

Questions of Conviction



Noel Eagling

Introduction

Life today is full of questions.

It seems to me that there are a lot more questions being posed in our world than there are answers supplied. Mankind is floundering its way through the 21st Century, desperately seeking answers and solutions to the myriad of questions and problems we face. Meetings, think tanks and global summits are increasing in number and frequency as the search continues for wisdom and understanding...

The cleverest people on the planet put forward their opinions and ideas but most are found to be lacking what is needed to meet our needs.

Questions, questions of conviction...

We can get to the stage where we are sick and tired of questions and ready to give up. But I believe we need to keep on asking, keep on seeking the right answers, persisting in looking for the solutions to life's challenges. If we cease to ask questions then we abdicate our rights and responsibilities.

This book is about questions. It asks us about our choices, reflects upon the content from a biblical perspective and challenges the reader to come up with a godly answer. I believe the secret to obtaining the right answers is, first of all, to ask the right questions and, secondly, to put God in the picture, because, without His guidance, without Holy Spirit direction, the best we can do is humanism and history shows us that this worldly approach to life doesn't work. What we need are questions of conviction, asking the Spirit to supply us with the right answer. Many of these questions have arisen as I have pastored people over the years, seeking to stimulate them in their faith.

May God speak to you as you read, as you grapple with the issues raised and help you to come up with answers which honor God and allow you to blossom and bloom in your walk with Him.

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God bless,
Noel Eagling

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Are we Mere Believers or Followers too?

This morning during our prayer walking session, my fellow prayer warrior made an interesting request which the Holy Spirit immediately brought alive to me. He asked the Father that our congregation members would not only *believe* in Christ but also want to *follow* Him.

It was one of those moments when a word which someone has spoken rings in your ears like a huge bell, immediately grabbing your attention, the words resounding in your mind as you contemplate what was said.

My mind was suddenly alive with stimulating thoughts. I found myself thinking upon what it means to follow, as opposed to merely believing. God made me think...

of those I know who believe in Jesus but don't attend church...

of people who believe but don't read their Bible at all or only every now and then...

of people who believe and have tremendous potential in God but fail to let Him lead them...

of believers who seem to be part time followers, preferring to spend too much time following the modern day false gods of self satisfaction, money and status, material possessions, sports, godless relationships, fashion, etc...

of believers who do not deny themselves daily, nor take up their cross to follow Jesus...

In just a few minutes God led me to do an inventory of my own life, examining what I had been doing in recent weeks, asking myself what evidence there was that I had been following Jesus. I found it quite challenging and realized I needed to make some changes.

The Bible asks us to *believe*, to have faith in Jesus, but also to *follow* Him, obeying what He commands and doing the things that He did. James reminds us that faith without works is dead – does our faith lead us into works for Jesus?

Perhaps today is a good time to take a careful look at our own walks with our Master. He has left huge footprints for us to follow. They have weathered almost 2000 years through time and are still clearly visible and He is still calling, 'Follow Me!' I'd like to suggest we ask ourselves two useful questions. First of all, 'Can I hear His voice?', and secondly, 'Am I willing to follow Him full time?'

Are You Driven or Compelled?

Paul is an inspiring figure in the Bible. He was so powerful in his ministry. I have been reading Acts again and it reminds me that he truly did the things that Jesus had been doing. Chapter 19 mentions about handkerchiefs and aprons that he had merely touched being taken to the sick 'and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them'. Chapter 20 tells us about Eutychus being raised from the dead through Paul – he may have been a long-winded preacher but he certainly knew how to bring back to life listeners who went to sleep on him!

Paul was so motivated, so dedicated, so committed to his task. I believe this Scripture tells us his secret:

‘And now, *compelled* by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there.
...I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me – the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace.’

Acts 20:22,24 (italics added)

He wasn't driven, but rather compelled by the Spirit. Some may contend that there is little difference but I feel that it is a significant one. I have found that driven people are certainly motivated and usually dedicated and committed, in a similar way to Paul, but the thing which drives them usually tends to consume them and eventually destroys them, robbing them of peace and joy.

If we let something or someone drive us, we tend to become enslaved and it demands every gram of our lives, draining us of energy and satisfaction. Being compelled by the Spirit, however, tends to energize us, allowing us to work harder for longer, being continually filled with inspiration and zeal, yet retaining peace and joy in the task rather than being continually tired out and often running on empty.

I believe Paul gained momentum as he aged and remained powerful in God because he had the right source for his inspiration. He wasn't building his own kingdom or enterprise but was always very aware that he was working for God, working in His strength rather than his own, *compelled* rather than driven, drawn rather than pushed.

It's a valuable question with a significant answer: are we driven or compelled?

Is This The Ultimate Heart Attack Prevention?

‘I have hidden your word in my heart
that I might not sin against you.’
Psalm 119:10

God’s Word is such an awesome, powerful thing – it guides us, inspires us, teaches us, convicts us of sin and protects us... Most of us love the Word and cannot wait to get to it each day, looking forward to what ‘goodies’ await our discovery at the start of a new day full of immense God-possibilities.

For the Word to be effective, however, it needs to be both retained and then applied to our lives. It will accomplish little if we read it and forget it or merely think, ‘Oh that’s sweet, or challenging, or comforting, or edifying, but do nothing with it. As we read, we need to ask, ‘What relevance does this part of the Word have to my life and circumstances and the people around me right now?’ We have to somehow store away what we have read so that it accumulates within us, taking us to a new level of understanding and functioning, to a deeper level of intimacy with God. I wonder ...where is the best place within us to do the storing away?

I love what it says in reference to the word in Psalm 119, verse 10, and I’ve been meditating upon it this morning. I invite you to come meditate with me...

I hear God speaking to me of my needing to be like a child who hides away a treasured possession so that it can’t be overlooked, misplaced or forgotten. It is so important, that the child cannot go to sleep without it near them as they are ‘tucked in’ by their parent. The last question they ask for the day is to check that this treasure, whether it is their favourite book or toy or rug or whatever, is near them as they sleep. I wonder...do I have the same feelings for God’s Word?

I hear God speaking to me about the importance of the heart. Why didn’t the writer say that he would hide the word in his mind? Perhaps he felt that his heart needed to be the part of him which was closest to God. Perhaps he realized that a mind relationship with God was susceptible to crooked thinking and the Word may be lost or pushed to the side as the things of the world flood in... Perhaps he knew that the Word would keep his heart soft so that God may more easily have His way in his life.

I hear God encouraging me to hide the Word in my heart as a protection against sin because I know my heart is so susceptible to temptation. I know I am so easily misled by my feelings – having the Word of God there can be like each of us having an inbuilt antidote to the poison of the serpent’s bites. We can use the power of the Word to counter the attacks of the enemy! I’ve been wondering... is this the ultimate in heart attack prevention?

Whom Will You Serve This Day?

Joshua was nearing the end of his time as the leader of Israel and he wanted to prepare the people in the best possible way for the time when he would no longer be with them. He was concerned about the future choices they would make.

In chapters 23 and 24 of the Book of Joshua, we read about his approach and I believe there are really important principles involved which we can apply to life today.

First of all, Joshua summoned the people and *reminded* them of God's goodness and His fantastic 'track record' in bringing them out of slavery and into their inheritance. No one could question God's ability to provide everything the people needed and Joshua presented a powerful case for why the followers should place their trust in Him.

As part of singing God's praises, He *cautioned* them about being disobedient to what they had been taught and how they needed to avoid being distracted by those about them who followed other gods. Joshua reminded them that God would continue to fight for them and that, through Him, all of their enemies could be defeated.

Then Joshua gave them the *freedom to choose* whom they would follow or serve.

As a means of *setting an example*, he told them very clearly whom he would serve. He let them know where he stood, and told them that his personal stance would also be that taken by his entire household. He followed the basic biblical principle of having his own home in order before seeking to lead others.

When the people responded positively, agreeing with Joshua's choice, he then *challenged* them to ensure that their response was not merely 'lip service'. He looked for a clear, sincere and heartfelt response, knowing that the people would be tested and that they needed to be absolutely sure about whom they would serve.

Then, and only then, did he make a covenant or *agreement* between the people and God. This only came when he had taken them 'the long way round' to ensure that their choice was solid and sincere.

I believe we can use a similar approach today in helping people to make important choices in life. We can:

- 1) *remind* them of God's goodness,
- 2) *caution* them against disobeying Him,
- 3) give them the *freedom to choose*, while
- 4) *setting an example* in the choice that we would make,
- 5) *challenge* them about the sincerity of their choice and, finally,
- 6) help them *agree with God*, thus sealing and strengthening their choice.

May God bless these six steps as we help people make better choices!

Why Do We Call It Good Friday?

Most of us would classify it as one of the worst possible days we could imagine. It was a day filled with the denial of justice, the agony of receiving thirty nine lashes, the disappointment of seeing some of your closest followers do a vanishing act, the back breaking struggle of carrying a huge piece of wood along a series of narrow streets and the final humiliation of a gruesome, naked death on a cross designed for a criminal. It would appear that no matter which way you look at it, the Friday on which Jesus suffered and died was a terribly sad, bad day.

And yet we call the day Good Friday...

It's not unlike James telling his readers to 'Consider it pure *joy*, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds...' To the natural mind this seems nonsense, but James explained himself by continuing, 'because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance and perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, *not lacking anything.*' James 1:2-4 (italics added)

James was telling his readers that the tough times they were encountering, while terrible when you were suffering, were actually going to turn out for their good.

Joseph was another Bible character who experienced some terrible times of injustice and he had this to say about his experiences: 'You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.' (Genesis 50:20). I believe Joseph 'hit the nail upon the head' when he said that God had turned bad into good for 'the saving of many lives.' I believe this saving of many lives is exactly why we call the day on which Jesus died Good Friday! God had in mind the salvation of *all* of mankind when He asked His Son to go the cross – many, many lives!

Jesus had to endure the tragedy and injustice of the cross because it was the only way that we could be saved. Again this Easter, we will reread and hear anew the Easter story, identifying with Jesus in this mockery of a trial and travesty of justice, trying to understand Jesus' immense love for us in surrendering Himself to a torturous dying day.

I believe it's a part of this 'upside down Kingdom' to which we belong. In God's Kingdom the normal practices of the world are denied: He asks us to put ourselves last, to endure humiliation without retaliating, to love our enemies, to rejoice in our sufferings because we know that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance produces character and character produces hope which does not disappoint us.' (Romans 5:3-5) .

The truth is that our definition of 'good' is different from that of worldly people. That's why we call the day *Good* Friday. May God touch us afresh this year with His awesome goodness!

Are We Willing to Make Such an Offering?

The Easter story is a brilliant narrative of many different facets, with perhaps the most significant one being that of heroic sacrifice. We are so pleased Jesus did not give in to His own desires in the Garden of Gethsemane. Instead, He followed the Father's will of *offering* Himself to be the final-ever Passover Lamb. Jesus *offered* to die in our place, to take for Himself the guilty verdict which we deserved for our sins. No other *offer* ever made in world history compares with this.

This was a truly magnificent *offer* which caused the devil to 'lick his lips' in anticipation, mistakenly believing that this would be the end of Jesus, the defeat of the Father's plan to make death obsolete. The devil was blindsided to the fact that Jesus had power to overcome any hurdle placed in His path, even death!

Jesus' *offer* won salvation for all mankind, so that there would no longer be the need for animal sacrifices as an atonement for sin. It did not, however, put an end to the human 'sacrificial' system for believers in Christ.

In Romans 12, believers were urged to '*offer* their bodies' just as Jesus did, but this time they were to be 'living sacrifices'. Jesus had once-and-for-all-time offered a perfect sacrifice in obedience to His Father and in doing so He did two things – firstly He destroyed the devils' hold over mankind and superseded the need for animal sacrifice. Secondly, He set an example for believers to follow. Just as we are directed to take up our cross daily and follow Jesus, this verse says that we are also to *offer* our bodies.

Jesus, realizing His Father's call upon His life, *offered* His body in response to the will of God. Our *offering*, by contrast, is a prerequisite to enable us to know the will of God! Romans chapter 12 verses 1 and 2 tells us the following:

'...offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God- this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. *Then* you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.' (italics added)

To be obedient to Paul's exhortation, we need to put to death our own selfish desires, offer our bodies in worship to God, offer our minds to be transformed so that we may become Kingdom thinkers in order that we may know God's will for our lives. Then we need to *offer* our wills, surrendering them to the will of God.

Jesus' sacrificial *offering* of His life changed the history of mankind. I believe that Christians who are willing to be living sacrifices can change the history of our churches and local communities. Are we willing to make such an offering?

Who Has The Numbers In Your Life?

It's been interesting watching on television the current battle for the White House in the United States. As the protagonists go blow for blow from state to state it becomes obvious that it is all about 'having the numbers'.

It's all about having the wealthiest sponsors and gaining enough votes to secure victory. The aim is to convince enough people that you will do the best job as leader of the nation. The candidates battle to have on their team the wisest and most influential advisors. The way the system works means that this race is about persuasion, 'scratching people where they itch', telling them what they want to hear, making themselves look more attractive.

It's immensely comforting to know that our God doesn't work that way.

He doesn't 'tickle our ears' with what we want to hear – instead, He tells us the truth. He tells us what we *need* to hear!

He doesn't need to convince people to back Him with corporate sponsorship – instead, He gives unto mankind out of His own bountiful riches – He owns it all and is keen to give it away to others rather than accumulate it for Himself! God doesn't need the best advisors – instead He is the one who gives out the best advice, advice that is better than money can buy! He doesn't need us to vote for Him or to empower Him because all power belongs to Him - He always has the numbers!

So much in life is all about the numbers game. Imagine one of us ordinary people trying to arrange a meeting with Hilary Clinton one on one – it would never happen. But God is more than happy to speak with us one-on-one anytime, day or night, for as long as we need Him. Imagine Barack Obama being willing to attend a meeting with just two or three ordinary people. It's very unlikely. Yet God is willing to be in the midst when only two or three of us gather together - He guarantees to be there in all His might and majesty, ready to listen, give, empower, heal, provide a miracle, instruct, encourage, guide, comfort – all of the things our awesome God is in the business of doing!

Aren't you glad that God doesn't need to be worried about the vote count, that His election is certain? Aren't you so pleased that we can be on His winning side and receive the wonderful benefits of His perfect government of our lives? Isn't it a privilege to know that God doesn't play political games with us, that He has all the best policies in place and that His ruling over our lives will cause us to be truly blessed?

So many people in the United States are worried about who will win the race for the White House. Isn't it great to know that our God will remain in office forever, being the perfect leader who always has the numbers!

Who has the numbers in your life?

Are We As Impressive As Our Message?

My wife Beckie and I have recently been privileged to attend a Bill Johnson 'When Heaven Invades Earth' Conference at Dayspring Church in Sydney. We thoroughly enjoyed the time and were inspired by the experience – the praise and worship, the fellowship of believers, Bill's teaching and especially witnessing hundreds of people being miraculously healed of many different types of ailments and injuries – all of it was so encouraging! We have come home changed for the better and richer in our appreciation of how God seeks to use us in extending His Kingdom.

We learnt a lot from Bill about his perspective on God's 'invasion of the Earth' but there were several things that impacted us in the way he conducted his ministry. Although he had with him a team of young people from his church in California, most of the praying for people was carried out by conference attendees. He said that he believes God wants to use every one of us in seeing God's power released. It was like I imagine it would have been being around Jesus – He taught his disciples about God's role for them and then released them to put the theory into practice. It reminded us of John Wimber's desire that in the life of the church 'everyone gets to play' rather than having many on the sidelines waiting to get game time. Bill involved as many people in the working of miracles – again and again he told people to gather around and pray – so many were involved involved. It was definitely not a 'typical power ministry' approach where the anointed leader does all of the work and everybody else just watches.

We were very impressed by Bill's humble and casual approach. Even though he has written several books and has travelled to many parts of the world ministering, in no way did he set himself up as the 'guru' who had all the answers. He was quite willing to say there were many parts of Scripture which he didn't understand and that he wished to never become so familiar with portions of the Bible so that it no longer 'stung him' and challenged him when reading it.

There was no 'hyped up attitude' in his approach to ministry; much of the time he just conversed with us as though we were taking part in a cell group or some other small gathering. He let the truth in God's Word 'do the talking'!

Even when we were asking God for miracles, Bill asked people to pray in a brief and simple fashion with no long, drawn out efforts and no yelling or shouting. He felt that the authority and power of God were sufficient to get the job done. And that certainly seemed to be the case.

We came back from this wonderful experience greatly encouraged. It certainly was a case of impressive message and messenger too!

A question to ask yourself - are you as impressive as your message?

Can Surrender Be Victorious?

Victorious surrender – it sounds like an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms. But when we place a Biblical perspective on it and explore the power which can be released through an act of surrender to God, I think it makes perfect sense.

In worldly terms, to surrender is to give in, to capitulate, to admit defeat, to give victory to the enemy. It is a negative term which is often associated with feelings of failure and shame. We are often taught to ‘tough it out’, ‘dig in’ and never bow down to the enemy. As we approach the celebration of ANZAC Day in Australia and New Zealand, the famous war time words of Sir Winston Churchill in response to Hitler’s call to surrender come to mind – ‘We will never, never, never give up!’

As we gather on April 25th to remember the disastrous Gallipoli attack in which so many died, we thankfully remember and respect the efforts of those who made the ultimate sacrifice in war, but we also celebrate the spirit of soldiers who never gave up and would not contemplate surrender. We admire them because they didn’t give in.

How then can we reconcile this with a term like ‘victorious’ surrender?

I believe we can in the context of the Kingdom of God, this ‘upside down Kingdom’ which so often operates in the opposite way to earthly kingdoms. I’m talking about people surrendering their lives *not to the enemy, but to the King of all Kings, the Lord Jesus Christ*. Surrendering to Him is often the most powerful way to find an answer, to solve a problem or to gain victory.

To give you an example, over this past weekend I went through a time of wrestling with an issue, trying my best to figure it out and see the way forward but all my efforts just ended up in frustration and lack of clarity. Finally, after hours of considering alternatives and still feeling no peace at all, I gave up and surrendered the situation to God and decided to do something totally different for several hours. Later that day, I returned to seek out God and I felt an immediate calm come over me. The weight lifted from my shoulders.

I felt God ask me, ‘Why didn’t you give this problem over to me to sort out in the first place?’ The Holy Spirit convicted me of my wrong doing, my stubbornness in trying to reason it out with my own (very) limited understanding. He spoke to me about the need for surrender before victory could be attained. I realized I wasn’t surrendering to the enemy – he was happy for me to continue to battle away in my own strength - but I was surrendering myself to God, following Jesus’ example. God’s power was released.

It was, for me, a classic case of victorious surrender! It’s a white flag I’ll gladly wave! How good are you in the surrendering of issues to God.

Is What You Do Who You Are?

Geoff walked away with shoulders slumped, head down and tears in his eyes, having made another mistake in his role and having been on the receiving end of a serve from his boss. 'You must be completely stupid to do that!' The words of the angry boss rang in his ears as he contemplated his future in the firm. He went home that evening feeling worthless... 'Lord, will I ever get this right? I'm a loser, I'm ready to quit -You must be ready to give up on me too...'

Kelly was disappointed. Another job interview and another "Don't call us – we'll call you" reaction from the prospective employer. This was not the first time. She began to wonder if God really did have a plan for her life. What did that favourite verse of hers say? "Plans to prosper you..."? Well the prospering didn't seem to apply to her ...

Dan thought he had left the past behind but here it was to haunt him again. 'Up to your old tricks again, Dan? I thought you had learned from your past mistakes. I guess it's true - a leopard can't change its spots!' He couldn't eat dinner that evening; his stomach was churning and he felt powerless to overcome the darkness beginning to settle over him. 'Why can't I be set free from those skeletons in my closet, Lord? They seem to turn up again, and I'm reminded of them just when things are starting to go so well...'

Geoff, Kelly and Dan all seem to be missing out on the joy and fulfillment that God has for their lives. All three have gone home burdened by circumstances, feeling bad about themselves and the roles they have in life. Unfortunately, they seem blinded to what God says about them and how He feels towards them. If only they knew the truth...

The truth is that all three are born again believers with God's Spirit dwelling within them. They are loved by God unconditionally. Jesus held nothing back in His quest to save them. Through His blood they have received forgiveness for their sins, including a cleaning out of all of the 'skeletons' in their closets. All three have been released from Satan's control and placed in the Kingdom of Heaven to receive an absolutely awesome inheritance. Their future is totally secure. There *is* a plan to prosper them because they have the favour of God upon them. He is not angry with them despite the fact that they still make mistakes. He doesn't think they are stupid, or losers, or unworthy, or unable to have their spots changed. Instead He gives them the mind of Christ, He makes them into winners regardless of what other people think, He makes them worthy through the blood of Jesus and cleanses them of not only every spot, but every wrinkle and blemish too!

