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Foreword

When I commenced my tenure at Singapore Bible College in 1969, I got to know Dr. James Yu. He was then the Editor-in-Chief of *The Gospel Weekly*. Over the decades, he remained faithful as a well-read and knowledgeable champion of literary ministry, and had more than twenty books to his name, such as *The Bible and Literature: A Flying Scroll*; *The Bible and Family*; *Scriptures, Semantics, and Salvation*; and other popular books. He is renowned for a writing style that combines scripture exposition with artistic literature.

This book – *The Blest Fellowship: A Topical Study of the Epistle of the Philippians* is Dr. Yu's first new work after his recovery from a cardiac arrest. I am fortunate to be the first to receive the manuscripts and was edified by it in many ways. The believers' faith, love, ideals, and perseverance are the four key topics in this book. Through the experiences of the apostle Paul, the author elucidates the essence of the epistle of Philippians and lifts up the name of Christ. For example, while Paul was imprisoned by the Romans, his faith in God's sovereignty enabled him to continue encouraging fellow believers, and even many who have yet to come to the faith. He was always filled with hope and joy through his obedience to God, and was a shining role model for the co-workers, churches, and even himself. Paul certainly is an example that believers today ought to strive to emulate.

In this book, one can also read about plenty of incidents, both from within and without the Bible. Famous quotes of faith from past and present and all parts of the world guide readers to apply profound doctrines into their daily lives. Most importantly, the book demonstrates how Paul, despite being incarcerated, continues to bear witness for the Gospel, care for the Church, show concern for the co-workers' labour, and maintain the noble pursuit of God's will. In his long-suffering service to the Lord, his joy never once waned. All these are evidence that the Gospel transforms and builds our character, that the values we are taught in the Bible are not empty proclamations, but practical principles that we can use and apply in our daily living. The above are but a few snippets about the inspiration I have drawn from this book, and I believe readers would reap a plethora of benefits in the faith from their own reading.

Stephen C. T. Chan
Summer of 1996

Introduction

In prison, a place supposedly segregated from feelings of cheer and happiness, the author nevertheless was able to write of joy multiple times in the epistle. How amazing can this be! Like the bush that burned but was not consumed even though it was in the dry and hot wilderness of Sinai (Exodus 3:2), such is a phenomenon that deserves attention.

When Moses witnessed the burning bush in Sinai, the thought in his mind would invariably be “why isn’t the bush consumed by the flames?” Likewise, we ought to be asking ourselves how Paul could remain joyful in the gloomy prison, and where did this joy come that lived in his soul.

We first must understand that joy is a strange thing. You cannot seek it out to make it your own – only under the right circumstances would joy manifest itself.

In the *Analects of Confucius*, it is said that “Gentlemen are open-hearted, cheerful, and upright, whereas the villainous are calculative, underhanded, and burdened with worries” (*The Analects*, “Shu Er”). Confucius was teaching his students that to be happy, one must have the heart of a superior man (Jun Zi).

Edmund Burke (1729-1797), an English politician and thinker, once made an interesting note: “A king may make a nobleman, but he cannot make a gentleman.” Here, he speaks of two different types of people. Nobility were individuals conferred on him a rank by a king, and enjoyed the high society benefits that came with peerage, while gentlemen were simply law-abiding ordinary people. During his time in England, anyone who wasn’t a slave or convicted criminal qualified to be a gentleman. The gentlemen of England were roughly the equivalent of the “Jun Zi” in Chinese, not in terms of status, but where personal character is concerned. No sovereign or ruler on earth could confer the status to anyone, and no circumstance can change it. A true gentleman does not need anybody to give him the title, nor does he need to please anybody to be one. To be such a person, one must be:

Deep in Faith, Wide in Love, High in Ideals, and Long in Perseverance.

By now, readers would be wondering if the author is trying to describe some sort of benchmark. Indeed, greatness and spirituality are not attributes that we give to just anyone. Neither are they meant to be vain praises we irresponsibly make to please others or add to their pride so they can boast about it before others. Greatness and spirituality are indeed measurable, by their length, width, height, and depth. Readers should thus prepare themselves to become great and spiritual Christians by God’s grace. This book offers guidance on how we can achieve those criteria – in fact, to become such is just a basic expectation God has of us as “normal” Christians. We can use these benchmarks in the book to assess ourselves to see if we have arrived, without deceiving ourselves nor be deceived by others. As 2 Corinthians 13:5 tells us: “Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves.”

The four living creatures in Revelation 4:7 conveys the same principles – the lion represents deep faith, the man represents wide love, the eagle represents high ideals, and the bull represents long perseverance. This was the kind of life that Paul lived. He emulated the life of Jesus Christ and demonstrated the true image of Jesus to others through his life and encourages fellow believers to do the same. This is what we should be looking forward to becoming, even though we may not be able to meet the standards in every aspect. This is why this book is titled *The Servant and the Church*.

The author of this book was deeply inspired by the book of Philippians after extensive meditation on its teachings. The contents in this book focus on both scriptural exposition and spiritual devotion and are categorized by topics to make them less tedious and easier to absorb for readers, so that they can easily put them into practice in daily life. I pray for the Holy Spirit to touch every reader and begin His

work in their hearts, so that we would reconsider how we can grow spiritually to be more like Jesus.

The Chinese quote “It takes ten years to grow a tree, but a hundred years to grow a person” comes to mind here. How similar are we to trees! To grow tall and expansive, a tree must be firmly rooted and be able to withstand the hostile elements and the test of time. This has to do with two characteristics of plants: negative geotropism drives the tree to grow upwards, away from the ground regardless of the strength of gravity, while phototaxis leads the tree to turn towards light and away from shade and darkness. Aren’t those amazing properties? Are they not also properties that believers and church workers must have? However, as human beings we do not have these characteristics by nature, and only receive them upon our first act of faith to accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour. Only with God’s grace can we continue to keep and hone these abilities and turn them into living testimonies for the Lord. You should, and can, make such growth. This is the hope and faith that would encourage you to finish reading this book – and I am sure you will.

Chapter 1: The Faith of the Saints - Depth

The earth was parched from the scorching summer sun arrogantly pouring its rays down from atop its lofty perch in the sky. One cannot help but worry that this fertile land would soon turn into a barren desert under such heat, for it seemed to melt even the intangible clouds and shadows. Our attention was soon captured by the presence of an expansive and verdant tree, majestic in how it towered over the rest of the landscape and evoking feelings of hope and reverence. To the east of Judah lay a great desert, from which bone-dry stinging winds arrived to bring us pain every summer. The prophet Jeremiah wrote thus:

“But blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord,
whose confidence is in him.
They will be like a tree planted by the water
that sends out its roots by the stream.
It does not fear when heat comes;
its leaves are always green.
It has no worries in a year of drought
and never fails to bear fruit.”
(Jeremiah 17:7-8)

What made this tree so special, that it was able to bear fruit and thrive in the stifling desert heat? What was its secret? It was nothing mysterious – the tree was simply deeply rooted by the waterside. The word “trust” in this verse was “*batach*” in the original Hebrew text, which meant to “believe and rely upon” or to “have conviction in” something. The deeper conviction was, the more one was capable of withstanding and overcoming suffering and adversity.

In the first chapter of Paul’s epistle to the Philippians, there was a word which appeared thrice, translated from the Greek word “*peitho*”. All three translated instances of the word have roughly the same meaning. In Chinese versions of the Bible, it was translated as “deep belief” (v.6 and 25) and “undoubting faith” (v.15) respectively. The translation had more variations in English versions of the Bible. For example, the King James Version (KJV) translates it as “confidence” (v.6 and 14) and “confident” (v.25). Other English versions of the Bible such as the NIV, NAS, RSV, NE, JB, and J.N. Darby all had similar but slightly differing translations of the word, too, but all ultimately meant “conviction” expressed in different terms.

Why do individuals who serve the Lord, when faced with the same trials and obstacles, each respond in ways that could be wildly different from one another? The fundamental reason is the variance in their degree of conviction. This is like the aftermath of a terrible storm - some trees with shallow roots become uprooted, while those that were firmly anchored in the soil were largely unscathed, losing only perhaps some leaves and branches at worst.

When one endeavours to fulfill a mission, the depth of one’s conviction determines the strength of one’s focus and commitment, which translates directly into stronger motivation and improved chances of success.

