

**PATIENCE
MAKES
THE MAN!**

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Meet the Author...

The Author was born to devoted Christian parents in Nazareth, a village highly influenced by English missionaries, in South Tamilnadu, India. He was born again at 16 in 1962 while a fresher in College, and since then has been a sincere student of the Bible. He graduated in building engineering from the Madras University in 1968, and earned his Master's in the Indian Institute of Technology, Chennai in 1970. After teaching for a while in the Regional Engineering College, Tiruchy, Tamilnadu, he worked as a Hospital Engineer in the Christian Medical College, founded by Dr. Ida Scudder in Vellore, till 1975.

The students ministry Brother Stanley started in 1963 grew into a nationwide revival cum missinonary evangelistic organisation known as Blessing Youth Mission in 1971. It now works in 13 States of India through over 300 fulltime staff and hundreds of youth outreach teams. Brother Stanley's wife, Dr. Lilian, is a medical missionary working among the poorest of the poor. Their only child and daughter, Evangeline, is a professional Christian Counsellor working as a Psychologist with her technician husband in CMC, Vellore.

Stanley is a profound Bible teacher, powerful revival preacher, passionate missions challenger, pert youth mobilizer, practical trainer, prolific writer and a pleasant friend. Several of those influenced by his life and ministry are pastors, missionaries and leaders in various parts of the world. His fruits abide. Besides giving administrative leadership to the Blessing Youth Mission, he alongwith his wife served in pioneer mission fields also. They have travelled worldwide encouraging God's people in Conventions and Conferences. Their books have been translated to over 10 Indian languages. In appreciation of his significant contribution to the Body of Christ, the Hindustan Bible Institute, Chennai, conferred on him the honorary degree of Doctor of Divinity in 2000.

Stanley underwent an open heart surgery in 1996 but enjoys good health now. After retiring from Blessing Youth Mission as a staff in 2003, he now spends more time in studying and writing than in preaching. He often thanks God for enabling him to pour out the best part and the most youthful years of his life in the cause of the Kingdom. His most favourite Bible text is 1 Corinthians 15:10, "I am what I am by the grace of God!"

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1

Patience makes the Man!

MAN lost Paradise because of impatience. It is the patience of God that keeps giving man opportunities again and again to come back to Him and restore whatever he lost.

No other religious literature teaches and illustrates patience as the Bible does. It highlights the rewards of patience and remorse of impatience—

B Patriarch Abraham complicated matters and delayed the fulfilment of God's promises because of his impatience.

B Moses' impatience cost him entry into the Land of Promise.

B Jacob's shortcuts and schemes were ultimately to his disadvantage.

B Joseph's patience for many long years was rewarded with glorious exaltation.

B The young widow Ruth won the heart of Boaz because she waited patiently according to her mother-in-law's instructions.

B King Saul lost his crown and anointing because of impatience.

B David did not scheme but waited patiently for his time and God made him the most celebrated King of Israel.

B Elisha patiently served Prophet Elijah and received the mantle of double anointing.

B Nehemiah patiently continued his work in spite of threats and discouragements, and completed the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem for the glory of God and the good of His people.

B The patient trust and confidence of Mordecai on the God of Salvation brought joy and honour to the Jews.

B Who does not know of the patience of Job? (See Chapter 7).

B The Book of Psalms is a treatise on waiting on God.

B The Book of Proverbs warns against quick riches and shortcuts to promotion.

B Daniel's patience in prayer brought splendid revelations of the endtime.

B Prophet Hosea encourages us to keep on seeking the Lord "until" He showers righteousness on us.

B Because of impatience Prophet Jonah was out of step with the God of patience.

B As we come to the New Testament, the patience of Jesus, as we observe in the Gospels, is amazing (See Chapter 6). He was patience personified. No wonder the most beloved disciple called himself as the “companion of the patience of Jesus” (Rev 1:9).

B The apostles in their letters and visits exhorted believers to be patient in tribulation and relationships. They quoted the Old Testament prophets and Job to illustrate patience in practice (Js 5:10,11). They put patience above all virtues (Js 1:4).

There will be no Bible history if God had not been patient. He never gave up on man. The repentance of every sinner celebrates the patience of God in the portals of Heaven.

No other virtue like patience needs so much patience to cultivate it. When we lose patience we lose everything. All the good things we have done can be destroyed by one act of impatience. To be patient is more difficult in these days than in the yester years. We save lot of time in doing things but waste more time than the previous generations.

The Blessing Youth Mission had declared 2003 as the Year of Patience. I had the privilege of writing the lead articles on this theme for the Mission’s monthly, *Blessing*. Never in my life was my patience tested so much as during this year. Nothing short of a furnace experience gave birth to the articles on this subject which are compiled here. I recognised the blessedness of brokenness more than ever. Several readers of the *Blessing* magazine wrote to me, “ So far you were serving us fruit, but this year it’s juice!”

The next Chapter explains how each of the manifestations of the fruit of love is linked to patience. The third Chapter is a call never to give up the efforts for character development. The meaning and the importance of waiting on God are explained in Chapter four. The fifth Chapter tells us why and how we must spend unhurried time with the Bible. The sixth Chapter titled, *What to speak when you Suffer*, is lessons from the confessions of Job during the dark hours of his life. The patience of Jesus outlined in Chapter seven is for us to emulate. The last Chapter is for those in Christian work. It is unlikely that you understand everything in this book in the first reading. Read and reread it with patience! You will be convinced that it is patience that makes the man!

I dedicate this book to the God of Patience. I thank Him for putting me with difficult persons and placing me in tough situations without which I could not have learnt what I have written here.

2

Love is Patient!

THE famous Love Chapter in the Bible, even 1 Corinthians 13, lists fifteen characteristics of love (vv 4-7). Most interestingly the very first manifestation is patience. “Love is patient!” I believe that the order of mention in the Scripture is also inspired by God. Shall we say that patience is the crown of virtues and the mark of perfection? (Js 1:4). Somewhere I read—

Love is...

Slow to suspect	-	Quick to trust
Slow to condemn	-	Quick to justify
Slow to offend	-	Quick to defend
Slow to expose	-	Quick to shield

Slow to reprimand - Quick to forbear
Slow to belittle - Quick to appreciate
Slow to demand - Quick to give
Slow to provoke - Quick to help
Slow to resent - Quick to forgive

When we talk about love, the passage that comes to our mind next to 1 Corinthians 13 is Galatians 5:22,23 where apostle Paul lists out the fruit of the Spirit. It is called the eightfold manifestation of love. Patience is one of them. My recent meditation of this passage tells me that each of the seven expressions of LOVE—Joy, Peace, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness, Gentleness, Self-control—is linked to PATIENCE. In other words, without patience we cannot mature and blossom in any of the fruits. This article is a practical study of this connection.

1. Patience & Joy

We often think that the absence of trouble is what happiness in life is. It's erroneous. The Bible calls us to "rejoice in hope, being patient in trouble" (Rom 12:12). The shame and suffering Jesus experienced could not disturb His joy, because He endured them with patience and hope (Heb 12:2).

We don't find happiness by jumping out of difficult situations. The secret of

happiness is to learn to accept the impossible, to do without the indispensable, and to bear the intolerable. Happiness comes when we stop wailing about the troubles we have, and offer thanks for all the troubles we don't have! "Weeping may go on all night, but joy comes with the morning" (Psa 30:5b). We miss happiness if we are not patient enough until sunrise. Life is a series of tunnels. No tunnel is without an exit. Impatience makes the time between entry and exit miserable. When Christ says, "Let's go over to the other side," we will not sink in the middle (Lk 8:22-25). It is of course natural to be terrified by the towering waves. But when we realize who is with us and what is promised, we can be patient to witness the end. We will not then lose the joy of the Lord.

Folks who are impatient with others not only kill their own joy by irritation but also that of others. We are to remember that we are made different from one another. If we possess anything extra or special over others, it is not of our own but a gift of God. Apostle Paul challenged the boastful Corinthians, "What makes you better than anyone else? What do you have that God has not given you? And if all you have is from God, why boast as though you have accomplished something

on your own?” (1 Cor 4:7). The Pharisee with the better-than-thou attitude returned from the Temple without any joy! (Lk 18:10-14).

To be able to find joy in another’s joy is the secret of happiness. The first reference to sadness is made in the Bible about the fellow-prisoners of Joseph (Gen 40:6-8). Interestingly it was the Joseph known for patience who cheered them up! We are told that it takes sixtyfour facial muscles to make a frown, but only thirteen to make a smile! Why work overtime?

Paul’s patience in his imprisonment has given us an Epistle of Joy—“Philippians.” He talks about “confidence” (1:6,25), “expectation” (1:20), “trust” (2:19,24), “hope” (2:23), “pressing on” (3:12,14), “waiting” (3:20), “contentment” (4:11), and “fullness” (4:18). Precious patience! Next to Jesus in the New Testament no one else suffered more than Paul. Yet the rule of his life was “sorrowful, yet always rejoicing” (2 Cor 6:10). This attitude made others rich and rejoice! See how he could cheer up the sailors when their ship was running aground near the Isle of Malta (Acts 27:21-26, 33-37). Impatience of leaders discourages the followers.

Happy homes are built with blocks of patience. A husband impatient with his wife’s cooking kills her enthusiasm. A wife impatient with her husband’s imperfections hinders his growth and development. A parent impatient with the casualness of the children spoils their jubilation. Children impatient with the parents’ strictness worries them. It takes patience to appreciate domestic bliss; volatile spirits prefer unhappiness. For every minute you are angry, you lose sixty seconds of happiness! If there’s tug-of-war at home, let the rope be the love of God!

2. Patience & Peace

Turbulence is the inevitable lot of impatient people. Even among Christian believers very few enjoy the peace of God “like a river.” The Bible promises “perfect” peace to those whose mind is “stayed” or fixed steadily on God (Isa 26:3). The Hebrew original for “perfect peace” is “Peace! Peace!” The condition to enjoy such a peace is patiently “trusting” in the Lord. “Whoever believes will not act hastily” (Isa 28:16b).

If we are not enjoying peace in our own hearts, we cannot live in real peace with others. Social conflicts are invariably the result of unresolved inner conflicts in man. Being patient with God’s dealings

with us is the only way to maintain peace and keep agitation away. God is not obliged to give us explanations, nor can we understand them if He gives. Whether it is prayers, puzzles, pain or problems, God's answer more often than we think is, "Wait!" The peace of God "surpasses all understanding" (Phil 4:7). Which means, we can enjoy the peace of God in spite of problems. Staying put and being patient is the secret.

Even after celebrating Christmas for generations we are yet to understand its full message. "Glory to God in the highest!" — This is only one half of the message. The other side of the coin is, "And on earth peace, good will toward men!" (Lk 2:14). Making peace with God can be done in an instant. Enemies of God can become His children the next moment. Not so with our horizontal relationships. Building relationships with people and maintaining them means time and labour. Reconciliation with people is not a miracle like reconciliation with God. It involves self-denial and patience with others. We are admonished, "Do your part to live in peace with everyone, as much as possible" (Rom 12:18). In the pretext of this Bible verse we write off certain individuals too soon. We say they are impossible to live with. But most often the problem lies

with us only. The Bible tells us, "When the ways of people please the Lord, He makes even their enemies live at peace with them" (Prov 16:7).

Peace is rare because it is difficult and the process is time-consuming. A statistics says, "Less than 8% of the time since the beginning of recorded time has the world been entirely at peace. In a total of 3530 years, only 286 have been warless. 8000 treaties have been broken in this time." However the Lord Almighty has promised, "All the nations will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks... Everyone will live quietly in their own homes in peace and prosperity" (Mic 4:3,4). The destructive weapons will be converted into constructive tools. Battlefields will become harvest fields. We as God's people are to be coworkers with God in this ministry of reconciling man with man.

Peacemaking is not to start at national and international levels. It must begin in the family, the Church and the communities. Peacebreakers outnumber peacemakers. God detests anyone "who sows discord among brothers" (Prov 6:19b). A distinguished mark of a child of God is that he would be a peacemaker (Mt 5:9). Number one reason for murders, splits and divorces

is impatience. Let's make the prayer of St. Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) our daily plea before God—

Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace!
Where there's hatred...let me sow love.
Where there's injury...pardon.
Where there's doubt...faith.
Where there's despair...hope.
Where there's darkness...light.
Where there's sadness...joy.
O Divine Master,
Grant that I may not so much seek
To be consoled...as to console,
To be understood...as to understand,
To be loved...as to love.
For,
It's in giving...that we receive,
It's in pardoning...that we are pardoned,
It's in dying...that we are born to eternal life.

God has called us Christians to be salt and light, but we have lost our saltiness and brightness. Churches and Christian organisations have become the breeding ponds of hatred, rivalry and disunity. There's no scarcity for leadership training and management seminars. But "wherever there is jealousy and selfish ambition, there you will find confusion and every kind of evil" (Js 3:16). Peace will be absent if there is no "willingness to yield" (v 17). Christian committee meetings are no better than pandemoniac Assembly and Parliament sessions. The only difference

is that we begin with prayer and end with benediction! Patient listening is the secret of peace in planning meetings. After all, we know what we want to say; on the other hand, we don't know what the other person is going to say! Apostle James in his practical wisdom wrote, "My dear brothers and sisters, be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry. Your anger can never make things right in God's sight" (Js 1:19,20). James must have learnt it from King Solomon who penned centuries ago from his administrative experience, "Avoiding a fight is a mark of honour!" (Prov 20:3).

There are of course born-fighters. They do not know the "way of peace" (Rom 3:17). They can't sleep unless they provoke someone. To be victorious in such trying situations is to follow the Jesus' method of staying silent without speaking a word (Mt 27:12-14).

3. Patience & Kindness

The very next thing Paul says after "Love is Patient" is "Love is Kind!" (1 Cor 13:4a). Also in the list of the marks of God's servants, he mentions "kindness" immediately after "patience" (2 Cor 6:6). So also in the list of the fruits of the Spirit, "kindness" follows "patience" (Gal 5:22). Kindness is a language that the dumb can speak and the deaf can hear

and understand. Some folks are supernaturally endowed, like Mother Teresa (1910-1997), with the gift of “showing mercy with cheerfulness” (Rom 12:8d). For most of us, kindness is a virtue that has to be cultivated. H.W. Longfellow (1807-1882), an American poet, put it this way—

Kind hearts are the gardens,
Kind thoughts are the roots,
Kind words are the flowers,
Kind deeds are the fruits.

That’s why we read that Jesus “grew” in favour with men (Lk 2:52).

Kindness is such an important virtue that John the Baptist equated the “fruits of repentance” to acts of kindness. He told the people, “Be kind to the have-nots!” To the tax-collectors he said, “Don’t overload the tax-payers!” He admonished the soldiers, “Don’t chargesheet anyone falsely!” (Lk 3:8-14). The greatest thing a man can do for his Heavenly Father is to be kind to His children! Jesus has taught us, “You must be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate” (Lk 6:36). The problem with us is that we tend to be kind only to those who are kind to us. But as for God, He is “kind to the unthankful and to those who are wicked” (v 35b). We must be kind to the unkind people; they need it the most! This is where patience is challenged.

There can be hundred-and-one reasons why we need not shower kindness on certain individuals. But Joseph of the Old Testament and Joseph of the New Testament stand before us to shout into our ears that it is never right to be unkind to anyone. What was the need for Joseph to be so kind to his brothers for all that they had done to him? (Gen 50:21). Why did the next Joseph hesitate to publicly disgrace his pregnant fiancée? (Mt 1:19). The law was after all on his side (Dt 24:1). These were men who had experienced God’s kindness in their own lives. That was the more-than-enough reason for them to be kind to the undeserving. The story of the unkind debtor Jesus narrated shames us and warns us sternly. When the debtor pleaded with the King, “Be patient with me,” his debt of millions of dollars was instantly forgiven out of kindness. But he grabbed the throat of his fellow-servant who had owed him just a few thousand dollars, eventhough he also pleaded, “Be patient with me!” The story ends with the moral, “Should we not be merciful to others as God is to us?” (Mt 18:21-35). Apostle James put it bluntly: “There will be no mercy for you if you have not been merciful to others. But if you have been merciful, then God’s mercy toward you will win out over His judgment against you” (Js 2:13).