The truth is that what we do is not who we are. In Christ, we are far greater than the job we do, much more important than the role we play, and always worthy of love and respect. Are you convinced that what you do is not who you are.

What Does Godly Influence Look Like?

Over the past two days, I have been part of a group of adults who have accompanied teachers and students from Grades 4 and 5 on a school trip. One of the jobs we had to do was to be group leaders when the students went to various locations and when they slept for the night at Camp Clayton. For two days it meant that I had the opportunity to carefully observe the behaviour of children, overseeing their movements, trying to anticipate problems and helping solve them when they occurred.

It soon became obvious that most children have an effect on one another's behaviour. One young boy seemed to stir up the others wherever he went. As soon as he joined a group there was a measure of friction and disharmony. Others were noisy and when they joined a group it became louder and more vocal. Some were very excitable, or immature or selfish and their behaviour was often transferred to a group when they joined it. On the positive side, I observed that some children brought a quietness or maturity or steadiness to a group and it was great to have their influence. Another thing I observed was that some children seemed to have no real impact at all – they didn't seem to influence a group in any significant way.

It made me think about the influence that we Christians have upon others when we join a group. Like these children, we have the opportunity to influence others, either for good or for bad or not at all. We can bring a positive influence or a negative one or be a neutral person who may as well not be there.

I wonder what godly influence looks like? A few thoughts that God brings to my mind...

Jesus said we ought to be 'salt' and 'light' in our communities, the salt for taste and its preservative effect, the light to drive out shadows and dispel the darkness.

Paul said we ought to be ministers of reconciliation, seeking to bring all people back into a right relationship with God and with one another. Jesus told us that we would be blessed as peacemakers, choosing to love everyone, even our enemies, and in doing so, bringing a peace and calm to the 'troubled waters' of social malfunction and disharmony. I'd hope we were people whom others welcome because of our terrific attitudes.

I feel integrity needs to be high on our list of priorities, letting our 'yes be yes and our no be no' and always avoiding gossip, instead going to a person face to face when we have an issue with them instead of speaking to others behind their backs.

It is admirable to aim to be positive and optimistic, always seeking to encourage rather than discourage, and always looking to the needs of others before our own. God wants us to serve others and be people who seek to be faithful to His agenda instead of promoting selfish desires. Godly influence... it's certainly a challenge to us all!

What does your brand of Godly influence look like?

Will You Accept A Miracle?

Most Christians believe it's true that nothing is impossible with God. But I wonder how much we really believe that a miracle will be ours. I wonder if we have an *expectant* attitude when we pray... If we have to wait for an answer, I wonder if the doubts cause us to lapse into unbelief... I wonder if we are open to God wanting to do something super special in us 'ordinary, everyday people' ...

I wonder if we have a Zechariah-type reaction or a Mary-type reaction when told of a miracle about to take place in our lives... Let me explain what I mean.

Luke's Gospel begins with the miraculous births of John the Baptist and Jesus. These births were miraculous because John's mother, Elizabeth, was old and barren and Jesus' mother had not had sexual relations with a man. Without the miraculous intervention of a God of the impossible, these two very significant babies would not have been born. And we would have been without hope, destined for eternity in hell! Thank God that He is not limited by natural boundaries.

An angel from God had a message for both Zechariah and for Mary. Both were told of miracles which involved them but their reactions to the news were different – one doubted while the other faithfully accepted.

Zechariah did not believe the words of the angel when told that his barren wife was going to have a son in her old age. As a result, God struck him dumb until the baby was born, as a reminder that he should not question an angel from God, that he should believe that God can do the impossible.

Mary, by contrast, had a different reaction when told that she was going to be the earthly mother of the Saviour of the World: 'I am the Lord's servant' Mary answered. 'May it be to me as you have said.' She had no doubts that God could perform a miracle and even though she didn't fully understand what it was all about, she trusted God and surrendered to His will, not questioning His reasons or His ability to make it happen. Though she asked about the means by which the miracle was to be brought about because she was a virgin, she humbly accepted the explanation supplied. God so admired her faith!

If only we can follow Mary's example and look to our God of miracles. Even in her relative youth, she believed her God could do anything, even performing a miracle of such huge proportions. She chose to accept it when God sent her a message which was, in natural terms, completely and utterly impossible. She refused to be dumbfounded as Zechariah was when the God of miracles decided to call! If we get a message from God that a miracle is on the way, then let us be free of doubts and also say 'May it be as you have said.'

Will you accept a miracle?

Are You Living on a Higher Plane?

One of the things that most impresses me about Jesus is His ability to live life on a higher plane, being almost detached from His circumstances. I am reluctant to use the word 'detached' because that term implies that He wasn't interested in what was going on around Him and didn't care. It's obvious that He was *vitaly* interested in all circumstances. I feel sure that He was certainly no 'dreamboat' but rather a person who was always totally aware of everything going on in His immediate area. He most assuredly wasn't disconnected or aloof from people around Him as some proud people tend to be. He was the ultimate 'people person'!

Jesus never seemed to be overcome by circumstances. Never did He permit anyone to 'press His buttons' or 'get at Him'. I can't think of an instance in Scripture where Jesus was taken by surprise or caught off guard. Even in the Garden of Gethsemane at the time of His arrest, He knew what was coming. He may have struggled in prayer that night, wanting to be sure of God's will, but He still willingly surrendered His life for mankind.

He was always in control, always able to cope, never phased by a nasty comment or a devious argument used against Him. There was never a time when He allowed Himself to be coerced or bullied into a decision or made to feel guilty and He never reacted in a defensive manner. Perhaps only once did He show any insecurity at all - when He cried out from the cross, 'My God, My God, why have You forsaken me?'

I think of how the local people wanted to throw Him off a cliff after He upset them when returning to Nazareth. It says that He merely 'walked through the crowd'; what poise, what assurance, what coolness – I'm sure all of us aspire to that – I know I certainly do!

How come Jesus could live like that? I've been thinking this through and I've come to the following conclusion:

I believe Jesus could live as He did because He had such an awesome relationship with His Heavenly Father. He had His Dad's love and approval in everything He did, so He wasn't worried when others criticized Him. He had His Dad's plan for each day, so He wasn't fazed when a seemingly 'out of the blue' occasion arose because He knew what His Dad had already arranged the circumstances. He had spoken with His Dad early every morning and, therefore, was totally secure, totally accepted, totally unfazed, totally at peace...

He was living on a higher plane. I don't know about you, but I certainly want to live there! Let's work on our relationship with Father God – I'm sure it's a crucial key! How are you going at living on a higher plane?

A Rebellion? Or A 'Heavenly 180', a Divine Restoration?

When Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, He asked his enemies if He was leading a rebellion. (Luke 22:52) In their eyes He obviously was. He was seen as a threat by members of the Sanhedrin. Jesus was disturbing the status quo, challenging the views of the leaders, questioning their teaching and generally making those in authority squirm as they administered their own version of justice.

But was He leading a rebellion? I don't believe so. My feeling is that instead He was paving the way for a 'heavenly 180 degree turn' around, a divine restoration for mankind. Some may say there is little difference, but I see a remarkable contrast between the rebel and the divine restorer, and I believe we can learn from Jesus' example.

Rebels usually have a bad or, at least, a questionable reputation because they often have a deep seated problem with authority. By definition, a rebel does things differently, often reflected in the way they dress or do their hair or mark their bodies. They nearly always have a difficulty in submitting to others and prefer to do their own thing. Often they 'thumb their nose' at those in authority over them and show a marked lack of respect for people. They usually want to follow only their own rules.

Jesus wasn't like that at all. He lived in perfect submission to His Heavenly Father and treated all people with respect, including those in authority, even those who were going to crucify Him. He had the power to call down divine retribution upon them but instead He chose to ask for their forgiveness. He was seeking a restoration of the Father's ways.

When Peter sought to fight in the Garden of Gethsemane, cutting off the ear of one of those sent to arrest Jesus, the Lord chose to heal him. When the disciples wanted to call down the fire of God upon unbelievers, Jesus chose to leave them alone. When synagogue leaders wanted to stone to death a woman caught in adultery, Jesus chose to save her by quietly appealing to their personal sense of purity before God. All of these were classic examples of 'heavenly 180's'!

Jesus brought with Him a 'heavenly 180' of unconditional love, restoring the Father's ways of dealing with mankind. Jesus came, not as a rebel who would condemn the authorities, but as a redeemer who would buy them back, turning things upside down, restoring them to how the Father had originally wanted them to be. The religious authorities mistakenly tagged Jesus as a rebel, but He had a much, much higher calling – that of restoring God's Lordship over mankind. We need to follow His example. Rather than being rebellious about the state of the world, whining and despairing about what currently exists, we should be determined to do our part in seeing a divine restoration take place!

Are You Up Close and Personal with Jesus?

One of my favourite Christian songs is called The More I Seek You written by Zach Neese. It's a beautiful, gentle worship song which features the following lines:

'I want to sit at Your feet, drink from the cup in Your hand,
Lay back against You and breathe, feel your heartbeat.
This love is so deep, it's more than I can stand.
I melt in Your peace, it's overwhelming.'

The lyrics of the song speak of getting really close to Jesus and the message is very reminiscent of Mary as opposed to Martha in her relationship with Jesus. Her Master said that Mary had made the better choice to sit at His feet and listen while Martha was 'distracted and busy with too many things.'

This message of getting 'up close and personal' with Jesus has been on my heart very strongly in recent times and I feel that it is a key for me in my growing relationship with Him and others. I feel Him beckoning me to come closer and spend more and more quality time with Him so I may learn and grow to be more like Him. As the song says, I want to experience the closeness of His breath and to feel His heartbeat.

In recent weeks I have spent a large part of my time in schools as an educational consultant sorting out relationships which have become unworkable as disagreements have arisen. My general approach has been to seek to bring people back together in a close relationship, asking them to apply grace to fractured friendships and encouraging individuals to be willing to take a walk in the other person's shoes and see the conflict from their point of view. God has been so good in doing His restorative work and I have seen smiles restored to so many people's faces where frowns were dominant!

In the case of those who are Christians, I have also encouraged them to get closer to Jesus as they have worked through difficult circumstances with other people and all, without exception, have agreed that closer proximity to Him has made a tremendous difference in sorting out their frustrations and hurts.

I have found that this has been a classic case of the following Biblical principle being applied: if our 'vertical relationship' with Jesus is strengthened then this will flow into all of our 'horizontal' ones with other people. Look to Him first and then to others.

Jesus is an awesome God who longs for us to get 'up close and personal' with Him. I have been so encouraged lately by setting aside extra time to simply be in His presence and drink of His Spirit. It's like an oasis in the desert of our busyness; so refreshing and uplifting. Might I encourage you to find the time to try it! Jesus won't disappoint you...

A God of Nonsense?

Jesus said, ‘Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...’ Matt 5:44

James said, ‘Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds...’
James 1:2

Isaiah said, ‘Sing, O barren woman...’ Isaiah 54:1

At first encounter, all three of these statements sound like nonsense. They seem to fly in the face of logical thinking. They make no sense at all when read through the eyes of this world.

Surely, our enemies deserve what is coming to them! It makes more sense to want to get even with them rather than pray for God to bless them!

Surely, it’s better to moan and grizzle when we face trials, wallowing in self pity and despair. Only a crazy person could see good coming out of trials and traumas!

Surely, the last thing a barren woman would want to do is sing. She would much prefer her friends to gather around her and console her and look to worldly solutions offered by IVF and surrogate motherhood...

Why would you pray for those who persecute you? Why would you rejoice when facing trials of many kinds? Why would a barren woman burst into song?

The answer, of course, is *God*. He is the One who causes us to think outside of the box and look at situations in an unworldly manner.

He is the One who is almighty God, the maker of the heavens and the earth, the Creator who has so much power that He could merely *speak* and everything came into being, the One who is absolutely and completely perfect, totally holy and infallible. He has a *plan for our lives* which encompasses each and every situation we may face in this life, even the unpleasant, despairing and frustrating ones. He is *able* to turn darkness into light and bring hope even into seemingly hopeless situations when everyone is about to give up, wondering how they will cope. He is *all powerful* and when He is involved in a situation, anything can, and usually does happen – the miraculous, the impossible, the improbable and the unlikely. He is *all knowing* and able to fathom the most difficult mysteries, to make sense of every contradiction and ambiguity.

He is the reason we can pray for our enemies and consider it pure joy we when we face trials and sing when there is barrenness in our life. Despite what the world may say, the truth is that there is no nonsense in Him!

What's Our Response to Jesus?

In Mark 14 we have the story of Jesus being anointed at Bethany. It's a marvelous tale which shows a huge variation in people's responses to Jesus.

On the one hand we have the woman, whom we know from John's account is Mary, Martha and Lazarus' sister, anointing Jesus with a year's worth of perfume. To me this speaks of extravagant worship and adoration of the King. This lady was obviously totally 'sold out' to Jesus, willing to give up a huge amount to please Him.

Next we have the 'some' people in the story who react with indignation and rebuke the woman harshly. They see her devotion to Jesus, her obvious commitment to Him, and it stirs up in them anger rather than admiration. They feel she is completely 'over the top' and that her sacrifice is wasted, the money being better spent on the poor. Their appreciation of Jesus is so small by comparison. I feel they were threatened by her act and so challenged that it was easier to attack her as being out of line.

Jesus is a key player in the story. As always, his actions are the perfect model for us to follow. He is appreciative of what she has done and defends her strongly. His words reveal the truth; the woman is to be exalted while the 'some' suffer extreme embarrassment.

Judas, who was no doubt one of the 'some' who harshly rebuked Mary, responds by going to the chief priests to betray Jesus. He has had enough of this man who defends women when they are, in his mind, stupidly wasteful.

What a contrast in responses to Jesus:

- extravagant, sacrificial adoration by Mary
- indignant rejection of her devotion to Jesus by some
- outright betrayal of Jesus on the part of Judas.

People are still responding to Jesus in much the same way.

There are those who are totally sold out to Him, willing to make huge sacrifices for Him, not worried about what others think as they pour out their lives in adoration of their King. In my opinion, these people are the types of worshippers that Jesus desires – those who hold nothing back in wanting to get closer to Him, even at the expense of being rebuked by some who are offended by their seemingly wasted efforts.

Many people today are indignant when you speak about commitment to Jesus, rebuking believers for their expression of faith and the time and money they give to the cause of Christianity. These people see a devoted Christian walk as a waste of a life which could have been devoted to much more important worldly pursuits such as career, the accumulation of money and material possessions. I believe that they are not only misguided, but deep down, they are probably jealous and threatened by the strength of a love such as Mary's. They pull away themselves, afraid to get so close and instead go on the attack, trying to justify their own cool response, making excuses that they are more devoted to the poor than they are to their Master.

What will our response to Jesus be like?

Are You Excited About Revival?

I've been thinking a lot lately about revival in the church. It's something that most of us dream about, pray for and wait in eager expectation for it to happen.

Just thinking about it quickens my pulse! To see the church alight with all of the 'goodies' of God on display – believers filled to overflowing with God's agape love and His Spirit, a rush of new salvations, many miraculous healings, hundreds of people released from their bondages and delivered from Satan's grip, broken marriages put back together and families restored, the downhearted given new hope, local communities transformed as people have hearts of stone replaced with hearts of love and compassion...and the list goes on! Truly magnificent and awesome – revival is the best thing that could ever happen!

I've spoken with believers about it and read books on the topic. I've asked if people think there are any prerequisites which need to be in place to lay a foundation for revival to come. The responses are varied.

Some believe holiness in the church is an important consideration and that God won't move until we humble ourselves, repent and deal with sin in the church. Others feel we need to get to our knees 'big time', to fast and pray, calling down God's power so as we see miracles at work – they believe that this will bring the non believers running. At a recent conference I heard David Crabtree say that Evan Roberts believed that we simply need to ask for a revival - there is absolutely nothing we can say or do to hurry along a revival – it is all up to God and in His time. Graham Cooke tends to believe that a key is concentrating on the manifest presence of God, looking to His inhabitation of believers rather than just a visitation. Others contend that we need to be thirsty and hungry for God, believing that our level of desperation needs to reach a certain level before God will act.

Maybe it's a combination of these ideas...perhaps it's a cocktail of humble desperation for God expressed through prayer and fasting, repentance and holiness among believers, asking and seeking for God's presence and His power manifested in miracles and deliverances...

Whatever conclusion we come to, I feel it's healthy to wrestle with this topic because I believe there is going to be a massive revival in the church. Scripture tells us that Jesus is coming back for a magnificent Bride, the Church, free from spot, wrinkle or blemish.

Are you fasting and praying for revival? What other things are you doing to hasten a revival in your area? Are there things which you know you need to deal with? Are you desperate to see God's awesome presence and His power released in your local church?

Do You *Have* (not *Had*) a Dream?

Do you remember the often quoted part of the famous speech by Dr Martin Luther King Junior, the famous African American leader who was seeking peace between blacks and whites in America? Remember that he was assassinated not long after delivering this speech. In it he uttered the now famous words, “I have a dream...”

Dr King was sharing about what might be, what could be, what should be, if we only learned to treat one another as God planned it to be. Love and respect were to be the benchmarks, regardless of our language, culture and, especially, the color of our skin.

His message is such an important one, one which all of us could write lots about I’m certain. Many a sermon has flowed from his wonderful words. But the thing which really took my attention when I recently thought about his speech was that he could have said, “I *had* a dream...” but he phrased it in the present tense; that is: . “I *have* a dream...”, meaning that it was an ongoing and current dream which lived and breathed within him.

God spoke to me as I contemplated this, asking “Is your dream on *ongoing* and *current* one, or is it something from the past which has since died within you?” So often we hear people testify that they used to dream about seeing a miracle or operating in the supernatural but it hasn’t happened and they’ve lost the passion for it. Other people are merely daydreaming, being distracted from what God really wants them to see or be or do. Yet others have no dream at all; the ability to dream has been drained out of them by the failures, disappointments and hurts they’ve experienced. They’ve become afraid to dream.

I perceive in my heart that God is encouraging us to begin dreaming afresh. I feel He wants us to begin to look anew into the realm of dreams because dreaming was part of the fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy referred to in Acts chapter 2. God’s Spirit would be poured out on all flesh and one of the resultant experiences would be to dream.

I heard Graham Cooke speak about this recently in Perth and Steve Thompson said similar things in Sydney. Both believe it is a time to start dreaming again, to start envisioning what God’s church could and should be like – filled with ‘on fire’ believers who are imitating Jesus in every facet of their lives, operating in signs and wonders, witnessing miracles and having a dramatic impact upon a despairing world.

I, too, feel that God is encouraging us to ask Him to give us a dream of what He wants His church to be like. We are told that Jesus is coming back for a ‘bride without spot, wrinkle or blemish’ but I wonder what that looks like in reality. I’m dreaming and I would encourage you to dream too. May we be inspired to not only have a dream but to live in an ongoing pursuit of it just as vigorously as Dr King pursued his!

Are We So Focused That We Miss Out On Encouragement?

Early one morning, as I normally do, I was prayer walking when a friendly looking little dog came towards me. I like dogs and often stop to pat them as I walk. Consequently, I asked the lady walking behind the dog if it was okay to pat him and she told me that he was very friendly and loved a pat. However, she told me that I was very unlikely to get his attention due to his total focus upon his early morning walk. What she said was true – he totally ignored me when I reached down to give him a pat, instead going happily on his way, enjoying the beautiful fresh morning air, sniffing here and there, pressing ahead along the path, leading the way for his owner.

I felt God spoke to me as I watched this little dog walking away. He said, ‘Both you and the dog missed out in that situation – he missed the attention of getting a pat from a complete stranger, meeting a very friendly and lovable Tasmanian (I added that last bit in about the friendly and loveable Tasmanian because God no doubt forgot to say it!) and you missed out on getting to meet and pat a new dog, a practice that you always enjoy.

I wondered how often I’m like that little dog, so focused upon where I’m heading that I miss out on ‘getting a pat’, a word of encouragement from someone... I believe that being focused can be a great thing, leading us to be productive rather wasting time in being distracted from our objectives, but I have also been learning that we need to be aware of great opportunities which may be passing us by. Maybe there have been times when my focus needed to be interrupted because I really needed a ‘pat’ of encouragement. Could it be that a person whom I quickly passed by when they reached out to me was a potentially significant person, someone whom God had sent to encourage me and guide me in my walk?

Could it also be that God sometimes deliberately puts someone in my path because I am on a dangerous course which may end in disaster? I dare not miss out on their input!

My encounter with that little dog reminded me to be aware of what is going on around me as I make my way through life. Even if I am so enjoying the journey and can’t wait to get to the next turn in the path, I need to be paying attention to the people who are journeying near me. I don’t want to miss out on a blessing which I may receive from them and I don’t want to deny someone else the opportunity of meeting with me, because, as a child of the Most High God, I believe I always have something positive and uplifting to offer others.

Let’s not be so focused that we miss out on that word of encouragement!