As believers, we are well aware that “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,” (Acts 14:22). Only with deep conviction can we be united as one with Christ to overcome the trials ahead and hold firm in the faith, till we stand in the light of the Lord’s eternal glory.

Faith in the Sovereignty of God

“being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 1:6)

1. Paul’s Faith in God’s Sovereignty

Ananias was sent to perform the laying on of hands when God chose Paul. He was instructed by the Lord about Paul: “...Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.” (Acts 9:15-16).

Who was this Ananias? He was an unknown believer from Damascus. Why did God send him of all people to lay hands on Paul? One reason was God wanted him to convey His mission for Paul and witness his conversion. God also wanted to demonstrate His sovereignty – it was not about one's knowledge, talents, reputation, or status. This was God's move to edify Paul's faith.

And thus it was done, even though it seemed impossible. The dangers and suffering that Paul endured were indescribable. In his own words, he "faced death" every day (1 Corinthians 15:31). Looking back at the experience, Paul said: "We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and He will deliver us again. On Him we have set our hope that He will continue to deliver us," (2 Corinthians 1:8-10)

Paul did not shift his focus, nor did he grumble and despair. He overcame unbelievable trials with unbelievable faith to complete the unbelievably amazing tasks according to God's will. How is such a feat possible? It may be impossible for mere mortals, but Paul had deep faith: "...not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead." God is almighty and holds absolute sovereignty. My life is insignificant, but the will of the Lord must be fulfilled. Such was the faith Paul inherited from Abraham.

Memories of Philippi

The city of Philippi held a special place in Paul's life and ministry and was a turning point for the history of the Church. Being Asian, Paul had wanted to advance east towards the continent of Asia for his second evangelistic journey, but the Holy Spirit bade him to go to the lands outside Asia Minor, "During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." (Acts 16:9). Paul knew this was the calling of God and abandoned his overland trip to Asia and instead took a ship to Europe. Two weeks after arriving in Philippi, the capital of Macedonia, a woman of rather high status accepted Christ after hearing his preaching during Sabbath.

Not too long after, Paul was accused and criticized for casting out a demon. Why? Was it a sin to cast out demons? The truth was the girl Paul delivered from the demon had been used by her master to make money, and he did not want her to be freed from demonic possession lest his profit comes to an end. The master angrily sued Paul and Silas and had them put in jail, where they were beaten and injured. How many believers facing such an unjust situation could still faithfully believe that they were doing God's will? Who wouldn't be discouraged? But Paul and Silas were not moved. Instead of weeping in the dark cell, they prayed and sang praises to God!

Suddenly, the ground shook in the throes of a mighty earthquake and the cell gates were thrust open. The shackles holding the prisoners also fell off. The prison warden was horrified and thought this was the end for him. According to Roman law, a jailer failing in his duty to secure the prison from escape was punishable with death. He was about to commit suicide with his own sword when Paul called out and comforted him, telling him not to take his own life as all the prisoners were still in their cells. When he recomposed himself, the warden was deeply touched by Paul's faith and uprightness and asked, "What do I need to do to be saved?" Paul and Silas replied: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household." The warden and his family immediately accepted Jesus Christ and received salvation. That night, darkness was overcome by light and the prison was filled with the joy of true freedom (Acts 16:16-40).

Thus the first little church in Philippi was formed, a fruit borne of suffering, which grew to become the home base of evangelism to Europe. The growth of this church stood in testimony of God's sovereignty and influenced the spread of the Gospel for a long time to come. God demonstrated His sovereignty in Asia Minor by "keeping" and "not allowing" the footsteps of Paul to proceed towards Asia (Acts 16:6-7). God's sovereignty was likewise manifested in the vision Paul had of the Macedonian Call while in Troas, in the gathering at the riverside outside the city gate and the invitation to stay at the newly baptized Lydia's home, in the exorcism in Philippi and subsequent accusation, suffering, and imprisonment, and in the sudden earthquake

that shook not only the ground but also the hearts of many. It was God's sovereignty in action that led them step by step to encounter each other by the river, and to have fellowship in Lydia's home. Each incident was a link that joined together to form a chain of events. We usually think of chains as a symbol of bondage, but this chain had instead freed many. How amazing God's work is!

Sweet memories are the assets of our souls and the basis of our faith in God. The Philippian Church was a beautiful memory for Paul and his pride and joy. "I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the Gospel from the first day until now" (Philippians 1:3-5). Paul was not a religious worker who saw his duties as a job. He was wholeheartedly committed to prayer and evangelism. Like the high priest in the Old Testament, with the 12 tribes of Israel represented by the gems on his breastplate, Paul always remembered them and prayed for them daily before our heavenly Father. He said: "Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?" (2 Corinthians 11:28-29). It was clear that Paul was a man with a burden for God's work. He held prayer in high regard, diligently interceding for believers and upholding God's Church. In his prayers, he remembered the Galatian Church, troubled by legalism in their ignorance, to the extent that they were "trying to pervert the Gospel of Christ." (Galatians 1:7). He prayed hard for the Corinthian Church, plagued by infighting between cliques and the believers' immoral behaviour. He intervened before God on behalf of the Ephesian Church, for them to know the one true God and realise the inheritance waiting for them in heaven, and to act with love (Ephesians 1:17-20, 3:16-21). When the time came to pray for the church in Philippi, however, his worries were replaced with joy and praise for God gushed forth from his heart. Paul's shining opinion of the church shows us how outstanding the faith of the believers in Philippi were.

2. The Church's Faith in God's Sovereignty

What made Paul regard this church with such positivity? From the very day they first gathered in Lydia's home, this church was destined to be different from the rest. They were not caught up with expanding their own numbers or erecting grand and magnificent church buildings, nor did they see fellowship as a means to develop their social network. They had only one goal amongst their group – to "unite in prospering the Gospel". They remembered the Great Commission of the Lord Jesus Christ and worked hard to propagate the Good news of Jesus' resurrection and the salvation He brought for all mankind. They brought the light of the Lord's Gospel into the darkness of the world – this was Paul's mission in life, and in this they and Paul were of one mind.

Gospel ministry depends not on human wisdom or wealth. God often uses His servants to demonstrate this principle in His ministries: "Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit," says the Lord Almighty." (Zechariah 4:6). This verse stays true even to this day. It is not by human power but by divine sovereignty that we are able to receive the Gospel into our hearts. The completion of our journey to sanctification is through the guiding and fulfilling grace of God. After beginning by means of the Spirit, we cannot try to finish by means of the flesh (Galatians 3:3).

We live in sin and are bound by it. Like Paul and Silas who were bound by chains in the prison, we could not set ourselves free. Only the power of Christ can shatter the chains and unlock the cell gates to set us free. Modern psychology tries to use music, lighting, ambience, surroundings, and fancy words to affect our emotions and redirect our attention away from adverse influences. This is an attempt to replicate the work of the Holy Spirit and the sovereignty of God, but no manmade methods can truly give us life, because "The wind blows wherever it pleases." (John 3:8). The ultimate outcome rests in God's sovereignty, and all our human actions can at most be secondary contributing factors. Psalm 118:8-9 reminds us: "It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in humans. It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in princes.", and in Psalm 146:3-6, we are told: "Do not put your trust in princes, in human beings, who cannot save. When their spirit departs, they return to the ground; on that very day their plans come to nothing. Blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God. He is the Maker of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them - he remains faithful forever."

Human life and ability are both limited, but God has unlimited power and lives forever. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End (Revelation 22:13). Therefore, the Lord is our “pioneer and perfecter of faith.” (Hebrews 12:2). We can believe in Him because He holds the almighty sovereignty.

Paul believes that “...God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be.” (1 Corinthians 12:18). Thus, the churches, being part of this mysterious and glorious body, are connected to one another in woe and weal. He reminds the Philippian believers: “It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart and, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God’s grace with me.” (Philippians 1:7)

We have been saved by God’s grace and become as one body. Therefore we ought to remember those in prison as if we were together with them in prison (Hebrews 13:3). Those who fight the beautiful battle for the Gospel are not alone for we are by their side and share his burden together. This is beyond human feelings and camaraderie, for the caring rapport comes from the grace of our Head in heaven. The apostle Paul said: “God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 1:8). Even though Paul did not have any personal acquaintance with the Philippians, his deep concern for them was evident. He said: “And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ - to the glory and praise of God.” (Philippians 1:9-11). The spiritual gifts of the saints were not some kind of natural talent from birth nor from learning in life but gifted from the Holy Spirit according to His will (1 Corinthians 12:11). Similarly, how much faith each believer has is dependent on how much God bestowed upon them (Romans 12:3). God’s will guide the life of each individual, and He desires for believers to grow into spiritual maturity to fulfill His ministries and His will on earth as it is in heaven.