Being too busy to be kind is both unhealthy and unchristian. We speak so much about the Good Samaritan but walk with the shoes of the Priest and the Levite! (Lk 10:30-35). I guess the Priest was hurrying to the Temple to offer sacrifices, and the Levite was following him to count the offerings! We are too busy if we are too busy to be kind! It is terrifying to realize that our acts of kindness will decide our eternal destiny (Mt 25:34-46). I read on a bumper sticker, "Beware the barrenness of busyness!" We are not to deny kindness even to strangers (Lev 19:33,34). Hospitality is included here (Heb 13:2). Abraham never realized he was entertaining angels when he was showing kindness to three strangers (Gen 18:1-8). Satan does not appear in black or angels in white, to our naked eyes!

Speaking kindly is an art to be learnt. Everyone in this world is hurting. Kind words are like medicine. If someone were to pay you Rs. 10/- for every kind word you ever spoke and collect Rs. 5/- for every unkind word, would you be rich or poor? Speak kind words and you will hear kind echoes! The person who sows seeds of kindness enjoys a perpetual harvest. There's a Malayan Proverb: "One can pay back the loan of gold, but one dies forever in debt to those who are

kind!" Acts of kindness are not to be broadcasted (Mt 6:1-4). He who has conferred kindness should be silent; he who has received one should speak of it.

Kindness begets kindness, but be patient if your kindness is not positively reciprocated. Pray for a short memory as to all unkindness. Someone said, "Two things stand like stone: Kindness in another's troubles; Courage in one's own!" Our disappointments are due to over-expectations. Blessed is he who expects nothing; for he shall not be disappointed! Gilbert Chesterton encourages kind folks saying, "The man who expects nothing sees redder roses than common men can see, and greener grass, and a more startling sun!" Kindness is like snow; it makes everything it covers beautiful.

4. Patience & Goodness

I consider Genesis 6:5 the saddest statement in the entire Scripture: "The Lord observed the extent of the people's wickedness, and He saw that all their thoughts were consistently and totally evil." David lamented centuries later : "All have turned away from God; all have become corrupt. No one does good, not even one!" (Psa 14:3). His son Solomon echoed, "There is not a single person in all the earth who is always good and never sins" (Eccl 7:20).

Apostle Paul summarised these Old Testament statements in his Epistle to the Roman Christians, “No one is good— not even one... For all have sinned!” (Rom 3:10,23).

This is the picture of the unregenerate man. At spiritual rebirth, God puts His Spirit into us to indwell. The residential ministry of the Holy Spirit in the life of every child of God is to transform him and make him like the very Son of God. This of course does not happen overnight. That’s why the godly virtues produced in our new life are called the “fruit” of the Spirit. Who has heard of instant fruit-bearing? Stripping us off our badness layer by layer and enabling us to express the goodness of God is the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit from day one of our conversion to Christ. This does not happen apart from our cooperation. That’s why we are called “to put off the old man... and put on the new man” (Eph 4:22-24). Because this is a long-drawn process, many have stopped in the middle due to impatience. (The next Chapter deals with this subject at length.)

When we talk about the virtue of goodness, there are two aspects—being good, and doing good. The first one leads to the other. Good people will do good, although

all those who do good may not be good people. This was the logic of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: “A good tree produces good fruit, and a bad tree produces bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot produce good fruit” (Mt 7:17,18). Goodness is a fruit of walking with God. God’s goodness is the root of all goodness. Psalmist David confessed to God, “You are my Master! My goodness is nothing apart from You” (Psa 16:2). I believe this is the main reason why God testified of David that he was a man after His own heart (Acts 13:22b). Oftentimes David exclaimed, “O Lord, how great is Your goodness!” (Psa 31:19a).

God’s goodness is associated with His patience. When He passed in front of Moses He proclaimed, “The Lord, the Lord God, ... longsuffering and abounding in goodness” (Ex 34:6). This proclamation was made when God instructed Moses to prepare two stone tablets like the first ones (v 1). It is the patience of God that manifests His goodness to us so He may give us a second chance! Referring to this nature of God, Paul rebuked the hardhearted, “Do you despise the riches of God’s goodness, tolerance and patience, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?” (Rom 2:4).

It was patience that enabled Jesus to do good to people all through His life. He was patient with folks in their slowness to understand. That was why He could continue to teach them (Lk 24:25-27). He was patient with the unbelief of people. That was why He could continue to heal them (Mt 17:17,18). He was patient with the thanklessness of the beneficiaries. That was why He could continue to bless the needy (Lk 17:17-19). He was patient with the forgetfulness of His disciples. That was why He continued to perform miracles for them (Mt 16:9,10). He was patient with the fearfulness of His associates. That was why He continued to encourage them (Mt 14:24-32). He was patient with the weakness of His disciples. That was why He could continue to support them (Lk 22:31-34).

We also cannot be good to people unless we are tolerant and patient. John Wesley (1703-1791) gives this excellent piece of advice—

Do all the good you can,
By all the means you can,
In all the ways you can,
In all the places you can,
At all the times you can,
To all the people you can,
As long as you can!

Goodness should not stay as an abstract virtue, but be expressed tangibly. Look at these examples of doing good to people: Helping an aged person; Destroying a letter written in anger; Offering the apology that saves a friendship; Stopping a scandal that's wrecking a reputation; Guiding a teenager to find himself; Taking time to show your mother consideration; Accepting the judgment of God on any question; Etc. There's no limit to the amount of good a man can do if he doesn't care who gets the credit. We need "good" men like Barnabas who can be patient with unsteady candidates like John Mark (Acts 11:24; 15:37,38). Otherwise the Church would not get strong men like Paul (Acts 11:25,26). Let Diotrepheses be converted into Demetriuses! (3 Jn 9-12). A little girl prayed, "Dear God, make all bad people good, and all good people nice!" Shall we all say, "Amen!"

5. Patience & Faithfulness

The KJV translation of the word "faith" in Galatians 5:22 is not correct. It is actually "faithfulness." The modern versions render this word correctly.

Nothing in life can take the place of faithfulness and dependability. Brilliance, genius and competence are all subservient to the quality of faithfulness. Take for

example, marriage. Faithfulness plus dutifulness is the ideal. But faithfulness minus dutifulness is better than dutifulness minus faithfulness (Mal 2:13-16). God's basic desire is that we stay faithful wherever He has called us to whatever responsibility. Moses was faithful to God "as a servant;" Jesus was faithful to Him "as a Son" (Heb 3:5,6). Whatever task God assigns to us is not because He has "found" us faithful but He has "counted" us faithful (1 Tim 1:12). We are to live up to it. The five-talented servant earned another five. The two-talented servant earned another two. Both of them were called "faithful" and rewarded equally, because each of them was 100% faithful with what they were entrusted with (Mt 25:19-23). It is said that the master of these servants returned to settle accounts with them "after a long time" (v19). The patient and consistent labour of the servants is obvious.

Faithfulness at the beginning of a work or a course is not difficult. When the initial excitement wanes and the early enthusiasm waxes, it is not easy to maintain faithfulness unless we are patient and committed to consistency. God complained to Ephraim, "Your faithfulness is like a morning cloud, and like the early dew it goes away" (Hos 6:4). The servant

who lost his patience because of the delay in the return of his master began to mistreat his fellow servants and became unfaithful in his responsibilities. He had his end in the lake of fire (Mt 24:48-51). Only if we are "faithful until death," we will receive the crown of life (Rev 2:10c).

From the very beginning of our Christian walk and work, we must learn to keep our eyes on the final day of rewards and not keep looking for immediate blessings and benefits. This is how we can be patient amidst all odds and stay faithful till the end. A lone missionary was preaching in the cold wilds of Alaska. An explorer asked him why he was wasting his life in a dreary place like that? The missionary replied, "Results are not my business. I leave the results with God. I must be faithful and do my best for God. Someday results will come!"

The Book of Proverbs has a lot to tell us about faithfulness. Faithfulness among friends and colleagues is to conceal unpleasant matters. Impatience drives us to reveal secrets (Prov 11:13). Faithfulness in communication brings health to the persons involved (13:17). The test of faithfulness is whether by what we speak we refresh people "as snow in the heat of summer" (25:13). "A faithful witness does

not lie” (14:5). We don’t cook up stories or exaggerate matters. The “yes” of a faithful man means “yes,” and his “no” is “no!” He assumes responsibility not only for what information he passes on, but also for what impression he leaves, and with what intention. What he speaks is not only true but also the truth. Lasting friendship is the result of unwavering faithfulness. Here’s a challenging question: “Many will say they are loyal friends, but who can find one who is really faithful?” (20:6). Faithful friends don’t flatter each other (27:5,6). Those who are faithful in business will labour patiently and tirelessly. They will not look for shortcuts for getting rich quick (28:20).

Faithfulness in money matters is incalculably important in the sight of God. Because the love of money is the root of all evil, God considers our faithfulness in financial dealings as the basic qualification to assume any spiritual responsibility. Jesus asks, “If you are unfaithful in worldly wealth, who will trust you with the true riches of Heaven?” (Lk 16:11). He concludes, “Unless you are faithful in small matters, you won’t be faithful in large ones” (v 10). Faithfulness in small things is the big thing! Faithfulness in money matters means several things: Not delay-

ing the repayment of loan; Prompt payment of taxes; Cheerful giving to God; Liberality in charity; Not accepting or giving bribe; and so on. Those in Christian ministry must be able to testify like Prophet Samuel (1 Sam 12:3-5) and Apostle Paul (Acts 20:33-35). Matters of dishonesty must be restituted as Zacchaeus volunteered (Lk 19:8).

If at any point of time, due to whatever reason, we stumble in faithfulness, we should not give up but resist the temptation to quit. The encouraging truth is that even if we become unfaithful, God remains faithful, because He cannot deny Himself (2 Tim 2:13). The very Name of our Elder Brother is “Faithful!” (Rev 19:11).

6. Patience & Gentleness

As I am writing these pages, I see one of my forty pigeons sitting on the window sill of the room upstairs. It’s white. How gentle and peaceful are its looks! I pray, “O Dovelike Spirit, take away my rudeness and roughness, and make me gentle like You and the lamblike Son of God!”

Gentleness or meekness and patience have often made a couplet in the Scriptures (Col 3:12; 1 Tim 6:11). Among the word pictures for “gentleness” in the Bible, two are prominent: One is that of a shep-

herd “gently leading the mother sheep with their young” (Isa 40:11c); the other is that of a mother “gently feeding and caring for her own children” (1 Thess 2:7b). When we decide to follow Jesus, He enrolls us in the School of Gentleness. He does not teach us from textbooks. As a role model He stands before us beckoning us, “Learn from Me, because I am humble and gentle” (Mt 11:29). When we take our eyes off Him, pride, arrogance, stubbornness, rudeness and the like take possession of us. We lose peace, patience and poise.

Isaac exemplified in gentleness in his patience with those who quarrelled with him over the wells (Gen 26:15-22). Gentleness yields. Later Jesus taught, “If anyone takes away your shirt, give him your coat, too!” (Mt 5:40). We wonder how this would be possible. Will not people take advantage of us? May be, but that’s how we can find “rest for our souls” (Mt 11:29). Did not David concerning Jesus sing prophetically, “I am a worm and not a man?” (Psa 26:6a).

Without a spirit of gentleness we cannot be patient with the faults of others. Apostle Paul admonished the Galatian Christians, “Dear brothers and sisters, if another Christian is overcome by some

sin, you who are godly should gently and humbly help that person back onto the right path” (Gal 6:1). One main reason why we must be patient with the faults of others is that they may have to be patient with ours! This is illustrated in the example of high priests. Hebrews 5:2, “Because he is human, he is able to deal gently with the people, though they are ignorant and wayward. For he is subject to the same weaknesses they have.” King David’s failures were unimaginable. God didn’t condone his sins but dealt with him redemptively. At the end of his life, he sang to God, “Your gentleness has made me great!” (2 Sam 22:36b). David had to pay heavily for his sin (Prov 6:29), but God’s generosity to him is seen in the choice of Bathsheba, among the wives of David, to be Solomon’s mother (2 Sam 12:24), eventhough centuries later Matthew wanted to still call her as Uriah’s wife (Mt 1:6). Solomon gratefully remembered his mother often in his Book of Proverbs (Prov 4:3; 1:8). Jesus does not break a bruised reed or quench a smoking flax (Mt 12:20).

A little boy cleaned up his fish tank and let four goldfish in. All of them died one after the other. He was wondering why. An expert discovered the problem. The boy had washed the tank with soap!

Sometimes in our zeal to clean up the lives of others, we unfortunately use “killer soaps”—condemnation, criticism, nagging, and fits of temper. We think we are doing right, but our harsh treatment is more than they can bear!

Gentleness is indispensable to those in leadership responsibilities. The temptation to crush the opposers with authority and power will always be there. Moses was a great leader. Matthew Henry (1662-1714) comments, “When God’s honour was affected, as in the case of the golden calf, Moses acted as a lion. When his own honour was touched, as in the matter of Aaron and Miriam backbiting him, he was mild as a lamb (Num 12:3).” He did not react but left the matter to God—“God heard it!” (v 12c). Being their apostle, Paul had every right to authoritatively address the Corinthian Christians when they were opposing him. But he wrote, “I, Paul, plead with you with the gentleness and meekness that Christ Himself would use” (2 Cor 10:1a).

Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892) has made this observation: “John Knox (Scottish Reformer, 1514-1572) did much, but he might perhaps have done more if he had a little love. Martin Luther (1483-1546) was a conqueror, but if he had sometimes

mixed a little mildness with it... he might have done more good than he did.” The motto of Christlike leadership is: “Behold, your King ... lowly!” (Mt 21:5). This call was given at His first advent. The same call comes to us on the eve of His second coming: “Let your gentleness be known to all men. The Lord is at hand” (Phil 4:5).

7. Patience & Self-control

We are exhorted to “add patience to self-control” (2 Pet 1:6). A 16th Century Bishop used to say, “Self-control is nine-tenths of Christianity!” Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865) observed, “Intemperance is one of the greatest—if not the greatest—of all evils known to mankind.” Solomon warned, “A person without self-control is as defenseless as a city with broken-down walls” (Prov 25:28). Uncontrolled temper is an ugly fruit of sin. It’s a wolf too ferocious for the flesh to tame. Our only hope is to let Christ transform our temper. Temperance is self-restraint in feelings, words and actions.

One of the paradoxical commandments in the New Testament is, “Be angry, and do not sin!” (Eph 4:26). I understand the meaning of this passage better from a modern paraphrase of the New Testament: “If you are angry, be sure that it is not

out of wounded pride or bad temper. Never go to bed angry—don't give the devil that sort of foothold." Wisdom says, "He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who conquers a city" (Prov 16:32). As a general rule, the angriest person in a controversy is the one who is wrong!

Tongue-control is supreme when we talk about self-control. "We all make many mistakes, but those who control their tongues can also control themselves in every other way" (Js 3:2). Solomon challenged, "Do you see a man hasty in his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him" (Prov 29:20). Someone prescribed, "When angry, count ten before speaking. When very angry, count one hundred and then don't speak!" No matter whether you are on the road or in an argument, when you begin to see red, STOP!

Faultfinding and slander are the worst plagues the Church of Jesus Christ is suffering with. We don't realize—

There's so much good in the worst of us,
And so much bad in the best of us,
That it ill becomes any of us
To find fault with the rest of us!