Are Sinful Habits Our Best Friends?

I recently saw a very clever ad in a local newspaper. It was part of the Australia wide anti smoking campaign. It read as follows:

'How to kill your best friend.

Some smokers get so attached to cigarettes, they actually begin to think of them as friends. Close friends.

Of course, the truth is cigarettes are not anyone's friend at all. They are actually the most sinister enemy you will ever cross paths with. The worst part of the relationship is the deception. At the same time as making you believe you can't live without them, they are quietly taking your life away from you – poisoning you and making you their slave along the way.'

It made me think of our sinful habits. So often, even though we are saved and going through the process of being made holy, we tend to hang onto some parts of our old life. We often feel familiar with these old habits, and, even though we recognize that they are wrong in God's eyes, we tolerate them, allowing them to remain active in our lives.

These sinful habits work in exactly the same manner as cigarettes. We can get so familiar with them that they can appear to be our friends. It's difficult to break the habit or the addiction and we fail to resist the temptation, instead defaulting to familiar behavior.

I believe the ongoing sin which we continue to allow in our lives is like the damage which smoking does to our bodies. The damage is hidden away so that we usually don't see it externally. But, as sure as every puff of a cigarette destroys more cells in our lungs, ongoing sinful habits in our lives are continually eroding our spiritual strength, spoiling our relationship with God and with others, stealing away our peace of mind and stifling our ability to win heavenly rewards for our earthly behaviour.

Just as the smoker needs to give up their habit as soon as possible, we too need to give up our sinful habits quickly. Each day we continue is significant, as more damage is being done.

Just as today is the day of salvation, so too today is the day of dealing with sin, of coming before our wonderful, merciful God with a repentant heart and asking for forgiveness. He longs to help us, to see us set free. This is one of the major reasons that Jesus came to the earth because we were, and still are, powerless to deal with our sin on our own.

But, dear brothers and sisters, please remember that it is our choice; God won't force us.

Let's realize today that sinful habits certainly aren't our best friends. Indeed, they are among our worst enemies. Face these enemies today and, with God's help, put them to death!

Are You A Pioneer or a Settler?

We know that Abraham was a man of great faith. When God called him, he left a comfortable lifestyle in his own land, accompanied by his own people and his father's household to take a huge risk, going to a land he knew nothing about. Other than God's promises to him, he had no business plan, no employment contract or guaranteed income, no idea of how he would cope in a new culture and, especially by today's globe-trotting standards, no travel insurance. By worldly standards, he was taking an immense step of faith. One can only imagine how his neighbors may have reacted...

'Poor old Abram, he's been out in the sun too long; he's lost it! Perhaps he's had a breakdown. The pressures of life, you know. He said God's spoken to him...which god?'
'Well I reckon it's just an old age crisis. (He was 75 years old, remember) Why doesn't he just have an extended holiday or buy a sports camel!

We, of course, know how the story ends. Abram, meaning exalted father, made the journey, had his name changed by God to Abraham, meaning father of many, and he did indeed become the father of many. Because of his obedience to God, his move to Canaan was immensely, supernaturally successful. He became the father of the Jewish nation, a wonderful reward for his step of faith.

I wonder, though, about the opportunities which may have been lost by Abraham's father, Terah. It says in Scripture that Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot and his daughter in law Sarai, the wife of Abram, from Ur of the Chaldeans 'to go to Canaan. But when they came to Haran, they settled there.' (Genesis 11:31)

It seems that Terah had the same initial intention as Abram, to go to Canaan. But he never reached his destination, instead settling for a new life in Haran. I wonder why... This city was a flourishing caravan meeting place and its people worshipped the moon god.

Perhaps he didn't like the idea of being 'on the road' and didn't have the inclination or the courage to move on further. It may have been that he was more of a settler than a pioneer...

Perhaps he wanted to spend his time chasing the moon god. The phases of the moon may have held him in bondage, never releasing him to pursue his true God-given inheritance. We know full well that bondages have an uncanny ability to do just that!

Perhaps he found it too stressful to break out and follow his dreams. It's often much easier to stay with the familiar, not facing the challenge of change, but being satisfied with the status quo instead of taking a risk in obedience to God's leading.

What about you? Are you moving on to God's destination for you or have you settled in a place short of your journey's end? Have you become too comfortable where you are and lack the strength to 'pull up stakes' and move on? Be assured, God is calling you to go farther...

May I encourage you to resist being a settler, but, like Abram, to be a pioneer!

Are You Wearing Your Spiritual Glasses?

It was a very windy day as I headed out for my early morning prayer walk with my dog, Bella. It was cold too, with the threat of rain, so I grabbed extra gear, my beanie to pull down over my ears and a jacket to keep out the cold. It was still dark with very little light, the sky dominated by murky black clouds as I set out.

I'd been going for about five minutes when I noticed somebody walking towards me on a narrow part of the footpath. I struggled to focus upon them in the gloom and suddenly realized that I had forgotten to put on my glasses. I'm near sighted and was having great trouble in tracking this person's direction, wanting to make sure that I didn't run into them and that my dog didn't trip them up. I squinted more carefully and avoided a collision, but the person was just a blob as they went by – it could have been a close friend but I wouldn't have known them because I was blinded to a certain extent. Poor eyesight and darkness are a lethal combination!

I persevered in the prayer walk for another five minutes but, in the end, I had to turn around and head back home to get my glasses because I was so distracted from praying by needing to concentrate so hard to ensure that I didn't walk into someone or something.

It made me think of the verses in Ephesians where Paul asks that the eyes of peoples' hearts be opened. Paul writes, 'I pray also that the eyes of your heart be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe.' (Ephesians 1:18,19)

These verses speak about an inner awareness, about our spiritual eyes being opened. There are so many things in this life which are spiritually discerned and are only perceived by our 'inner senses'. There are some things which we come to know and yet we haven't seen, heard, smelt, tasted or touched them. I believe we need these inner senses switched on or we can feel like I did walking in the dark without my glasses.

Paul tells us that we need the eyes of our hearts opened or we lack things such as these:

hope – we have been called to be a people of optimism and sure footedness!

riches – God has great things in store for us, a treasure trove in abundance!

incomparably great power – believers are to be powerful rather than feeble!

Walking in the dark without your glasses causes you to be anxious, timid, powerless and faltering – this is how the enemy wants us to be in our Christian walk, so that we lack effectiveness. But God, on the other hand, wants us to be striding out boldly, full of hope and optimism, filled with His power and appreciating the wonderful inheritance we have in the saints. God wants us to be the true 'power walkers' of this world, not merely for physical fitness, but doing our part to see His Kingdom come. So put on your 'spiritual glasses' by asking God to open the eyes of your heart. That way you will be able to really 'walk the talk!'

Are You Prepared to Wait for Isaac?

‘Sarai said to Abram, “God has not seen fit to let me have a child. Sleep with my maid. Maybe I can get a family from her.” Abram agreed to do what Sarai said.’

Genesis 16:1b,2 The Message

We read these verses and cringe because we know the terrible outcome of Sarai’s bright idea. Abram slept with his maid, Hagar, and she had his child, but this wasn’t the fulfillment of God’s promise. It proved to be an absolute disaster! Instead of Abram and Sarai being blessed with a male child in their old age, as was God’s plan in Isaac, they ended up with a son named Ishmael who grew to be a ‘wild donkey of a man’, a trouble maker.

Sarai’s ‘*maybe* I can get a family from her’ was a *definite* maybe! Her own mind, bound by human finiteness, wasn’t capable of comprehending how God’s awesome promise might be fulfilled and she wasn’t able to entrust Him with the responsibility to carry out what He said He would do. She presumed God needed her help in working it all out!

In chapter 15 of Genesis, God had promised Abram as many descendants as the number of stars in the night sky and that his heir would come from his own aged body. Perhaps Abram grasped only part of what God said, thinking that he may produce an heir even though he was approaching 100 years old, but he didn’t seem to think God could enable Sarai to mother a baby at her age. Even with someone as strong in faith as Abram, it would seem there were doubts in his mind! I feel this is a possible reason why he agreed to his wife’s plan.

In Sarai’s case, she even had a bit of a laugh later in the story when she was told by God that she herself was in fact the one who would be giving birth to the heir for which they had waited so long. This concept was obviously way beyond her perception at that stage in her walk with God. Following Sarai’s faithless response, God then asked Abram, ‘Is anything too hard for God?’ My feeling is that if this question had been directed to Sarai, it’s a ‘fair bet’ she would have been wavering somewhere between answering ‘Probably...’ and ‘Yes!’!

So often, I believe we too can fall into the same trap of thinking that not even God can carry out the impossible. It’s easy for us to default into worldly thinking and to assume that God needs our great ideas to enable His promises to be fulfilled. We shouldn’t second guess God, nor should we presume that He is going to fulfill a promise by a certain course of action. Our plans often delay God’s provision, interfere with the divine plan and create an absolute mess. Let’s wait for Isaac rather than creating an Ishmael!

If we find ourselves trying to do God’s work, we are certainly ‘skating on thin ice’ and can look forward to a dunking, and probably sooner rather than later. We need to be patient, trusting, and accepting. God is able to do what He says He will and in His own miraculous way!

Are You Asking For A Miracle?

I listened to the situation of the young man as he told me his sad story. He was worried and perplexed at what was happening. He felt he was at the end of his tether, struggling with constant headaches and stomach upsets. He doubted he could go on for much longer...

Another young man was in danger of losing all he owned because of circumstances beyond his control. The situation held a few possibilities, all of which were long shots which might come too late, if at all. He needed someone to intervene. And quickly...

The mother of four had just received the worst of news at the doctors. The lump was cancerous and it was doubtful it could be removed because of its location. She had a five percent chance of beating this illness...

These are just three examples of needs which may exist in your church, your family or your community. There are so many sad stories, challenges and 'impossible' situations which lead people to seek out help - broken relationships, injured self images, physical illness, financial crises, emotional meltdowns, moral failures and other ministry nightmares. So many cases look to be terminal. It would be so easy for us to merely offer our sympathy, provide comfort and thank the people for sharing with us, have a cuppa and send them on their way...

I remember hearing Steve Sampson speak at a conference in Perth. He is a great man of prayer who has been used significantly by God to bring the supernatural to bear on the everyday situations of life. He believes that God is speaking to us 24/7 and that we only need to 'tune into' His voice to be able to receive. At one stage he shared that he now spends the bulk of his time in prayer doing two things:

he listens a lot rather than speaking and
most of his time when he is speaking he is asking God for miracles.

Steve stimulated my thinking about miracles and I must admit that I, too, now spend most of my time when speaking to God asking for miracles. You may ask why.

It's really quite simple – I believe that in every difficulty we face in life, ranging from periods of frustration all the way through to an all-out crisis, there is a miracle provided by God, just waiting for us to 'cash in' or apply for. Scripture tells us that God will meet our every need and I believe that especially applies to the 'impossible' situations at the end of the spectrum which require supernatural intervention.

Our Father is all knowing and all powerful. There is absolutely nothing that is beyond His reach, His comprehension or His ability to fix, change, heal, overcome, reverse or defeat. I believe God almost always has a miracle in mind because He loves divine intervention and nothing thrills Him more than to bring the solution when everyone has given up. Miracles are not in limited supply. You need only ask. God may have one waiting that He has prepared earlier!

Have You Closed Your Mouth To Listen?

In chapter 17 of Matthew's Gospel, we are told of Jesus taking Peter, James and John with Him up a high mountain. This was one of those rare episodes in which Jesus' 'inner circle' of followers, His chosen trio whom He let get closer to Him than any others, was privileged to experience something very special.

We are told Jesus was 'transfigured before them, His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light.' This, no doubt, would have 'boggled' their small minds and left them staggered by yet another miraculous happening involving Jesus. But wait, there is more... Not only that, but Jesus also met and spoke with Moses and Elijah. We can only wonder how Peter, James and John would have felt in this situation - amazed, astonished, lost for words? This was probably the case for James and John but, as usual, Peter's mouth was just moving into gear. As happened so often, Peter was about to 'put his foot in it' and make a silly suggestion. He had a bright idea about building shelters for Jesus, Moses and Elijah.

But God had a much better idea.

He spoke from a cloud which enveloped them: 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. *Listen* to him! (italics mine)

I believe God was very patient with and overly kind to Peter. I would have probably lost patience and angrily cried out something like this: 'Peter, do you always have to rush in to say something? Do you always have to have an opinion and blurt out ridiculous things. Would you, for once, 'clam up' and *listen*, I mean, *really listen* to what Jesus has to say. After all, He is my Son, the Incarnate God, the One who has lived a perfect life and has all wisdom and knowledge. He knows and understands what I am up to and what is best in every situation. How about letting go of your own ideas and learn to *listen* to Him?

Now I'm sure I would have offended Peter and have caused him grief. God got His message across in His own wonderful, quiet way.

But I feel there is a big lesson for us to learn in this story – or maybe I should say, *I* have to learn a big lesson. So often I speak instead of listening to Jesus, especially when something quite profound or amazing has happened. Too often my mouth 'runs away with me' and gets me into trouble when God wants me to say nothing but rather have Him help me process what I have just experienced. I feel God wants us to spend more time reflecting upon what is happening around us and look to Jesus before we respond.

I'm learning to ask, 'What's going on here, Jesus? What should I make of this? How do you want me to respond?' I'm asking *before* I open my mouth to make a comment.'

I can recommend this change and testify to 'putting my foot in it' much less often in later years..

I'm coming to a new appreciation of closing my mouth and listening!

Do You Feel Worthy of a Miracle?

A man was explaining to me what a mess his life was in. He had mismanaged his farm, including getting into heavy debt, planting the wrong crops and making poor choices about irrigation. He was clearly burdened by his current predicament and at a loss as to what he should do.

I suggested, 'Have you prayed about this? Why don't you ask God for a miracle? The first thing I do when I've made a mess of something is to ask God to bail me out, and show me how to do it better.' I knew this man had faith and so I was really surprised by his reply.

He said, 'Noel, I feel like I'd have a real cheek asking for a miracle. I got myself into this mess by not asking God to guide me and now I feel He would expect me to get myself out of it. I don't think I qualify for a miracle.'

I felt for this man because he honestly believed that God would react to him in such a way. He was under the mistaken impression that God's granting of miracles was conditional. I then proceeded to encourage him that God's love for us is unconditional and that He wants to help us in *every* circumstance. He is not reluctant to deliver miracles and it doesn't matter whether the fault is ours or someone else's.

I believe God looks on us as His dear children and He wants to help us, bless us, love us extravagantly, especially when He sees us burdened by painful circumstances. He isn't stingy, and doesn't give us a quota of miracles – it's not like we are only allowed to have a certain number each month or each year or even each lifetime. God isn't a 'hard man' who wants us to grow up 'tough' by leaving us to work out our own problems. He's not sitting there on His throne in heaven saying, 'Hey people, do you think I'm made of miracles?!' The truth is He is willing and able to grant us a miracle even if we have made the mess ourselves.

Graham Cooke says that God is the most generous person he knows and I am finding exactly the same thing in my experience of Him. Every day He is pouring out blessings into my life – things I don't deserve, things I definitely haven't earned, simply because He loves me.

I know the Word says that God doesn't have favourites, and doesn't give any one of us preferential treatment, but, you know, my view is that He loves every one of us so much that every one of us is in fact His favourite and that all of us do get preferential treatment. I know that sounds a bit 'Irish' but I think you know what I mean. He is simply so good to *all* of His children. In essence *each of us* is His 'pinkeye' who gets special favours!

The truth is that Jesus' blood qualifies each and every one of us for a miracle, even when we have gotten ourselves into a mess. Jesus is the Good Shepherd, the Ultimate Shepherd, the Best Ever Shepherd and He looks after *all* of the sheep, even the stupid ones (and aren't we all in this category at least some of the time!) that continually wander off and get themselves stuck in a bog hole.

Are you worthy of a miracle? Yes, you are!

Are Positives Adding To Your Life?

My wife Beckie spoke at church about the importance of dwelling upon positive things and shutting our minds to the negativity of the devil and this world. Her message was a timely reminder for us to continue to stay focused on godly things, to strive to fill our minds with ideas which build us up rather than pull us down, and to let God make us new in our thinking.

It's a mathematical principle that if you want to increase the size of a number you *add* something to it eg. 3 add 2 equals 5 or $3 + 2 = 5$. The positive (+) increases the size of the number whereas a negative (-) decreases its size. eg. $3 - 2 = 1$. I believe it's exactly the same with our thoughts. Every negative one decreases the effectiveness of our thinking while positive ones expand our capacity and productivity.

In Philippians 2:5 we are told that our attitudes, a product of our thinking, should be the same as that of Jesus. Paul explains how our Lord *humbled* himself even to the point of dying upon the cross. Humility, a character trait which the world often treats with disdain, as weakness and only for losers was used by God to achieve the greatest positive the world has ever experienced – the salvation of mankind. What was initially seen as defeat when Jesus died on the cross turned out to be the ultimate triumph of good over evil!

I believe it's fascinating that the cross (+), a hugely negative symbol in the time of the Romans because it represented a painful, brutal death, is used by mathematicians as a positive, a plus sign, a symbol of adding, of expanding the size of something, just as the cross for Christians is the key to adding an incomparable eternal dimension to our lives.

Jesus set us an excellent example in approaching every circumstance in a positive way, never bowing down to the negativity around Him. His thinking and His resultant actions were always positive!

In response to the need to feed thousands of people with merely a few fish and some loaves of bread, He didn't throw up His hands in despair, but instead took this as the opportunity to perform a miracle. When the people were ready to throw Him off a cliff He didn't panic, become defensive or go on the attack but merely 'walked through the crowd'. When his 'right hand man', Peter, denied him three times, instead of being consumed with rejection and disappointment, He restored him rather than writing him off. He came to compassionately rescue people rather than telling them that their circumstances were self inflicted and, therefore, deserved. He came to restore them rather than to condemn. Jesus thwarted the negative of demonic possession by positively taking authority over evil spirits and kicking them out. He came to break the chains of those imprisoned by their own negative thinking, showing them that everything is possible with God and that when facing disaster, they should not despair, but 'only believe.'

How often do we think negatively when faced with pressure, opposition, frustration, delays, criticism, denial and disappointment instead of meeting every challenge with a positive response, believing that God has a way out for us, a miracle provision, a valuable lesson to be learned or something else which is out of our view at present. Remember that positives add to your life

Divine Healing Theory or Practice?

I had been to the doctor at 5:30pm on the Friday evening because for a couple of days I had been troubled by an ear ache. I felt I may have had an ear infection because earlier in the week I was suffering from a head cold and sometimes these are accompanied by ear blockages and aches.

The doctor checked me out, syringed my ears because of a build up of wax but said I definitely did not have an ear infection. We speculated that it may be a tooth playing up due to the fact that I had recently had some dental work done.

Sure enough, that night, at about midnight, I began to get a tooth ache on the same side of my face as the earlier ear ache. As an hour or so passed, the throb was getting worse, I was praying feverishly and vowing that I would never eat another sweet or chocolate bar or whatever may have caused this pain!

I got out of bed and went out into the lounge room, stoked up the fire and opened my Bible. The throb was really getting bad by this time. I tried to read but had trouble focusing. I was calling out to God, asking Him to heal this problem but nothing good was happening!

This is the time that I begin thinking about people in Jesus' day. They had no dentists or if there was one available, they probably could not afford to pay for treatment anyway. They more than likely had no pain killers. At least I could take some as I prayed. If things got really desperate, I may be able to go up to the local hospital which is just four doors from our home. But in Jesus' day, there was no emergency room at the hospital. They were totally reliant upon a miracle, just like I was at 2:30am.

I was thinking to myself, 'This is where my faith is tested out! This is the time when the theory of divine healing and the practice of it come together. Lord I'm looking to you, I'm relying on you. I'm desperate for healing! Please give me a release from this throbbing.

You won't believe it, but really you should. Within a few minutes of this desperate call for help and admitting my total reliance upon Jesus, my tooth ache disappeared and I was able to go back to bed and actually get to sleep! What a relief! How good I felt!

This is my testimony - Jesus is great. He is just awesome. And I love Him with a passion, a renewed passion which was awakened in me by this experience. The middle of the night is often the time when the theory and the practice of what we believe come together. I know God heals *today*. He *is* the same yesterday, today and forever!

How Much Time Do You Have?

‘What I mean brothers is that the time is short.’

I Corinthians 7:29

I had just completed my first week ‘full time’ as a pastor after finishing up as principal of Circular Head Christian School. My stint in the school spanned some 17 years, so the habits of schooling were deeply engrained in my psyche. This new lifestyle had certainly been different!

In schools, everything runs to schedule. The sirens which sound at various times during the day dictate when it is time to begin and time to end. There haven’t been any sirens at home or in the church office. It’s been different and, in a way, wonderful...

I’ve had the privilege of being able to decide for myself when a particular activity is finished, whether it be a prayer time, reading The Word or other Christian books, preparing a message or visiting someone. I’ve been able to flex my time more creatively.