Paul prayed for the Philippian church instead of for himself, not for their material prosperity and development, but for their spiritual growth. His prayers focused on people other than himself, and his motivation was for the benefit of “you all”. The ultimate goal of his prayers was to glorify God.

Paul’s Ideal of a Church that Grows

Love Balanced with Knowledge: Love is invaluable, but also dangerous without knowledge to guide it. Micah’s mother loved him so much that she condoned his thievery and helped him to build his idols (Judges 17). This was clearly against God’s commandments and a stark example of evil willfulness that would lead to more harm ahead. The Israelites loved their judge Gideon so much that they gladly gave their valuables to make an ephod idol for him. Such blind hero worshipping became a snare to Gideon and his family (Judges 8:22-27). In Hosea 4:6, God’s people were destroyed from lack of knowledge. On the other hand, cold knowledge without love breeds pride, for love is the only thing that edifies people (1 Corinthians 8:1). Love and knowledge needs to be exercised in unison, such that on the foundation of knowledge, love continues to grow.

Putting Faith Into Action: Faith does not drive us to become judgmental. The ability to discern by faith is intended to point us in the right direction. Even the most well-drawn map cannot bring us to our destinations like a magic carpet, and we need to start moving if we want to get somewhere. Thus, it is God’s desire for us to put our faith into action, “for we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” (Ephesians 2:10)

Living by the Lord to Glorify God: Believers cannot bear the fruit of righteousness on their own. Only with a new life in Christ and staying connected to Him like the branches to the grapevine can we do so. “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing... This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.” (John 15:5, 8). The grape branches have nothing to boast about, for it’s purpose of existence is not for itself, but to produce the new wine that cheers both God and humans (Judges 9:13) so that people are edified, and God is glorified.

The Philippian church is, of course, still far from being the ideal church, but Paul believes in the sovereignty of God and the leadership of Christ as the Church's Head. The Lord will protect and the Lord will fulfill. He mentions "until the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:6), pointing to Jesus as the "...horn of salvation for us" (Luke 1:69) who will rescue us from the enemy's hands. He is the Christ, the king of glory (Philippians 1:10), and we will partake of His kingdom by His side when He returns.

3. The Prophets' Faith in God's Sovereignty

The path of the cross seems to get narrower for Paul the further he walked on it. In the end, he was arrested and put in prison, and there was no one he could turn to for help. Yet, his faith in God was never wavered. "We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair" (2 Corinthians 4:8). The Chinese character for prisoner or imprisonment had a person ("*ren*") encased within four walls, but with the light of faith shining upon him, even the walls of the cell could not shut Paul away from God's joy!

The prophet Jeremiah was called to declare God's will to the people: "Today I have made you a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall to stand against the whole land - against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests and the people of the land." (Jeremiah 1:18). His job was a tough and thankless one. He had no glory and was unwelcomed and suffered in many ways. As God's prophet, he saw the corruption of society, the dark secrets of religion, and the low brow ugliness of politics. He wept for the broken and perilous state his nation of Judah was in. The rulers, while powerless to stop the invaders, continued to abuse their power to oppress God's prophets. Jeremiah himself was cast into the dungeons filled with mud and grime, how humiliating! In the dark of the night, he raised his eyes to the heavens and looked to the stars, and thought to himself: "But the Lord is the true God; He is the living God, the eternal King... But God made the earth by his power; He founded the world by His wisdom and stretched out the heavens by His understanding. When He thunders, the waters in the heavens roar; He makes clouds rise from the ends of the earth. He sends lightning with the rain and brings out the wind from His storehouses." (Jeremiah 10:10-13). The storms around Jeremiah shook the houses to their very foundations and threatened to uproot great trees, but he knew that God was in control.

The prophet Ezekiel was captured after his country was conquered. He was called by God to minister to the shameless and hard-hearted Israelites of his time. It was indeed a difficult job, but he saw the glory of God revealed to him in a vision, and God showed him the glorious sight of the future revival. From then, he knew God was sovereign above all these, and was filled with joy and power.

The prophet Habakkuk witnessed the sins and unjust acts of his people and the invasion and pillaging of his homeland by enemy nations. He pleaded with God on the watchtower and was answered "See, the enemy is puffed up; his desires are not upright - but the righteous person will live by his faithfulness... For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea." (Habakkuk 2:4, 14). In the darkest moment of his life, he saw God through the shadows with eyes of faith, and joy spilled forth from his heart.

The Westminster Confession of Faith tells us: "They, whom God hath accepted in His beloved, effectually called and sanctified by His Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace; but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved." (17:1). This is because God has supreme sovereignty.

Faith in Co-Labourers in the Lord

"And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear." (Philippians 1:14). Loneliness is one of the problems that plague the mental wellness of modern people. Such feelings of isolation are not geographical, such as when a person is trapped alone on a deserted island, but rather the separation from one's community.

Inseparable

Inmates in a prison are forcibly separated from the community at large and their movement is closely monitored and restricted (rehabilitation as a goal was a relatively recent development in penitentiary and corrective services). Paul was arrested, charged, and jailed for the sake of the Gospel. The enemies' intent was to restrict him and prevent him from contact with the community, because they viewed him as "...a troublemaker, stirring up riots among the Jews all over the world. He is a ringleader of the Nazarene sect." (Acts 24:5). However, they did not realise Paul's mission was beyond influencing the Jews – he was also reaching out to non-Jews. They did not know that as the power of God, the Gospel cannot be contained. Ironically, they did exhibit some semblance of knowledge of modern-day pandemic response – to isolate and limit the spread of the "pathogen".

Paul's detractors got what they wanted – Paul was thrown into prison. Little did they know that they could trap his body but not his spirit of evangelism, and the results were quite the opposite of what they had expected. "Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the Gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ." (Philippians 1:12-13). The four walls of Paul's cell could not contain the Gospel, and human power was unable to limit the reach of the Gospel. Paul told the believers: "for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God's word is not chained." (2 Timothy 2:9). Those were not empty words or self-comfort, but indisputable facts. The Gospel was like mighty flood waters that washed over all by the power of the Holy Spirit and arrived at places that were normally out of reach, and even spread to the high places to touch people such as the personal guards of Caesar and members of his palace staff (Philippians 4:22). People who sympathised with Paul, comforted him, and learnt from his teachings increased rather than decreasing, and his ministry opportunities grew along with the numbers of his co-workers. Even those who opposed him had unknowingly become his co-workers, and the resistance they put up had instead enabled the Gospel to spread even quicker!

The cunning devil had been made a fool of, inadvertently helping in the development of evangelism. The enemies of God would continue to make the same mistake over the years. Their persecution of the Church and believers instead prospered the Gospel even more!

An evangelist had served in Africa for many years, and his wife and two daughters were all buried there after they died. When he retired at an old and frail age, he returned to New York. At the harbour, he was met by a huge welcome party! He soon realised that it was not him that they were welcoming home, but Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919), 26th President of the United States, who happened to be returning from a hunting trip in Africa on the same ship. The elderly gospel warrior quietly disembarked with his luggage and suddenly felt a sad loneliness that he had never experienced even when in the wilderness of Africa. That night, he wept in his hotel room, and was so overwhelmed that he could not pray. Suddenly, from nowhere in the quiet night, he heard the voice of God telling him: "My child, you are not even home yet!"

Not Alone

The prophet Elijah was like a courageous lion when he faced the evil king Ahab of Israel and his four hundred prophets of Baal. The Lord answered his prayer and unleashed fire from heaven to burn the offerings on the altar. Ironically, despite achieving this great spiritual victory, Elijah succumbed to the threats of queen Jezebel and felt alone and powerless against the unseen enemy. He fled to the wilderness in despair and sought death. He told God: "The Israelites have rejected your covenant... I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too." (1 Kings 19:10). The once fearless prophet who risked his life to confront the king (1 Kings 18:22) has been defeated by loneliness! But God replied him saying: "Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and whose mouths have not kissed him." (1 Kings 19:18). Not one person, but seven thousand! When we witness God working amongst His people, we would not feel alone or hopeless.