How we react to slander and abuse measures how Christian we are! Attacks

and counterattacks are unproductive. David said, "I am deaf to all their threats. I am silent before them as one who cannot speak. I choose to hear nothing, and I make no reply ... I prayed, O Lord my God, Don't let my enemies rejoice at my downfall" (Psa 38: 13-16). When Shimei cursed David, one of David's men wanted to cut off Shimei's head. But David restrained him with the words, "If the Lord has told him to curse me, who am I to stop him?" (2 Sam 16:5-10).

As we get closer and closer to the end of the age, there will be more and more "slandering without self-control" (2 Tim 3:3b). Let's resist our impatient and impulsive desire to root out all evil instantly. We are not capable of doing a perfect job. We may mistake wheat for weeds! Wait for the Day! (Mt 13:24-30; 1 Cor 4:5).

3

When will I ever change?

PATIENCE is the secret! Doctors need patience to perform successful surgeries. Engineers need patience to build complex structures. Teachers need patience to produce distinguished scholars. Parents need patience to raise responsible children. Scientists need patience to explore shrouded mysteries. Spouses need patience to build harmonious families. Christians need patience to develop holy character.

Is it true?

An oft-quoted Bible verse in Christian discipleship programmes is 2 Corinthians 5:17, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away;

behold, all things have become new!” But the new disciple soon finds out that at least in his case this Scripture is not experienced. He wonders why. He dares not ask others about it. He struggles within himself, sometimes even for years, without finding a satisfactory explanation. He worries whether he is the lonely struggler. If no one gives him a clear teaching on this subject, he settles down for the status quo and even thinks that such promises in the Bible are applicable only to deluxe editions of Christians. May be, dear reader, you are in such a condition. The total change promised in this text seems to be out of your reach. You are however constantly bothered by the question, *When will I ever change?* This article is an attempt to answer this question with whatever Biblical insight I could receive.

Am I unable to sin?

Spiritual rebirth through faith in Christ does not make us unable to sin. If sinning becomes an impossibility, there was no need for the writers of the New Testament epistles to call the readers not to entertain anger, jealousy, immorality, covetousness and the like. The recipients of these letters were actually believers, called to be saints (Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1; Eph 1:1; Phil 1:1; etc.) Think of

the condition of the Corinthian Christians! Sinless perfection is not at all promised during our earthly sojourn. On the other hand, the Scriptures emphatically state, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves," and "We all stumble in many things" (1 Jn 1:8; Js 3:2a).

Apostle Paul confessed, "Evil is present with me" (Rom 7:21). His Epistle to the Romans was the textbook of Protestant Reformation for Martin Luther (1483-1546). Luther was ruthlessly opposed for his preaching of salvation by faith. He told his close friends, "I more fear what is within me than what comes from without!" Three centuries later John Wesley (1703-1791) the Father of Methodism penned, "Worst of all my foes, I fear the enemy within!"

What we are given at rebirth is an obedient heart instead of our stony heart, and a new spirit instead of our rebellious spirit (Ezek 36:26). God writes His law in our minds and hearts. This means that He enlightens our conscience so we may choose what is pleasing to Him (Jer 31:33). This is the blessing of the New Covenant (Heb 8:8-10). Enablement to walk in holiness does not mean inability to commit sin.

Onion & garlic

Change of character is a process. It begins with the crisis experience of rebirth. We must not be slack or passive but be patient. Jesus said, "In your patience possess your souls" (Lk 21:19). We must resist the temptation to give up. It's always too early to quit. The message of the New Testament is the story of Jesus and a call to become like Him. The word "patience" and its cognates occur in this book over 40 times! It was easier for the Israelites to get out of Egypt than to get Egypt out of them! To develop a distaste for the Egyptian onions and garlic was not easy (Num 11:5). They had to struggle. So also in Christian life we don't grow from babyhood to adulthood overnight. Having tasted the mercy of God and the milk of His Word, we must take conscious and consistent effort to develop a dislike for all malice (1 Pet 2:1-3).

Who is the winner?

In His encounter with Jacob at Peniel, God told him, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel" (Gen 32:28). But the Bible continued to call him Jacob (e.g. Gen 33:1). Our "old nature" is not eradicated from us. We have to live with our "old man" all our life. No one but Paul was frank and honest enough to acknowledge this fact: "I know I am rotten

through and through so far as my old sinful nature is concerned. No matter which way I turn, I can't make myself do right. I want to, but I can't... If I am doing what I don't want to do, I am not really the one doing it; the sin within me is doing it" (Rom 7:18-20). He found out that victory over sin is only by "considering" constantly that we are dead to sin, and giving preference to the new man in us to make choices (Rom 6:11). In this lifelong warfare, there need not be but there might be occasions when the new man would lose to the old man. We must not retreat in discouragement. It is concerning the "righteous" it is said, "They may trip seven times, but each time they will rise again" (Prov 24:16).

Peter & Judas

I am afraid that this teaching might be misunderstood. Apostle Paul who boldly expounded this subject had the same apprehension. He made a daring statement, "Where sin abounded, grace abounded much more!" (Rom 5:20b). Suddenly he realized that he might be grossly misunderstood. Therefore he asked and answered a corrective question: "Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not!" (Rom 6:1,2a). Here is no suggestion to excuse sin, but this is a persuasion to embrace and exalt grace.

Many Christians are living under "condemnation" because of repeated failures in their lives. The Bible asserts, "There is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus" (Rom 8:1). The Holy Spirit never "condemns" God's people. He just "convicts" them. Judas Iscariot accepted "condemnation" and that led to awful destruction. On the other hand, Simon Peter came under "conviction" which led to awesome restoration. Judas betrayed Christ only once whereas Peter denied Him thrice! Peter learnt the all-important lesson that only by patiently trying again and again one can grow in godliness. This he wrote in his second Epistle (2 Pet 1:6). He listed seven virtues for growing in fruitfulness and increasing in effectiveness in Christian life. Patience is mentioned fourth as the central one! Patience is to be added to the first three, and the last three to patience! (vv 5-8).

Potter's clay

Because God is patient towards us, especially in our failures, we must persevere in our efforts to live holy. It is the goodness of God, even His tolerance and patience, that motivates us to keep on repenting (Rom 2:4). We fear God because He abundantly forgives (Psa 130:4). Christ is tirelessly interceding for us from the right hand of His Father and that's why

we must resist temptation to sin (1 Jn 2:1). God is the Potter and we are the clay. We are still in the making. He has not finished with us yet. When God Himself is so patient with us in shaping our character, how can we become impatient with ourselves and quit trying? Patience strengthens the spirit, sweetens the temper, stifles anger and subdues pride.

Watering & weeding

Gifts of the Holy Spirit are “received” whereas His fruits are to be “cultivated.” It is by the fruit of the Spirit we overcome the desires of our sinful nature (Gal 5:19-23). There’s no magic seed which grows and yields fruit in one day! Who has heard of an instant harvest? We are not mushrooms but trees planted by God! Impatience in agriculture is detrimental. Hybrid varieties are manmade and they are inferior to what is supernaturally natural. Our life is like a garden. Each virtue is represented by a tree. Tending the garden requires lot of patience. Regular and unhurried meditation of the Bible is like weeding and watering. We shall be “like trees planted along the riverbank, bearing fruit each season without fail” (Psa 1:2,3). The Bible tells us what we are and what we ought to be. Its truths are deep but not complicated. If only we

are sincere enough to follow its simple guidelines, we will experience a daily transformation in our lives. It was in the context of fruitbearing Jesus encouraged His disciples saying, “You are already clean because of the WORD which I have spoken to you” (Jn 15:1-3).

Axe at the root

Outward decorations don’t take long or last long. We are not Christmas trees with stars and lights! We are called to bring forth real and abiding fruit. This is not possible without taking care of the root. “If the roots of the tree are holy, the branches will be, too” (Rom 11:16b). Our hearts are the root. Vices originate in the heart (Mt 15:19). That’s why we are admonished to keep a constant vigil over the heart (Prov 4:23). For every failure in life, there is a root cause. Healing and restoration do not come unless “the axe is laid at the root!” The process may be slow and painful, but this is how we can bring about a change in character. According to the Bible, the love of money is at the root of all kinds of evil (1 Tim 6:10a). Unless this monster is dealt with, it will show its ugly head in so many areas of our life. The true sign of Pentecost is the loosening of grip on gold (Acts 2:1,44,45). Very few acquire this blessed-

ness overnight. Scales from our eyes fall off one by one, and then we begin to see the vanity of riches.

Little foxes

Character development begins with small things. Excusing ourselves in minor offences usually leads to major transgressions. Jesus taught, “He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much” (Lk 16:10a). Backsliding or deterioration is usually in stages. Psalmist David has drawn it as a graph for us in Psalm 19:12,13. First it’s just “errors,” then “secret faults,” then “deliberate sins,” and finally “great transgression!” That’s why the call: “Quick! Catch all the LITTLE foxes before they ruin the vineyard, for the grapevines are all in blossom” (SS 2:15). Judas had the habit of taking coins from the common money bag for his pocket expenses (Jn 12:6). We know where it finally led him to. Character is simply habit long continued.

Leopard & snakes

Psychologists differ on whether or not temperaments and traits are genetic. Condemning the sins of Judah, God asked, “Can an Ethiopian change the colour of his skin? Can a leopard take away its spots? Neither can you start doing good, for you always do evil!” (Jer 13:23). Jesus

once rebuked the Pharisees, “You brood of snakes! How could evil men like you speak what is good and right?” (Mt 12:34). These analogies speak simply of the extent of ungodliness and the futility of mere human efforts to change hearts. Otherwise how can God hold a person responsible for his behaviour which is not his by choice but his by just inheritance? There was a proverb in the land of Israel: “The parents have eaten sour grapes, but their children’s mouths pucker at the taste!” But God commanded that this proverb be quoted no longer. He said, “This is My rule: The person who sins will be the one who dies!” (Ezek 18:1-4). Of course children do what they observe their parents do.

Unlearning any learnt behaviour which is not Biblically sanctioned is the individual’s responsibility. That’s why at rebirth we are transplanted with a soft heart which is flexible and pliable. Unlearning no doubt takes longer time, but when we patiently work at it the Holy Spirit helps us strip off sins which easily hinder our progress (Heb 12:1). We are to proceed steadily with patience!

Friendship & fellowship

Imitation is a human instinct. “Bad company corrupts good character” (1 Cor

15:33). If we associate with the humble, we will imbibe the spirit of humility (Rom 12:16). Fellowship with saintly Christians will deepen our love for holiness (2 Tim 2:22). Company of those who have a grip on grace will make us graceful in our dealings with people. Even a brief stay with missionaries in remote places will drive away from us murmuring of all sorts. Working with the poorest of the poor fills us with a spirit of gratitude and thankfulness for God's manifold blessings in our lives (Dan 4:27).

God purposely puts together two individuals of diametrically opposite temperaments, as spouses or hostel roommates or colleagues, to shape one another. King Solomon wrote in his wisdom, "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another" (Prov 27:17). It may be a torturous and excruciating experience. But if we separate "what God has joined together," He will employ even more rigorous methods to transform our character. I wonder whether the deplored death of the 29 year old Iranian conjoined twin sisters, Ladan and Laleh Bijani, in a clinically successful 52 hour surgery on 8th July 2003 in Singapore to get their heads separated from each other, does not have a message to a world which seeks over-independence!

Follow or flee?

If you are weak in a particular area, fellowshiping with someone strong in it will strengthen you (Rom 15:1). This is why we are put into the Body of Christ. Reading of biographies and autobiographies of saints and soldiers of the Cross is a highly profitable exercise for behavioural change and character development. The devil will whisper in our ears the bad examples in the Bible so we may justify certain wrongs in our lives. To this we must not give room. Our fallen nature will be quick to take refuge under the ungodly acts of godly men and women. The failures of saints recorded in the Bible are simply to warn us against pitfalls. We must not lie like Abraham, lose temper like Moses, lust like David, or fight like Paul with coworkers over small matters! Bishop J.C. Ryle (1816-1900) observed, "There's no sin so great that a great saint may not fall into it; and there's no saint so great that he may not fall into a great sin!" Therefore, beloved, watch out!

Lamp of God

Conscience is a matchless gift from God. It is His lamp to search all the inner depths of our hearts (Prov 20:27). It is sometimes called the "spirit of man" (1 Cor 2:11a). A sharp conscience is an inesti-

mable asset for character building. The conscience must be trained to love what's right with perfect love and hate what's wrong with perfect hatred. It's easier to love good than to hate evil. If we choose the easier one and ignore the other, we will become popular with men but won't please God. If we love good and hate evil equally, we will earn the smile of God as well as the sneer of the devil (Heb 1:9). Only when we keep our conscience clear, we will not mix up black and white. "Woe to those who say that evil is good and good is evil; that dark is light and light is dark; that bitter is sweet and sweet is bitter" (Isa 5:20). Anselm (1033-1109) an Archbishop of Canterbury was able to testify, "If hell were on one side and sin on the other, I would rather leap into hell than willingly sin against my God!" Such strength in character is gained by perseveringly training up the conscience (Acts 23:1; 24:16).

A Degree in Patience

God sends difficulties and disappointments, and allows defeats and diseases in our lives to serve as a rod of correction. His punishments are not just an expression of anger. He has the end in view, even our transformation (Heb 12:10). Our problem is that we want to have solutions

and explanations right now (v 11). We reject God's voice of silence and turn to wrong sources. The result is further complications. Impatience with the dealings of God wastes our time and energy. A minor sprain becomes a major dislocation (v13b). But "perseverance produces character" (Rom 5:3,4).

In the beginning of Christian life we may only "hear" about the holiness of God. After walking through fires of testing we will actually "see" His holiness. Our repentance will be deepened. It's no more prayers of repentance at the altar, but tears of repentance in ashes! This was Job's experience (Job 42:5,6). The Bible calls us to follow the "patience of Job" (Js 5:11). We must study all our lifetime in the School of Suffering and College of Chastisement. God has used sicknesses to break the lifestyle of many an arrogant man and woman. Following a bitter experience with a killer disease, King Hezekiah decided, "I will walk humbly all my years because of this anguish of my soul" (Isa 38:15b).

WWJD

Any Christian who is serious about changing his carnal nature into spiritual-mindedness ought to study the Sermon

on the Mount diligently (Matthew 5-7). This is the Magna Carta of the Kingdom of God. No better sermon has been ever preached to present the Kingdom values. This Sermon is the Highway of Holiness. Its intense practicality is never outdated. Memorizing this Sermon and frequent meditation of the same will load our minds with “whatever is true... honourable... right... pure... lovely... admirable... excellent and praiseworthy” (Phil 4:8). These virtues will then manifest in our words and deeds. Whatever is in our hearts determines what we say or do (Lk 6:45). Jesus lived out the Sermon on the Mount to the minutest detail.

I believe that Paul’s thumb rule in any situation was WWJD (**What Would Jesus Do?**). Whenever there was the slightest deviation he would withdraw himself and say, “We have not so learned Christ!” (Eph 4:20). Sermons from the four Gospels these days are mostly on the miracles of Christ rather than His manner of life. We want to experience His power without emulating His pattern. This explains the hollowness in our ministries. Holiness is nothing more or less than Christlikeness. The one who occupies himself with the study of the life of Christ is sure to become like Him.

Take time to be holy!

Eventhough we learn from our failures, everytime we yield to temptation we become weaker and weaker. It is by overcoming we grow strong. The first preparation to resist temptation is to be watchful in prayer (Mt 26:41). A “willing spirit” that is not strengthened by prayer cannot prevent the “weak flesh” falling into sin. Two of the seven requests in the Lord’s prayer relate to temptation and sin. The first one is to seek forgiveness for our sins; the next one is to seek strength to overcome sin (Mt 6:12,13). Watchfulness in prayer means carrying the spirit of prayer throughout the day by being conscious of the presence of God with us. Our sense of sin is in proportion to our nearness to God (Isa 6:1-5). We must view the sins of omission as seriously as the sins of commission.