In some respects I’ve felt like a ‘dog let off the chain’. I’ve really enjoyed the freedom of setting my schedule independent of a regimented time frame. I’ve really enjoyed *simply having extra time* to spend with the Lord and the people in my care.

God has spoken to me in this new experience and showed me things.

I’ve come to realize that perhaps the most precious gift I have to offer other people is simply my time. It has been revealed to me that, no matter how well developed my other gifts and talents may be, if I haven’t the time to spend with people, these gifts and talents are under utilised. In the past I have had people say to me, ‘I wanted to talk this over with you but I knew you were so busy and I didn’t want to bother you...’ Hopefully, I will now be able to say, at least in most cases, ‘Drop in or call me or email me and we will talk.’

It has been terrific to have an extra measure of time to spend in deepening my relationship with God, and, particularly in view of Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians about time being short, I wish to take advantage of every opportunity afforded me. I want to tell more people about Jesus and help them understand what the Gospel is all about. I feel a greater need to spend my time investing in others, helping them go to the next stage in their faith walk. I feel an urgency to produce more of these types of messages in the hope of encouraging others and stimulating their thinking about Christianity.

Time is such a valuable asset. I’ve had a fresh revelation of this truth and wish to encourage others to use every minute of this life more effectively to serve God and those around us.

Are You Shining for Him?

Moses had been on the mountain in God's presence for a long time and when he came back down to the rest of the people at the base of Mt Sinai, his face was shining brightly, so brightly that he had to wear a veil when in their presence. In those days, sunglasses hadn't been invented and the people talking with Moses couldn't bear the glare off his face. The 'skin of Moses' face shone' (Exodus 34:30), reflecting the glory of God and testifying to the fact that he had been in God's presence.

This is a really interesting story in the Scriptures and we can reflect upon it in many ways. We might ask questions such as: Did Moses receive a heavenly facial while in God's presence? Was the air on the mountain so fresh that Moses had all the impurities removed from his skin or was his fasting during this time the key to his face shining? We can speculate, but I believe the story is a powerful testimony for us of the positive effect it has upon our countenance when we spend quality time in God's presence.

While acknowledging that Moses had come literally face to face with the living God, an experience we will not fully understand until we reach Glory, I feel that we may experience a similar though less powerful effect when we maintain a close encounter with God in our devotion to Him, particularly if we devote ongoing quality time.

In recent months I have been led to spend longer amounts of time simply walking and talking with God, 'hanging out' with Him a lot, to coin a phrase, and setting aside time to press into God and feel His touch. As a result of this, I have felt a larger measure of peace and tranquility and a greater measure of joy in my life. I'm sure this has been reflected in my countenance because people have commented on it.

I know that our circumstances and roles in life will impact upon how we feel and our general health will, of course, play a part, but I believe strongly that our relationship with God plays a vitally important part in how we look. I maintain that we will have a special sparkle about our face when we get our lives right with our heavenly Father. I would like to encourage each and every one of us to attempt to spend more quality time with God so that our faces may shine for Him in ever increasing measure.

Okay, a stronger and more intimate relationship with God may not leave us shining so much that we have to wear a veil or ask people to wear sunglasses when in our presence, but I'm sure that we will be more attractive to people with whom we are wishing to share the Gospel. I'm confident that our faces will in some respects reflect the passion for Jesus which we feel in our hearts.

Happy shining...

Are You a Mighty Man of Valor?

I've recently been rereading the story of Gideon in chapter six of the book of Judges. This story never ceases to amaze and inspire me because I can so easily identify with him. Lots of the time, I don't feel like a mighty man of valor when God asks me to do something. Like Gideon, I often feel that my family is insignificant and, like Gideon, being the youngest son in my family, I sometimes feel the least.

As I read the story this time, God spoke to me afresh about the issue of Gideon's expectation of God in the story and I want to share this insight I received with you.

Gideon, for all his self doubt, never-the-less, had a high expectation of what God could do. He said to the angel, 'O my lord, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all His miracles which our fathers told us about...'

Gideon understood that when God is truly with us in our walk then there should be fruit in our lives. We shouldn't be bullied by our enemies and living in fear. There should be miracles going on around us. We should be seeing God at work in supernatural ways.

At no point in the story does Gideon doubt God or what He could do.

He obviously knew that God wanted to bless His people but he also realised that God had withdrawn this blessing because of their unfaithfulness. It seems that he understood that God was a God of justice and discipline. But, as soon as he realised that he had found favor with God, however, the process of raising him up to be another champion of God began. We know how the story ends with God and Gideon winning a truly lopsided victory.

Even though Gideon doubted himself it is obvious that he had no doubts about God's ability. I feel this is why he gained confidence as he communicated with God and even came to trust God in stripping down the armed forces he was leading to a mere 300 soldiers. In the natural this would have seemed to be a silly thing to do.

I believe the seed of confidence in and expectation of God was in Gideon all along and that's why he became the champion which God knew him to be, even at the start.

I believe we can *all* be mighty men and women of valor who can do marvelous exploits for God if only we believe in what He can do and what He can achieve through *us*. We may always doubt ourselves and perhaps this is good in that it keeps us humble, but let's never lower our expectation of God!

He is capable of anything, even when working through 'vessels of clay' such as ourselves!

Relational or Informational?

As we study the Bible, it soon becomes very clear that there is so much to learn. We can easily become daunted by the extraordinary content of the Word. It contains so much information and we can think we'll never be able to take it all in and process it properly. A good friend of mine, a brother in the ministry, put my mind at rest about this issue.

Very early on in our friendship, I remember this friend telling me that with all the teaching he had received through Bible College, church involvement, going to seminars and conferences, and books he had read, including *The Word*, even if he lived to be 150 years old, he would have more than enough information about God to last him through. But what he craves most, and would probably still seek out even if he lived to 150, is a better, closer, more loving relationship with Him and the people of His world.

I found myself totally agreeing with him, and I'm sure some of you reading this are nodding in agreement too.

The older I get, the more I realise that what we need most is not more information *about* God, but to spend more time speaking with Him, hearing from Him, experiencing an authentic Father/son relationship with Him and learning how to relate more effectively to Him and those around me. I know I need to feel His heartbeat, and let His Spirit flow more freely through me as I encounter life's circumstances. I have a growing need to be more like Him in every aspect of my being.

Because of this, I'm tending to spend more of my time simply being with God. Not so much asking for help, or bringing needs to Him, or even praising Him, but attempting to create space in my life for God's manifest presence to impact my thinking, my doing and my being.

I wish to encourage each and every person to spend more time relating to God. Could it be that we are guilty of filling our time with activity which actually hinders our encounter with God? Might we benefit from our time being less cluttered in our meetings and more focused on simply being in God's presence?

Should we trade off some informationship in favor of relationship...?

Yes, for I believe this may lead us to be truly transformed rather than simply informed!

Are You a Mountain Mover?

I believe Jesus wants us to have ‘mountain moving’ faith. Twice in Matthew’s Gospel there are accounts given about believing for and seeing impossible things happen.

In Matthew 17 and again in chapter 21, Jesus says that we can move mountains, or do the impossible. The story in chapter 17 refers to a demon being driven out of a boy to enable him to be healed. The disciples couldn’t complete the task and Jesus’ reaction was one of annoyance. He said, ‘O faithless and perverse generation...’ He told them they couldn’t drive the demon out because they had ‘so little faith.’ Obviously, He was hoping they would have had faith to see the job done. He told them that they only needed faith ‘as small as a mustard seed’ to see the mountain moved. He followed this with, ‘...and nothing will be impossible for you.’

The other account is about the cursing of the fig tree. This time Jesus told His disciples that if they had faith and did not doubt they would see ‘mountains cast into the sea’. He added, ‘And whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive.’

I find both of these pieces of Scripture to be amazing, inspirational and powerful! These are the sorts of verses which bring out the best in me, a type of ‘Let’s go out and kick ten goals in the first quarter!’ feeling, to put it in Australian football terms! They enthuse me to lift my belief to a higher plane in which I can more and more frequently see the impossible made possible.

How, then, might we become mountain movers? I can see at least four principles that may be drawn out of these two accounts. Perhaps you’ll find more.

First of all, we need *faith*. But not just ‘any old’ faith; what is required is a pure faith free from doubt. It seems to me that Jesus was indicating that it wasn’t so much the amount of faith but indeed the quality which we possess that was vital. Hence the encouragement that it need only be ‘mustard seed’ in size. ie their faith was of ‘little’ use.

Secondly, I feel this quality faith needs to be properly directed; ie towards a God who has authority over everything and everyone in this universe; We need to believe He can do the impossible anytime, anywhere, no matter what the circumstances may be! It’s when we have the very highest expectations of our God that we see Him move mightily.

Thirdly, we need to unwaveringly believe that what we have asked for will become reality. I believe that quality faith needs to be applied, not just generally, but specifically to the particular circumstances.

Finally, we need to understand that Jesus said, ‘Nothing will be impossible for you’, meaning that He has an expectation of us speaking to the specific mountains, faithfully believing, and seeing them move! How awesome is this?

Happy mountain moving!

Is Affluence a Stumbling Block for You?

On a missions trip to Soweto in South Africa, I saw some terrific things happen on the streets and in the houses of residents of Diepkloof, the suburb in which we were working. Our approach was to say we had come from Australia with a message of good news and team members were thrilled that so many people were willing to stop on the streets or welcome us into their homes to hear the story of Jesus. Over three days, we witnessed to hundreds of people with 70 to 80 people giving their hearts to Jesus, and many others willing to consider what Jesus had to offer them.

During the evangelism strategy, one of the local church members told me that they would leave the most difficult area of Diepkloof till last so that the team had gained confidence in winning some converts in the earlier days of the campaign before tackling the 'hard hearts'. I imagined that when they spoke of this 'most difficult' area, they were probably referring to the most violent one in which many criminals and dysfunctional families resided or a place in which the people lived in cardboard shacks or corrugated tin dwellings. I imagined a lot of intimidating, huge black men giving us 'the big stare' as we approached them, fearful that we may take away the little that they had. How wrong I was!

It turns out that the most difficult place for evangelism in Diepkloof is the most affluent area in which the residents are better off materially, having bigger and better homes, better cars and living a more westernized lifestyle. It seems that these people are the most difficult to reach, many being less interested in the Gospel of Jesus because they have more of the things of this world.

If only they realized that materialism isn't the answer to their problems and that the witness of the western world is so often a façade of bright lights with nothing behind them, a make-believe existence based on the faulty premises that bigger is better and more is best. Of course, there is nothing wrong with a bigger or better house in itself, but not if this becomes a replacement for God. If only these dear Sowetans could understand that there is a richness in life to be gained, but that it is not in gold nor silver nor any other material possession. It appears some have been sold a lie and our hearts go out to them.

The true riches of life are to be found in Jesus, and in Him only. Many of the residents of Soweto now know this truth and we praise God for revealing it to them. Others, however, have chosen to have a bigger house in this life rather than a mansion with many rooms in eternity.

Are You Secure in Christ?

In the past I have done some educational consultancy work in Christian schools on the north-west coast of Tasmania. Most of the time I worked with leaders, helping them go to the next level of effectiveness in their roles. Some of these leaders had been struggling in their roles, seemingly insecure in their positions and finding the going tough. I'd been seeking to help them discover where they were as a developing leader, analyzing their strengths and weaknesses and helping them formulate a plan for the future which would, hopefully, greatly enhance their performance.

It's very interesting that I perceived a common thread in each leader who was struggling - all appeared to have a deep seated insecurity. In each case I felt that the person was insecure in their leadership role because they hadn't yet fully grasped who they were in Jesus. Their self identity in Christ was lacking. Often they were quick to be defensive when challenged, uptight when things did not go their way, critical of others, easily hurt when criticized, domineering when a directive they gave was questioned and sometimes unwilling to accept advice. I believe that each one of these behaviours often arises when people feel insecure in who they are.

One of the ways in which I have sought to encourage a turn-around in the attitude of the people with whom I had been working was to contrast their approach with someone who had found success and satisfaction in their role as a leader. One leader had this to say:

'I love doing this job because I feel it's one of the roles that God has equipped me to play, one of the jobs I have in which I can successfully serve other people. I look forward to the challenges I face because I know Jesus' Spirit will be within me to help me bring glory to God by effectively fulfilling the task He has called me to do.

I feel secure doing this work because I know that, even when I make mistakes, as I'm certain to do, God will still love me and will think no less of me. Some people may be unappreciative of my help, but I will not be phased because I know Jesus is guiding me and approving what I do. I don't have to feel threatened when I am challenged or hurt when I'm criticized because my performance in my role is not who I am. I don't have to get uptight when the pressure is on because Jesus takes my burdens and I welcome all advice because God puts people around me to provide help. Because of this, I can accept correction and discipline, learning from my mistakes.'

What a positive attitude! Secure in Christ. The testimony of a good leader...

At Times, Do You Find Your Voice?!

Alan, the little seven year old boy, stooped down, picked up the rock and hurled it at the bully with all his might. In spectacular fashion, the projectile flew swiftly and cannoned into the forehead of the bully, knocking him unconscious, causing him to slowly topple over and fall in an untidy heap in front of his followers. They all turned and ran away.

It was hard for Alan to take it all in. He stood dumbfounded for a few moments, and then he gradually found his voice, beginning to yell, ‘Take that you, you,...rotten bully you! That’ll teach you to leave me alone and stop bullying other kids too! You, you, ...’

At that very moment, Alan woke up. His mum was bending over his bed saying, ‘Come on my big boy, it’s time for breakfast. You’ve been dreaming again – giving somebody a good old telling off, you were.’

Alan couldn’t believe it! Only a dream... If only he really had the courage to stand up to the bully, even if the rock was a bit drastic. But it did feel good, he had to admit it. He had never yelled at the bully before, had never even thought about speaking out his disapproval. It made him wonder...

That day at school, he took a deep breath as the bully approached him to steal his sandwiches again. As the hand reached out to take his lunch, Alan spoke. ‘They are not yours and I’m going to tell somebody if you pinch them again.’ His voice was quiet but gaining in decibels as he warmed to the task. ‘If you keep on bullying me I’m going to do something about it. I’m sick of your behaviour and I won’t tolerate it anymore! It’s just not fair!’

‘Hey’ thought Alan to himself, ‘This feels alright. I feel so much better getting this out of my system. Even if he still takes my lunch, I feel better. Why did I wait so long?’

The bully was taken aback, frowned, but then withdrew his hand and headed for the next little boy. ‘No you don’t!’ It was Alan’s voice again. He could hardly believe it when he heard his own voice. ‘You aren’t going to bully him or any of us!’ The bully was lost for words, turned and, mumbling to himself, stomped off down the corridor. All of the little kids cheered Alan and there was lots of back slapping went on.

‘The power of dreams,’ Alan thought to himself as he went into class. ‘Boy am I pleased I finally found my voice.’ The other kids were inspired by Alan’s example and they began to find their voices too. From that day on, the bully was put ‘out of business’.

The next time the devil attacks you or uses others to bully you, will you find your God-given voice? It may be that you too are surprised at just how easily he is put out of business too...

Do You Apply the Gamaliel Principle?

How often have you been in the situation where you are assessing an activity in which you are engaged, trying to decide if it is worthwhile or not in God's sight. We all know the importance of following God rather than man's leading and I, for one, am desperate to know His ways. As with most challenges of this nature, there are characters in the Bible who have 'been there, done that' and we can learn from their experiences.

One such character is Gamaliel.

In Acts, chapter 5, the members of the Sanhedrin had forbidden the apostles to teach in Jesus' Name, to which Peter and the other apostles had replied, 'We must obey God rather than men!'

The members of the Sanhedrin were really 'ticked off' by this response and were contemplating putting the rebels to death. Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, displayed excellent wisdom in advising that these men be let go because, if what they said was of human origin, it would fail and be of no consequence, whereas if it were from God, it would not be able to be stopped, and those opposing it would end up fighting against God. Gamaliel was spot on in his call – by working against the apostles, the Sanhedrin ended up opposing the work of God and were doomed to failure in trying to stop the Gospel of Jesus from spreading. Despite torrid opposition, the apostles triumphed in telling people from near and far about Jesus because God was with them, empowering their efforts!

I like to call this the 'Gamaliel Principle' and I often use it when trying to discern the origin of activities. I'll often ask people to carefully assess the fruit being produced in an area of their lives in which they are investing their time. For me, if there is no current fruit coming from a particular activity, or even the promise of some in the future, then God is probably not in it, and it's time to seek out more productive ways of serving Him.

I have been involved in at least a couple of activities in which I believe people have jumped to the wrong conclusions in the early months and years by not following Gamaliel's approach.

In the early history of Circular Head Christian School, we had many Christians who believed God was not supportive of Christian schools. These people felt we should be instead supporting the state schools and that our efforts would fail. The school is now thriving, obviously bearing fruit for God as He has mightily blessed it, and many people have realised that God was with us. What looked unlikely to succeed when it began has proven to have its origins in God and has, therefore, become successful. I'm sure most of you would be aware of similar such stories in which question marks have arisen over the origins of new ideas and activities.

The next time you are assessing how you are spending your own time, or whether God has indeed inspired people to do something new or different, think about Gamaliel's wisdom. Ask yourself, 'Am I applying the Gamaliel Principle in my life?'

In Charge or In Control?

I work a lot with Christian leaders. It's interesting, stimulating and challenging work, seeking to help them progress to the next level of competence and effectiveness.

Many people I come across lack confidence in leadership and have trouble standing strongly when it is required, stepping out of the boat to confront issues and leading from the front in a manner which inspires the members of their flock. The people who follow them tend to be critical of their weakness as leaders and would love to see them receive an injection of courage, enabling them to become bolder in their approach.

Others, however, seem to operate at the other end of the leadership spectrum and tend to lead in a heavy handed way. They are sometimes too pushy and get their people offside by being too aggressive in pursuing objectives. The people they are leading tend to be critical of their insensitivity in leadership and would love to see them receive an injection of gentleness, enabling them to become more people oriented in their approach.

And, of course, there many are leaders who fall somewhere in between these two extremes in their leadership styles. They have other issues which they find a challenge. The simple truth is that successful godly leadership is no easy task; getting an ideal balance is difficult work. A notion I have found very helpful in developing leaders is teaching them to differentiate between 'being in charge' and 'being in control'.

I believe God puts us in charge of a group of people and expects us to lead them in His authority, placing our confidence in Him working through us. We should always look to Him when problems arise and seek to model our leadership on Him. I feel this approach allows leaders to be humble enough to admit their total reliance upon God but confident enough to press on despite errors because He is with them to inspire, uplift and empower. Being in charge flows easily from a realisation that God is in control!

If leaders mistakenly believe, however, that they are meant to be in control, I feel they will tend to be 'driven' leaders who lean towards aggressively pushing and single handedly trying to manipulate situations to ensure the correct outcome. Often they become burdened in trying to do God's job and become 'like a bull in a china shop'. They need to submit to God, and begin to relax, working in His strength, letting Him be in control. They need to pray more and trust God, gaining peace from the realization that they are not totally and completely responsible for what happens – God is!

As a leader, ask yourself – are you seeking to be in charge or in control?

No Pain, No Gain?

‘Then Jesus said to his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will gain it.” Matthew 16:24, 25

Jesus was talking about *denial* for the sake of God’s cause. The context of these verses was Him telling His disciples about His sacrificial death at the hands of the elders, chief priests and the teachers of the law. He was seeking to convince his disciples that they had to let go of selfish and worldly ways in order to be able to effectively follow Him.

For me, the major lesson for us to learn in these important verses is about *denial of our own wants and agendas in favor of doing things God’s way*.

Taking up our crosses and following Jesus speaks to me of selflessness and a willingness to experience pain for the sake of building the Kingdom of God. It means giving up pleasures and living a life of sacrifice for the sake of the Gospel.

In simple terms, it’s another way of expressing the often used term in physical training of “No pain, no gain”. We are all well aware of the hard work, discipline and pain required to maintain good levels of physical fitness. I feel it is much the same with our spiritual fitness.

All athletes wanting to achieve high fitness levels must curb their social appetites and rein in their tendency towards laziness in favor of spending time in training. Similarly, Christians wanting to achieve high levels of performance for God must be prepared to spend *generous amounts of time* with God and serving Him. Could it be that we need to curb our devotion to watching television, surfing the net, going out, playing sports or going fishing in favor of *praising and worshipping Him, studying His Word, praying and doing the things He asks us to do, such as serving others, having people over, visiting, texting and phone calling?*

Just as serious athletes need to curb their appetites for the wrong sort of, or too much food, we followers of Jesus need to deny ourselves ‘fast food’ such as worldly magazines and the wrong internet sites in favor of feeding on the Bread of Life, the Word of God and, at times, mix this with *fasting*. Fasting involves denial and pain but it brings powerful results!