The prophet Elisha was unwittingly caught up in the political intrigue between two nations. As his plans were of benefit to his country, the king of the enemy nation of

Aram sent his army to capture Elisha. When Elisha and his servant woke up in the morning, they found their little city of Dothan besieged by the enemy's chariots, horses, and soldiers. Facing this hopeless situation all by themselves, Elisha prayed to the Lord to open the eyes of this young man. God opened the young servant's eyes, and he saw God's flaming chariots and horses surrounding Elisha, just as what Elisha had told him before, "Don't be afraid, those who are with us are more than those who are with them." (2 Kings 6:8-17). The Bible mentioned that "The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them." (Psalm 34:7). This is very real and not exaggeration. When we see through eyes of faith, we see the faithfulness of God's promises and the reality of His presence and know that we are not on our own.

Inside his cell, all Paul was able to hear were the footsteps of the Roman soldiers guarding him, and the clanging sound of their weapons, but with his faithful eyes, he saw the fires of the Gospel igniting everywhere. What an exciting and interesting vision! He knew that God was with him, and the Holy Spirit worked alongside him, together with the many ambassadors of the Lord. He knew God's beautiful will was behind his imprisonment – his incarceration and suffering led to the Gospel becoming more prosperous than ever. As the number of believers grew, God's kingdom expanded every day.

Tertullian (Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus, c.145-220), an early church father born in the second century, once loudly declared in the senate of Carthage that "The blood of the Martyrs is the seed of the Church – we have conquered your cities, islands, fortresses, towns, councils, military camps, palaces and even your senate halls!" History had proven time and again that suffering makes the Gospel spread faster, and oppression makes the Church more prosperous. Paul knew that his suffering prospered the Gospel and increased the number of the faithful. Non-believers were touched and converted, while believers discovered new meaning in their faith.

Never to Fail

Christianity grew and spread after its founder was no longer in this world. Before His ascension, the Lord Jesus Christ told His disciples: "Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father" (John 14:12).

The wise Pharisee teacher Gamaliel used the continued development of the Christian faith to demonstrate that it was from God. He quoted examples of previous revolutionaries such as Theudas and Judas of Galilee. They were followed by many and held great influence, but when they fell from grace, what they had accumulated and built soon scattered in the winds of change. Pointing at the disciples, Gamaliel said: "Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God." (Acts 5:34-39).

The religious leaders who opposed the disciples found what he said to be reasonable, and they saw that the disciples had next to no chance of success. By common logic, the fledgling Church had no feasible means to survive and grow. The leaders of the Church were "unschooled, ordinary men" (Acts 4:13) who were caught in between the power play of the political and religious elite. They were persecuted constantly, and the future looked bleak for them. It would take a great miracle for them to even just continue to exist. Yet, this miracle came to be right before their eyes. Not only did the Church survive, but it grew at an exponential rate. On the very day the Church's leaders were arrested, there were thousands of new believers who converted to faith: "But many who heard the message believed; so the number of men who believed grew to about five thousand" (Acts 4:4). This was clearly beyond human planning and ability and was the power of the Holy Spirit at work. Satan thought he had successfully murdered the Lord of life (Acts 3:15) on the cross. He did not understand that the Lord of life cannot be killed, and instead the cursed cross became the blessed symbol of God's salvation for mankind. Till this day, when we see a cross, we are reminded that "unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds".

The enemies celebrated with great cheer when Paul was imprisoned. They thought they had managed to contain the gospel “plague” that Paul was spreading. But did they? The believers were hardly fazed by what happened and became emboldened as they saw the power of God in Paul’s personal example. Prior to Paul being put in jail, what they saw was the great apostle Paul and his teachings. After Paul was imprisoned, they started to see the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ manifested in Paul’s life. Paul had said: “For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.” (2 Corinthians 4:11-12). This is the foundational principle on which new lives are transformed, “And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear.” (Philippians 1:14)

A Noble Mindset

Paul did not exaggerate the Gospel, nor did God’s work exist only in his imagination. He knew not everyone shared his faith and conviction. When he said “most”, he meant a vast majority of the believers, who were members of the body of Christ whom he could trust. This is the conviction that kept him motivated, knowing that he had many dependable co-workers who were strong and brave in the Lord and edified one another and reinforced each other’s faith.

Paul understood that not all who spread the Gospel held the same belief: “It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the Gospel. The former preaches Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains.” (Philippians 1:15-17).

1. To Have a Big Heart

We might want to ask then, if they were not sincere and had no real love for Christ, and were not “compelled by the love of Christ” (2 Corinthians 5:14), why would they evangelise? Paul explained that such people harboured selfish ambition and preached out of the disorder in their hearts and their evil practices (James 3:14-16). The Church was little more than a social network and a tool for attaining their political ambitions, and they would go wherever they could acquire adoration, profit, and good name. Yet, their unchanged nature leads them to commit sins, which are then unfortunately attributed to Christians in general because the people of the world are incapable of discerning the truth, nor are they interested to. Ultimately, they bring shame to God’s name and create more reasons for persecutors to oppress the Church. What a wicked strategy! Satan’s plans are advanced by their actions and the people of God like Paul suffer more, and the masses’ perceptions are turned against Christians.

Paul, however, was not discouraged. He knew the Lord had warned them of tares in the wheat fields. The master of the fields knew the tares were sown by the enemy (Matthew 13:28). Even as the Holy Spirit works ceaselessly amongst the elect, the devil’s evil spirits would also be doing their best to plant seeds of discord and destruction. Fortunately, the wheat with true life outnumbers the tares in the field. These co-workers who harbour goodwill love the Lord and know the value of their work. Although they were not employees of the Church, they serve alongside Paul as comrades in the Gospel. This brought endless comfort to Paul’s heart and spirit. In Paul we see the big heart of a true servant of God. He magnanimously said: “But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.” (Philippians 1:18). How difficult it is for us to think this way, even when we know it is the reflection of a heart that loves God and emulates the heart of Christ.

Paul did not seek his own success, but that of the Church. “My church” and “my ministry” are but tiny circles we draw around ourselves. When God led the Israelites out of Egypt, He granted Moses’s request to appoint seventy elders from the people, “Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke with him, and he took some of the power of the Spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders. When the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied - but did not do so again. However, two men, whose names were Eldad and Medad, had remained in the camp. They were listed among the elders but did not go out to the tent. Yet the Spirit also rested on them,

and they prophesied in the camp. A young man ran and told Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp." Joshua son of Nun, who had been Moses' aide since youth, spoke up and said, "Moses, my lord, stop them!" But Moses replied, "Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put His Spirit on them!" (Numbers 11:25-29).

Once, during Jesus' time on earth, John came to Him and complained: "Master," said John, "we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we tried to stop him, because he is not one of us." To John, not casting out the demons and leaving them to enslave their victims was not the problem, but someone who was not one of the disciples casting out Demons was. He, and in fact the other disciples, were of the opinion that exorcising demons had to be exclusive to their circle. This was a matter of personal "direction" to them, and people who had a different direction from joining their circle had to be stopped! Little did John expect Jesus to say: "Do not stop him," Jesus said, "for whoever is not against you, is for you." (Luke 9:49-50). The Lord did not just expand the circle beyond the limits set by the disciples, He helped them to change their flawed views of "if you are not with us, you are against us" and taught them to abstain from conflict amongst believers and while setting themselves firmly against the demons. This is the right principle to uphold, as co-workers who perform the same ministry for God. Sadly, many Christians instead view their fellow servants of God as opponents, thinking of them as "Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters." (Luke 11:23). When our ego replaces the position of the Lord in ministry, there will be dissension in the body of Christ, with believers harming and hating each other – thus making the enemy happy and hurting God's heart!

We must never meet jealousy with jealousy, nor try to end conflict with more conflict. Hate must not displace love, and carnal methods must not be used to achieve spiritual goals. Paul does not look at how different others were, and only focuses on the similarities. He does not look at the negative side of people, only at the positive outcomes they achieve. As long as the name of Christ is spread, we ought to rejoice. This is the heart of the Lord, and this is how we magnify God's name. Any ministry requires teamwork and sincere cooperation between the co-workers if we are to attain beautiful results. This is more than just common sense – it is a spiritual principle.

2. Transcendental Pursuit

Paul's vision reaches far, high, and wide. He mentioned: "for I know that through your prayers and God's provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance." (Philippians 1:19), pointing out that the support required by ministries come from both human prayers and divine help.