In the kind of busy world we live, we at times do not become instantly aware of our failures. Unhurried time before God in self-examination is a must. This is what prompted William Longstaff (1822-1894) to compose the hymn—

*Take time to be holy, the world rushes on;
Spend much time in secret with Jesus alone.
By looking to Jesus, like Him thou shalt be;
Thy friends in thy conduct His likeness shall see.*

This was the only hymn Mr. Longstaff wrote in his life. Is it not enough?

The other side

Most of what we have considered so far speaks of what “we” are to do to change our nature. We will now turn to the other side of the coin. Otherwise we will end up with a religion of works. Of the 39 books of the Old Testament the theme of Holiness is not so bountifully dealt with in any book other than the Book of Leviticus. It is from this Book apostle Peter quoted the curt commandment: “Be holy!” (1 Pet 1:16; Lev 19:2). If God had stopped just with this commandment, we only will have to perish in guilt and condemnation. How can I in a sinful earth with a sinful nature be holy like God who indwells a sinless Heaven and who has not known sin? His expectation is lofty but not logical! That’s why He sent His Son in flesh and blood to give us a followable pattern for holiness. If God the Father says, “Be holy,” God the Son would add, “Be holy, AS I am holy!” Here again we may argue, “Jesus does not have the sinful Adamic nature like us because He was born of the Holy Spirit!” Here’s where God the Holy Spirit comes with an ultimate solution: “I am the Lord who makes you holy” (Lev 20:8). Sing Hallelujah!

Miracle of miracles

Growth in holiness is comparable to the construction of a building. “It is neither by (our) might nor (our) power, but by God’s Spirit!” (Zech 4:6). Progress in holiness is comparable to a race. “It is not of him who desires, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy” (Rom 9:16). Ripening in holiness is comparable to cultivation. “He who plants is not anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the harvest” (1 Cor 3:6). God is more interested in making us holy than we are in becoming holy! All the three Persons of the Trinitarian Godhead are working together to change us into the image of Jesus the central Person in Godhead. The miracle of miracles happens, which is this : God takes an unholy man from an unholy world, makes him holy, puts him back in the unholy world, and keeps him holy!!! Shout, Glory!

God cannot lie!

The promises of God are as bright as God Himself! His “exceedingly great and precious promises” are just to make us “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet 1:4). As I have pointed out several times in this article, transformation of character is a process which must be patiently worked at. Just like mountaineering, oftentimes

we may slide down but we must keep climbing. God is working in us all the time. We are “being transformed” into the very likeness of Jesus “from glory to glory” — from one state to the other (2 Cor 3:18). After listening to me preach on the theme, *Like Jesus*, a bank official with eyes full came running and asked me, “Brother, Do you really think a person like me can ever become like Jesus?” I instantly replied, “If an unseemly caterpillar can transform into an attractive butterfly, you surely can become like Jesus!” He is now a growing and glowing Christian because of this faith. With Patriarch Job let’s keep confessing, “All the days of my appointed time will I wait, till my change comes” (Job 14:14).

By *standing*, all believers in Christ are already holy before God. The robe of Christ’s righteousness is on us. However, by *state*, we are still filthy and being sanctified. Our standing and state will become one and the same when we would meet Christ face to face. Here’s the assurance for this anticipation: “Whom God predestined, those He also called; whom He called, those He also justified; and whom He justified, those He also glorified!” (Rom 8:30). Towards this eternal purpose, all things in our lives work together for good! (v 28).

Therefore, beloved, don’t allow men or Satan to condemn you whether you stand or fall (Rom 8:31-34; 14:4). Keep on keeping on! Faithful is He who has called you to be holy; He will also do it! God Himself shall sanctify you completely; and your whole spirit and soul and body will be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thess 5:23,24). Therefore, “be patient; take courage; for the coming of the Lord is near!” (Js 5:8).

Waiting on God

IN an age of fast food, electronic mail and instant everything, the art of waiting on God is disappearing fast. The modern generation may soon forget the spelling of patience. Even if a preacher may occasionally speak on patience, the trend of the times is such that the congregation will leave the service with the prayer, “OK Lord, give us patience, but give it right now!”

The God of the Bible is known for waiting. He never acts in haste. His very name is the “God of Patience” (Rom 15:5). In all His dealings with man, sinner or saint, He is patient throughout. If He had

not been so, everyone of us would have perished long ago. As He is patient with us, it is only right that He expects us to be patient in our relationship with Him. This is what the Bible calls as “Waiting on God.” So much is preached and published on the subjects of prayer, worship and meditation. But specific teaching on waiting on God is scarce though this exercise is quite essential for Christian discipleship and growth. In this article I have attempted to lead the reader to a Biblical understanding and experience of waiting on God.

WHY wait on God?

a) To know God's mind

According to Apostle Paul, “God has given us the spirit of a sound mind” and “we have the mind of Christ” (2 Tim 1:7; 1 Cor 2:16). This does not imply that whatever we think is according to the mind of God. What is meant here is that under the New Covenant, God through His Spirit puts His laws in our mind and writes them on our hearts (Heb 8:10). In other words, at new birth He gives us the potential ability to understand His mind. But the truth always remains that God's thoughts are higher than ours as the heavens are higher than the earth (Isa 55:8,9).

“The carnal mind is enmity against God” (Rom 8:7b).

Waiting on God is an exercise by which we calm our minds and tune them up to receive signals from Above. An agitated and turbulent mind cannot recognize God’s voice. Psalmist David prayed, “Show me Your ways, O Lord; teach me Your paths. Lead me in Your truth and teach me... On you I **wait** all the day” (Psa 25:4,5). This sounds like a morning prayer. Having made such a prayer at dawn, David had been waiting for the answer all through the day.

Rarely does God reveal His mind instantly. His delays are purposeful. He knows when our minds are ready to respond to the revelation of His will. Our minds get prepared during the time when we wait on Him. We imbibe a spirit of reverence when we wait on God. In the same Psalm we quoted above, David says, “Who is the man who fears the Lord? He shall teach him in the way He chooses... The secret of the Lord is with those who fear Him” (Psa 25:12,14).

Waiting on God to know His mind is comparable to a servant looking to his master for orders and instructions. This

is pictorially illustrated in Psalm 123:2, “As the eyes of servants look to the hand of their masters, and as the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the Lord our God.” Nothing else should interest us if our attention before God is to be undivided. To hear the voice from Above, it is necessary we stop our ears to the voices from around. Directions for the first missionary movement were received while a team of five prophets-cum-teachers was waiting on God with fasting and prayer (Acts 13:1-4).

We miss God’s will at critical situations just because we don’t withdraw ourselves for a while to wait on Him. We draw rash conclusions and rush into courses of action which are totally outside the will of God. The beheading of John the Baptist was not an ordinary news to Jesus. John was both a family member and a fellow minister to Jesus. “As soon as Jesus heard the news, He went off by Himself in a boat to a remote area to be alone” (Mt 14:13). When He heard that His friend Lazarus was sick, He waited a while to know His Father’s mind in the matter. The four days of delay paved way not only to perform a resurrection miracle but also prepared a pulpit for Jesus to teach precious truths on resurrection (Jn 11).

When we are at crossroads, and there are more than one option, waiting on God is indispensable. Deciding between good and bad is easier than choosing between good and better. What is apparent may not be the actual. Only God knows which is best for us. He alone knows the end from the beginning (Isa 46:10). We are concerned about the immediate but He cares for the ultimate. Many a headache and loss can be avoided if only we take time to wait on God to see how He would steer the events. Eliezer made a trip to Mesopotamia to hunt for a bride for Isaac. When he saw Rebekah who was exquisitely beautiful and exceptionally helpful, he was quite excited. However he “remained silent so as to know whether the Lord had prospered his trip or not” (Gen 24:21). Interestingly, during that time, the groom was also waiting on God by spending time in meditation out in the fields (v 63). What a lesson for parents and youngsters!

Another reason why we must wait on God is—

b) To strengthen our hearts

Discouragement is the most effective tool in the hands of the devil against the children of God. There’s hardly any saint

who has never been hit by the arrows of discouragement. Problems, pressures, perplexities and pains spare no Christian. No other words of encouragement are found so often in the Bible like “Fear Not!” The only way to live above fear, worry and depression is to wait on God.

But for the difficult and dreadful terrain the Psalmist walked through, he would not have given us so many priceless Psalms. The call to wait on God is not so loud and repetitious in any other book of the Bible. Take for example Psalm 27:14, “**Wait** on the Lord; be of good courage and He shall strengthen your heart; **Wait**, I say, on the Lord!” David confessed that he would have lost heart if he had not waited on God in faith (v13).

God alone is omnipotent. We all have weaknesses, but in different areas. There’s no Spiderman in the Church. God has blessed us with limitations and inabilities so we may walk humbly before Him and others. True we have our natural strengths and skills. When we wait on God, He anoints them with His Spirit so our accomplishments and activities for His Kingdom are acceptable to Him. When we wait on Him, the spiritual powers overrule our natural abilities. This is the meaning of the famous passage in Isaiah

40:29-31, “God gives power to the weak, and to those who have no might He increases strength. Even the youths shall faint and become tired, and the young men shall utterly fall. But those who **wait** on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not grow weary; they shall walk and not faint!” The fear-filled disciples became spiritual revolutionaries when they collectively waited on God for ten days and received the power of His Spirit (Lk 24:49; Acts 1:5,8,14; 17:6b).

God chastises those whom He loves. No parent who spares the rod loves the child sincerely (Heb 10:7-10). During periods of chastisement, our hands become tired, knees shaky and feet faltering (vv 12,13).

Prophet Jeremiah’s testimony is enlightening and encouraging: “I am the one who has seen the afflictions that come from the rod of the Lord’s anger... The thought of my suffering and homelessness is bitter beyond words... The unfailing love of the Lord never ends! By His mercies we have been kept from complete destruction. They are new every morning... The Lord is good to those who **wait** for Him... It is good to **wait** quietly for

salvation from the Lord... Let them sit alone in silence beneath the Lord’s demands” (Lam 3:1,19,22,23,25, 26,28). There’s nothing that strengthens our hearts like the remembrance of the mercies of God in reverential silence.

The situation we find ourselves in may be just “mire and mud.” Yet when we wait on God, He will not only bring us out of the horrible pit, but also set our feet on a rock, stabilize our walk, and stir up our hearts to sing! (Psa 40:1-3). This doesn’t mean we will experience instant deliverance always when we wait on God. Rather the night will shine as the day, and darkness as light! (Psa 139:11,12). Our hands may be fettered with chains but our hearts will be given feathers to soar high. That was the experience of Paul and Silas in the Philippian prison. There’s no way to be triumphant in darkness except by waiting on God with trust and confidence. God will send His servants to encourage us at such times. We must not be disappointed if their shouts of prayer do not lift us an inch. Here is the Scriptural prescription for our malady: “Who among you fears the Lord and obeys His servant? If you are (still) walking in darkness, without a ray of light, trust in the Lord and rely on your God” (Isa 50:10).

Just yesterday we would have witnessed the power of God spectacularly in fire from Heaven. Next day we may be sitting dumped in depression. The only thing we desire may be death. There may again be wind, earthquake and fire. Based on our yesterday's experience, we may look for God in these elements. But He may not be there in any of them. This is where patient waiting on the Lord helps. He will speak through "a still small voice!" (1 Ki 18:38; 19:9-13). Sometimes God's ways are "in the whirlwind and in the storm" (Nah 1:3b). Other times He leads us through "still waters" (Psa 23:2b). There's no stereotype with God. Only those who habitually wait on Him will not miss Him.

Thirdly, we wait on God—

c) To fight the enemy

It is only natural to run for shelter and refuge on the face of threat and danger. It's a reflex action that's common to humankind. But in this era of swift and lethal weaponry, no place is absolutely safe unless God protects us. Because our times are in His hands and we are in His palms, we must learn to relax in any situation. The profitability of waiting on God when we are threatened and hounded

is best explained in Isaiah 30:15,16. "The sovereign Lord says: Only in returning to Me and **waiting** for Me will you be saved. In quietness and confidence is your strength. But you would have none of it. You said, No, we will flee on swift horses... But the only swiftness you are going to see is the swiftness of your enemies chasing you." God says that He would wait for us even if we would not **wait** for Him. What a gracious God He is! (v 18). Elsewhere in the Book of Isaiah we read, "When the enemy comes in like a flood, the Spirit of the Lord will lift up a banner against him" (59:19b).

God's silence and slowness in acting on our behalf when we are under the severe attack of our enemies may be due to two reasons. Either God wants to strengthen us by delaying deliverance or He wants to sanctify us. It is when we wait on the Lord we will understand why. Here's a classic passage on this subject: Isaiah 59:1,2,9,10, "Listen! The Lord is not too weak to save you, and He is not becoming deaf... Your sins have cut you off from God... It is because of all this evil that deliverance is far from us. That's why God doesn't punish those who injure us. No wonder we are in darkness when we expect light!... Even at brightest noon-time, we fall down as though it were

dark!” Taking time to sit before God in self-examination is the only way to experience victory.

There may come times when friends and family folks may turn out to be our enemies. Prophet Micah tells us what we should do in such a situation: “Your enemies will be right in your our family. Therefore I will look to the Lord for His help. I will **wait** confidently for God to save me, and my God will certainly hear me” (Mic 7:5-7). When King Saul sent soldiers to watch David’s house in order to kill him, David sang, “Lord, You are my strength; I **wait** for You to rescue me; for You, O God, are my place of safety. In His unfailing love, my God will come and help me” (Psa 59:8-10).

The weapons of our warfare are not worldly. They are mighty through God to knock down the devil’s strongholds. We don’t wage war with human plans and methods (2 Cor 10:3,4). We sharpen our spiritual weapons in prayer and waiting before God with perseverance (Eph 6:13-18). The Lord of Hosts is with us. We **stand still** and know that He is God! (Psa 46:9-11). In the classic passage of spiritual warfare, five out of six weapons are for defense! (Eph 6:14-17). This explains how waiting on God is the most powerful means

of wrestling against Satan. It is by staying under the authority of God, we exercise authority over the enemy. Interestingly the word “patience” comes from two Greek words, meaning “stay under!”

In fighting the enemy, we must be more conscious of the orders of our Captain than our strengths and experience. Eventhough David was a man of war, he had the habit of inquiring of the Lord whether to go against the enemy or not, and how to go about it. In the case of Philistines, once the Lord commanded him to go, and next time He said, “Don’t go.” David surrendered his logical and reasoning powers to the Lord of the Armies and that was the secret of his victory (2 Sam 5:18-25). Somewhere I have read, “A handful of patience is worth more than a bucketful of brains!”

Having looked at the main reasons WHY we must wait on God, let’s browse the Bible to learn—

HOW to wait on God.

a) Pour out your heart before God.

Waiting on God is more than just praying. In prayer we essentially present our requests before God and seek His favour

for an answer. But while waiting on God we simply open up and throw up ourselves before the Almighty. It is not an exaggeration if I say that waiting on God begins only after presenting our needs before Him in prayer. Waiting for an answer to prayer, especially for guidance, is often part of the answer. Here is David with his testimony and teaching: “Truly my soul silently **waits** for God alone; for my expectation is from Him... Trust in Him at all times, you people; pour out your heart before Him” (Psa 62:1,5,8). Prayer can be offered in a hurry; but without taking time we cannot wait on God. The posture need not always be kneeling. It can be standing or sitting or walking or even lying down. It’s a time of uninterrupted communion in our spirit with God. There need not always be a specific subject to dwell upon. It is just waiting on “God alone” (Psa 62:5a). It is an exercise of all our heart, mind, soul and spirit being filled with God Himself. It is fellowship in its purest form.

b) Saturate yourself with the Scriptures.