Top athletes know how harmful smoking and excessive drinking are to their performance so they avoid these things. Similarly, as Christians we need to *avoid surrendering to sinful desires* which can shipwreck our faith and effectiveness for God. As believers, we need to *bring all facets of our lives under God’s control* – our viewing, our spending, our use of time, our everything!

Remember, even in the things of the Spirit, it’s true – no pain, no gain!

When's the Right Time to Witness?

The story of Jesus ministering to the woman at the well is an inspiring one and it reminds us of the importance of sharing the Gospel with people we meet, but it is much more than that. I feel a major point of this amazing testimony is that Jesus sets us an example of when it is the best time to witness to others – the point I am wishing to make is that it is *always the right time to share the Gospel!*

Let's look carefully at the circumstances in which Jesus found Himself.

First of all He was in '*enemy*' territory, the place where the Samaritans, the 'half breed' Jews lived. Most Jews crossed the Jordan and travelled through the Decapolis when journeying from Jerusalem to Galilee. But Jesus wanted to reach the Samaritans with God's message so He went to where they dwelt.

Tired as He was from his journey, Jesus still ministered when the lady approached the well. He could have sat down to rest, saying that He was too tired to talk but the lady's eternal destiny was still a priority.

As well as being tired, *Jesus was hungry* but this was a not an excuse for Him either. His food was to do the will of the Father, despite feeling tired and hungry.

He talked with the woman in *the heat of the day*, a time when most people would have thought it too hot to be bothered sharing the Gospel. But Jesus did it anyway.

Jesus shared with a *Samaritan*, a person considered to be an enemy of the Jews and not worth talking to, but not only that, He shared with a Samaritan *woman*, the weaker sex who were considered by many to be second class citizens. He was going against the cultural guidelines of His day.

Not only this, but this woman was a social outcast, an adulteress who was banished to working in the heat of the day. She was certainly not a person of influence! Why didn't He choose an important person of excellent social standing with whom to share His message?

It would seem that all of the circumstances were wrong – *the wrong person in the wrong place at the wrong time*. But for Jesus the circumstances were not an important factor. The main factor was that His Father wanted Him to share with this particular woman at this particular time in this particular place. Divine encounters often take place in the most unlikely circumstances and involve the most unlikely people!

I believe God speaks powerfully to us through this story. I find myself encouraged to be ready and willing to *share the Gospel at all times and in all circumstances and with all people*. It may be that God brings somebody across our path when we least expect it and when we feel the least prepared to do this crucial work. But if God says 'Do it!', then we had better be ready to do His will!

Remember, it's always the right time to witness for Jesus!

Decoration or Inspiration?

It was a beautiful, ornate cross hanging around the young lady's neck. It drew your attention as you spoke with her – lovely colors and intricate shapes within the cross' overall shape had been cleverly designed. In speaking with her, however, it became obvious that she had no Christian faith.

A good friend of mine wears a simple wooden cross around his neck. With this guy, it's obvious he's a Christian. Rarely does a conversation of reasonable length go by without a reference to his Lord. In his case the small cross around his neck has huge meaning.

I wonder if it's to do with the type of cross it is...? Perhaps ornate examples offend God with His preference being for simplicity...

I've seen other examples – one person I know has a small silver cross on his key ring. Another has a large painting featuring a cross on his lounge room wall. Some ladies carry a cross in their purse. And I've noticed that it's become very trendy to have a cross tattooed somewhere on your body, particularly among younger people.

The cross is a truly powerful symbol in Christian circles, reminding us of Jesus' atoning death. Without His wonderful, sacrificial death we could not experience rebirth, we could not be born again into the Kingdom of God, we could not experience the forgiveness of our sins and freedom from our bondages, we would be on our way to a lost eternity – all this and more flows from the awesome cross of Christ.

But it seems to me that the symbol itself is of little use. It's obvious that for some people it is a mere *decoration*, something with which they adorn themselves and it could just as easily be a star sign, an advertising logo or even an occult symbol such as a pentagram.

For Christians, however, the cross of Christ should be our *inspiration*.

Every time we see a cross it should inspire us to live a life of sacrifice for others. Jesus told us to take up our cross daily, deny ourselves and follow Him. In Roman times, the cross was a symbol of a slow and drawn out, publicly humiliating, agonizing death but Jesus transformed it into an inspirational, uplifting and motivating symbol of selfless, humble devotion to the rescue of mankind from the power of the devil.

For believers the cross reflects the 'upside down Kingdom' to which we belong. It reminds us that in order to find our lives we need to lose them in Christ and that before a seed can reproduce it needs to fall to the ground and die. We need to be crucified with Christ before we can be resurrected with Him and experience true life.

As He so often does, Jesus took something which initially represented the rotteness of mankind and transformed it into a symbol of glorious victory. How does the cross affect you? Gruesome suffering or defeat of the devil?

Decoration or inspiration?

The Praise of God or Man?

In John chapter 12, we are told that the Pharisees would not confess their faith in Jesus because they feared they would be put out of the synagogue ‘for they loved praise from men more than praise from God.’ (John 12:43)

It was a dilemma for some of the Pharisees because it says ‘many even among the leaders believed in him (Jesus)’. They had seen his miracles, heard him teach and *believed*, yet were afraid to confess their faith or tell others that they believed for fear of persecution.

I’m sure this dilemma is still in existence today. Many people have seen God at work, they know He is real, they have received His touch and yet they are afraid to be witnesses for Him because they are afraid they will upset other people. And unfortunately, they value praise from other people more highly than praise from God. I believe this attitude is one of our biggest bondages to overcome and perhaps our greatest hurdle to successful evangelism.

It comes down to our conviction – which do we value more? – praise from men or praise from God. I know that it is possible to have both in some situations, but usually only when we are around other believers. The truth is that most of the time what pleases God is unpopular with unbelievers and causes us to be thought of, and also spoken of, in derogatory terms.

It’s part of what we ‘sign up’ for when we profess faith in Jesus. Our Lord said that as people hated Him, many would hate us as His followers. He also warned us that in this world we would ‘have trouble’, but to take heart because He had overcome the world.

We need to accept that the value system which we seek to adhere to is largely offensive to lots of people. When we say that we should always speak the truth and be open and honest with people in relationships, it doesn’t always go down well. When we stand against things such as euthanasia we are often seen as religious bigots because to most people the thought of putting a suffering soul out of their misery is a merciful, and therefore, a correct thing to do. When we say we believe in giving a tenth of our income to God’s work, many people ridicule us!

In confessing our faith in Jesus, we need to realize that we will probably come into conflict with the bulk of people in our communities because our belief in Jesus is neither understood nor appreciated by most people. So, what should do we do? Do we keep our faith in Jesus to ourselves for fear of upsetting others? Or do press on and enthusiastically witness for Him?

I’d like to encourage you to focus upon the blessings which will flow from pleasing God. For me, this is the trade off to being popular with all people and I feel it is more than worth the trade! If we seek praise from Jesus, He will reward, He will protect, He will make a way when there doesn’t seem to be one, He will lift us up and even, at times, make our enemies smile upon us!

Choose this day what and whom you will seek – the praise of God or man?!

Is Your Passion Bringing Him Fame?

Jesus Culture is my favourite Christian band at present and I love their album which is titled *Consumed*. Lots of the songs on this disc are consistent with their past efforts in focusing upon the magnificence of God and how He wants an up-close-and-personal relationship with believers.

One of the outstanding lines amongst an inspiring set of lyrics says, ‘Let our passion bring You fame.’

I feel this line encapsulates how God wants us to shine for Him. All of us have different personalities and temperaments, different gifts, different things about God which have been impressed upon our hearts and different styles in how we walk with Him. But I believe an element that needs to be in each and every believer is an absolute *passion* for God and the coming of His Kingdom upon the Earth. Our love for God needs to be expressed in our total lifestyle with our enthusiasm continually bubbling to the surface.

To my way of thinking, there is nothing worse than having the best message in the world to share, and this is certainly the case with Christians, but then keeping it to ourselves or presenting it in a dull, lifeless and boring way.

I remember hearing a story about an unbelieving radio personality who attended a church in New Zealand and heard the Gospel for the first time while talking with a member of the congregation after the service. He was so impressed with the passion for God in the person who had witnessed to him that he became a believer. But his testimony after the event was focused upon why he hadn’t seen the same passion and excitement for God in the people during the actual church service. He was amazed that the people of the church had the most exciting message in the world to share but that they met together in a boring, regimented, and almost disinterested way. He asked why these believers weren’t demonstrating their passion for God in the way they ‘did church’.

I remember a former pastor of mine used to say, ‘If believers are on fire for God then people will come from miles around to watch them burn!’ This pastor believed in being passionate about our Lord and this passion flowed into everything he did in his role.

May I encourage us as believers to let the totality of our lives – our countenance, attitude, language and values – let everything in life be impacted by our passion for God. May it shine out of us every day. Let’s become the most joyful, positive and enthusiastic people in our communities. Let’s shout from the rooftops the inspiring message which God has whispered into our hearts so that our passion might bring Him fame!

Are You Doing Better Than Being 'Really Nice'?

How often have you heard it said about someone that they are a 'really nice' person? What people usually mean by this expression is that the person is easy to like, usually pretty popular, one who tends not to make waves but 'goes with the flow', one who doesn't upset anyone but is easy going, relaxed and non-confrontational.

I've heard the 'really nice' comment many times and, more often than not, it's been said about Christians. And what's more, it is often followed up by something like this: 'They are a really good Christian witness.' I get the feeling that many people consider being 'really nice' is equivalent to being a 'really good' Christian. I wonder if that's the sort of witnesses God is looking for or is He seeking more from us...

I feel that we should be doing better – much better - and aiming higher than being 'really nice'. I will be most disappointed if my family members put on my grave stone, 'Here lies a man who was really nice.'

I would much rather that they felt to write things like this:

Here lies a man who was *full of passion* for Christianity and *compassionate* towards others, one who sought to *follow Jesus* and *imitate Him* in all facets of life.

He was a *committed* person who gave up many personal preferences in order to be an effective *servant* of others. He was *courageous* and willing to *confront injustice* and *deal with issues* rather than 'sweeping them under the carpet'.

He was one who was *willing to challenge others*, seeking to *stimulate* them and *inspire* them to do better with what God had given them. He wasn't satisfied with the status quo but *always strived to seek out a better, a more godly way of doing life*. There was a thirst in him to *live beyond the ordinary*, to reject mediocrity in favour of aiming at excellence in all endeavours. He was *vigorous and forceful for the things of God* and consistent in his ability to *walk the talk*, preferring to build the Kingdom of God instead of pursuing personal ambition.

He wouldn't back down when confronted by worldly values and 'rubbish' philosophies. He *chose to reject materialism and other false gods* in favour of *wholeheartedly following the one and only true God*. He was quite happy being branded as *narrow minded* and *totally sold out to 'that God stuff'*. He was committed to doing the 'hard yards' for Jesus and *wasn't afraid of the sacrifices* involved in daily taking up his cross.

You see, he believed in a Saviour who didn't major on 'being nice'. Jesus had a much higher calling and so do we – let's do much, much better than merely being 'really nice'!

Are You Afraid or Just Believing?

Jesus had been approached by Jairus, a ruler in the synagogue, to heal his daughter who was at death's door. Jairus had great faith; he believed that if Jesus came and put His hands on the young girl she would be healed and live.

Faith step 1 – when life threatening illness threatens, take the problem to Jesus...

But there was a delay in Jesus getting to go to the girl and a message came, 'Your daughter is dead. Why bother the teacher anymore?' Most people believed that Jesus had to be there to deliver healing while life still existed and that once the girl had breathed her last then it was all over. Jesus had a new lesson for them to learn.

Faith step 2 – it's never too late when Jesus has been invited to come and minister...

Jesus chose to ignore the suggestion of not bothering Him anymore. To begin with, it wasn't a *bother* to Him to heal someone and, secondly, He wasn't restricted by worldly timeframes. As a result, His words to Jairus were life changing – words we all need to know when death threatens: 'Don't be afraid; just believe.'

So often, we are seized by fear when we hear such devastating news. The enemy seeks to paralyze us with fearful doubts and steal away our faith. Satan doesn't want us to believe for a miracle. He wants us to spiral down into sadness and despair, and question the ability of God to 'deliver the goods'. He knows if we lose our expectation of a miracle then it is unlikely to be forthcoming. It's important to reject fear and to maintain our belief that Jesus is always able, wonderfully able, miraculously able...

To continue with our story, Jesus and Jairus went to the daughter to find that the mourning of her death had already begun. People had given up, and resigned themselves to the fact that life was gone, never to be restored. When Jesus told them that the child was not dead but 'merely asleep', He was laughed at.

Faith step 3 – ignore the people who will reject your faith, and move beyond the doubters who will ridicule you – concentrate upon what God has said...

There will always be doubters and those who do not have your degree of revelation from God. Even some other believers will seek to dilute your faith and level of expectation. Some will seek to convince you that death is simply part of the deal and God's will when serious illness threatens. Just accept it – don't 'bother' Jesus by asking for a miracle.

To finish our story, Jairus and his family 'were completely astonished' at Jesus' awesome miracle. He showed, as in the raising of Lazarus, that He is not bound by earthly time constraints and that it is never too late for a miracle.

Let's not be afraid; just believe...

Are We Following Through Until the Third Day?

Jesus had a tough day on Good Friday. The betrayal, the injustice, the pain and suffering, the ridicule, His mother and other close followers having to watch His torture and death – the first day of most spiritually significant tasks is painful. There is a sacrifice to be made. We thank God for day one sacrifices which lay a foundation for victory.

We aren't given a lot of details about what happened on Easter Saturday, the second day, but it appears that Jesus was busy following up on His defeat of Satan and the powers of darkness after dying on the cross by taking a firm grasp on the keys to the Kingdom. This day of transition was hard work as He 'tied up all of the loose ends' in the invisible world to put things back in their right order. We thank God for day two follow through which reinforces the day one defeat of the enemy's power. But the third day beckons...

On this wonderful third day, the deal was complete, the victory was officially claimed and the resurrected, triumphant Jesus began to reveal Himself to mankind, first to His closest followers and then, little by little, to more and more people until, eventually, all of mankind in all parts of the world would be told through the work of the Church.

I want to suggest that the final, total and complete victory of the third day was what Jesus focused upon as He went into battle for us. I feel this is what would have soothed Him when the pain was terrible, encouraged Him as the hours of torture dragged by, enthused Him to persevere and endure all that was being thrown at Him. And I believe that the third day victory is what He wants us to be focused upon as we go about our work.

It's so easy to get down and discouraged when we are in the thick of the battle. There are painful wounds to be received, distractions to be overcome, frustrations to be endured, but, we should rejoice because, with God, there is always a win in store! Even though He often seems to make us wait, patient endurance is always worth it!

Mountain top experiences are there for us to work towards, but we need to realize that a lot of the time we're carrying out first and second day tasks, working hard in redemptive duties, all of these aimed at leading people out of darkness and into God's wonderful light. Frustration may be with us right now, but, remember that the third day is on the way! There *will* be victory in God, there *will* be breakthrough, there *will* be triumph, there *will* be revival, but we need to see it through until that third day dawns. Sometimes we are tempted to give up before the task is complete – can you imagine where we would be now if Jesus had not followed through until the third day?

Renovating or Satisfied How We Are?

There was a time when we had been renovating Beckie's dad's old house, as Pop at last agreed to go into a nursing home. He had lived on his own for the past forty or so years and had done an excellent job to stay in his own place until he was 92! His home was in pretty poor shape when we began, having had virtually nothing done to it for the last fifteen years. Pop, being fiercely independent, had stoutly resisted our attempts to repaint and do many other jobs which badly needed doing. According to Pop, his home was 'very comfortable and cosy' just as it was.

But, the sad truth was that the old place badly needed rebirth! So we got permission from Pop, made a plan and set to work to see the old home resuscitated back to life.

First of all, we went in and pulled out the old kitchen and bathroom, both of which had died, took out some walls to let in more light, pulled up the old carpets and vinyl, took down the old curtains and blinds and carted a *lot* of rubbish to the tip.

Then the builders went to work rebuilding the kitchen, reconstructing the bathroom, taking off the roof so as the wiring could be redone, adding in some new walls and fitting new doors. Then it all had to be painted and the exterior pressure cleaned, new carpets put down and new curtains hung. At last we completed the project.

Now, why am I telling you all this! Well, it's because what had happened to this old house reminds me so much of what God seeks to do with our old lives! He wants to renovate our lives, bring us to rebirth, making us better than we have ever been before.

He wants permission to come into our lives (just as we had to wait for Pop to give us permission to rebuild his home) and pull out some old structures (dismantling out worldly viewpoints), clean out the rubbish (delivering us), let in some new light (the light of His countenance), redo our floor coverings (giving us godly foundations), open new doors (of opportunity for serving Him), rewire us (transforming our thinking) and repaint us (in the lifesaving blood of His Son).

God loves us in our old dilapidated condition (just as Pop loved his old home just as it was) but *He loves us too much* to leave us as we are. He wants for us to open the doors so He can come in to rebuild us, enabling us to be all He designed us to be in the first place. God seeks an excellent dwelling place for His Spirit, a house swept clean, one which has been renovated by the Master Builder, a home worthy for the King.

Will you give Him permission to begin renovating or are you satisfied with your present state?

Are You On The Christmas Roller Coaster?

Christmas is, or should be such a terrific time of the year... Well, it seems to depend upon whom you talk to...it depends upon how you approach it...

I've recently spoken with some people who say they *hate* Christmas. How come? 'Well, I'm sick and tired of the way everything has to be done *before* Christmas. I have to work so hard before we actually get to Christmas, that the holiday that comes with it is practically useless because all I want to do is sleep – I don't get any time with the kids!'

Another person said that they were *over Christmas*, even early in December. How come?

'I find that it's such an expensive time with all the presents which have to be bought – and so many dinners, barbecues and parties to go to. It goes throughout December and I wish I lived on an isolated little island somewhere that hadn't heard of Christmas.'

Others say that the all-consuming materialism and 'Santa stuff' puts them off.

It's such a pity that the time to celebrate the birth of the Saviour of the World has become a time of loathing for some people. Even in the church, I find some who are actually *burdened* by a lot of the worldly things that go with the Christmas season.

I believe we need to stand against these things which take away our joy at Christmas and really press in for the true meaning to be kept at the forefront of our thinking and actions.

Let's simply refuse to get on the 'roller coaster' of materialism, worldly celebrations and busyness, limiting the degree to which we become involved. We don't have to take part in the excessive drinking and over eating which is a hallmark of many gatherings. We can choose to live on a higher plane, being obedient to Jesus in being *in* the world but not *of* it. We can all set aside time to focus ourselves upon the real issue – Jesus' birth.

Let's curb our spending and refuse to be drawn into the trap of materialism, preferring instead to give people perhaps our most valuable possession – our time. We don't have to overindulge in expensive presents; we can choose to keep it simple and be good stewards with our finances and not become victims of credit card mania. Keep Jesus central!

I believe all of these strategies help put Christ back into Xmas (the abbreviation most of us avoid like the plague!) and allow it to be a tremendous time of the year for us. With the right approach, we can draw aside and make time for godly joy and celebration to enter our hearts. Jesus is the true reason for this season so let's keep Him uppermost in our minds as we draw near to December 25th.

I feel the words of Simon and Garfunkel are appropriate for us: 'Slow down, you move too fast...'

Are You Into Home Town Recognition?

I was privileged to attend a Keith Urban concert recently. It was an excellent night of entertainment; Keith and his band sang and played really well – he is so talented, being not only a great singer but his guitar work on both acoustic and electric guitars was exceptional. The concert featured very creative lighting and special effects and a feature was that Keith came out into the crowd on several occasions, used only uplifting and God-honoring language and farewelled the audience by saying ‘God bless you and believe in yourself’.

That last comment really stuck in my mind. I so much appreciated his approach, and, while I wasn’t that familiar with his music and lyrics, a good friend of mine is, and he commented on there being a lot of ‘mini sermons’ in Keith’s songs. I wonder if the fact that he encouraged people to believe in themselves came from a time in his life when people probably didn’t believe in him.

His first album was a flop and he was never really appreciated in Australia. It’s only in the latter part of his career after ten or more years in the industry that he has been recognized as a talented performer and only after he had to go to another country. He has encountered problems with alcohol and other drugs too – I wonder if those distractions arose because he hadn’t been recognized as being successful, particularly by his own countrymen and he doubted he could do it...I don’t really know much of his story and am merely ‘thinking out loud’ based upon ideas that I feel God dropped into my heart.

Keith Urban’s experience is not unlike that of Jesus. The Saviour of the World was rejected in his own home town and even when He came to Jerusalem on His mission to save all mankind from their sins, His own countrymen didn’t recognize His greatness. ‘We have no king but Caesar!’ they chanted when asked if Pilate should free their king.