Reuben Archer Torrey (1856-1928) was very particular about intercession. Before embarking on each of his evangelistic trips, he would send out thousands of letters requesting for prayers. Of all intercessors, two were of special importance to him – the Holy Spirit who "intercedes for us through wordless groans" and the risen Christ, who "is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us" (Romans 8: 26, 34). The suffering of Paul edifies the spiritual life of those who intercede for him. In the same way, when Simon Peter was imprisoned by king Herod and about to be executed in public, the Church prayed fervently for him (Acts 12:1-19) and learnt a valuable lesson in prayer through what happened to Peter. Their prayers were answered when God sent His angel to rescue Peter from prison – after witnessing such a miracle, would they still be uninterested in prayer?

"*Soteria*" was the word used for deliverance in Philippians 1:19. This word meant more than salvation and could also refer to liberation from bondage or healing from disease. Salvation is for those who believe and is received immediately. Paul did not need to hope for salvation as he already had it, so what he meant would be deliverance from his present situation and from physical imprisonment, so that he could continue to bring glory to Christ. He then said: "I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death." (Philippians 1:20).

Here, we see the nobility and transcendence of Paul's purpose for continuing to stay alive! He did not seek his own benefit and glory, and only wished to manifest the glory of Christ through his life. Neither did he just want to demonstrate Christ's glory for a time – he wanted to commit all his life to magnify Christ's glory. He was

determined not to bring shame to God's name, but in a fallen and evil world, he needed courage from above to live a life of truth. It is not easy to live differently from the social norm and cannot be accomplished by a cowardly person. It is not as simple as some spineless scholars of theology make it out to be, nor would a profit-driven, business-minded person want anything to do with such a life. Living this way means not bending to the winds of the times and standing tall as a pillar for God. Such "courage" involves freely letting go of one's losses and gains, and even life and death. When someone warned him that it was dangerous to go to Jerusalem, Paul's reply was: "I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me - the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace." (Acts 20:24).

Was this an easy task? Certainly not. It is extremely difficult to put into practice. Many who fancy themselves to be heroes could not take falls and feared shame, but Paul did not depend on his own ability. He had the Holy Spirit's help, trust in the co-workers' conviction, and faith in the Church's intercession for him. He knew that with the help from the brethren and the Holy Spirit, he can proudly declare: "...because I know whom I have believed and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him until that day." (2 Timothy 1:12)

Faith in One's Personal Value

"Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith." (Philippians 1:25). People naturally feel uncomfortable with those who think the whole world needs them. There is a saying that plenty of tombstones mark the graves of those who think the world needs them. This is of course sarcasm, and no one had misunderstood it to be literal. Before anyone of us were born, the earth was already in existence. It will not cease to rotate in space just because anyone of use were gone.

1. Re-aligning Our Personal Values

We need to strike a balance in how we assess our self-worth. Self-importance may be a problem, but so is self-denigration. If we think we are "extras" in this world, we would not be able to see the meaning of life. For example, many seniors find life bland and meaningless because they no longer feel needed by their children or society, and that they have become burdens for others.

Suicide rates are highest in the most developed and affluent countries. Many who live in these places feel they are not needed by others, while at the same time they do not find themselves needing or wanting anything more in life. Thus, life has no goal and loses meaning for them. On the other hand, suicides were uncommon during times of war. According to the rationale given by some experts, this was because people in a war saw the need to unite as one people to survive and win, so there are less feelings of isolation. They felt the collective responsibility and the ability to contribute to the nation and fight the enemy. This took their attention away from "self" and reduced conflicts between fellow citizens. In a certain ironic sense, the evil of war actually produces some positive outcomes.

Christ is the Prince of Peace, not a warmonger. Yet, every Christian is caught in the midst of a raging spiritual battle that no one could stay out of or remain a neutral party.

The great Tang dynasty poet Li Bai was a proud and talented individual who said that "there is a purpose in my existence". He did not bother to evaluate circumstances and was dejected his whole life. A constantly depressed alcoholic, he finally met his demise when he attempted to fish the moon out of a river in his drunkenness. He slipped and drowned in the water. One wonders if that incident were truly an accident or was it a cleverly orchestrated suicide. The vanity of his death held a certain artistic symbolism for many. Not so for Christians – Christians live for Christ according to God's plan; thus our lives are not without meaning. We can honestly declare: "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain." (Philippians 1:21). When Paul said this, he did not imply that he was somebody. He simply knew that his life was for the glory of God and to manifest the image of Christ. Even though he knew clearly that if he died, his soul would leave his body to rest in glory and eternal blessings, and endure no more suffering, he saw his living as glory that

“far outweighs” everything else (2 Corinthians 4:17); instead of thinking for his own well-being, his focus was on his mission. Thus he said: “If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know!” (Philippians 1:22). It was a tough decision between benefitting himself and fulfilling his mission from God.

The Eastern Han general Jia Fu had many battles with the Qingdu bandits. On one occasion, the fierce battle raged on till the afternoon sun was high in the sky. Emperor Guang Wu told Jia Fu: “the men are all tired and hungry and have not even eaten their breakfast. Let’s cease the battle for now and continue after they have rested and ate.” Jia Fu replied: “we will rest after we have beaten the enemy.” He promptly led the charge against the bandits and scattered their formation. His example was one that demonstrated the necessity to place responsibility and mission before one’s own individual needs and wants when the two are in conflict and fulfill one’s duty.

2. The Pursuit to Realise One’s Values

The apostle Paul served the Lord for thirty years. In his old age, he was sick and put in prison. But he saw the hope of glory awaiting him and was able to persevere in his mission. The vision of eternal joy and blessings was so clear and vivid that he could hardly resist rushing ahead to embrace it sooner! At the same time, he remembered that the Church still needed his leadership, care, nurturing, and guidance. How could he bear to abandon them? Thus he said: “I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.” (Philippians 1:23-24). He did not insist on overstaying his welcome but remained only because the Church still had need for him – because he did not live for himself alone (Romans 14:7-8).

It is noble and normal for Christians to desire to leave this world to be with the Lord. This meant that the Christian had built a strong relationship with Christ and no longer belongs to the fallen world, knowing for certain where his eternal home is: “For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God... All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth.” (Hebrews 11:10-13). It is normal to long for home, and only those who have a home in heaven can be homesick in this way. The heroes of faith in the book of Hebrews and the great men and women in church history all felt the same desire. We can also say they all share the same vital characteristic that showed they are true followers of Christ. However, this was not the only characteristic shared by these faithful heroes – they also shared the desire to remain in the flesh, so that they could continue to fight battles for the Lord and edify the Church. Interestingly, this dilemma is a necessary quality in a servant of the Lord.

We all know the importance of godliness. Philipp Jakob Spener (1635-1705) led the Collegia Pietatis movement that sought a reform emphasizing the pursuit of spiritual depth in contrast with the superficial and corrupt religious practices of the time. It was a refreshing change to the rampant rationalism in the Church and encouraged people to awaken their spirits and rediscover their souls to draw closer to God. Sadly, near the end of the movement, it began to degenerate into a pursuit of ritualistic godliness that focused only on individual spiritual growth – a spiritual selfishness that did not care for the needs of others and the world. They had all but abandoned the commission of the Lord and secluded themselves from the world to focus on themselves. Those who adopted this mindset would of course not have to face the dilemma of choosing between personal bliss and the needs of the Church and world, but their so called “peace” was nothing more than spiritual “dead silence”.

On the extreme opposing end were movements that used human organisations and goals to replace the work of the Holy Spirit, with an emphasis on so called “social gospel” that supplanted evangelism and salvation with care and aid. From a historical perspective, this school of thought had its roots in liberal theology and Postmillennialism and gave many a false hope. Unfortunately, the proponents of godliness were also opponents of the social aspects of the Gospel, and social care ministries soon became a monopolised staple to be offered almost exclusively by such liberal groups.

During the 19th century and the early 20th century, fundamentalist Christians developed a faulty attitude where “anything that the opponent supported shall be opposed by us”. The modernists promoted rationalism, so we shall oppose rationalism. The modernist emphasised academic knowledge, so we shall oppose academic knowledge. In the end, scholastic bastions in Christianity were torn down one by one. Only those who cloistered together in closed-up and self-proclaimed “godly” fellowships that patted one another on the back remained – and rejoiced among themselves over the sorry state of Christianity. This was certainly not the strategy that Paul devised for believers. Paul constantly reminded Christians to rely on the power of the Holy Spirit: “The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.” (2 Corinthians 10:4-5).

