic leukaemia, which would require immediate treatment.

“What I thought was going to be simply a quick check-over turned into months of hospitalisation, much of it in isolation, with heavy doses of chemotherapy, steroids, antibiotics, radiotherapy etc. I was admitted to the Royal Brompton Hospital, London, in April 2000 for the heart valve replacement and then within a couple of weeks went to the Royal Marsden

Hospital in Surrey for a stem-cell transplant. Both procedures went exceptionally well and for about a year I was seemingly free from the leukaemia.

“I was getting back into a fairly normal work routine as part of the leadership team of Basingstoke Community Churches, when two infections in quick succession, and the resultant blood tests and bone marrow tests, revealed that the leukaemia had returned with a vengeance. The only treatment available, other than ongoing chemotherapy, was a highly risky un-related bone marrow transplant which neither Hazel, my wife, nor I felt happy to pursue. This means that all that can be offered to me medically is further chemotherapy to sustain my life for ‘a season’ ”.

A few months later, in January 2002 David wrote: “I am still being treated with steroids and chemotherapy and I am recovering from shingles and some very nasty post-herpetic neuralgia, which is proving to be the most painful thing I have ever encountered.

“However, our trust continues to be steadfast in our miracle-working God to whom we look daily for his strength and enabling to persevere. It has been very humbling to be the recipients of so much prayer and support, and as a family we can testify to God’s amazing grace, which has time and time again kept us in that place of peace and joy! Our confidence and trust has always been in God’s healing power and it is to Him we look daily for strength and provision. We tell the doctors that the age of miracles is not over, not because it’s a cliché, but because we believe it! We are so blessed by your loving prayer support and again thank you if you feel able to persevere with us.”

Here is a man and his family who have truly been learning to trust in God and not in themselves, despite – or perhaps because of – the most challenging of circumstances.

And here’s another story telling the same message.

On October 5th 2001, I received an email requesting urgent prayer for Rebecca Petrie, whom I mentioned earlier. The e-mail said: “Rebecca fell (or possibly passed out) yesterday down the stairs at her house. She had been praying with a few ladies and was coming down the stairs with a tray in her hands. She broke her neck at the second vertebra. She has no feeling or

movement in her upper body, arms, or hands at present. She has slight movement in her feet and legs, but only slight feeling in her left foot. She is having great difficulty breathing, and after vomiting said she felt a terrible strange feeling. Rebecca was unconscious and not breathing when Paul got to her. One of the ladies who was there is a nurse and she began CPR and Paul started mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. He believes they saved her life. She began to breath in a very laboured fashion before the emergency people arrived. She remained unconscious until after arriving at the hospital.”

The following day I received another e-mail that said they had discovered that the movement in her legs was non-intentional. The message continued: “She is now, however, not able to speak and so has no means of communication. If in distress, she cannot push a button, speak out, or indicate in any way her need. For the children and I this was very difficult. We cannot help her because we have no way of knowing her needs. She is locked in a body that doesn’t feel or move, and now can’t speak. Please pray with us that she will quickly be able to breath on her own.”

And then Paul made one of the most moving and profound declarations it has ever been my privilege to hear. “As the children and I prayed together, I knew that though I couldn’t hear her, the Father could; that though I didn’t know her needs, the Father did; that though the hospital limits the amount of time I can be with her, He is always there. I prayed that she would flee the exterior confines and conflicts of that precious body, and run to the place, in her heart, where she communes with Him – to find her real home in Him. Only He can be what she needs. No matter how desperately I want to help her, only He can now. I’ve never known such helplessness, such dependence – or such knowledge that He will be all to her that she needs Him to be.”

Whatever Satan wanted to sow in Paul’s heart to turn him bitter and resentful towards God, Paul, by his faith declaration, dealt with the matter right there.

Paul continued: “The doctors assure us that this will be a long process. And I trust it will be a successful one. One day this will be history, a memory. And she will be walking, active, living and serving again.”

5. *To minister effectively to others*

This was something that the Apostle Paul discovered through his own hard experiences in life: that as we learn to find God in our own times of trouble, so we are equipped to help others find God in theirs. He summed it up like this: “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God” (2 Corinthians 1:3-5).

6. *To make us more fruitful*

The promise of Jesus was that the Father’s ‘pruning’ of our lives is not harsh or uncaring, but purposeful, in order that we might bring forth more fruit for Him. Jesus put it like this: “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. 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 15:1-2).

7. *To conform us to the image of God’s Son*

In that great passage in Romans where Paul speaks of God taking hold of everything and working it all together for his good purpose, he tells us the purpose of this: “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers” (Romans 8:28-29).

Only the Holy Spirit can help us to bow our hearts before God’s throne and say with Paul, “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:7-10).

A Final Story

Let me conclude with a touching and most compelling story, drawn from an article in the Spring 2001 issue of the Prairie Bible Institute's magazine.