“I **wait** for the Lord, my soul **waits**, and in His word I do hope” (Psa 130:5). Waiting on God doesn’t mean passivity or keeping our minds blank. This may attract the devil because he keeps roaming about

to occupy vacant and well-swept houses (Lk 11:24-26). We must feed richly on the Word of God during seasons of waiting on God. This is what Jesus did during the forty days He spent in the desert before He began His public ministry. There must always be an open Bible before us when we kneel down to wait on God. The time of waiting on God can also be used to ruminate the truths we study during our regular meditations of the Scriptures.

God had revealed His plan to young Joseph through dreams. Everything that followed in his life was just the opposite. The imprisonment in Egypt on false charges of sexual misbehaviour provided for him an excellent time to wait on God who never fails His Word. Joseph had written the vision clearly in his heart. He had been assured that the vision was yet for an appointed time; though it delayed, he must wait for it; it would surely be fulfilled (Hab 2:2,3). The divine record says, “The word of the Lord tested Joseph until the time came for its fulfillment” (Psa 105:19). If we are really waiting on God, we will not employ fleshly methods to work out things for our promotion. You get the chicken by hatching the egg, not by smashing it open!

I urge you, dear reader, to read and reread Psalm 37 until its message sinks deep in your soul. During the 40 years of my walk with God (1963-2003), I have always experienced calm at the depth of my heart in spite of roaring waves above because I have believed every one of the 40 verses of this Psalm. Here is a sample passage from this golden Psalm: “Rest in the Lord, and **wait** patiently for Him; do not fret because of him who prospers in his way, because of the man who brings wicked schemes to pass. Cease from anger, and forsake wrath; Do not fret—it only causes harm” (vv 7,8).

c) Keep on serving God faithfully.

Waiting on God does not mean we stop working for Him. Priest Zacharias kept on serving God till his very old age while waiting for an answer to his prayer for a child (Lk 1:5-14). David once lamented, “I am exhausted from crying for help; my throat is parched and dry. My eyes are swollen with weeping, **waiting** for my God to help me” (Psa 69:3). Nevertheless he kept on composing songs for God which became the Messianic prophecies and promises, like this Psalm. Servants of God down through the ages have testified that they had been soaking their pillows at nights with tears, but God anointed

them with the oil of gladness when they stood on the pulpits. This is the power of waiting on God.

It is dangerous to become too busy to find time to wait on God because of the pressures of ministry and the demands of work. Waiting time is not a wasted time. The time spent in waiting to find the will of God will be saved while carrying it out. Waiting on knees brings us to our journey’s end quicker than walking on foot!

5

How much time for the Bible?

TO produce one tablespoon of honey, the little bee makes 4200 trips to flowers. It makes about 100 trips a day to the fields, each trip lasting 20 minutes average and 400 flowers!

Wow! When my eyes hit this piece of astounding information in a book of illustrations, my mind instantly switched on to think about the Holy Bible. The Bible is compared to honey and honeycomb (Psa 19:10; 119:103). The Bible was written over a span of about 1500 years. God spoke in parts and in different ways (Heb 1:1). He has revealed His will and ways

to us in stages—“precept upon precept; line upon line; here a little, there a little!” (Isa 28:10). In other words, the Bible was not written overnight and released in the early morning as a newspaper. God was not in haste while writing His book. He was extremely patient throughout the production of this unique piece of literature which would never need be revised or updated.

Daily Bread

I would say that the underlying reason for our poor understanding of the Scriptures is our impatience. The modern generation of Christians is more impatient than those of the earlier generations when it comes to Bible meditation. The spirit of this age of fast food and junk food has prevailed us. Preachers and pastors teach God’s people strictly to give at least one tenth of their income to God. But hardly do we hear sermons which persuade us to spend at least one twentieth of our time, which is about an hour per day, with God’s Word. On the other hand we come across slogans like “Just Five Minutes a Day!” in the context of daily devotions.

Manna, the daily bread with which God fed His people for forty years in their wilderness journey towards Canaan, is a

type of the Word of God (Ex 16:14-36). This seedlike substance did not come from Heaven as food packets thrown from a helicopter. It was not a readymade food. Folks had to go about and gather it and grind it with handmills or pound it in mortars. They had to boil it and make it into flax cakes (Num 11:7,8). It did take time. If we are serious about receiving the intended benefit from God's Word, we must decide once and for all that we would spend unhurried quality time with it. There are no shortcuts.

Hidden Treasures

Pebbles can be picked up from the banks of rivers. But if we look for pearls we must go for deep sea diving. God has compared His words to "hidden treasures" (Prov 2:4,5). What is hidden is not readily available on the table to be picked up. One must extensively and patiently search for it. Bible study is like a treasure hunt. We are called to "search from the Book of the Lord and read" (Isa 34:16a). Unless we do the searching the Holy Spirit will not help us (v 16c). Blessed are those who make the searching of the Scriptures a daily practice. This is what made the believers of Berea stand out! (Acts 17:11). They excelled even the Thessalonian Christians whom Paul showed as models to challenge congregations everywhere.

St. Augustine (AD 354-430) in a letter to his son wrote, "Such is the depth of the Christian Scriptures that even if I were attempting to study them and nothing else from early boyhood to decrepit old age, with the utmost leisure, the most unwearied zeal, and talents greater than I have, I would still daily be making progress in discovering their treasures!"

Start early!

The discipline of spending enough time with the Bible must start from childhood. The responsibility lies primarily with parents. Paul was a spiritual giant. He had been bestowed with unsurpassed skills and potentials. His intellectual brilliance was unusual. His accomplishments were unparalleled. Can we find a secondline leader to walk into his shoes? Paul had an eye on young Timothy, but was he not too timid and too apprehensive to take up the mantle? (1 Cor 16:10,11; 1 Tim 5:23). Nevertheless there was an outstanding attraction in Timothy. His love for the Scriptures which was born in his childhood itself, perhaps even before he attained the age of accountability to repent of his sins and receive Christ as his Saviour (2 Tim 3:14,15). The credit goes to his granny and mummy (2 Tim 1:5).

Parents & Children

Parents spend so much time each day with their children, outside the classroom hours, in coaching and coaxing them to study their textbooks. This is fine and necessary in a world of competition. But how much time are the children made to spend with the Bible? We little realize that such a partiality angers God. He lamented through Prophet Hosea, “I have written for My people the great things of My law, but they were considered a strange thing” (Hos 8:12). In His anger He said, “Because you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children” (Hos 4:6b).

I don’t worship Mary but I do hail her! How much she cooperated with God in preparing her Son for His redemptive ministry! Think of her efforts in filling the mind and heart of Boy Jesus with so much of Scriptures that even the teachers in the Temple were amazed! (Lk 2:46-48a). She continued to be a Bible tutor for Him from His twelfth to thirtieth year. For a young rural woman, in a carpenter’s home, with very little academic exposure, and amidst so many domestic responsibilities, spending time with her Son alongwith the other children for the study of the Scriptures would not have been

easy. The name “Mary” is common in Christian circles, but mothers like her are a rare breed.

Memorization

Memorizing is so easy in childhood and youthhood. The multiplication tables we memorize in school stay with us to old age. Childhood memories are like a nail on the green tree! John Newton (1725-1807) was a hymnwriter and an Anglican pastor. He played a leading part in the abolition of the slave trade. “*Amazing Grace*” is his hymn. Hear his testimony: “My mother stored my memory, which was then very retentive, with many valuable pieces, chapters and portions of Scripture, Catechisms, hymns and poems. When the Lord at length opened my eyes, I found great benefit from the recollections of them!” How many children today can testify so about their parents? My younger brother Christopher and I can certainly hail our late mother for it! So will our daughter remember my wife for sitting with her to teach the Bible.

I urge youngsters to take advantage of the formative years to memorize Scripture passages. You certainly can’t be too busy to memorize just one verse a day! What an asset to add over 300 verses

every year to your memory! You will be full of joy, wisdom and discretion. Fleeing lustful desires and overcoming Satan become easy (Psa 119:9,11; 1 Jn 2:14b). Dr. Billy Graham (1918-) tells us, “Like Joseph storing up grain during the years of plenty to be used during the years of famine that lay ahead, may we store up the truths of God’s Word in our hearts as much as possible, so that we are prepared for whatever suffering we are called upon to endure!”

It is suggested that the initial memorisation of Bible verses is done in one’s mother tongue. As a school boy I memorized Scripture passages in Tamil. It then became easy for me to memorize them in English when I entered college at the age of sixteen. Today I enjoy the advantage of knowing both English and Tamil Bibles, and writing devotional articles in both the languages. The hours spent for the memorisation exercise have been a lifetime investment. South Indians who hated the Hindi language and failed in Hindi exams started studying this language with intense interest in order to watch Hindi movies! Everything is possible if only we have a heart to do it! Hours spent with what we like will appear just like minutes!

Read aloud!

Family prayertime is either not there or too short in many a Christian home. Not much can be accomplished in a family prayer which hardly lasts for thirty minutes. The time can be divided equally between Bible meditation and prayer. During the restoration ministry of Ezra and Nehemiah, the people were reading the Scriptures from morning six to twelve noon, and then on upto evening six they were confessing their sins and worshipping (Neh 9:3). This is a healthy proportion. The first fifteen minutes in family prayer may be allotted for reading and meditating the Bible. That will make praise and prayer in the remaining time meaningful. The sons and daughters must be encouraged to read portions of the Scriptures aloud. Since this is not practiced in many homes, most of our young people don’t know how to follow the punctuation marks in reading aloud. Paul instructed Timothy, “Give attention to reading” (1 Tim 4:13). This actually meant public reading. Jesus was good at it. Folks listened to His reading with rapt attention (Lk 4:16,17,20).

I did not miss a single service in the Anglican Church at Nazareth where I grew. Two elderly gentlemen used to read the

first and the second Scripture lessons. I can never forget their majestic voice with which they read. This part of the service was more appealing to me than the rest. I would read along with them, of course quietly. This was the training for my Scripture reading in pulpit preaching today. Several free Churches have dispensed with this practice of reading Bible lessons. I pity the members, especially the youngsters!

“Dry as a stick!”

The more we read the Bible the more we would like to read it. There will be times when we may not find Bible reading and meditation interesting. The excitement may not be there. This is when we must be careful. We may be tempted to give up the customary practices of Bible reading until a new desire and enthusiasm springs up. John Bunyan (1628-1688) the author of *Pilgrim's Progress* testified, “I have sometimes seen more in a line of the Bible than I could well tell how to stand under, and yet at another time the whole Bible has been to me as dry as a stick!” Such dry spells will be common in our interaction with the Scriptures. We must neither decrease the time nor discontinue the routine. We don't know when and from which passage God would speak to us. We must not be like little boys who

knock at the neighbour's door but disappear when the owner opens it!

Ask questions!

The Bible is God's Word. The message we receive from it is God's voice. In Greek the former is called “*logos*” and the latter is “*rhema*.” Under normal circumstances we don't receive “*rhema*” instantly. We must dwell on a passage of the Scripture long enough until the message comes out. We must read that passage several times. Miles Coverdale (1488-1569) was a Bible translator. His was the first printed English Bible. His version became the basis for King James Version. He has written his own Bible study technique in the preface to his translation, in the 15th Century English:

*It shall greatly helpe ye
to understand the Scripture,
If thou mark
Not only what is spoken or wrytten,
But of whom,
And to whom,
With what words,
At what time,
Where,
To what intent,
With what circumstances,
Considering what goeth before
and what followeth.*

How can we find answers to these ten questions without spending time? They are only fundamental! If the Bible is to get into us, we must get into it.

When we are stingy with the time to be spent with the Bible, we tend to be choosy with the passages. We read certain portions of the Scriptures again and again and leave out the rest. The result is that we don't get "wholesome" food. We miss the "whole" counsel of God (Acts 20:27). The Bible claims that "all" of it is inspired by God (2 Tim 3:16,17). We cannot become "complete" and be "thoroughly" equipped if we neglect portions of it. On the face of it certain books and passages may appear disinteresting. But when we discipline our minds and force ourselves to read and meditate them, we will be amazed at what we get out of them. God unrolled a scroll before Prophet Ezekiel. Its both sides were writings of "lamentations, mourning and doom." God asked him to eat it! When he overcame his hesitation and ate it, it tasted "as sweet as honey" (Ezek 2:8-3:3).

Reading & Rereading

There are several Bible reading calendars which will take us through the Bible from Genesis to Revelation in one or two

or three years. Choose a plan that suits you and be regular to read the daily portion. Early hours of the day are the best because your mind will be fresh enough to absorb a lot. This is just reading. Close meditation can be on a few verses from the daily portion or from elsewhere. When you read through the Bible again and again, comparing Scripture with Scripture becomes easy. Thomas Watson has interestingly said, "Nothing can cut the diamond but the diamond; nothing can interpret Scripture but Scripture!" There are two outstanding benefits of this method of studying the Bible. One, very difficult passages suddenly become clear when other passages throw light on them. Second, we can be saved from wrong interpretation leading to false doctrines. False doctrines, like false witnesses, agree not among themselves!

The unnamed Ethiopian government official had the habit of reading through the Scripture even if he didn't understand it. He had picked up the Book of Isaiah for his recent trip to Jerusalem. See how a brief exposition by Evangelist Philip could bring him to a consummate understanding of Gospel truth! (Acts 8:26-40). Keep a fine ballpen or pencil, whenever you open the Bible, to underline words, phrases and sentences which have

a special appeal to you. Because the Bible paper is thin, don't use poor quality ballpens which bleed and smudge. Leave a question mark on the margin against a verse or passage you don't understand. You will have the joy of striking out some of them in your next reading! Questions will disappear one by one in subsequent readings. God reveals His truths to us in stages according to our level of understanding and maturity. Once Jesus told His disciples, "Oh, there is so much more I want to tell you, but you can't bear it now!" (Jn 16:12). Growth in Biblical understanding will be in proportion to our response to the illumination of the Holy Spirit (v 13). On another occasion Jesus said, "You don't understand now why I am doing it; someday you will" (Jn 13:7). Keep a notebook exclusively for jotting down points which make your heart glow. Laziness will prevent you to do this, and the loss will be heavy.

Bible & Prayer

The time we spend with the Bible will enliven and enrich our prayertime. The Bible is a book of prayers. Out of 667 recorded prayers, there are 454 recorded answers. We can articulate the very words of the Scripture when we lift up our hearts to God in prayer. Even though David was

a King, he went through almost all the problems and crises we face as average citizens. He had his failures, struggles, questions, puzzles, oppositions, betrayals, sicknesses, loneliness, and name what. Many of his Psalms were born out of deep stirrings of the heart. He verbalised them as songs of prayer and worship. Everyone of the 176 verses of Psalm 119 is a prayer of praise or confession. Interestingly 171 of these verses refer to God's Word. David formatted this Psalm in alphabetical order from "aleph" to "tav", as from A to Z. Dr. Ravi Zacharias writes in his recent book, *Recapture the Wonder* (2003), "God's Word exhausts the very alphabet!"