After much careful consideration, Paul decided to make the ultimate sacrifice and remain in this world to serve the needs of his fellow believers. This was a most Christ-like choice: “He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.” (Romans 4:25).

Christ died on the cross for us and rose from the dead for us. He saw the light of heaven beckoning to him to return. Faced with a world that despised him and rebelled against God, he said: “You unbelieving and perverse generation, how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy here to me.” (Matthew 17:17). If He had chosen not to tolerate the adverse circumstances and returned to heaven, mankind would not receive God’s salvation, because “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:12). He had to remain on earth to cast out demons, heal the sick, deliver God’s word, and save souls in order to fulfill God’s will. When His time came, He went onto the cross without resistance.

Such is the dilemma faced by Christians. Paul’s decision in this conflicting situation was to stay “for you all”. This was his principle as a Christian and one that should be held dearly by all believers. Till this day, the most appropriate choice to make when we seek God’s will and direction is to choose the benefit of others instead of ourselves. Knowing that our lives edified others around us would bring new meaning to life.

There is a Chinese saying, “the lazy horse loves the feed in the stable”. This refers to weak and lazy horses that did not desire to gallop across the land and only looks forward to feeding time each day so it can fill its stomach with delicious beans. People without goals in their lives and those who fight tooth and nail cling on to their comfortable positions are excellent examples of this. They lust after wealth, fame, and status with no care for their eternal destiny. Paul was definitely not such a person. He served God without ever asking for benefits or a good salary, and never shunned dangerous and tiring work. All his resources and energy were expended for the good of others. To many, he might have appeared foolish for not looking after his own needs, but he did not live for himself nor for worldly wealth. His was the Christian principle of living for the good of others.

“Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith”. Paul’s faith drives his mission. He knew what he had to remain to do. Even though he did not belong to this world, he saw the need for him to stay here “with all of you”. This did not mean he stayed in the same physical premises but was a reference to having the same mindset and status. His purpose of staying was “for your progress and joy in the faith”.

3. The Value of Joyful Ministry

Paul first mentioned “for you all”, now followed by “so that you all”. “For you all” was his hope, a willingness, while “so that you all” puts his hope into action, the ability to realise his hope. There are too many things in this world that are beyond our control. At Gethsemane, the three disciples closest to the Lord could not even keep themselves awake for a moment to be with Him before He went to the cross. It was a classical example of “the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” (Matthew 6:36-41).

They had the sincere desire to be with the Lord, but their physical weakness did not allow them.

In the early experience of Paul, he shared that “For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.” (Romans 7:18). It shows the moral desire to do something hindered by the lack of the ability to do it, just like what the poet Tao Yuan-ming called “the heart is limited by the corporeal body”. Many hopes and ideals in history never came to fruition because of this limitation.

When Paul’s ministry was more matured, he realised that he only had to focus on guiding the later saints in their faith so that they grew in the way of the Lord. He did not need fabricated reports or church statistics, or fancy causes and grand titles to create illusions of church growth. He only wanted to see each believer truly grow in the Lord: “until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants...” (Ephesians 4:13-14). He hopes to see us receiving the joy of God as we journeyed in the path of truth. Such joy is different from the happiness of this world, as Peter said: “Though you have not seen Him, you love Him; and even though you do not see Him now, you believe in Him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy” (1 Peter 1:8). This heavenly joy comes from the risen Lord in heaven, who will come again. “All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth.” (Hebrews 11:13). Faith needs an object to be placed in – just as we place our faith in the glorious Christ and the heavenly glory that awaits us in heaven. Faith brings joy to those who believe, both during the wait and when we finally receive what we hoped for. A strong faith drives us to eagerly look forward to our heavenly reward.

The prophet Nehemiah said to the people: “Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.” (Nehemiah 8:10). Oddly, many Christians neglect the importance of joy – it is a fruit of the Holy Spirit, and it is essential that we understand the majestic origin where joy comes from. A believer once said: “A Christian without joy must most certainly be having some problems with his faith.” Joy does not necessarily equate to fun and laughter, and definitely not indulgence and partying. The apostles were beaten by the Sanhedrin for testifying to the resurrection of the Lord. When they were released, they were “rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.” (Acts 5:41). Nobody would celebrate getting beaten up for no reason, “but rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.” (1 Peter 4:12-16). This is a joy that can only come from the Holy Spirit.

4. The Value of Fellowship in the Lord

The joy of fellowship stems from the communion of the saints. Paul believed that he had value to give to the Church, and the Philippian church treasured his mentorship. They welcomed his presence and looked forward to meeting with him: “so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me.” (Philippians 1:26). The awareness of his own popularity did not come from self-importance, but from the fact that he knew he did not burden the Church and was able to edify them spiritually. Both Paul and the Church knew he was not a fundraiser that everyone avoided from a mile away, nor a gossip who went about speaking ill of others and exposing private secrets. Paul was obviously not the type of person that could spoil a party just by being present. Neither was he a court jester whose purpose was to entertain his audience. His presence was like a refreshing breeze to those he met and edified their spiritual lives and brought joy in the Lord. Those who share life in Christ naturally love one another and receive the same joyful vitalisation from the Holy Spirit (John 15:10-11). Sin is the only thing that could impede this joyful communion. It pollutes the fellowship and erects a barrier between the saints. The consequences of sin are judgement and punishment (1 Corinthians 4:21), and leads to shared grief in the body of Christ.

Writing about the Corinthian church, Paul mentioned the effects of sin: “I wrote as I did, so that when I came, I would not be distressed by those who should have made

me rejoice. I had confidence in all of you, that you would all share my joy. For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you. If anyone has caused grief, he has not so much grieved me as he has grieved all of you to some extent - not to put it too severely." (2 Corinthians 2:3-5). He describes here how one person's sin can damage the harmony and joy in the entire fellowship. Sin grieved him and the fellowship alike and hurt the hearts of the leaders of the Church, bringing them "anguish of heart and with many tears". Joy is lost from the fellowship when this happens and reflects how members of a fellowship are closely connected to one another.

Paul believed that he could bring joy to the Philippian church, because he "came to you all", and helped to grow their joy in the Lord. This belief was that "someone needs me, welcomes me, and I am able to bring good to them." What an enviable position to have in the body of Christ!

Such joyful fellowship is not the result of self-indulgence and mutual praise or calling each other spiritual. It is the result of active and concrete actions of love. Paul expressed his hopes for the Church: "Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the Gospel" (Philippians 1:27)

"In a manner worthy" refers to how the life of a Christian bears testimony for Christ's goodness before others and lights the way for them. One of my brothers in Christ who worked at a hospital shared a challenge he faced at work. He had a subordinate who claimed to be "Christian". This person had terrible work performance but loved to share his "testimony" during work hours. Sometimes, while on duty in the emergency room, he would even neglect his work to talk about the Gospel with the patients' families. My brother in Christ eventually felt enough was enough, and told him to finish his work properly before going around to share his so called "testimony"! Actions speak louder than words, and it has been said that "a sermon preached from your own doorstep is the most effective". What we do must align with the teachings of Christ in the Gospel, and our actions must align with what we preach. Christians who preach one thing yet do another are in fact the greatest barrier to the spread of the Gospel.

The Gospel Battle

We must proclaim our faith if we want others to know that salvation is in Jesus Christ. John the Baptist dressed himself in camel furs and leather belts and subsisted on wild honey and locusts when he was in the wilderness. To onlookers, he was a weirdo, though perhaps a wise one who led the life of a hermit, but at the same time, he declared the message of salvation: "repent, for heaven is near!". His powerful call from the wilderness touch hearts and led many to repent, paving the way ahead for Christ's ministry. His exclamation: "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29) identified Jesus Christ to the people as the Saviour. A believer's image and how they live is no doubt very important, but a believer's life is more than that, and it is not the be all and end all of evangelism.

Paul used war as an analogy – Jesus is the Prince of Peace and has reconciled us to God's salvation with His sacrifice on the cross, so that we can spread the Gospel of peace (Matthew 5:9, Ephesians 2:16-17). On the other hand, Christians are also warriors of the Gospel: "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." (Ephesians 6:12). Those who do not believe are unknowingly part of Satan's kingdom and household they are slaves to the evil one and part of his possessions (Ephesians 2:2, Matthew 12:28-30). This "strong man" whom Satan is called can only be bound by the Gospel, so that those who rebel against God can be turned around and submit to Christ. This is the reality of spiritual warfare; thus Christians are not only doves, but they are also eagles. These are two sides of the same coin and do not contradict with each other.