I wonder if we do similar things to our own... I wonder if we reject or don’t fully appreciate the talents, giftings and anointing upon our own local people, preferring to wait for someone to come from somewhere else to switch us on to God. I wonder if we feel that we can receive inspiration and life changing messages *only* from the likes of T D Jakes, Bill Johnson or Jenetzen Franklin. I wonder if we leave it too late to recognize the touch of God upon our own people and find that they are invited to go somewhere else and only when they begin to minister there do people say, ‘Hey this guy is terrific!’

Let’s appreciate our own and recognize our prophets (and musos, apostles, preachers, teachers, evangelists, leaders and pastors) in their own home towns!

Are You Selecting Your Photos Carefully?

New Year's Eve is traditionally a time of remembering back over the year which is about to finish. How do you find that? It can be a difficult time for some, particularly when people have had a bad/rotten/horrible/traumatic year, having experienced the loss of a loved one, or perhaps they lost a home in terrible bush fires or suffered in serious floods. Or perhaps their family was touched by the devastation of terrorist attack or a tsunami turned a holiday into a nightmare...

Personally, I don't like dredging up memories of the past year. It seems to be a time when Satan whispers in our ears, reminding us of all our mistakes, failures and mess-ups during the year. I believe he uses it to pull us down and if we listen long enough to what he says, we run the risk of entering the new year feeling depressed.

I believe God wants us to take a different approach at the dawn of a new year. He has encouraged me to treat the past year like a treasured photo album, and, like any photo album, ensuring that I only put in the photos (the 'trigger' for our memories if you like) which build me up and encourage me to go on strongly in the new year. He says don't include photos of your 'bad hair days', or the picture of you failing to finish in the cross country race or the day you broke up with your girlfriend or when you fell into sinful thoughts about the new girl down the street. Don't include memories of the day you were embarrassed by a close friend or made to feel an idiot by what your coach said to you.

I feel God wants our 'photo album' of memories to be exclusively for reminding us of moments of victory and triumph in our lives. Include 'shots' of your successful, productive relationships, the best examples of you serving others and the times of blessing when God intervened miraculously in your life. Include 'photos' of your best efforts to share the Gospel with others, the times you went out of your way to help others and of all of the times you visited people or invited them to your place to encourage them. Preserve your 'mind pictures' of those for whom you prayed during the past year and include the memories of the days you heard that your prayers were answered.

Are you getting the picture? Include only the photos or memories of what God wants included and leave out the snapshots of which Satan would like to remind you. Deny the enemy the ability to remind you of the pain, frustration and suffering you endured during the past year but instead focus upon all of the great things you achieved.

Select your photos carefully. The best ones lay a brilliant foundation for the year to come!

Are You Free To Choose?

We have a member in our church who has recently begun attending our pre-meeting times of prayer. As is the case with most churches, we have only a few people who make the commitment to come along to these prayer times, with most perceiving them as an optional extra set aside for leaders, those who aren't busy, those who have a special interest in or who have a heart for prayer. A pity...

This new attendee really blessed me when he told me his reason for deciding to begin coming to these times of prayer. He said he wasn't coming to please the pastor or to impress anyone else in the church; no, he was coming because 'he wanted to develop a closer relationship with The Man Upstairs', to use his exact words. He was choosing to come for the right, godly reasons; he was exercising his free choice given to him by God.

Free choice is a challenging concept. So often I believe we misuse it to our own detriment, employing it as an excuse for lack of commitment to God's work.

It's easy to become lukewarm in our relationship with God and lazy in our commitment to the Body of Christ, His Church, by contending that God has left us free to choose whether or not we pray daily, read the Word consistently and attend church regularly.

Scripture tells us that we are free to choose but that we need to be very careful because free choice without godly consideration is dangerous: 'Everything is permissible - but not everything is beneficial...not everything is constructive.' (1 Corinthians 10:23, 24)

Joshua asked the people to '*...choose* this day whom you will serve...' (Joshua 24:15b italics added) With all his heart, he wanted them to choose to serve the Most High God and not the false gods around them but he knew God's way was to give people free choice. This freedom can lead to blessings but it can also be a pathway to curses.

Jesus offers us salvation but it is up to us to choose. Jesus calls us to live with integrity but it is up to us to choose. The wrong choices lead to destruction – our choices are vital!

How, then, should we handle this gift of free choice? How do we use it responsibly and obediently? How do we let our choices result in blessings for us and others?

I have found that asking myself questions such as these is helpful:

Will this choice honor God? Is it a choice of obedience? Will this choice bring me closer to God? Is this choice selfish or God-centred? Will this choice strengthen the church? Is this choice in agreement with biblical principles? Will this choice be a good witness to others? Is this choice consistent with my desire to be 'on fire for Christ'?

Are You Rising up in His Authority?

God has been speaking to me a lot recently about authority, and, in particular, the authority which we possess as believers in Jesus. The first few chapters of Mark's Gospel tell us a lot about Jesus' authority:

- 1:22 the people were amazed at His teaching because 'he taught them as one who had authority'
- 1:27 'What is this? A new teaching – and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him.'
- 2:10 '...the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins...'

These references are backed up by some wonderful testimonies of Jesus taking authority over many 'things', for want of a better term. He healed many people of many different types of illnesses – for example, a man with leprosy, a woman with a chronic issue of blood and a paralytic – He had authority over all of these illnesses. Jesus also delivered a demon possessed 'madman', having authority over evil spirits. He raised Jairus' daughter from the dead, demonstrating, as He did with Lazarus, that He has authority over death, including His own as we are told later in this Gospel! Not only that, but Jesus also has authority over the natural elements shown by His calming of the storm in Mark 4.

I believe there are other instances of His wonderful authority. He called His disciples and they left everything behind and followed Him – truly amazing! Most of us have enough trouble getting our dogs to follow us when we go for a walk, let alone calling a person to leave their family and job behind and follow us on an adventure into the unknown.

I believe Jesus also had authority over spirits of religion and legalism as He demonstrated in encounters with the Pharisees and other religious leaders. Time and again, He made them look foolish as He was challenged, leaving their ungodly arguments in tatters.

Before giving His followers the Great Commission, (see Matthew 28) Jesus reminded them that *all* authority in heaven and on earth had been given to Him and I believe He was sending them out, and is still sending us today, in that same authority. They were apostles or 'sent ones', just as we are today, and a feature of apostles was that they were sent *in the authority of the One sending them*. And when Jesus is the One doing the sending, we should be super confident! He told them that He would be with them all of the time, that they would have His presence. Remember that part of His presence is His authority over all things on the earth. So be encouraged, believers, and rise up in His authority as you do His work in His world!

Godly Resistance Training?

For the past three days I've been in the city where I have had access to a big gym and I've been going along to work my body with the aim of shedding a few kilos which 'mysteriously' appeared on my waistline over Christmas. This gym has dozens and dozens of machines, hundreds of weights, many training rooms and lots programs on offer. So I've been sweating away for the past few mornings and during this time God has been talking to me. He's been revealing things to me about *resistance training*.

Most of the programs and machines in this gym offer increased fitness for participants by pitting their bodies - hearts, muscles, lungs, etc *against some type of resistance*. The aim is to make people stronger, fitter, more powerful and generally healthier by working their body against a resisting force. People seek to lift heavier weights/run further/pedal more quickly for longer and punch a bag harder, becoming fitter as they battle the resistance.

As I observed these things, God spoke to me. He wants believers to undertake *resistance training* every day so that we become stronger and fitter in the battle against our enemies – the flesh, the world and the devil. Just as He left the enemy tribes in the Promised Land for the people of God to drive out with the aim of them becoming stronger in God, He leaves enemies in our midst so that we become stronger and fitter in/for Him as we resist, refusing to bow down to them. We need this type of *resistance training* on a daily basis. God knows that we become spiritually fat and flabby if we do not put our *spiritual muscles* to work. Every day we need to submit to God and resist the devil so that he will flee from us.

Here are some other little insights the Lord led me to while working out in the gym:

- As most in the gym take their drink bottles with them to ensure they stay hydrated, we need to *keep filling up on the Holy Spirit* so that we do not become 'spiritually dehydrated'
- Many training with weights lift them above their heads to gain strength – we grow stronger as we *lift up others to God* and serve them
- Committed gym people go on a *daily* basis – a physical workout is part of their daily routine and it has a powerful positive effect – they are trim and strongly built – daily time in *God's gym* will have the same powerful positive effect on us!
- God would love us to be as committed to Him as the 'gym junkies' are to getting their daily 'fix' – He loves us to 'sweat it out' by worshipping Him, soaking in His presence, devouring the Word, praying and fasting and exercising our faith!

How about some Godly resistance training for you?

Is He Becoming Greater in You?

John the Baptist is a hero of the Christian Faith. He was given the privilege of paving the way for Jesus, of setting the scene so that people were ready for the Messiah to be revealed to the world. For some 400 years before the birth of Jesus, we are not told about what God had said to mankind or what was actually happening in Israel. Not since the time of the prophet Malachi had anyone been raised up to speak out for God – John was the one chosen to break the silence – surely, a significant role. If anyone had good reason to become proud and arrogant, he certainly did.

He was the one called to ready peoples' hearts for the Kingdom of God to come (John 1:23) He was the one who was told that the Messiah was the One upon whom the Spirit would come down and remain. (John 1:33) It was revealed to him that Jesus was to be the Lamb of God to take away the sin of the world (John 1:29) He was even thought by some to be the Christ or Elijah or the Prophet (John 1:19-21)

He was given privileged information and such an important, highly visible and vital role to play. He gained a big following – surely he would end up with an enlarged ego! But, no, he didn't – he remained a humble servant, and when people came to him concerned that Jesus was baptizing and everyone was going to Him, he was able to say 'He must become greater; I must become less.' (John 3:30)

I feel John's attitude sets us a powerful example of how to go about our ministering for God. He knew he had an important role to play and he forthrightly went about his task, being strong in his views and not afraid to confront people in their sin. But John didn't overstep the mark by trying to make a name for himself. In fact, he continually sought to play down his role, preferring to humbly go about his work. I love what John had to say about his relationship with Jesus – 'The friend (John referring to himself) who attends the bridegroom (Jesus) waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice (John 4:29b). He longed for Jesus to rise up as Messiah and for him to play a less significant part. Likewise, we need more and more of the Messiah in our lives, to talk about Him and His exploits more and more and speak less of our efforts. Pride is always crouching at the door, wanting to rush into our lives and become a stumbling block as we witness for God.

It can be a really difficult juggling act - to be positive, enthusiastic, strong, authoritative and decisive for God, yet all the time remaining humble, submissive and always pointing to God's greatness.

I feel John knew the secret – that *He must become greater!*

Are You Like a ‘Slippery Pig’ in Satan’s Hands?

In John chapter 13 we are told that Jesus knew Judas was going to betray Him and also that Peter was going to deny knowing Him three times.

Betrayal and denial are not good things to have happen to us. I wonder if you’ve experienced them?... I wonder how you felt?... Probably very disappointed, hurt deep inside, perhaps frustrated or angry, and more than likely with strong feelings of rejection thrown in. Not good feelings! Jesus knows all about them...

I wonder how you reacted? More than likely in a manner of retribution, being angrily ready to give the betrayers and deniers a serve, a piece (a bad piece, I’m sure!) of your minds! Or maybe, you internalized the negative feelings, allowing them to simmer away over the weeks and months until a lethal concoction of bitterness took hold in your spirit... Either way, Satan takes hold of you.

Jesus didn’t react like this. He still loved them, still washed their feet, still served them, refusing to make a fuss or expose them to public ridicule. He simply told Judas to get on with it and quickly. He lovingly told Peter what would happen, but His prediction wasn’t accompanied by a lecture on loyalty and courage to stand beside them when our close friends came under attack. He kept focus upon the task at hand – that of dying for mankind, these betrayers and deniers included.

How come? How could He accept the circumstances so peacefully and still love the to-be-offenders? I believe the answer lies in chapter 14 of John’s Gospel: ‘He (Satan) has no hold on me...’ Jesus wouldn’t allow Satan to influence His attitude or His thinking. The image that comes into my mind is that of a greasy or slippery pig being chased by people at a fair, with the winner being the first one to take hold of the poor pig. Jesus was like ‘a slippery pig’ in the enemy’s hands, so totally immersed in the Father’s will, so completely sold out to accepting the means by which His Father would bring about this rescue mission for mankind and so wonderfully empowered to finish the task! The Father’s touch and Jesus’ supreme obedience resulted in Him being coated in the oil of the Holy Spirit, making it impossible for Satan to have any hold over Him. Jesus refused to let the attitudes and actions of others to affect Him detrimentally – He remained faithful to His calling. No hurt, no anger, no retribution - only forgiveness.

I believe God wants to equip us to live in a similar vein. He has in mind for us to be like Jesus, like slippery pigs in Satan’s hands. A close relationship with our Father, repentant obedience to Him and Holy Spirit empowerment are the keys! Are you being slippery enough?

Are You Okay With Jesus...and His Team Too?

For several years, Anne, who was a vibrant and outgoing member of her local church, had been reaching out to one of her workmates and she felt the time was right to be bold enough to invite her friend along to church one weekend. Anne said Hi to Sheryl and they talked about how their weekends had been, mainly discussing things like shopping and the weather - just ordinary things. Then she invited her friend to come to church.

‘I’m sorry, Anne, but I don’t want come to church with you.’ Sheryl replied. ‘I’m okay with Jesus but I’ll give church a miss. I’ve heard what people say and I just don’t see the point – you don’t ever really achieve anything and I’ve a problem with some of your people too. Not to mention your leaders – they’re a bit ‘over the top’ and it seems they only want you in church to give you a job to do. God is cool but the church, well...!’

It seems to me that Sheryl’s response was not unlike that of many people we come across in our local communities. We have to admit that the church doesn’t have a great reputation with many unbelievers, and some believers too for that matter!

We want to promote church involvement and draw in as many as we can, so how might we overcome the obstacles and deal with the challenges? Perhaps the following comparison of the church with a football team may be helpful.

Accepting Jesus but rejecting His church, the thing that He died to bring into existence, is like saying that you want to play football (be a Christian) but don’t want to play for a club (be part of the church). You end up merely being a spectator who never experiences what it is like being out on the ground and in the game. And even if you do impact someone with your love for Jesus, you can only lead them to become a spectator like yourself. You become an armchair expert who has all the answers but you only ever theorize about what might work better – you sit back and criticize but you never get to put your ideas into practice. Even though you show support and you cheer for Jesus, you don’t ever kick any goals for Him. You never have the ball (a role in the church) put in your hands to take the team into attack and you have no power to impact the team’s performance. You merely yell from the sidelines...

If you don’t join a club, you never get to benefit from the coach’s (Jesus) pep talks during the game or play alongside the team captain (church leaders) and find joy in helping them attempt to overcome the opposition (Satan).

If you’re okay with Jesus, I believe you should be okay with His team too, despite its faults!

Are You Dreaming Impossible Dreams?

A famous song starts with the words ‘To dream the *impossible* dream...’ (italics added)
The words of the song came to mind this morning. It happened when I attended a special assembly in the Christian school where I used to work several years ago. On this very day, back in 1985, the school first opened its doors with a mere 25 students, on a tiny piece of land in a church building. Now it has almost 400 students, is located on a beautiful, large campus and is perhaps as well resourced as any school of its size anywhere in the country.

If, twenty five years ago, you had asked the founders what their dream for the future of the school was back then, I’m sure what has emerged years later would have been classified as an *impossible* dream! I’m sure no one was expecting the miracle which God has performed in allowing this particular school to become, per head of population, one of the biggest Christian schools in the country – there are Christian schools in cities of well over 100000 people and larger throughout Australia which aren’t as big as this one which is located in a town of only 3500 people and in a total catchment area of only 8000. In natural terms, and according to national statistics, and all logic, this simply should not happen. Why, then, do we see this aberration, this *impossible* thing come to pass.

I believe it happened because people had a God-given-dream, an *impossible* dream, that’s why! I remember walking the boundary of the campus back in the early 1990’s, praying for this school which then still had less than a hundred students, to become, for the glory of God, the biggest and most influential school in the district. And the dream is now a reality! And I believe it hasn’t finished yet, but is still unfolding.

It is of great encouragement to see these things happen and it enthralls me to continue to dream *impossible* dreams and to exhort others to do likewise. I’m sure everyone reading this will have a testimony of their own in relation to something which was initially seen as impossible by this world’s standards actually coming to pass when they have put God in the centre of their dreaming.

He is the God of the impossible, and I feel we need to be reminded again and again of His awesome ability. Let’s not dream small, insignificant dreams but ones which will speak to people of God’s greatness. Let’s not approach the challenges set before us negatively, wrongly thinking that not even God could do this.

Dream something which is impossible in human terms and bring glory to God by allowing Him to show the awesome miracles of which He is capable. I’m confident He is ready, and willing, and awesomely able!

Is He Your Constant Dwelling Place?

Psalm 91 is a powerful testimony to the heart desire of God. It speaks about God's wonderful protection for us – how He desires to save us from the snares of life, and how He covers us, being our shield from attack, providing in Himself a safe refuge.

It tells of many wonderful things that God plans to do for us and how we need not fear illness and disease, how God will save us, how He will rescue and protect us, how He will send His angels to guard us, deliver us and honor us, satisfying us with long life. It's a list of promises which we can't help but respond by saying, 'Yes, please Lord – I'll have a dose of that, and that and that and that and that too!'

In today's world, with so many life threatening illnesses and diseases about, so many deadly accidents, tragic house fires, earthquakes, plane crashes, terrorist attacks and the like, it's very comforting to know that there is a God who wants us to live life free from fear. He wants us to live confidently, appreciating that His watching eye is continually upon us – it brings such peace to us, giving us rest amidst the many threats to our lives.

It sounds almost too good to be true, doesn't it? But there is a proviso, there is a condition to this wonderful protection. It's to do with our *dwelling place*.

The psalm begins with these words:

'He who *dwells in the shelter of the
Most High...*

A little further along, the psalm says:

'*If you make the Most High your
dwelling-
even the Lord, who is my refuge-
then no harm...no disaster...*

It's a glorious formula for success – making the Most High our dwelling brings protection – us living in His love and Him living in ours, submitting ourselves to Him in every aspect of life, spending time in His presence, coming back to Him again and again and again, or even better, never leaving Him in the first place! The wonderful blessings of provision and protection are dependent upon where we position ourselves, upon our place of living or dwelling.

Let's ask ourselves, 'Do I truly live in Him? Is He my constant dwelling place?'

Are You Putting Out Into Deep Water?

In Luke 5, we are told about a group of fishermen who had been fishing all night and had caught nothing. One could imagine that they were tired, disappointed and probably pretty well 'fed up'. Sometimes you may have felt like that in your job. The next morning, Jesus had come along and asked if he could use one of the boats to sit in so as He could teach a large crowd of people who had gathered on the shore of the lake.

We don't know what He taught about. I wonder if He told His listeners about the abundant life which was available to them in His Kingdom, or about God's guidance in their daily responsibilities and jobs. I wonder if He taught them about His ability to lead them into being successful when their own efforts had been disastrously ineffective. I wonder if He encouraged them to go out into deeper waters. We can only guess...

After Jesus had completed His little stint of teaching, He asked Simon, one of the fishermen, to put out into deep water and let down his nets for a catch. I wonder if this was Jesus wanting to follow up His teaching with a practical demonstration of the power of God... or maybe He wanted to test out Simon's obedience to His suggestion...

And the rest 'is history', as they say. Simon had his doubts but, *because Jesus had said so*, he followed the advice and caught an incredible amount of fish, enough to fill not only his boat but another one as well!

What a contrast! After a full night of hard work these fisherman, experienced professionals, had produced absolutely nothing. But along comes the Lord Jesus Christ onto the scene and everything changes! Jesus in the midst brought an abundance, so much so that these fishermen gave up what they were doing to follow Him. They had realized that He makes all of the difference in whatever we're doing!

We might have all of the training in the world in our particular vocation – it matters not what it is because Jesus knows everything there is to know about it. He's an expert in any field you could name. Why would we struggle on without His wonderful, miraculous input? Why would we contemplate not following His suggestions? Imagine if Simon had said he was too tired and wouldn't do as Jesus asked – he would have missed out big time! And we can also miss out big time too if we want to struggle along in our own strength and rely on our own understanding. We often need to go deeper.

Why not put out *into deep water* and let down your nets for a catch? Just ask Jesus for guidance and then follow His directions - an abundance awaits!

Do You Believe God Will Show Up?

I got caught in the rain on my bike ride this morning. The weather was overcast when I set out and, although some rain had been forecast, it still looked okay for a morning pedal.

When I was two thirds of the way through my ride, however, it began to rain and I called out to God asking Him for some help. My prayer went something like this... 'Lord, you know I hate riding in the rain so please keep it away from me, let me get home quickly, keep me safe as the roads get slippery and don't get my bike all wet and mucky as I've only just given it a really good spit and polish!' I believe in applying the Scripture which says you don't have because you don't ask!