Study Aids

If only we know how much time the Bible translators take to translate a single portion of the Scripture, we will not consider Bible meditation an extracurricular activity! What a privilege to have the entire Bible in our mother tongue, that too in so many versions! There are still over 1000 languages without a single line of the Scripture translated into them. This generation is enviably blessed with an abundance of Study Bibles and study aids. I could not afford to buy a single Study Bible during the first eight years (1962-1970) of my spiritual life as a student

in the college. Oh, how I prayed for one with my campus prayer mates! God granted the desire of my heart in 1970 when my father-in-law presented me a *Dake's Annotated Reference Bible* when I got engaged to Lilian. It was a 1965 edition and the price was Rs. 161/- It took Finis Jennings Dake (1902-1987) about 100,000 hours during a span of 43 years to produce this Study Bible. Today I own dozens of Study Bibles. I handle them with reverence because as a Bible teacher I can understand what it would take for the authors of Study Bibles to complete such works. It's good to buy Study Bibles but do we set aside time to study them? For most of us Sunday is the only holiday. If you attend more than one worship service or meeting on Sundays, you will hardly be left with any time for the family and personal study. Sunday afternoons after a siesta may be set aside for rigorous study of the Scriptures through study aids. Try and see!

There are three steps in Bible study. (1) Observation: What does this passage say? (2) Interpretation: What does this passage mean? (3) Application: How does this passage apply to me? In the step of observation, we discover the message; in interpretation, we digest the message; and in application, we demonstrate the

message. Because of impatience, we jump from observation to application, skipping the essential step of interpretation. Interpretation is time-consuming. If we hurry through this middle step, we usually end up in falsehood and distortion of truth. We are admonished to "rightly divide the Word of truth" (2 Tim 2:15b). This involves patience and hard work (v 15a). You may not be able to look into study aids everytime you read the Bible. But you must atleast take advantage of the cross references given in the central column or at the foot of verses. What's the use of possessing a Reference Bible if you don't turn to the references? Cross references which connect the Old and the New Testaments are of inestimable value. Your heart will revel in finding that the New Testament had been concealed in the Old, and the Old is revealed in the New. Time will fly off in this exultation!

Which Translation?

New versions of the Bible are a stupendous asset to people like us who have not studied Hebrew and Greek. No one translation is absolutely perfect or totally faulty. Each has its strengths and defects. Don't be dominated by sentimentality and get closed to other versions. Take time to read your daily portions in one or two

other versions. You will be thrilled at the fresh insights and understanding you receive! Let the King James Version addicts who are averse to other translations remember that the KJV is not the first version of the English Bible but a revision of dozen versions. Several Indian vernacular editions of the Bible are also being updated and they are welcome.

Hard to understand

The Bible is both “milk” and “meat.” For beginners it is milk, and for the grown-ups and the mature it is meat (Heb 5:12-14). Chewing of meat takes longer time than drinking milk. As we grow in our Christian life, we must allot more and more time for Bible meditation. We will come across several Bible difficulties and tough questions. Bible Dictionaries explain the cultural background against which each book of the Bible was written. I read through these Dictionaries from beginning to end at the rate of one or two pages per day. The entries in Dictionaries are of course in alphabetical order, but oftentimes I find myself reading just exactly what is necessary for the Bible passage I am meditating at that time! The Holy Spirit is simply anxious to help sincere seekers. Jesus said, “Seek, and you will find” (Mt 7:7). I understand it as, “Seek until you find!”

Just 71 hours!

Satan uses our Biblical illiteracy to his advantage. We are tossed to and fro by every wind of false doctrine (Eph 4:14). Though we possess the Sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God, we don't know how to wield it against evil powers (Eph 6:17). On the face of trials and tribulations we lose our song and joy (Psa 119:92). Reading and rereading of the Scriptures is the surest way to keep our faith in tact and overcome temptations (Rom 10:17; Psa 119:9,11). “It is written” becomes effective only when “It is read!” To go for picnics and attend spiritual meetings we apply for leave. Why not go on leave for three or four days every year exclusively for reading through the Bible from Genesis to Revelation? The entire Old and New Testaments can be read aloud slowly and with expressions in less than 71 hours! The Church itself can organize such Bible Reading Retreats for its members in gardens, hills and quiet camp centres. I challenge that the Church then will not be what it is now! This would accomplish in the lives of Christians what million dollar seminars and conferences have failed to do!

Three day fasting prayers have become common. We need them and we can never

pray too much. However, praying without an equal dose of Biblical intake is the shortcut to deception. Many false doctrines and questionable practices have had their birth during seasons of fasting where sufficient time was not spent for Bible reading and meditation. The spirit world is filled with deceptions (1 Tim 4:1; Eph 6:12). That's why the Bible clearly teaches that hearing from God should precede speaking to Him (Eccl 5:1,2). Audiotapes of the entire Bible in English and also vernaculars are available. We can play them and read along. This way our reading style also will be refined.

Fire in the Pulpit!

Thank God for Bible software that's flooding the market. But remember, it cannot become a substitute for your personal meditation of the Book on your knees. The extensiveness of Biblical knowledge one can acquire through these software is unimaginable. However, breadth is not the same as depth. The software can save us time in gathering facts but they cannot shorten the time we need to spend with God's Word to understand His mind. Knowledge is not the same as life. The Tree of Knowledge is not the Tree of Life. This explains why our pulpits are still void of message inspite of the tremen-

dous access preachers have to computerised Biblical information. The laptop should not become lecterntop. When there's no message to inspire people we resort to theatrical performances and sensational practices to impress the audience. Revivalist Leonard Ravenhill (1907-1994) lamented, "Too many dead preachers are preaching too many dead sermons to too many dead congregations!" The only way to get back life in the pulpit is to strip pastors and preachers off all administrative and financial management responsibilities and shut them inside closets with their Bibles until they hear from God! (Acts 6:3,4). Then will the long-awaited revival come!

6

Patience of Jesus

ONE of the most startling statements Jesus made to His disciples was, “I no longer call you servants... Now you are My friends” (Jn 15:15). It is unlikely that the disciples at that time understood its full implication. What Jesus meant was intimate fellowship with Him in life and death. After Easter and Pentecost the disciples started growing deeper and deeper in that fellowship through the power of the Holy Spirit. This companionship in spirit with Jesus was expressed in their lives through various characteristics of His person. One such character was patience. After walking with Christ for over

60 years, apostle John at the end of his life declared that he was a “companion in the PATIENCE of Jesus” (Rev 1:9).

The very name of the Almighty is the “God of Patience” (Rom 15:5). Though Christian life is a race, it must be run with patience (Heb 12:1). According to Paul, a strong Christian is one who is patient and longsuffering (Col 1:11). The first three in the list of the fruits of the Spirit are the outcome of the next six virtues. Patience is the first of the six (Gal 5:22,23). It is given top priority in the classic description of Christian love (1 Cor 13:4). Patience is the perfecting power of spirituality (Js 1:4).

Man lost Paradise because of impatience. This cardinal sin has plagued every section of the society and is invading every quarter of the Church. More patience in the business world would mean less corruption in transactions. More patience in family life would mean less broken homes. More patience in highways would mean less patients in hospitals. More patience in Christian life would mean less weaklings in the Church. More patience in the Christian work would mean less carnality in the methods. So goes the list. Lengthening our patience is the best way to shorten our troubles!

The life of Christ vividly illustrates the power of patience.

1. Patience for Growth

While spiritual birth happens at an instant, growth is a process. Born as the Son of God, Jesus took about 30 years for His growth (Lk 3:23). He did not begin His public ministry until then. Luke records that Jesus “grew” in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and with men (2:52)—intellectual, physical, spiritual and social growth.

The Boy Jesus knew so much even at the age of twelve. His wisdom surprised the religious leaders and people. But He did not rush into ministry eventhough He undoubtedly had a sense of urgency. He waited. He refused to be pressurised by the needs around. This preministerial preparation of Jesus is tacitly overlooked by us to our own disadvantage and disaster.

In his first letter to Timothy, Paul stresses that a leader should not be a recent convert (1 Tim 3:6). An immature person gets puffed up with pride when he is catapulted to positions of authority. He crashlands and brings disgrace to himself and dishonour to the work of God.

Paul equates it to the downfall of the devil. In verses 4 and 5 the apostle speaks of proving in domestic responsibility, and in verse 7 he calls for public dignity. These are neither learnt nor developed overnight.

Our pulpits are downgraded by immature ministers. They defend themselves quoting Paul who started preaching “immediately” after his conversion (Acts 9:20). What they forget is the years of rigorous training and teaching this Jewish zealot had before his highway experience with Christ. All through his life Paul was committed to his personal growth (Acts 9:22a; Phil 3:8-14). Even while awaiting execution, he asked for his “books” (2 Tim 4:13).

2. Patience for Guidance

Patient waiting is often the highest way of doing God’s will. To Jesus the will of the Father was more important than His necessary food. He waited patiently until He knew what the Father had wanted Him to do. He never panicked whatever the situation, but quietly pondered over to understand what His Father would have done at that time. He testified, “The Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do; for whatever He does, the Son also does in like manner” (Jn 5:19).

When they ran out of wine in the wedding at Cana, Mary rushed to Jesus and reported the problem. Jesus coolly replied, "My hour has not yet come!" (Jn 2:3,4). In other words, He had not yet heard from His Father what to do and how. It was when the servants relaxed and waited, Jesus began to give instructions (vv 5-8). During the waiting time, Jesus perhaps went around to see what was all available. He found huge waterpots and enough water to fill them! Simultaneously He must have received directions from Above. What an illustration!

Our carnal mind desires to know everything and that too instantly. When Saul Paul from the dusty road cried out in amazement, "Lord, what do You want me to do?", the Lord did not give him a blueprint. No package plan! He simply said, "Go into the city, and you will be told what you must do" (Acts 9:6). What a humiliating answer to that highminded scholar! But God shows only one step at a time. The first step that God shows us is sometimes so simple that most of us are reluctant to take, and therefore miss the second step and the entire guidance.

With the restoration of the gifts of the Spirit, there's a presumption that one can know everything instantly. This is nothing

but the devil's timeless trick: "You will be like God, knowing..." (Gen 3:5). But God's method of revelation and guidance is always "here a little, there a little" (Isa 28:10). This too is promised only to those who take a childlike attitude (v 9; Psa 131:2).

Many a young person has ruined his or her marriage by an impatient choice. Don't run ahead of God or lag behind. Learn from Him how to rest. His rest is like "a pleasant summer day" and "a lovely autumn morning" (Isa 18:4; Mt 11:28-30).

3. Patience for Promotion

The Feast of Tabernacles was near. Jesus' own brothers urged Him to go to the Feast and work miracles publicly. They said, "No one who wants to become a public figure acts in secret!" (Jn 7:4). Look at His answer: "The right time for Me has not yet come; for you any time is right" (v 6).

Eventhough it was His own brothers who suggested the promotional programme to Jesus, He politely turned it down. He knew that a natural man could not understand the things of God, and the carnal mind was enmity against God. So many preachers have missed the perfect will of

God because of strained comparison and ill advice. How many ministries are corrupted and commercialised because of the lust for limelight!

Jesus knew that promotion would come from Above, not from east or west or south (Psa 75:6,7). It was this firm conviction that made Him say a resounding no to a related temptation on the hilltop (Mt 4:8-10). He taught Himself patience to await the Father's time when every knee would bow before Him acknowledging His lordship (Phil 2:9-11).

Apostle Peter exhorted young people to humble themselves under the mighty hand of God, that He might exalt them in "due time" (1 Pet 5:6). No man can exalt us to a place God has not designed for us; nor can anyone bring us down from where God has placed us. God will vindicate us for any injustice done to us. The earlier we learn this truth the better for us. We will be freed from tensions and conflicts. Self-promoting techniques simply place us at the devil's hands. The end will be miserable.

4. Patience for Discernment

The patience of the Carpenter of Nazareth at odd circumstances was admirable. Now,

it was a woman caught redhand in adultery. The accusers were Bible teachers and temple leaders. They demanded a verdict from Jesus. But He bent down and began writing on the ground as though He did not hear. As the leaders kept on questioning Him, He replied, "He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first." They were convicted and left one by one, leaving the woman before the One who alone had the right to stone her. Jesus then told her, "Neither do I condemn you!" (Jn 8:1-11).

Jesus did not act on impulse. He calmly analysed the situation. He thought about the accused and the accusers. He took time, writing on the ground. Don't we keep scribbling on paper when we just don't know what exactly to do, or how to tackle a situation?

We are commanded not to judge anything before the "appointed time" (1 Cor 4:5). Let's be patient with the faults of others; they may have to be patient with ours! Friends are separated and fellowships are broken because of judgmental mentality. If God is as impatient with us as we are towards others, what will be our lot? (Mt 18:21-35). Count seventy times seven!

Jesus could have returned long ago to judge this world which is sold out to sin. But He is delaying because of His unwillingness that anyone should perish without enough time for repentance (2 Pet 3:9). Folks are mistaking His patience for slackness, but He does not bother about people's opinion. He is concerned only about their salvation. In the same way, people may call our tolerance as compromise. But we must always be restorative in our dealings with others, as Jesus was to that sinful woman. We are called to disciple people, not destroy them by our haste and hurry. Many times it is the plank in our own eye that blurs the vision against enlightened discernment (Mt 7:1-5).

5. Patience for Deliverance

News reached Jesus that His friend Lazarus was sick. Anyone else would have at once hurried to the spot to help his friend or perform a miracle if he could. But not Jesus. "He stayed two more days in the place where He was" (Jn 11:6). We know it was a purposeful delay, because later He told His disciples, "I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, that you may believe" (v 15).

Had Jesus visited Lazarus immediately, the miracle would have been one of healing. Now because He delayed, the family could have a greater miracle—resurrection! Divine delays are not denials. They are meant to develop us and the situation so we may better comprehend His ways.

Praise God for instant healings. But the undeniable fact is that most of the healings are delayed and gradual. Almost all the healing miracles of Jesus in the gospels were instant. But there is no one like Jesus who walks in perfect obedience and submission to the Father. As such God has not entrusted any other man with such power. Our acceptance or otherwise of this fact does not alter it.

Biblical patience is not rooted in fatalism that says everything is out of control. It is rooted in faith that says everything is in God's control (Rom 8:28). There's no place for faith if we expect God to fulfil immediately what He promises. Patient endurance is a condition to receive what God has promised (Heb 10:36; 6:12). The Book of Psalms abounds with testimonies of deliverance that David experienced when he waited patiently (Psa 40:1; 62:1). A German proverb says, Patience is a bitter plant but it bears sweet fruit!

6. Patience in Suffering

The trouble with us today is that we want a 707 flight to the promised land without walking through the wilderness. Our impatience only learns patience through the thorn of delay and darkness.

Though the entire earthly life of Christ was one of suffering from the cradle to the Cross, His sufferings intensified infinitely during the final days. Read through the last chapters of the gospels. His patience stands out. Peter, who was an eyewitness of all the mistreatment and suffering his Master experienced, wrote later, "When you do good and suffer for it, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God. For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps" (1 Pet 2:20,21).

How could Jesus be so patient in suffering? Because, He knew that everything in His life had been ordained by His Father. And that the Father had a lofty purpose behind all that. And the sufferings were for His own learning and perfection (Heb 2:10; 5:8). Because He suffered He succours with sympathetic understanding those who suffer (Heb 4:15,16). Nothing but this confidence can keep us patient in suffering.

"Indeed we count them blessed who endure. You have heard of the patience of Job and seen the end intended by the Lord that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful" (Js 5:11). "Count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience" (1:2,3). Patience is the sturdiest of all shock absorbers.

Everything worked contrary to what God had revealed to young Joseph in a dream. But he waited patiently without murmuring. He let the Word of God try him during the dark years. Finally the sun rose on him. He walked majestically from prison to palace (Psa 105:17-22).

Patience for Patience

Of all the virtues, patience must be learnt patiently. The moment you decide to be patient, legions of situations will arise to try your patience. Don't give up, but imitate Jesus the Master of patience. The ultimate victory of the saints over Satan is through patience (Rev 13:10; 14:12). Be patient, beloved, be patient!