5. Putting Faith Into Practice

Paul was a member of this fellowship and more. From the perspective of a construction project, he was a “wise builder” (1 Corinthians 3:10). From the angle of warfare, he was a good and valuable general who had the confidence and faith to win the spiritual war.

So how are we supposed to win this war? First, we must be “of one mind”. Evangelism is a group effort and a ministry that cannot rely on individual heroism. It must be performed by a group of people of like mind and without conflict. Only then can they unify their strength to take on the external forces that oppose them. The Bible’s record of the four men who carried the paraplegic to see Jesus for healing was a good example. They had to be united along the way as they carried the paralysed man and find their way through the crowds that were blocking access to Jesus by lifting the paraplegic onto the roof (Mark 2:3-11)! This was no easy task and if they were of different minds and had an argument along the way, the paraplegic could have been thrown to the ground in their fight. How tragic it would be if he had to suffer even more injuries and broken bones in the process and endure the headache and broken heart brought on by the group’s discord? As far as evangelism ministry is concerned, nothing can take the place of unity.

In order to “stand firm”, we need both faith and perseverance. Those who give up halfway and are indecisive on important matters would fail in any endeavour. David’s warrior Shammah stood his ground before the Philistines when everybody else was fleeing, like an immovable pillar in the middle of the field. Because of his firm stand, he successfully defended his homeland and the people of Israel, and motivated them to turn around and face their enemies, leading to their victory (2 Samuel 23:11-12).

In the 16th century, the Roman Catholic Church was rife with corruption. God raised Martin Luther to shine His light through the darkness and challenge the powers that be, declaring “this is my stand!” and starting the Protestant Reformation that made the light of the Gospel shine across the world. Thus, standing firm is critical in a spiritual battle. The full armour of God all protect the warrior’s front, with nothing to defend the back. This meant that a gospel warrior must never turn and run or he will risk exposing his back to the enemy.

Of course, a war cannot be fought without real action. The Chinese have long had the problem of indulging in philosophical musings and discussions of no practical use. John Dewey (1859-1952) was invited to lecture in China between 1919 and 1921 as a “foreign sage”. He noticed that many Chinese academics of the time enjoyed talking about idealism, activism, and saving the nation, but made no real effort to realise their goals. In his article for the “Asia” journal, he made fun of the Chinese’s love for “indoor activism”, which was all empty rhetoric. Those people at the time did not believe they could really do anything about the circumstances, nor were they interested to do anything.

As Christians, our desire to “be of one mind for the Gospel” is not empty talk. It is driven by concerted will, full effort, and perseverance through the unity of Christians. When Joab and Abishai fought the overwhelming coalition of the Aramean and Ammonite armies, Joab told Abishai: “If the Arameans are too strong for me, then you are to come to my rescue; but if the Ammonites are too strong for you, then I will come to rescue you. Be strong and let us fight bravely for our people and the cities of our God. The Lord will do what is good in his sight.” (2 Samuel 10:11-14). In the end, they emerged victorious.

Warfare is a concerted effort that cannot tolerate personal disagreements, distrust, and jealousy among the fighters. There must also not be discord and infighting that tears apart unity. Being united does not mean we must be uniform in all things, be it ability, behaviour, or appearance. There are those who cannot tolerate anyone who was even just a tiny bit different from themselves. To them, those who were different were either abnormal or wrong. The truth is all these differences are part of God’s plan for us to complement one another with our different gifts and talents and creates opportunities for us to sharpen one another so that we are better equipped to complete His work. Historically speaking, very few countries that no longer exist were actually destroyed by external invaders. A good majority of them actually did themselves in with infighting and internal discord.

John Wesley (1703-1791) was one who emphasised the importance of unity. He used the encounter between Jehu and the people of Jehonadab son of Rekab as an example. Jehonadab was a unique specimen even amongst the greatest weirdos of his time. He gave his people a commandment that said "Neither you nor your descendants must ever drink wine. Also you must never build houses, sow seed or plant vineyards; you must never have any of these things but must always live in tents. Then you will live a long time in the land where you are nomads." (Jeremiah 35:6-7). Jehu's magnanimous heart was able to accommodate his strangeness. While cleansing the household of Ahab for the Lord, "...he came upon Jehonadab son of Rekab, who was on his way to meet him. Jehu greeted him and said, "Are you in accord with me, as I am with you?" "I am," Jehonadab answered. "If so," said Jehu, "give me your hand." So he did, and Jehu helped him up into the chariot. Jehu said, "Come with me and see my zeal for the Lord." Then he had him ride along in his chariot." (2 Kings 10:15-16). Jehu did not make things complicated for Jehonadab. This is also the attitude we should have as Christians, so that we can unite for the Gospel instead of combing through every little difference between ourselves and fellow believers.

6. The Victory of the Suffering Fellowship

There are plenty of leaders who would flee and save themselves at the first sign of danger. Paul was not such a leader. His testimonies as a trustworthy man were known to all the Church. Faced with enemies, a leader must never compromise but "be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power." (Ephesians 6:10), "For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline." (2 Timothy 1:7). Only a brave leader can stand firm "without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you.", and "This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved - and that by God." (Philippians 1:28). We learn of a simple truth here - that we belong to the truth of God and evangelism destroys the fortresses of Satan, saving people from the clutches of death into God's life. Thus it is normal to receive threats from the enemy, but the truth is brave, and we stand on the side that will emerge victorious. God is sovereign over everything and there is no question that final victory belongs to Him.

However, this does not mean that everything we do would be smooth sailing. "For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for Him" (Philippians 1:29). Before a joyful harvest, there is invariably tearful sowing, and there is no celebration of victory without a challenging battle. To be called by God to become a Christian is to relinquish one's own choices and submit to Christ, to bear His yoke and be part of His fellowship, sharing all His burdens and suffering. We must understand this "so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. For you know quite well that we are destined for them." (1 Thessalonians 3:3). We already know when we became Christians that we have committed ourselves unto Christ. We are no longer our old selves and have given up our desires and life to Him. We do not suffer as a result of believing in Christ, but rather, this is part of our belief in Him, and part of the grace that we received: "To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in His steps." (1 Peter 2:21).

7. The Practical Role Model

Paul was not known to be one who was glib tongued. He had suffered much for the sake of the Gospel. Christ is the pioneer of our salvation (Hebrews 2:10) . He did not come in the flesh to enjoy the luxury of a prince but served as a suffering servant who went through many grueling trials (1 Peter 2:1). Paul was put in chains for spreading the Gospel and survived many battles and ordeals. He continued to follow Christ and emulate His example despite all that he had been put through. The triumphant Christ had ascended back to heaven. In His place, He sent the Holy Spirit to be our counselor and instructed us to carry on the Great Commission, the battle for the truth of the Gospel until His glorious return in the end times.

The saints need a visible hero of faith like Paul to lead them in spiritual battles, a leader who suffered alongside the "good soldiers of Jesus Christ" (2 Timothy 2:3). His presence is necessary and brings encouragement to the believers. As he had said: "since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have." (Philippians 1:30)

Spanish writer Miguel De Cervantes (1547-1616) once said: "scars will turn into medals". The scars Paul bore for the sake of God's word allowed him to declare: "... for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus" (Galatians 6:17). He can also tell disillusioned and tired believers: "Look at these scars! I have suffered for the sake of God's truth, but it is worthy and glorious, for He has chosen me, and I thank and praise Him!" The comfort and smile of this warrior of God is no doubt a great encouragement for those who come after!

Appendix: A Leader Who Lost His Faith

From Victory to Defeat: A Crisis of Faith

Throughout history, we have seen no lack of extremely capable people who succeeded in putting together grandiose accomplishments but sadly died at a relatively young age. On the other hand, there were also heroes who enjoyed great success in their early endeavours, but as they aged, their abilities declined and what they built fell apart. Sometimes, the difference between their early and late years can be so vast that we could hardly tell it was the same person. While we are not here to comment and judge on these predecessors, we want to understand the cause of their eventual failure – what I would call the Crisis of the Successful.