God turned up 'big time' in answer to my prayer – just try this set of 'coincidences' for size! The sky just west of me became as black as ink but I only received a sprinkling of rain – it seemed obvious areas not far away from me were getting a complete downpour! The wind 'just happened' to be behind me and pushed me all the way up a reasonably long and steep hill on the way home – I usually get back to third gear and average about 15kmph up this hill but today I stayed in 5th and didn't drop below 23kmph for the entire climb! My clothing remained almost dry - certainly wetter in perspiration than in rain water! I seemed to have more energy than normal to pedal hard in getting home and did the last third of the journey in record time. And my bike had only a few spots of rain on it and picked up off the road a bare minimum of sludge and splashes – it hardly even needed a wipe down to be clean again after I arrived! I was only back home for a minute or two when it began to rain really hard!

We might expect God to be too busy managing more important issues and say 'Gee it's only a bike ride, after all – does it really matter if this guy gets soaked? – he won't die – if he dawdles home slowly he probably won't fall off and he can climb in the shower, clean up his bike again and soon he and the bike will be as good as gold.'

But our God cares about each and every aspect of our lives. This little episode brought home to me how He has everything in hand ahead of time and wants to 'show up' when we need help. He knows every circumstance we will encounter on any given day and is always a step ahead, preparing to help us, provide for us, guide us and make life more enjoyable and effective. It builds our faith when He responds in such a way.

If God was so good to me in this small, insignificant part of my day, how much more can I expect Him to 'show up' in everything else I do, especially when a serious situation occurs. Be encouraged - He won't hold out on us – it's His nature to 'show up'!

Will You See It Through?

I was watching the latest episode of Top Gear in which the show's three heroes were speed testing American muscle cars at the Bonneville Salt Flats in the US of A. Each driver set themselves a target top speed to try to achieve. After many attempts, each one had come close but hadn't quite achieved what they had set out to do. Time and again the computer read out showed that they had fallen short.

Other viewers, like me, were probably wondering if the drivers would hang in there until success was achieved...

And...the answer? Yes, they did! Each one persevered through the frustration, through numerous failed attempts, getting another and another chance until, finally, they successfully launched their cars off the starting line, got the gear changes and traction just right, accelerated in the most efficient manner to achieve their ultimate speed, topping their targets by a few kmph.

They saw it through...

It started me thinking about Jesus and the story of the cross - the most significant story in the history of the world! This is surely a wonderfully inspiring and marvelously tragic true story of heroic sacrifice at its brilliant best.

Jesus saw it through... overcoming savage and determined opposition, enduring excruciating pain, experiencing betrayal and desertion, undergoing humiliating and completely undeserved brutal treatment... He triumphed! He hung in there, He persevered, even when His Father had to turn away from Him as He took the sin of the world upon Himself. For six terrible hours, which must have seemed like weeks in duration, He hung on the cross for us!

But, unlike our Top Gear drivers who were able to have many attempts, Jesus only got one shot at it, only one chance to do the impossible, only one life to lay down – to overcome death, the ultimate weapon with which Satan had tormented mankind.

Where would we be if He had faltered, even once? If He had weakened, even for a moment and had called on the legions of angels who were waiting to come and take Him down from the cross and end His suffering. What if He had called out to His Father, saying that it was too painful, too difficult for Him to achieve, too big a price to pay? We would have been doomed to an eternity in hell.

Thank God Jesus was not a quitter! Thank God He was willing to 'bite the bullet' and refused to be self-centred. Thank God He was obedient to His Father. May we be inspired to see it through and 'lay down our lives' for the sake of saving mankind!

Didn't You Have Church? (Oh Yes We Did!)

It was Easter Sunday at about 11:30am and a group of 25 of us met in the home of one of our congregation members. In our area, Easter is traditionally a time of people going away from home for family holidays because the school students get the entire next week off school, we hadn't scheduled one of our usual church gatherings at the hall.

I felt God encouraged us that, even though many of our people would be away, those of us still in town should get together to celebrate Resurrection Sunday.

We began with some prayer and worship songs, mingled with thanksgiving and various other responses to God, one of our pastors playing guitar while sitting on the floor. There were no words for us to follow, so we joined in with singing the familiar songs and sat, just listening to others when we didn't know the words. A wonderful peace settled over us as we experienced God's presence. We experienced a new song which God inspired our lead worshipper to share with us. This beautiful song led us into a time of people sharing pieces of Scripture and prophetic words. There was a strong anointing.

One of our ladies shared a powerful word with the group about trusting God and being willing to surrender all things to Him. This was a confirmation for the word which I had on my heart – I shared some thoughts about the Easter story and how God had drawn my attention to all of the choices with which people had been presented. Peter, the other disciples, Pilate, Judas, the crowd, the criminals crucified with Jesus and Jesus Himself - all had choices to make – I shared that these people made the correct choices when they were willing to put their *trust* in God.

At the conclusion of the short message, we lay hands on everyone, asking for them to have more trust in God, to receive an anointing so they would be more willing to surrender all choices to Him. Then we enjoyed a wonderful lunch together, connecting closely with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Some would say we didn't have church on Easter Sunday, but, oh yes we did! Because church *isn't* dependent upon these things - the numbers, the building, the band, the platform, the order of service, the seating, spending most of the time looking at the back of someone's head, the altar call, having the words displayed, the sound system...

But church *is* all to do with these things - gathering together, focusing upon God, worshipping Him, thanking Him, singing Him a new song, knowing His presence, enjoying one another, sharing our gifts, encouraging others, delving into His Word to extract greater inspiration and revelation, praying and laying hands upon one another...

So you didn't have church on Easter Sunday? Oh, yes we did!!!

When Is the Story Over?

I have included this week a message which I shared at the funeral of a dear friend, Vonda Townsend. Hopefully, it encourages us to keep an eternal perspective on life (and death) at all times.

It's a sad day, a sad time...Yes, Vonda has died and we will miss her greatly ...but ... this story isn't over... and there is a good ending in store!

I can say the story of Vonda's life isn't over because she is a Christian, a believer in Jesus, the Saviour of the World, the One who died for all of mankind that all who believe in Him may dwell in God's presence forever. When she became a Christian, Vonda entered into eternal life at that point – she didn't have to wait until she died, but all of the rights and privileges of the Kingdom of Heaven were hers from that time on. When she was born again, she inherited the right to dwell with Jesus in heaven, and a few days ago when her body was finally exhausted from battling cancer, her spirit rose and went to be with her Saviour to begin the most important part of her life.

You see the story of Vonda's life isn't over by a long, long shot because this life here on earth, when compared with eternity, even if Vonda had lived to be a hundred years old, is like a teaspoon of water compared with the massive amount of water in the Pacific Ocean. The truth is that her 55 years here on the earth was just the first stage of a wonderful life which she now continues in another, better place.

For Vonda now, there is no pain, no more suffering, no negative emotions, no feelings of loss, no sadness at all but only an awesome, heart resuscitating joy and boundless peace and happiness as she reaps the benefit of a life of sacrifice, a life of faith in Jesus lived out here on the earth. She chose to invest her life in His Kingdom and now she cashes in on that investment. Let's rejoice in this!

You see she now dwells in a perfect world which is beyond all evil, all negativity, all worry and fear, all injustice, all suffering and loss. Let this news uplift us and cause us to look to our own eternal destinies – let's ensure that we can share in the same wonderful inheritance. Let's be certain that we will hear God's voice affirming each one of us, reassuring us that all is well with our souls.

Vonda dwells in ultimate peace because she has heard Jesus say to her, 'Well done good and faithful servant!' She has heard Him say, 'You and Mike and your family lived for me, choosing to give up worldly things to serve me in my church. I commend and praise you for that and I promise that, just as I blessed you abundantly in your life on earth, there will be rewards for your earthly efforts here in heaven.

Mike and the others will continue to serve me, and although they will miss you terribly, they will not sink into despair, but gain great encouragement and be richly comforted in knowing that they will see you again when their time comes to be called home. They believe that choices which were made – choices to believe in Jesus as Lord and Saviour, choices to live according to the leading of The Holy Spirit, choices to live by faith, believing that I am a good God who loves you deeply and wants only the best for you – these choices mean that even on the day they farewell Vonda - their sweetheart, their mother, their grandmother, their

daughter, their friend - those who believe will rise on wings like eagles, they will get over their grief, their tears and come through rejoicing because they know this isn't the end. It is merely the closing paragraph of a wonderful chapter, the turning of a page in the history of the Townsend and Quilliam families.'

Yes, there is grief, but... there is also resurrection life and joy.

Yes, there is loss, but...there is also a life found in the heavenlies.

Yes, there is a terrible disease called cancer but... there is a healer named Jesus who has authority over everything in the universe and He has the ability to give us a brand new glorified body like His own.

Yes, there will always be trouble in this world but... take heart, Jesus has overcome the world... though things appear to be out of control, He has everything in hand.

This story isn't over – it continues as God rings the changes, as He begins to write a new chapter for this family, as He engineers exciting new challenges and opportunities for all of us.

Vonda now has a new address and new gardens in which to work. We can't visit, but we can be assured of going to be where she is one day if only we believe.

She says to us today, 'I know how the story ends – for all of us who believe, we all live happily ever after.'

She now knows the complete truth and I'm certain she would encourage us to dry our tears and to celebrate the time we had with her and to get on with living, to enjoy this wonderful life which God gives us.

For Vonda, the race has been run and she has finished the course in victory, despite the last few months being tough in the extreme, for her and the entire family.

Yes, it is a sad day, a sad time but... the story isn't over!

Are You Keeping in Step with the Spirit?

‘Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.’ Galatians 5:25

Many of us will have watched the recent ANZAC Day celebrations. There is always a lot of marching goes on as part of these festivities and, as we watch the marchers file past, it is so obvious when someone is out of step.

Paul tells the Galatians to ‘keep in step’ with the Spirit. By this, he means that if we are committed to living by the Spirit, we need to be consistent and measured in our approach, bringing our spirits into alignment with what the Holy Spirit wishes for us.

There are enemies in our lives which seek to run interference and prevent us keeping in step with the Spirit. We need to identify and kill off these enemies.

Our egos want to direct our lives and we quickly get out of step with the Spirit when pride enters our hearts. We tend to seek our own good and are driven to make a name for ourselves instead of bringing glory to God.

In the verse immediately following the one listed above, Paul says, ‘Let us not become *conceited*, provoking and envying each other.’ He knew that self importance grieved the Holy Spirit, causing Him to withdraw and leaving us working in our own strength. Like a soldier who is out of step, it soon becomes obvious to others when we lose the anointing of the Spirit. We tend to provoke and be critical of people instead of encouraging and uplifting them, letting envy become a force which divides us from them.

‘The sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit,’ says Paul a little earlier in his letter to the Galatians. When we sin, the Holy Spirit is saddened and His fruit becomes still born within us. Our joy dies and we struggle with feelings of guilt and condemnation. Of course, we can quickly repent, and the forgiveness of God is guaranteed, but it is far better that we do not sin in the first place. In John’s first letter, he tells his readers, ‘I write this to you so that *you will not sin*’ because he knew that sin causes us to get out of step with the Spirit.

We also need to not run ahead of God in our efforts for Him, nor, indeed, to lag behind. On the one hand, our zeal can sometimes cause us to be like ‘a bull in a China shop’, getting ahead of God and doing more harm than good, and on the other hand, our laziness can mean that we miss out on a miracle because we weren’t obedient to being in the right place at the right time. We need to listen carefully to the Spirit’s drum beat.

Keeping in step with the Spirit is so very, very important! By the Spirit, quick march!

Is Your Bread Fresh?

I love bread with jam on it, or even a cheese sandwich, as long as it's extra tasty cheddar cheese. Honey sandwiches are really good too. And so is tomato relish as long as you have plenty of butter with it. But the secret to any of these sandwiches, no matter what the topping may be, is – the bread must be *fresh*! It needs that soft, melt in your mouth texture that is only there on the first day. Even by day two of its life, a staleness is beginning to set in – I find it's really only good for making toast at that stage.

Lately I've been thinking about bread from heaven.

During the time of the people of God wandering in the desert, they were provided with manna, a type of bread, which came down from heaven each day. It's interesting that God created this supernatural food so that it would last only one day. If the people went out and gathered more than they needed for the day and retained some for the next one, it very quickly 'went off' and was inedible. The only exception was on Friday – on this day they were allowed to collect enough to last them for two days because God wanted them to be able to rest and spend the time with him on the Sabbath.

It seems that God had in mind for His people to feed upon *fresh bread*.

In New Testament times, Jesus gave His disciples a prayer which included a line about bread. 'Give us this day our daily bread', they were told to pray. It was to be *daily* bread.

In John, chapter 6, Jesus refers to Himself as 'the bread of life'. He says, 'For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.' He provides a contrast between himself and the bread of heaven provided in Moses' time, telling them that He is the 'true bread from heaven'. At the last Supper, Jesus takes bread and breaks it, saying 'This is my body given for you'.

My conviction is that we need to feed upon *fresh* bread. This leads me to ensure that my relationship with Jesus is renewed on a *daily* basis. It's not good enough to talk with Him every second or third day; that's like eating stale bread. Every day, I find the need to reconnect with Him and read His Word, letting it be *fresh* food for me, *daily* sustenance which makes me stronger and stronger in Him. What I read from the Word yesterday is stale today; I need *fresh* revelation and *fresh* inspiration for today.

Is there a staleness in your Christian walk? Is there a complacency in your desire for Him? Are you tired of experiencing the 'same old, same old'? Is toast the best you can offer others?

If this is the case, it sounds like you need some *fresh* bread in your life!

Shaken and Stirred?

Anyone who has watched James Bond movies over the many years that they have been produced will be familiar with his saying, 'Shaken, not stirred'. The hero makes the statement in relation to how he likes his vodka martinis to be prepared. I was reminded of this saying as I read the account of the disciples praying in Acts 4.

Peter and John had been released from jail after doing a mighty miracle in healing the crippled man at the Gate Beautiful. The miracle had caused a sensation in Jerusalem – many were rejoicing at this wonderful demonstration of God's power but members of the Sanhedrin were up in arms because Peter and John were adamant that it had been accomplished 'by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth'. The members of the religious establishment wanted Jesus' name quickly forgotten following His crucifixion and they warned Peter and John 'not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus'.

However, when the two 'trouble makers' were released they went back to the other disciples and they had an absolutely awesome prayer meeting. The Scripture says that 'After they had prayed, the place where they were meeting was *shaken*.' Wouldn't this be an exciting experience – for God to so profoundly put His seal of approval on a prayer meeting that the place in which it took place to be literally shaken. The Greek word used is *saleuo* meaning *to become agitated, rocked or shaken, moved or stirred up*. It's interesting that the definition includes both shaken *and* stirred.

James Bond would not have been pleased but God wanted to not only *shake* the foundations of the believers' faith so that all of the dead wood and unproductive thinking was disposed of, but He also wanted them *stirred* so that the power of His Holy Spirit was fully mixed with what Jesus had already told them. This brand new church which had been birthed on the day of Pentecost was designed to *shake* the world, to *stir* people from their complacency and self reliance, to change the history of planet Earth, putting Jesus in His rightful place as King of King and Lord of Lords.

I believe that what took place in the room where they were meeting was a great example of warfare prayer, with the followers of Jesus asking God to give them boldness to stand against the enemy. They asked God to challenge the members of the Sanhedrin by doing more signs and wonders in their midst. These believers were totally committed to pressing in to see God's will done. They could have asked for protection from the authorities, for the persecution to be stopped or for God to ease up on the miracles so the pressure on them would be minimized. But, no, they asked God to, in effect, 'bring it on!'

They wanted to be *shaken* out of their fear of what the religious authorities might do to them and *stirred* up by the Holy Spirit to do greater exploits for the Lord. I love prayer meetings like this, in which people 'nail their colours to the mast' and declare that they wish to press on with God, regardless of what the sacrifice may be and how hard the enemy may come against them!

Lord, let us, unlike James Bond, prefer both – let what we drink from You be both *shaken and stirred* within us!

Are You Thirsty Enough?

I remember reading about an explorer in the West Australian desert who almost perished. Having become lost, he went for an extended time without both food and water. He almost died. After surviving the ordeal, he recounted how he rationed his food when he realized he could be on his own for quite a while, but when he eventually ran out, this wasn't the major problem he faced. His body, though feeling weak, could still function. However, when he ran out of water, he knew he was in dire straits. The body can do without food for quite a while but we can live without water for only a few days.

He got to the stage where all he could think about was water; wherever he walked he had visions of water and whenever he slept he dreamed about water; even when desperately trying to find his way out of the wilderness, knowing that if he didn't soon find help he would perish, his thoughts kept on coming back to water. He imagined its taste, its feel, its cooling qualities. He imagined it trickling down his throat, the feel of it on his parched body...glorious water, beautiful water, wonderful water...he became obsessed by the thought of it. I wonder if we feel the same way about our God...are we so totally sold out for Him that we have visions of God, dreams about God? Do we imagine His taste, His touch...?

Psalm 42 speaks about the deer panting for streams of water, and compares it with the soul panting for God. It says, 'My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.' I believe the sons of Korah, who wrote this psalm, understood what it was to be thirsty, really thirsty, like this explorer who became lost. They both knew that life soon came to an end if they were without water for long. Spiritual life without God also quickly comes to an end.

I wonder if our souls are thirsty, really thirsty for God? I wonder if we have ever experienced what it is to become so desperate for Him that we seek Him with all we have? Are we so keen to spend more time with Him that we deny ourselves, give up worldly pleasures for Him, spend less time at work, spend fewer hours in front of the TV or computer, spend less time sleeping – all with the objective of being able to spend more time with Him! Or are we satisfied with what we have of God at present?

Many Christians I know are seeking more of God, more of His power, more miracles, more salvations, more moves of His Spirit, but others are more interested in other things.... Some with whom I speak are excitedly looking to and urgently asking God for revival, but others merely pay lip service to talk about revival...

I wonder if we show our thirst for a mighty move of God in our community by how we live? What evidence is there of sacrifices we are prepared to make to see God pour out His Spirit? I wonder if God is holding back revival, waiting till we demonstrate that we are really, really serious about our people being totally and completely set free. I wonder if He is willing to put up with our whining and moaning about how bad things are becoming in our region until we show that we are willing to play our part in seeing something positive happen... Will our thirst for heaven's blessings to be poured out be greater than our reluctance to come to our knees in humble submission and petition?

Are you thirsty enough?

How's Your Timing?

In most ball sports, timing is a crucial element of being able to play the game at the highest level. Roger Federer, perhaps the world's best ever tennis player, times the ball wonderfully well. Sir Donald Bradman who is recognized as being the greatest ever test batsman, was often said to have had near perfect timing. All of the greatest golfers know about timing too. But even the best sports people, no matter how much they practiced and no matter how talented they were could only ever approach perfection in their timing – there is only One who has perfected the art of timing and that is God!

At midweek group last night, one of our members commented on God's perfect timing. His testimony was that his flight on a trip back to New Zealand 'just happened' to coincide with a friend going to Launceston to a conference so that he could travel with them. Others in our group agreed that there are so many times when something 'just happens' to fit in perfectly with something else. The feeling was that these happenings are not mere coincidences but rather 'Godincidences', with God as the master planner who can fit all things together.

We were made very aware of this just recently. My wife's dear old dad was 93 and 'on his last legs' in an old people's home in Smithton. Suffering from dementia and kidney failure, his death approached but the doctors could only give us general guidance with regard to the time frame involved. In the last week, Beckie and I visited him two or three times most days, wanting to spend the maximum amount of time with him before he departed to be with Jesus. It just amazed us as to the actual timing of his death.

It came during our school holidays. This meant that Beckie, who is a school teacher, could have as much time as she wanted in the few days prior to his death to visit him without disrupting the school in any way. Being in school holidays also meant that our youngest daughter who is a school teacher too, could be at our place for the funeral and for several days before and after it while our second daughter flew over from Western Australia to spend some time with the family. School holidays are always quieter times in the life of the church so it was ideal timing for me as a pastor too, enabling me to spend all the time I needed with family during the immediate grieving process.

It happened at the weekend which gave people close to us the time to phone call or visit. It occurred during the night when there *just happened to be* two Christian carer/nurses on duty at the home and they couldn't have ministered to us in a better fashion. Their words of comfort and caring for us at 3am were brilliant.

In my experience, this type of scenario happens continually. I have found that even when things have gone wrong, it seems that it has turned out to be the best time possible to deal with a difficulty or crisis. Again and again, I have found that God has all things in hand. He has an awesome ability to time things perfectly. It doesn't phase Him as to whether it is a death, a birth, a house sale, a healing, a long awaited promotion or wage increase, an opportunity to put something right, a myriad of miracles which are sought – you name it, and God has the wondrous ability to time it perfectly!

So, how's your timing?

Are We Believers, Followers and Witnesses?