What to Speak when you Suffer

BE slow to speak! (Js 1:19). If patience is the mark of perfection, patience in words is the crown of a perfect life. Most of our troubles are due to our carelessness in words. Relationships are damaged by hasty and harsh words. Fellowship with God is also disturbed by impatient words. He is angered more by our words than our deeds. Because, whatever is in our hearts determines what we say (Mt 12:34).

Controlling the tongue when everything is calm and we are composed is easy, and it requires no special effort. But when we are agitated with anger and agonizing

in anguish, we speak out what we are not supposed to. God does not ignore what we speak in such moments. Rather He takes a serious view of it. The Book of Job vividly illustrates this point. What God said at the end of the story is a sober truth. He told Eliphaz, “I am angry with you and with your two friends, for you have not been right in what you SAID about Me, as My servant was” (Job 42:7).

No one other than Jesus suffered mentally and physically like Job. The Bible admonishes us to follow the “patience of Job” (Js 5:10,11). What he spoke when he suffered is worthy of close meditation. Based on his words approved and appreciated by the Almighty, I have compiled here a list of confessions we should make as we go through the furnace of suffering and fires of testing.

1. I praise God for everything!

“The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away. Praise the Name of the Lord!” (Job 1:21b).

This is a famous text for funeral services. We may read it today formally as a Bible text. But when the lips of Job gave birth to these words, it was an absolutely real confession, which sprang from a heart

of honesty. The losses of Job were by no means ordinary. Death of his cattle, their caretakers and his children, all in quick succession! (Job 1:13-19). To worsen the situation, he became sick with an abominable disease.

Several advocates of positive confession tell us that Job was right when he said, "The Lord gave!" but he was wrong when he added, "The Lord has taken away!" They say that it was not the Lord but Satan who took away Job's blessings. The fallacy of this interpretation is obvious. In the very next verse of the narrative the Holy Spirit has recorded, "In all of this, Job did not sin by blaming God" (v22). The Scripture again says, "In all this, Job said nothing wrong!" (2:10b). Job's understanding was that God was supreme and sovereign; Satan was simply His servant! How profound was the theology of this patriarch! It was this knowledge that made Job praise God for everything in every situation.

We are taught to "be always thankful, no matter what happens, for this is God's will for us who belong to Christ Jesus" (1 Thess 5:18). We may not "feel" like praising God while we are crushed by pain and problems. It doesn't matter, praise God anyway. Praise God when you don't feel

like praising Him. Keep on praising Him until you feel like praising Him!

2. I accept whatever God allows!

"Should we accept only good things from the hand of God and never anything bad?" (Job 2:10).

In an Indian Airlines domestic flight I heard two kids shouting from behind my seat, "Fly Indian Airlines. No other hostess is so kind!" I soon found out that the air hostess had given them some extra chocolates! Unfortunately the theology of many an average Christian is so childish! God is no more than a Santa Claus for them! How do we justify our belief that only seemingly good things proceed from God, in the light of the following Scriptures?

"Enjoy prosperity while you can. But when hard times strike, realize that both come from God. That way you will realize that nothing is certain in this life" (Eccl 7:14).

"The Lord God arranged for a leafy plant to grow and spread its shade over Jonah's head... But God also prepared a worm! The next morning at dawn the worm ate through the stem of the plant, so that it soon died and withered away" (Jon 4:6,7).

“I am the Lord, and there is no other. I am the one who creates the light and makes the darkness. I am the one who sends good times and bad times. I, the Lord, am the one who does these things” (Isa 45:7).

Only when we are thoroughly convinced of the sovereignty of God and that nothing goes beyond His control and happens without His permission, we can sing with apostle Paul that all things work together for good even if it is calamity or danger (Rom 8:28,35). This conviction leads us to unshakable confidence and we are enabled to “be patient in trouble” (Rom 12:12). Folks may guess and say hundred and one things about our suffering. But we can assure ourselves by asking, “Who does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this?” (Job 12:9).

3. I am open to correction!

“Teach me, and I will be silent; and show me how I have erred” (Job 6:24).

God has no pleasure in our suffering. If we sinful people desire that our children should be happy and healthy, how much more will our heavenly Father desire so for His children! But if suffering is an incomparable means to correct us and

teach us His ways, will the Heavenly Father spoil us by sparing that rod?

The testimony of Psalmist David is that of all prophets, patriarchs and people who walked closely with God in their generations. He confessed to God, “The suffering You sent was good for me, for it taught me to pay attention to Your principles... I used to wander off until You disciplined me; but now I closely follow Your word” (Psa 119:71,67). Our lips may not instantly utter such words when adverse winds blow on us. But if we recollect the outcome of the sufferings of the past, we will stay patient instead of turning bitter. The unknown author of the Epistle to the Hebrews has written for us these timeless words: “No discipline is enjoyable while it is happening—it is painful! But afterward there will be a quiet harvest of right living for those who are trained in this way” (Heb 12:11).

We have these days short-term courses and distant education as substitutes for rigorous training and systematic learning in classrooms for long years. Substitutes are invented to save time and enjoy ease. But as for God, He never changes and He is not in a hurry. Times are in His hands. Life’s lessons are not learnt overnight. Patience and perseverance are

inevitable. No wonder the saints of old called suffering a school!

4. I am unworthy of God's favour!

“What is man that You magnify him, and that You are concerned about him?” (Job 7:17).

Have I not walked in integrity? Why then does God let me suffer like this? Have I not served Him faithfully all these years? Why then did He allow this calamity in my life? Have I not been unselfish and sacrificial in my dealings with people? Why then did He permit this loss in my business? Have I not loved Him so dearly that I never enjoyed any ungodly pastime? Why then does He punish me like this in displeasure? These questions flood our minds and fill our mouths when we suffer.

Though these questions may appear sensible, they are wrong. We need to correct our thinking. We don't add anything to God by our offerings or service. He is absolutely absolute in Himself and He doesn't need anything from us (Acts 17:25; Psa 50:7-13). He won't feel miserable or helpless if we desert Him. We don't do Him favour by serving Him. Rather we are fortunate to be called by Him. He

doesn't in the strict sense need us; we need Him. The right confession would be what a man like Paul made: “I am not worthy to be called an apostle... But whatever I am now, it is all because God poured out His special FAVOUR on me... I have worked harder than all the other apostles, yet it was not I but God who was working through me by His GRACE” (1 Cor 15:9,10; Eph 3:7,8).

Job seems to have had a better understanding of God's grace than we who are living in the dispensation of grace. He said, “Who am I, that I should try to answer God or even reason with Him? Even if I were innocent, I would have no defence. I could only plead for MERCY” (Job 9:14,15). More the thorns in life, greater the appreciation of God's grace (2 Cor 12:9).

5. I trust God in darkness!

“God's great works are too marvellous to understand. He performs miracles without number. Yet when He comes near, I cannot see Him. When He moves on, I do not see Him go” (Job 9:10,11).

It is the “why” and “what” questions which disturb our equilibrium and make us pour out words of impatience while

suffering. There will be calm in spite of storm if only we know “who” is in control.

God is light and He is in the light. This is only one side of divine revelation. Solomon the wise had known the other side. He once prayed, “O Lord, You have said that You would live in thick darkness” (1 Ki 8:12). Glittering light and pompous show will there be where earthly kings are seated. It’s different with the King of kings. “The Lord is King... Clouds and darkness surround Him” (Psa 97:1,2).

Christian life is comparable to a walk from the outer court to the innermost sanctuary through the holy place of the Tabernacle. There is sunlight in the outer court, candlelight in the inner court, but no light in the innermost court. One has to walk there only in faith and not by sight or any other sense (2 Cor 5:7). In Heavenly Jerusalem also there will be no lamplight or sunlight, but the Lord Himself will be the Light (Rev 22:5). When we walk in faith, quit asking questions, and quiet the turbulent mind, it will be heaven on earth even if the times would be worst ever.

In our humanness we may cry out, “My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?” But we should quickly commit our-

selves to Him, saying, “Father, I entrust My spirit into Your hands!” (Mt 27:46; Lk 23:46). Dr. Raymond Edman (1900-1967), a longtime President of Wheaton College, calls this the “discipline of darkness” (Isa 50:10).

6. I serve a God worth suffering for!

“Though God slay me, I will hope in Him” (Job 13:15).

“Bless God when He blesses you; but curse Him when He crushes you!” This was the philosophy of Mrs. Job (Job 2:8-10). Sadly many Christians are ruled by this philosophy. We may not actually “curse” God, but what do we do when we don’t praise Him? If we follow Jesus only “because of” the blessings we receive from Him, our relationship and religion are utilitarian. Following Him “in spite of” buffetings and brickbats is true service and pure worship.

What the three Hebrew young men spoke before King Nebuchadnezzar weakened his strategy. They politely but firmly said, “If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God whom we serve is able to save us. But even if He does not, Your Majesty can be sure that we will never serve your gods or worship the gold statue you have

set up!” (Dan 3:17,18). The early disciples had the same spirit. When they were flogged for their dauntless witness, they rejoiced that God had counted them worthy to suffer dishonour for the Name of Jesus (Acts 5:40,41).

As we approach the end of endtimes, our days of adversity seem to outnumber the days of prosperity. That will be no excuse for our murmuring and complaints. Because, in the very first instance we are called not only to believe on Christ but also to suffer for Him (Phil 1:29). The *New Living Translation* renders it as the “privilege of suffering!” An active Christian earns the frown of the devil. The devil will attack him in all areas of his life—physical, mental, spiritual, financial and social. If Christ died for us, no suffering of ours will be too much, and no sacrifice too great!

7. I look forward to the future glory!

“I know that my Redeemer lives, and that He will stand on the earth at last. And after my body has decayed, yet in my body I will see God! I will see Him for myself. Yes, I will see Him with my own eyes. I am overwhelmed at the thought!” (Job 19:25-27).

What lies beyond death and grave is the greatest strengthener of our feeble hands and weak knees. We have every reason to be agitated and lose patience in suffering if there is no life after death. How many long hours we sometimes wait in visa issuing offices to travel overseas! How much we rejoice when the visa is finally stamped on our passports! How much more patient should we be today for the glory land we would enter tomorrow! “What we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory God will give us later” (Rom 8:18).

When we lose patience in any situation, virtues leave us one by one, and vices lift up their ugly heads. We suddenly realize that we have spoken detestable words which are too many to be taken back. If we are quiet and confident, we can declare, “God knows the way I take; when He has tried me, I shall come forth as gold” (Job 23:10).

I quote Paul (Rom 5:3-5b) in conclusion: “We can rejoice when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they are good for us — they help us learn patience. And patience develops strength of character in us, and character strengthens our confident expectation of salvation. And this expectation will not disappoint us!”

Preachers & Patience

IF God is not patient with His creation, no one or nothing can survive. If parents are not patient with children, no child will mature in behaviour. If teachers are not patient with students, no responsible citizen will pass out of classrooms and lecture halls. If preachers are not patient with people, the purposes of God cannot be fully accomplished on earth. Preachers as well as people need patience, but the former need it more than the latter.

When we talk about patience, what comes to our mind instantly is suffering.

The Bible speaks so much about being patient in suffering. Every Christian goes through some suffering or other. This being so, preachers always find themselves in a position to exhort “others” to be patient. Hardly does a preacher realize that he is the one who is expected to exercise untiring patience more than anyone else. In this article, by preachers I mean anyone in Christian service and leadership whatever be the size of his group or the level of his responsibility.

Father & Mother

The Bible uses various word pictures for those in Christian work. A servant of God is compared to a nursing mother. Apostle Paul testified to the Christians in Thessalonica, “As apostles of Christ... we were as gentle among you as a mother feeding and caring for her own children” (1 Thess 2:7). A mother’s patience is like a tube of toothpaste—it’s never quite all gone! Paul goes on to say, “You know that we treated each of you as a father treats his own children” (v 11). He says that he “pleaded” with them, “encouraged” them, and “urged” them to live a God-pleasing life (v 12). What practical manifestation of patience!

Patience of a donkey

None of the five typical ministries listed in Ephesians 4:11 can be fulfilled with-

out patience. Apostles must go forth with the patience of pioneers. Prophets must wait with the patience of seers. Evangelists must work with the patience of farmers. Pastors must care with the patience of shepherds. Teachers must instruct pupils with the patience of parents. Someone quipped, “A pastor must have the patience of a donkey, the meekness of a lamb, the hide of a rhinoceros, the industry of a beaver and the strength of an ox.” I wonder how many will opt to become a pastor if this requirement is placed before them when they choose their ministry! Folks in the congregation are usually in a frivolous hurry. They expect too much for too little too soon. They want to get to the promised land without going through the wilderness. Your patience will be tested to the core when you work with the impatient. It is said, “After five or ten years those who are active against us in our church will outnumber those who are active for us! Be patient!”

Let’s look at various types and categories of people that preachers work with to whom they must show patience—

“As Elijah did!”

Expecting people to believe on Christ following the very first sermon is un-

reasonable. When the people of a Samaritan village rejected the messengers of Christ, two of the top leaders of His team asked Him, “Lord, should we order down fire from heaven to burn them up, as Elijah did?” (Lk 9:51-54). Jesus rebuked them saying, “You don’t know what manner of spirit you are of” (v 55b). James and John would have boastfully thought about their own instant obedience to Christ’s call and contrasted it with the poor response of the Samaritans. What they failed to remember was the rich Jewish background they had already had! There are still thousands of unconverted men and women in our Churches even after listening to thousands of sermons. If Jesus must act on the suggestion of James and John, all our Churches would be in flames and ashes!

Christians or Non-Christians?

Why then did Jesus tell His disciples to shake off the dust from their feet against any town or city which rejected their message? (Mt 10:14). These were not non-Jewish villages but villages of Israelites (vv5,6). We also misquote Paul to justify our impatience. When those in Corinth opposed him, he shook his garments and said to them, “Your blood be on your own heads; I am clean. From now on I will go

to the Gentiles” (Acts 18:6). We forget that Paul did not take this step just after one or two sermons. On the other hand, he had “stayed” with a tentmaking couple, “worked” with them in this trade, and preached “every Sabbath” in their synagogue! (vv 3,4). In the same way, it was after stretching out His hands to the people of Israel “all day long,” God made Himself manifest to the non-Israelites (Rom 10:20,21).

Sowing & Reaping

The popular trend in the missiological world today is not to waste time with irresponsive peoples but move fast to the responsive groups. This may sound logical and profitable, but this viewpoint does not fall in line with the consistent teaching of the Bible. Did not Jesus say, “One sows, and another reaps?” (Jn 4:37). May be God wants one mission group to labour for long years in a field without visible fruits, and He would send there another group to reap that for which it did not labour (v 38). Because we run for responsive groups in India, we have practically neglected the resistant caste Hindus. When Church growth is more rural than urban, the moral climate of the nation will not be changed. The intelligentsia of the society will remain untouched.

Ishmaels or Isaacs?

It’s good to fix targets, but unrealistic goals and rigid targets will crush the workers in the mission fields. No doubt the supporters look for attractive reports, but the way of the Spirit may be quite different (Eccl 11:5,6). The Great Commission of Christ is not to christianize the world but to evangelize it. William Carey (1761-1834) laboured for seven years before the first Hindu convert was baptized. In Burma, Adoniram Judson (1788-1850) toiled for seven years before he had one. He wrote to England, “Beg the Churches to have patience!” If evangelistic preachers are not patient, they will fill our pews with more of Ishmaels than Isaacs. We are called to sow faithfully and wait patiently so we may reap “at the appropriate time” (Gal 6:9). The appropriate time may come “after many days” (Eccl 11:1).

Who will write for us?