In 1921, a Swedish missionary couple named David and Svea Flood, together with another couple, the Ericksons, settled to N'dolera, a remote village in the heart of the former Belgian Congo. Living in primitive mud huts, their contact with the nearest hostile villagers was limited to a young lad who sold them chickens and eggs twice a week. Their only success was the conversion of this young boy, who was led to Christ by Svea. Apart from this one bright ray of encouragement, everything else was dark and depressing.

After repeated bouts of Malaria, the Ericksons had had enough and returned to the main mission station. The Floods were alone and weakened by repeated bouts of Malaria. Then Svea became pregnant. Nine months later, a little girl was born. They named her Aina; but the exhausting delivery was too much for Svea's frail body, and within seventeen days she was dead.

This was just too much for David Flood. Deeply scandalized with God, he buried his young wife and took off to join the Ericksons. Handing over his child to them, he bitterly remarked, "I'm going back to Sweden. I've lost my wife and I can't take care of this baby. God has ruined my life." Abandoning his child, his God and his calling, he returned to Sweden, a broken man. Eight months later disaster struck again: both the Ericksons were taken ill and died. Baby Aina was turned over to some American missionaries who adjusted her Swedish name to "Aggie" and eventually brought her back to the United States where they decided to remain.

The years passed by until, as a young woman, Aggie fell in love and married a man called Dewey Hurst. In time, Aggie's husband became president of a Christian college in the city of Seattle. One day, quite unsolicited, a Swedish religious magazine appeared in her mailbox. Unable to read the words, she nonetheless scanned the pages. Suddenly a photo stopped her cold. Set in primitive surroundings was a grave with a white cross on which was inscribed the name 'Svea Flood'. Aggie's heart began to quicken with

excitement. Finding a Swedish-speaking faculty member, she asked what it said.

The article told of the arrival of missionaries to N'dolera long ago, the birth of a white baby, the death of the young mother, the one little African boy who had been led to Christ, and of how he had grown up and finally persuaded the chief to let him build a school in the once-hostile village. Gradually he won all his students to Christ, and the children in turn led their parents to Christ, even the chief who had so bitterly opposed them and refused them admission to the village. There were now six hundred Christian believers in that one village – and all because of the sacrifice of David and Svea Flood.

For the Hursts' twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, the college sent them on vacation to Sweden where Aggie sought out her real father. David Flood had remarried, fathered four more children, and generally dissipated his life with alcohol. He had recently suffered a stroke. Still bitter, he had one rule in his family: "Never mention the name of God – because God took everything from me."

She walked into the squalid apartment, littered with liquor bottles and approached the seventy-three-year-old man lying in a dirty, rumpled bed.

"Papa?" she said tentatively.

He turned away and began to cry. "Aina," he said. "I never meant to give you away."

"It's all right Papa," she replied, hugging him gently. "God took care of me."

The man instantly stiffened. The tears stopped.

"God forgot all of us. Our lives have been like this because of Him." He turned his face to the wall but Aggie continued, undaunted.

"Papa, you didn't go to Africa in vain. Mama didn't die in vain. The little boy who you led to the Lord won that whole village to Jesus. The seed you planted just kept on growing and growing. Today six hundred Africans are serving the Lord because you were faithful to the call of God. Papa, Jesus loves you. He never hated you."

The old man turned back to look into his daughter's eyes. His body relaxed and by the end of the afternoon David Flood had come back to the God that he had hated for so many years.

A few weeks later at a conference in London, the Hurst's listened to a report from Zaire (the former Belgian Congo). The superintendent of the national church, representing some 11,000 baptised believers, spoke of the gospel's spread in his nation. Afterwards Aggie asked him if he had ever heard of David and Svea Flood. "Yes Madam," he replied, "Svea led me to Christ. I was the boy who brought food to your parents before you were born. To this day your mother's grave and memory are honoured by us all." He embraced her in a long sobbing hug, and said, "You must come to Africa to see; your mother is the most famous person in our history."

And that is exactly what Aggie and her husband did. They were met by cheering throngs of villagers as the pastor escorted them to her mother's white cross where Aggie knelt to pray and give thanks. Later that day in the church, the pastor read from John 12:24: "I tell you the truth, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds." He followed this with a confident declaration: "Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy" (Psalm 126:5).

Sometimes we will experience troubles for which there seems no logical explanation. William Cowper, who suffered from long bouts of depression, wrote: "God moves in a mysterious way ... Blind unbelief is sure to err and scan his works in vain". Remember, Svea Flood had no knowledge in this life of the wonderful fruit that would ensue from her faithful sowing of the gospel seed. Like her, we too have to learn to rest in the knowledge that God is sovereign and that He knows what He's about.

Let me conclude with three key Scriptures:

"Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life" (Proverbs 4:23).

"For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:20).

"For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us, an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).