Jesus taught His disciples that they should *believe* in Him – John 3:16 says that whoever *believes* in Him will inherit eternal life. Jesus also taught His disciples that they needed to follow Him – Matthew 16:24 says that if anyone would come after Him, they must deny themselves, take up their cross and *follow* Him. The person who believes needed to take the next step; they needed to prove that their belief was real by following Jesus, walking in His footsteps of self denial and taking the sacrificial way of the cross. I John 3:16 says, ‘This is how we know what loves is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.’

As I observe believers today, I see some who say that they believe but there doesn’t appear to be a lot of following of Jesus going on in their lives. It’s as though they know the theory of what it means to be a Christian but lack the commitment, courage or whatever to take up their cross and follow after Him. The fruit seems to be still born on the tree of their lives.

But others exhibit a lot of following in the way they live. They deny themselves, make sacrifices to serve others, to serve in the church and go out of their way to complement their faith with practical deeds, as James encourages us to do. It’s great to see Christians believing and following, but I would like to suggest that there is a third step that God challenges us to take in the outworking of our faith and that is *witnessing*. In Acts 1:8, Jesus said, ‘...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.’ Being witnesses for Jesus is an important theme in Acts – see also 2:32, 3:15, 5:32, 10:39, 13:31 and 22:15.

When it came to the time of Jesus’ trial and crucifixion, most of His believers and followers didn’t do terribly well. The vast majority of them ran away in fear that they too would be dealt with severely and brutally by the Romans. Peter, one of His right hand men, denied Him three times and was criticized for this, but, let’s be fair in our assessment - at least he waited around long enough to be challenged – it appears that the rest went into hiding while the trial was being carried out, giving Jesus no support whatsoever. Jesus must have felt that He had failed miserably with his disciples; most of us would have given up on them, but He had the benefit of knowing what was to come.

He had in mind to baptize them in the Holy Spirit and thus transform them from mere *believers* and *followers* into powerful *witnesses* who would turn the world upside down as they spread the Gospel, the Good News, throughout all the nations to the ends of the earth. He wanted them to go to the next stage in their development. His plan was to raise up a group of people who would not only believe in Him and His mission on the Earth, and not only follow Him, demonstrating a dying to self and a determination to serve Him even when the going got tough, but also to tell others about Him, being steadfast, authentic and courageous witnesses for Him. Witnesses testify to what they have seen and heard, they speak out the truth and pass onto others an understanding of what actually happened in a particular circumstance.

Are we believers, followers *and* witnesses too?

Where is Your High Water Mark of God's Presence?

I was at the beach recently on a simply beautiful day. There was not a cloud in the sky – all of the scuds of previous days had been swept away by a strong wind overnight and now just a gentle breeze was blowing. The sea was glistening, crystal clear and relatively still, coloured a beautiful dark blue, with a few small waves breaking on the beach as the tide slowly came in. The previous tide had swept the beach absolutely clean of all rubbish and evidence of what had happened there yesterday – it was smooth, just as though someone had put a huge roller over it, almost perfect. As I looked back down the beach, I could see only my own footprints as I had sauntered along the water's edge.

I was thinking to myself, 'It doesn't get much better than this...glorious weather, a lovely, clean beach, just the Lord and I walking and talking together...a bit reminiscent of the Garden of Eden...' And then I saw it.

Above the high water mark on the far end of the beach, a strip of sand only a few metres wide was strewn with rubbish. This blot on the otherwise beautiful landscape was a mixture of bits of drift wood, dozens of soft drink cans, a myriad of lolly wrappers and remnants of paper and plastic bags and bits of rag. Unfortunately, it took my attention, spoiled my thoroughly enjoyable walk and got me thinking about the things which litter our lives.

The rest of the beach had been washed clean, but this section, above the high water mark missed out on being refreshed and cleansed because it was beyond the reach of the incoming tide. I felt God spoke to me about our lives and how we need cleansing on a daily basis, just like a beach does or else the rubbish just builds up and stays there. This is what happens when the incoming waters don't come in far enough to be able to clean all of the sand.

I felt God tell me that sometimes we limit His cleansing power in our lives by not surrendering each and every part to Him. Often we leave a strip of our lives which stays beyond the 'high water mark' of God's presence. We hold back a part of our life from God, preferring to look after it and manage it ourselves, wanting to be boss of it and denying God access. The result is that we end up with a dirty, polluted 'strip of beach' in our lives which spoils the rest of it and detracts from the other cleansed areas.

The truth is we can't manage any part of our life, even a thin strip, without God's help. We simply aren't capable of keeping it clean because the devil, the world and our own sinful nature bombards us on a daily basis with new bits of drift (away from God) wood, cans and wrappers containing sugar-filled worldly temptations, distracting bags of sin and rags of self righteousness.

Do you find that you have a strip of your life which remains dirty and polluted? The solution is to invite God to come further and deeper into your existence. Totally surrender *every* aspect of your life to Him so that the high water mark of His presence includes the entire 'beach' of your life. Let Him wash over you to sweep away every element of litter from your life so that when others walk with you along the beach, they are not affronted by any polluted portions!

Are Your Blockages Proving Costly?

For a while now, I've had a blocked downpipe on my guttering at the back of our house. I suspected that tennis balls which had come over the fence from next door were the culprits and this proved to be the case when I recently cut the pipe and removed the section. Two absolutely soggy tennis balls were wedged into the fat part of the down pipe, preventing the water getting through. This was causing the guttering to fill to the top and then overflow into our yard instead of being carried away into the storm water main outside our place.

I thanked the plumber for reattaching the piece of pipe for me, thinking that the job was 'done and dusted', and quite cheaply too. However, when I got up on the roof to clean out the guttering I found that, as a consequence of the pipe being blocked for months, the residue of water which had stayed in the guttering, unable to escape, had rusted it out. As I carefully tried to silicon the rusted piece, the entire bottom of the guttering fell out – not good news. My delay in dealing with the problem is now going to prove costly – about \$200+ worth of costly!

Blockages can be like that – the longer you leave them, the worse they often become and the more damage is done. It's like the old proverb says, 'A stitch in time saves nine'. In my case it was: 'An unblockage in time could have saved \$209' or words of wisdom to that effect! I've learnt that blockages can be costly!

They can be in the natural world:

- how many people die because they have blocked arteries?
- how many people die from malnutrition while the greed of wealthy countries blocks the path to sharing the food we produce?
- how many otherwise beautiful rivers are blocked with silt and pollution?
- how smelly is a blocked septic tank?
- how frustrating is a road block in peak hour traffic?

Blockages can be costly in the spiritual realm too:

- how many people miss out on guidance and blessing because they have blocked spiritual ears and are unable to hear God's voice?
- how many people go to a lost eternity because their spiritual arteries are hard, thus blocking their receiving of the blood of Jesus to cover their sins and resuscitate their hearts?
- how many people keep the good news about Jesus to themselves because their fear of upsetting someone blocks their attempts to share their faith?
- how many people continue in broken relationships because the path to reconciliation is blocked by their unforgiveness and bitterness?

I should have done something about my blockage much sooner than I did. The delay has proved costly. I've learnt a valuable lesson.

I wonder if there are blockages in your life with which you need to deal? Are you procrastinating about a spiritual blockage in your life?

Are You Ready for a Wilderness Experience?

I've often speculated on the significance and purpose of Jesus' wilderness experience. Lately I've been meditating upon it and I feel God has revealed to me some ideas which I would like to share with you.

We begin with Jesus at about 30 years old. Up until that time we have heard about His conception and birth and a small episode when He was about 12 years old in the Temple with the teachers of the law. Other than that we know very little of His life on earth.

We pick up the story with Jesus having just been water baptized by John and Holy Spirit baptized by His Father, being made ready to begin His earthly ministry, a three year journey which turned the world upside down.

I can imagine a conversation between Jesus, His Father and the Holy Spirit. Dad has begun the conversation with this: 'This is my beloved Son, and I am fully pleased with him.' God wanted to begin by telling Jesus that He loved Him for who He was, even before He has done anything truly significant. The Father is fully pleased with Jesus simply because He is His Son. Jesus had to know this because His Father's love would be what carried Him through His times of suffering in the future.

Jesus responds, 'Okay Dad, I'm all set to begin now – both water and Holy Spirit baptized – right ready to transform this world. Let me at it. Show me what comes next!'

But then the Holy Spirit says 'Now hang on a bit, Jesus - there are some things we need to get sorted out first. We want to make sure that this world has absolutely no hold upon you at all. Or else you won't be able to carry out the mission we have in mind. It's going to get pretty messy towards the end.'

To begin with, let's get you out of town, and away from the city – they have so many distractions which can take your attention away from the plan we have. We're heading off to give you some space in your life. It'll be a break from carpentry, a rest from the daily rhythms of life, and a getting away from the clock which dominates so much of our lives. We're going to put you in a slow cooker, so to speak, for forty days, to see that you are 'well done, good and faithful servant' before you are ready to save the world.

You need to come away all by yourself so that any reliance upon family and friends can be dealt with. You need to be influenced by no one other than your Father and I. In the future, your family won't understand your behavior and those closest to you will deny knowing you and we don't want you distracted and hurt by them. You need to be committed to be able to hear only our voices, and to see in the spirit realm so that the bright lights and colors of everyday life will not spoil your view of what life is really all about.'

'Okay' says Jesus, let's load up with food and get going. We'll need a fair bit for forty days.' 'Well, no, we're not going to take any food – that too will be a distraction. We want you to be reliant upon only every word which comes from the mouth of God – nothing else! Later on in this little trek, we're going to let Satan have a go at you and we don't want there to be

anything, nothing at all in life that you're addicted to or really need other than to know what your Dad has in mind for every situation.

We'll send some angels to give you a hand when it gets really tough but other than that, we don't want anything of this world getting in between you and Your Father. Your relationship needs to be such that you will believe Him and obey Him no matter what He asks of You. When you begin your ministry He will tell you some pretty wild things to do – we don't want worldly reasoning to get in the way. Basic, simple trust is what we need to breed into you.'

'But won't I get bored out there?' asks Jesus. 'Nothing to do, no one to talk to, nothing to watch, no music to listen to, no scroll to read, no games...'

'Jesus, the forty days and nights out there won't be boring in the slightest – the time will be full of messages from heaven detailing what your Father has planned for you for the next three years. He wants to get you so deeply into the 'God zone' that it will remain with you and never leave. You need to have every single worldly thought deprogrammed from your brain and replaced with heavenly wisdom and conviction. Your Father is going to fill your heart to overflowing with love and compassion – there can be no hint of hard heartedness within you or your mission will fail. You have to be able to forgive, no matter what people do to you, no matter how badly they treat you.

Out in the wilderness, you'll learn to be totally reliant upon us so you won't be conned by anything with which the Devil tempts you. We need to arrow proof you so that you can withstand everything that will come against you. You'll need to be tough, Jesus, just like your followers will need to be tough to live the lifestyle to which you'll be introducing them.

It will be a case of going into the wilderness 'full of the Spirit', but forty days later, you'll come out 'in the power of the Spirit', so reliant upon Him that you'll be ready to go out and turn this world upside down!'

Yes, I know I've taken a fair bit of 'theological poetic license' in imagining these conversations, but it seems to me that Jesus' wilderness experience was so very, very important to His preparation for what lay ahead, and not only this, but I feel that we would benefit from some similar types of experiences ourselves. I'm finding that I need more time out of the 'mainstream of life' to be able to get closer and closer to God.

Are you ready for a bit of wilderness experience?

Are We Showing Disdain or Identifying with their Pain?

I am an avid anti smoker. I hate what it does to people – having seen a brother, sister-in-law and an auntie die of lung cancer, and knowing several people who are suffering from emphysema caused by smoking, I am perhaps more sensitive than most to smoking's destructive abilities.

The Lord has been speaking to me lately about my attitude in relation to this issue. I have felt Him challenging me, asking me if I am looking on smokers with disdain or am I identifying with their pain. Under Holy Spirit conviction, I've been asking myself, 'Am I acting with compassion or being judgmental towards them? Am I approaching the issue with a soft heart or have I allowed myself to become hardened because of what I have seen in the suffering that smoking can cause?'

When Jesus looked upon His people and felt that they were behaving like sheep without a shepherd, He didn't shun them and write them off as stupid and beyond help, but reached out to them and became their Shepherd by dying for them. When Jesus was suffering immensely while hanging on the cross, it wasn't a feeling of loathing which rose up within Him but it was compassion and love; why else would He ask His Father to forgive His persecutors because they didn't know what they were doing? With the woman caught in adultery, Jesus chose to encourage her to leave her life of sin rather than condemning her.

Smokers used to annoy me so much but I now find myself feeling compassion for them and praying that they will be set free from their addiction. I am now seeing them in a different light, empathizing with them, feeling for them, identifying with their pain, even the ones who have a flippant attitude, saying that we all have to die of something, and aren't trying to give up smoking. If God gives me an opportunity, I would love to pray for them to be able to give up the habit.

As Christians, I believe we need to have a similar approach to people who experience all sorts of problems flowing from the enemy. There are so many people around us who are bound by a myriad of bondages and practices which can make them the 'modern day lepers', a term which is often given to smokers. In Jesus' day, everyone stayed clear of the lepers lest they become infected – Jesus rewrote the social protocols by reaching out and touching these poor outcasts and healed them, not only setting their bodies free from leprosy but also restoring their relationships with others.

Whether a person's problem is drinking to excess, other drug addictions, frequently using bad language, hooning in cars, problems with pornography and other sexual immorality issues or vandalism, to name a few of Satan's favourite life destroyers, we can choose to overcome our personal preferences and condemn or demonstrate compassion, criticize or empathize, be annoyed or show grace, shun or reach out to heal.

Our master has set the standard - may His love and power be sufficient in us to follow His example!

Are We Taking Responsibility for the pre Believers Too?

Jesus referred to Himself as the Good Shepherd. He was totally committed to looking after the sheep in His care. He had great compassion for the people of Israel, at one stage referring to them as being 'like sheep without a shepherd' when He observed them going about their daily lives.

Jesus also spoke about the way to destruction or hell being wide and the way to heaven being narrow and not many people finding it. He knew that not everyone in Israel nor the entire world would be saved. But when He died on the cross, He did so for *all of mankind*, even the ones who would never believe in Him. It seems that He was willing to be the Good Shepherd for *all of the sheep* in the universe, even the ones whom He knew would never hear nor listen to His voice and, therefore, never follow Him.

I've been thinking a lot lately about Jesus' example as a shepherd, about Him being The Good and Ultimate Shepherd, as I have prayer walked the streets of my local community. I've always prayed for the *saints*, that is, all of those who are saved in our local area, and especially for those in my congregation for they are the ones Jesus has given me direct responsibility for. I believe we should always do that. We should pray for all believers to come 'on fire' for Jesus, including believers in congregations other than our own, to see each one stirred up to reach out to the lost and lonely with greater and greater desperation.

But recently, I've been convicted to place greater emphasis on praying for *all of those who are lost*, all 8000, or whatever the exact number is, in Circular Head, the area or community in which God has placed me. I feel God has encouraged me to pray for *all* of them, to confess sin on their behalf, to ask for forgiveness for *all* of them and for them to want to forgive others, to ask for *all* of them to be protected from the evil one and to do my best to be a shepherd to *all* of them.

I believe God has encouraged me in two major ways at this time:

Firstly I feel He has given me an extra big dose of agape love which is motivating me to pray for, reach out to and be more aware than ever of the needs of *all* of the people of my own area.

Secondly, I believe He is leading me to look more and more to the 'big picture' of what's happening around us. I find myself crying out more desperately on behalf of *all* residents, taking more responsibility than ever before in seeing God pour out His blessing on *everyone* in our community, in seeing *all* of the believers come alive and be 'set on fire' for the things of God, but also in believing for *every* captive to be set free from their bondages and addictions, in seeing *all* of those who are in need of healing released from their suffering and praying for *all* people who are battling with relationships to have them restored.

The Great Commission commands us to go out and make disciples of *all* mankind. May I encourage you to get more involved than ever with the people of our local community, taking responsibility for *all* of them, praying for *all* of them to be saved, for *all* of them to come under Holy Spirit conviction, for *all* of them to have their hearts softened so they may receive Jesus as their Lord and Saviour.

Are You Able *and* Willing?

“Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean. Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. “I am willing,” he said. “Be clean!” And immediately the leprosy left him. Luke 5:12b,13

These verses reveal so much to us about Jesus.

They show us His power to heal. Leprosy was a devastating disease, which at that stage in world history, had no cure. It was not unlike today’s cancer. People in those days feared this disease – if they contracted it, they faced a death sentence, being doomed to a long, lonely and drawn out time of suffering.

The verses also show us Jesus’ supreme, wonderful, loving attitude towards people. The man He reached out to touch was a leper, a social outcast who, because of this terrible, incurable (until Jesus came on the scene, of course!) disease, had to go about calling ‘Unclean, unclean!’, warning people not to come near for fear of them contracting leprosy themselves. In Jesus, we saw not only the power to do something about the plight of the lepers but also the willingness to do something about it. Many people in this world have the power, the ability and the resources to help others overcome adversity and deliver them from life threatening problems, but, unfortunately, they choose not to. For a variety of reasons, and a lot of them seemingly sound, reasonable and justifiable, they withhold their life-delivering ability, and deny suffering souls the opportunity to be set free.

Not Jesus. He wasn’t like that. He wasn’t like that at all!

He was not only *able* to solve such terrible problems, but He was also *willing!* He loved without measure and reached out to every person who called to Him. He didn’t withhold the healing power which the leper so desperately needed. He loved Him, He reached out, He extended a loving hand, He wasn’t afraid of either the disease or what others would say.

And Jesus not only did this with lepers. He also reached out to others who were considered socially unacceptable – people such as Samaritans who were considered half-breed Jews, perhaps even worse than Gentiles. He reached out to adulterers, to prostitutes, to Roman soldiers, to foreign women, to tax collectors, to paralytics and children, too, who in those days were most definitely meant to be ‘seen and not heard’.

Jesus became an absolute celebrity as it became known that He not only had power over disease, but also over the natural elements, over sin and even over death. People flocked to Him. Yet, He never became too busy for ordinary people. He never became proud and uncaring about others. He never became self opinionated or carried away with His own agenda. Even when dying on the cross, He took time to sort out who was going to look after His mother after He died. So willing, just so willing...

He set the bar pretty high for us, didn’t He? We can so easily be daunted by the challenge of following in His footsteps. But I believe we *can* effectively follow Him, even in the things referred to in the above verses because, in Him, we can be both *able and willing*.

Do You Have Great Expectations of God?

Have you ever noticed the varied reactions of people attending the same church or midweek meeting? One might say that God's presence was so strong that you could almost 'taste' Him while another's view is that they didn't get any inspiration or encouragement at all. One will sense a wonderful anointing upon the worship while another says they found it dull and boring and took their seat after a couple of songs. One receives a startling revelation from the Lord but another person goes away defeated and deflated.

It amazes me that the reactions can be so diverse from people who may have even been sitting quite close to one another. I've been pondering this enigma, seeking the Lord for an answer. This is what He has revealed to me:

In the story of the woman with the ongoing bleeding problem in Mark chapter 5, many people had touched Him and yet she was the only one who received a miraculous healing. Why? Because she had a desperate belief coupled with a very high expectation that He would heal her! Her attitude was one of fervently believing that if she just touched his clothes, not even Jesus Himself, she would be healed. She wasn't going to wait for Him to touch her, or wait for the organizers to give her an opportunity to meet with Jesus, or waiting till there was an altar call. No, instead she stepped out in faith, took the initiative despite all of the people crowding around her and pressed in to touch Him. She didn't even demand His direct attention, but realized that His presence was sufficient to meet her deep, deep need.

Many others in the crowd received nothing from Jesus. A contrast...

Some people go along to church with an attitude like the others in the crowd. Some were there merely to watch. Some were perhaps expecting Jesus to notice them, to pick them out of the group, to give them His direct attention, to initiate reaching out and touching them. With people like this, pride determines that if God doesn't reach out to them then they won't humble themselves and pursue the relationship. Their attitude is not unlike teenagers playing 'hard to get' with a romantic interest. Some may have simply lacked the confidence and courage to approach Jesus. We can be like that too.

Some people don't actually want to get close to Jesus, but actually prefer to keep Him at a distance for fear of Him radically impacting their lives. Even if they do happen to 'brush up against Him' during some part of the meeting, as did some people who were crowding around Jesus on the day the lady was healed, there is no expectation or anticipation within them to draw the power out of Jesus.

On the other hand, my experience is that people who approach the throne of God with a positive frame of mind, an enthusiasm to engage their King in dialogue and a fire in their bellies to see Him inhabit them more and more powerfully are the ones to whom He releases His miracles. It seems to me that those who come to God desperate to see Him move in their midst are not often disappointed. Those who have the greatest expectations are the people who receive the greatest rewards.

Do you have great expectations of God?