Among those who decide to serve God fulltime, very few choose the ministry of Bible translation, because it’s a time-consuming job and the results will not be impressive or spectacular to carnal eyes. This also explains the reason for the scarcity of Christian writers in India. Among the popular preachers very few sit to write. We shun anything that

requires patient and painstaking labour. Apostle Paul might have felt that he had been paralysed by imprisonments. But that was God's way of making him sit and write without distractions and itinerancy! O how many Epistles the Church would have otherwise lost! The climaxing book in the New Testament was written by John during his banishment to an island!

Athens & India

Idolatry in India would upset any true worshipper of the living God. But if we lose patience and prudence, we will shout from public pulpits words which will only antagonize the non-Christians rather than awaken them to consider the claims of Christ. The Bible suffers more in the hands of its exponents than its opponents. Apostle Paul was deeply provoked in his spirit when he saw the entire city of Athens sold out to idolatry (Acts 17:16). But he showed dignified restraint when he began to speak to the city folks. Read his sermon from verses 22 to 31. He uses the word "we" more often than "you!"

The opposers of the Gospel are not our enemies; they are simply the victims of the Enemy, even Satan. We are called to bless those who persecute us and to pray for them (Mt 5:44). It was in a hostile atmosphere Paul showed the patience and

gentleness of a mother and a father (1 Thess 2:1,2,7,11). This he could do because he never forgot God's patience towards him before his conversion. Writing to his trainee Timothy he said, "That is why God had mercy on me, so that Christ Jesus could use me as a prime example of His great patience with even the worst sinners" (1 Tim 1:16). Let no one in the ministry of the Gospel ever forget this!

Nicodemus of the night

I have seen preachers being unkind and impatient with secret Christians. How on earth can anyone be a "secret" Christian? —they would ask. Were not Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea "secret" followers of Christ? Nicodemus is always referred to as one who came to Jesus "by night" (Jn 3:2; 7:50; 19:39). Joseph was called "a disciple of Jesus, but secretly, for fear of the Jews" (Jn 19:38). But both in life and death of Jesus these two men were unusually close to Him! Preachers who are patient towards people actually affirm, "We are not trying to dominate you and your faith, but we can work with you to increase your joy" (2 Cor 1:24).

Judging others is the easiest thing to do. I once saw a woman, at the reception counter of a Christian retreat centre, with

a haircut that made her look like a man. I thought why people had kept such ultra-moderns in a retreat centre where folks had been coming for spiritual renewal. Soon I realized that she had lost her fingers in her right hand due to leprosy, and with one hand she could not manage long hair. I was ashamed of my impatient conclusion.

Little by little

New believers are babies just born into the Kingdom of God. In our enthusiasm we must not push them into our perfection moulds. Neonatal deaths abound in Churches because of the impatience of pastors and preachers. People must be given time to grow. The only condition for water baptism is a sincere faith in the heart (Acts 8:36,37). Any addition is not Scriptural. There are no “seven” steps to salvation. There is only one! (Acts 16:30,31). See how God teaches us: “Line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little” (Isa 28:13). He treats us like those “just weaned from mother’s milk” (v9). So much of fruit of evangelistic labour is lost because of insufficient follow-up. Everyone wants to be a planter like Paul, but very few opt to become a waterman like Apollos. Watering is to be done patiently and consistently (1 Cor 3:6; Js 5:6).

Devil’s trap

Doctrinal deceptions are on the increase. The deceived don’t know that they are deceived. That’s what deception is. What’s the point then in getting angry with them? See how thoughtfully apostle Paul advised Timothy: “The Lord’s servants must not quarrel but must be kind to everyone. They must be able to teach effectively and be patient with difficult people. They should gently teach those who oppose the truth. Perhaps God will change those people’s hearts, and they will believe the truth. Then they will come to their senses and escape from the Devil’s trap. For they have been held captive by him to do whatever he wants” (2 Tim 2:24-26).

Who is the Prodigal?

Backsliding is common whereas restoration is uncommon. Of the many reasons I have observed, one weighty reason is the impatient remarks and reactions of pastors and preachers towards backsliders. Under no circumstance should we condemn anyone. The parables of the lost sheep, the lost silver coin and the lost son better illustrate restoration from backsliding than the initial repentance of a sinner. The lost sheep was once in the fold. The lost silver coin was once in the forehead. The lost son was once in the

family. What is highlighted in these three stories is the patience with which the losers searched or waited. Pastors have the moral responsibility to find out the underlying cause of backsliding in each case. Remedying the situation will not only pave way for the backslider to return but also prevent others from going astray.

God loves backsliders. The Old Testament is filled with the restoration messages of prophets. See how patient He had been and has been with Israel! In fact there is atleast a little backsliding in each of us. Who among us does maintain the same glow at all times? Unnoticed backsliding is more serious than apparent backsliding. In the parable of the two sons the younger one backslided outside the home whereas the elder backslided right inside. If the end of a story is more important than its beginning, the younger boy has got in whereas the elder one is out. Who is the real prodigal, I wonder! Does the elder boy portray unkind and impatient church elders?

Paul & Mark

It is repeatedly said that leadership in the New Testament is plural. But it is more a theory than a practice. We are not able to tolerate differences and be patient with imperfections. Jesus could not have

built a strong team for world evangelisation if He had not been patient with an unstable Peter, power-hungry James and John or a doubting Thomas. Even the noblest among us will succumb to the temptation to lose patience towards one another, unless we are watchful and self-controlled. Whatever may be the reason, Paul's impatience in the matter of John Mark cannot be condoned. His impatience cost him the ministerial companionship of a Barnabas who had been named as the Son of Encouragement (Acts 4:36; 15:36-40).

Paul & Peter

Again, Paul need not have opposed a senior leader like Peter publicly (Gal 2:11-14). Peter might have been wrong to play "hypocrisy" as Paul termed it! But Paul was not right either in speaking against him in front of others. Why did then Paul circumcise Timothy? (Acts 16:3). Why this appeasement? Why did Paul shave his head? (Acts 21:23-26). If you so want, you can find fault with anyone. Without making some allowances, coexistence is impossible. In spite of Paul's stiff attitude, Peter was gracious enough to acknowledge his wisdom (2 Pet 3:15,16). Perhaps this is why eventhough Christ made Paul the Kingdom builder, He gave the keys to Peter!

When you are criticized...

Hardly any preacher escapes false accusations sometime or other in his ministerial career. The devil uses scandal as a powerful weapon to destroy servants of God. The Lord will ultimately vindicate them, but the passage is painful. Joseph was patient towards a sex scandal. Moses was patient towards a marriage scandal. God permitted Jesus to be crucified on false charges. Here's a thumb rule: "Never fear criticism when you are right; never ignore criticism when you are wrong!" H. W. Longfellow has penned these insightful lines: "If we could only read the secret history of our enemies, we would find in each man's life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility!"

Prophets without honour

No institution teaches us patience like the school of marriage. It is at home a preacher's patience will be tested exhaustively. When he returns home with lots of enthusiasm and encouragement after a successful preaching programme, he finds his family members pouring cold water on his excitement. He must not get irritated or lose patience, but remember the words of Jesus: "A prophet is honoured everywhere except in his own hometown and among his own family" (Mt 13:57b).

John Wesley (1703-1791) the Father of Methodism used to receive such a contemptible treatment from his wife whenever he returned home after preaching fiery sermons. He took it patiently. His marriage failed but he stayed faithful in his calling till the end. William Carey's wife suffered severe mental depression. Life was not easy for him. But he was steadfast in his work and became the Father of Modern Missions. However, there's nothing like a husband-wife team in Christian work. Challenges and problems will be there, but rewards will be great if patience overrules (Eccl 4:9-12).

Children are the next patience-testers. According to a recent study, over 75% of the children of missionaries never want to choose missionary career. Many pastors' children hate religion though they cannot show it out. Every other preacher has unruly children. Paul wondered how a man could take care of God's Church if he could not manage his own family well, with children who respect and obey him (1 Tim 3:4,5). If this text is to be taken literally as a qualification for a minister, over half of the pastors and preachers will have to resign. What is implied here is that servants of God must not neglect their families in the pretext of ministerial responsibilities. Both family and ministry

are from God (Prov 18:22; Psa 127:3; Acts 20:24). Don't sacrifice one for the other but balance them and work patiently at each of them against all odds.

Having seen some of the categories of people with whom we must be patient as servants of God, we will now study the areas where we need to be patient—

Sermons or Messages?

Sermon preparation is a work that demands lots of patience. Before it became too late the early apostles decided that they would devote themselves exclusively to the ministry of the Word and prayer. There were of course other necessary things, but they made a choice to spend their time primarily on knees for preparation and then to stand up for the proclamation of the Word of God (Acts 6:3,4). Very few are the modern preachers who patiently shut themselves in their prayer closets until they hear from God what they must speak to people. There are plenty of sermons but there's a scarcity for messages from God. Preachers are too busy with financial and administrative matters to wait on God patiently. Someone said, "Christianity began in a catacomb with nothing but a message, and ended up in a cathedral with nothing but money!"

Information or inspiration?

Dr. Billy Graham was once asked how he would spend his life if he were to start all over again. He replied, "I'll preach less and study more!" Preachers don't grow because they are no more listeners and learners. You need patience to listen and to learn. If you prepare sermons without sitting quietly before God, you will be dominated more by informations and imaginations than inspirations. John Newman rightly said, "The false preacher is one who has to say something; the true preacher is one who has something to say!" The preacher who cannot broaden and deepen his sermons usually lengthens them. If we are too busy to listen to God, He takes us into difficult situations so we are compelled to slow down. Prophet Jonah learnt more at the bottom of the sea than some preachers learn at a theological seminary. Example: "Salvation is of the Lord" (Jon 2:9c).

40 years

There is no one who does not like promotion. Because preachers are mostly self-employed, they can do whatever they want to be exalted and become popular. Waiting for God's time has become a forgotten habit. About Moses God testified

that there was never a prophet like him before or after him (Dt 34:10-12). It took years for him to come to this place of honour. He died at 120. The first 40 years he learnt that he was somebody. The next 40 years convinced him that he was nobody. During the last 40 years he understood that God was everything. Jesus resisted the temptation for quick promotion whether it came from Satan or his relatives (Mt 4:8-10; Jn 7:2-6).

Elisha Vs. Gehazi

Promotion comes from God. We are exhorted to humble ourselves under His mighty hand that He might exalt us in due time (1 Pet 5:6). Elisha waited patiently, and the mantle of Elijah fell on him. But Elisha's servant Gehazi was too anxious. He was after ministerial promotion and material prosperity. He spoke the language of his master Elisha and even used his staff. But he could not revive the dead child. He went after money stealthily and bought only leprosy (2 Ki 4 & 5). Ministries will be ruined if tricky and manipulative Gehazis come to leadership positions.

Ignoring so many senior associates and mature believers in their own congregations, several pastors make their sons as next leaders. These youngsters may have

talents and an overseas degree. But what is essential for leadership is an experience of walking patiently with God. That's why Paul admonished Timothy, "Do not lay hands on any one hastily" (1 Tim 5:22a). No wonder glory departs congregations and organisations after the days of the founders. Preachers must keep Jeremiah 45:5 always before them: "Are you seeking great things for yourself? Don't do it!"

Power & Patience

Patience is also necessary in the operation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit and manifestation of His power. When we talk about the marks of an apostle, we immediately think of signs, wonders and miracles. This is right, but we forget the setting for these which is patience. See the testimony of Paul, an apostle par excellence: "Truly the signs of an apostle were accomplished among you WITH ALL PATIENCE, in signs and wonders and miracles" (2 Cor 12:12). Moses in impatience smote the rock the second time. Of course waters did gush out! The miracle did happen! People were abundantly blessed. But God was totally displeased. He viewed the impatience of Moses so seriously that he was denied entry into the Promised Land! (Num 20:7-12).

As Elisha did?

The descent of the Dove-like Spirit on Jesus at the riverbank and His forty day fasting in the desert charged Him with God's power beyond measure. But when the devil prompted Him to try it out by turning stones into bread, Jesus refused (Mt 3:16-4:4). This is patience that's perfect. In contrast, prophet Elisha, who was patient before getting the mantle, started acting in haste once he received it. He struck Jordon immediately with the mantle (2 Ki 2:13,14). In his impatience he cursed fortytwo youths who mocked at him. They were instantly devoured by wild bears (vv 23-25). What did Elisha gain by the death of so many youngsters? God forbid that we in impatience do any destructive thing "as Elisha did!" Gifts of the Spirit and His fruit are two different things. Charisma is not the same as character. It is possible to excel in prophesying, exhibit mountain-moving faith and even embrace martyrdom without love which is perfected by patience (1 Cor 13:1-4a; Js 1:4). Emerson commented, "A man is a hero, not because he is braver than anyone else, but because he is brave for ten minutes longer!"

With God for God!

God endows us with gifts of power. In order that they may be operated for the

glory of God, we must wait patiently before Him. Jesus had already given His disciples power over unclean spirits (Mt 10:1). But when they could not cast out a demon from a young boy, the explanation of Jesus was that they should spend enough time unhurriedly with God in fasting and prayer. Faith and power alone won't do (Mt 17:19-21). Why did Jesus delay His visit to Lazarus when he was dying? He took time to receive specific instructions from His Father about the situation.

A.W. Tozer (1871-1963) observed, "We hear a great deal about GO YE, but not much about TARRY YE!" This was the worry of the 18th century Scottish preacher, Andrew Bonar (1810-1892), who warned ministers of his day, "One of the gravest perils which besets the ministry is a restless scattering of energies over an amazing multiplicity of interests which leaves no margin of time and of strength for receptive and absorbing communion with God." A prepared messenger is more important than a prepared message. We cannot cultivate a spirit of prayer unless we acquaint ourselves with divine patience. We should begin to pray before we kneel down, and we should not cease when we rise up!

My own vineyard

When we become overoccupied with the work of God and neglect personal devotions, our spiritual growth will be stunted. Then we will have to lament like the Shulamite in the Song of Solomon, "They made me the keeper of the vineyards, but my own vineyard I have not kept" (SS 1:6b). Jesus was always watchful to avoid this pitfall. When the work increased, He increased His quiet time with His Father. Historian Luke gives a firsthand report: "Despite Jesus' instructions, the report of His power spread even faster, and vast crowds came to hear Him preach and to be healed of their diseases. But Jesus often withdrew to the wilderness for prayer" (Lk 5:15,16).

Attention-getters

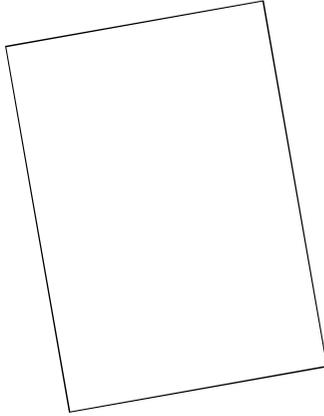
The saintly Robert Murray M'Cheyne said, "Every wise workman takes his tools away from the work from time to time that they may be ground and sharpened; so does the only-wise Jehovah take His ministers oftentimes away into darkness and loneliness and trouble that He may sharpen and prepare them for harder work in His service." Blessed thought! God allows crises in our lives to slow us down in the rat race. We should not be discouraged, but at the same time we should not

sail against God's wind. Financial difficulties, fruitlessness in work, material losses, failures in life, family problems, physical ailments, deaths of dear ones, and the like may be God's attention-getters. Stay sensitive.

Perhaps today!

Fulfilment of visions, accomplishment of goals, answers to prayers, solution of problems and several such things may be inordinately delayed in our work for God. But he who waits on God loses no time. We will not be frustrated if what we primarily look forward to is the Return of Christ rather than any of the above things. Horatius Bonar (1808-1889) was called the prince of Scottish hymn-writers. He served God for over sixty years. When he gets up in the morning, he would say, "Perhaps today, Lord!" When he retires to bed, "Perhaps tonight, Lord!" God knows that it is a struggle for us to be patient. That's why Christ repeatedly says, "Behold, I come quickly!"

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