The most striking example of such in the Bible would be none other than the mighty prophet Elijah. The thought of him would bring up images of a powerful lion. He was loyal to God and had courageous passion for the truth. He was put on par with Moses and respected by future generations. During the Transfiguration on the Mount, he appeared in glory with Jesus and discussed matters of the next life with Him (ref. Matthew 17:1-3, Luke 9:28-31). This was an outstanding incident recorded in the Bible.

Elijah, a giant of faith who dared to face the evil king Ahab alone, did not mince his words in the confrontation: "I have not made trouble for Israel," Elijah replied. "But you and your father's family have. You have abandoned the Lord's commands and have followed the Baals." (1 Kings 18:18). Such was the courage he expressed to speak the truth! On Mount Carmel, faced with Ahab and the many palace prophets of Baal he hosted, Elijah demonstrated magnificent confidence. He prayed for God to send fire from the heavens to burn the offerings on the altar. Such was the power of his faith! At the river Kishon, he gathered God's people to wipe out the prophets of Baal in one swift act that made the people glad. Elijah would have been the best role model for the people of God and was standing tall on the peak of spiritual success. Ironically, just several days after accomplishing his great deeds for God, he transformed into a disappointing and discouraging example right before our eyes.

Afraid of both foreign invasion and the wrath of his wife, Ahab reported to Jezebel what had transpired on Mount Carmel. Jezebel then sent a messenger to Elijah to tell him: "May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them" (1 Kings 19:2). Little would we have expected Jezebel to be so obsessed with ceremonial formalities that she even made an "appointment" in advance with the person she wanted to kill!

Like many modern politicians, despite her strong words and appearance of determination, she was devoid of confidence and substance. Jezebel was a woman without morals and principles. Such a person would never truly have the courage to avenge her prophets of Baal against a mighty prophet of God (ref. 2 Kings 9:30-31). The harlot knew that Elijah had the support of the people, so instead of decisively sending an assassin to kill Elijah, she sent a messenger to deliver empty threats with the intention to beat a hasty retreat after saving some face. If Elijah had not fled, Jezebel probably would have. She had already packed her belongings in preparation to flee back to her family home in Sidon and was even ready to travel by sea with the seafaring expertise of her fellow Phoenicians if need be. When God's prophet Elijah triumphantly returned, what did Jezebel do? She was aware that he was back, yet she quietly hid in the palace and did nothing while Elijah chastised her husband Ahab (1 Kings 21:20-29)! She may sound aggressive with her words, but her heart was actually filled with fear. If Elijah had seized this opportunity, he could have wiped out idolatry in the nation and brought a great revival to Israel. Instead, he failed to discern the true circumstances and turned the chance for victory into defeat!

The Fugitive Hero

“Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there,” (1 Kings 19:3). The mere verbal threats of a harlot sent the hero of faith packing and fleeing. Jezebel must have felt great relief followed by cheer when she saw the outcome. Elijah ran all the way out of the boundaries of Israel and right into Judah. It suddenly struck him that the royal family of Judah were the in-laws of Ahab, and so felt he was still not safe. Travelling further south, he eventually reached Beersheba. By then he had lost his trust in the people around him, even his personal servant. He was afraid that his tracks would be leaked by them and hastily dismissed them. After another day of walking, he arrived at the uninhabited wilderness at Judah’s border, and pleaded under a rowan tree with God to let him die. He was completely desperate and exhausted at this point. If he wanted to die, why didn’t he choose to do so heroically as a martyr, instead of travelling all the way to the wilderness? He was probably going through what Moses had experienced during the Exodus from Egypt, what we call “burnout” in modern terminology. He was overworked, undernourished, and his fatigued state contributed further to his mental decline.

God is merciful. He knows His servant’s weaknesses. An angel from God delivered water and coal-baked bread to him while he was asleep. “The angel of the Lord came back a second time and touched him and said, “Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you.” (1 Kings 19:7). Why did the angel come twice? The first time, it was to replenish Elijah’s energy, as he had traversed great distances. The second time was to prepare him for the challenges on his return journey to fight the beautiful battle of truth for the Lord once again.

After Elijah ate, his strength was restored, and he continued on his journey. However, he did not go north as he was supposed to, but instead headed south, eventually reaching Mount Horeb. Why Mount Horeb? Elijah probably remembered the dark days when Moses was fleeing from Egypt. Moses met God at Mount Horeb and was revived with new power to continue in his mission from God. He might also have sought it as God’s place of shelter for him, where he could hide himself deep within a cool, shady cave that was safely hidden away from his pursuers. How did this godly hero of Mount Carmel end up as the fugitive of Mount Horeb? Elijah’s actions showed us that humans change their attitude and behaviour according to their circumstances and emotions, but God never changes and always keeps to His promise.

The Affliction and the Cure

For all his weaknesses, Elijah was nevertheless still a servant of God. God’s presence came upon him on Mount Horeb, the “Mountain of God”, where he was closest yet furthest from God at the same time. In his weakness, he failed to find God, but God cared for his weakness and found him. “What are you doing here, Elijah?” God asked. God’s questions always carried deeper meanings. When Adam fell to sin, the Lord asked him: “Where are you?” (Genesis 3:9). When Cain murdered Abel and hid his corpse, God asked him: “Where is your brother Abel?”. God’s information network had not failed when He asked those questions. He was reminding those people of the situation they were in, and the question to Elijah was no different.

That verse had many translated versions. The KJV and Darby bibles translate it as “What doest thou here?”. Some versions translate it as “What are you doing here?”, such as the NIV, RSV, NASB, and JB. In the NEB, God’s question was presented as “Why are you here?”. We cannot be sure of the exact intent of God’s question as we do not know His tone at the time. Apart from the obvious meaning on the surface, God could also be asking Elijah “how did you end up here?” or “how did you come to be in this sorry state?”. It can even be interpreted as God saying, “you do not need to be here!”. The many English translations show us the different interpretations one can make of that simple question (1 Kings 19:9-18).

God does not waste time with extra words, but here, He repeated the question to Elijah. Elijah’s answer was off topic because he did not really catch the meaning of God’s words. Seemingly trying to make things clearer for Elijah, God commanded

him to “come out to the mountain and stand before me!”. When God showed Himself, there were great winds, earthquakes, and rockslides, followed by a fire. God then asked Elijah the same question again in a gentle voice. From this scene, we are able to know that God has power over nature and the environment, yet He is gentle and caring towards His servants. Elijah, blinded by his fearful obsession, gave God the same answer twice in a row: “I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.” (1 Kings 19:10, 14).

These words of Elijah were referred to as his appeal to God against Israel in Romans 11:2-5. He had prepared the complaint over the past seven weeks as he became more and more disappointed and dissatisfied with their lack of faith. What he did not realise was that in allowing these grievances to ferment, he too lost his faith and was no longer the courageous hero of God that he used to be.

On Mount Carmel, at the peak of his power, Elijah’s prayers started with reference to God and His glory: “Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known today that You are God in Israel and that I am Your servant and have done all these things at Your command. Answer me, Lord, answer me, so these people will know that You, Lord, are God, and that You are turning their hearts back again.” (1 Kings 18:36-37). This time, however, it started with “I”. With fame and success came self-importance, and Elijah began to pride himself on the great things he had done for God. Such was the difference in his mentality!

Today, many believers continue to exhibit the same problem. They were people used by God to achieve great ministries. As time passed, their dedication instead became the meticulously upkeeping of their “personal” achievements. It was “I” who succeeded with “my” passion for the ministry, or so they thought. The root of the problem was their focus on human achievements and turning their eyes away from God and towards man. Faith in humans is doomed to eventual failure no matter how good the intention was, but faith in God leads to true and long-lasting success.

Look at how Elijah viewed his co-workers. Indeed, he was their spiritual leader, but he has forgotten that they were the ones who laboured with him atop Mount Carmel to repair the Lord’s altar. Who prepared the firewood for the sacrifice? Who dug the trenches and brought the water? Who stood firmly with him at the river Kishon against the 450 prophets of Baal from the king’s palace? None of these were accomplished by one man alone. When a leader forgets his co-workers, he becomes a commander with no man under his lead. What kind of a leader would that be? “I am the only one left” is a thought that arises from self-isolation. Even today, there are people who think they are always right, and anyone with a different opinion from them are wrong. This was Elijah’s issue – he thought he held the key to certain divine secrets and discounted everyone else in Israel who served God. The Apostles’ Creed tells us that the Holy Spirit lives in our hearts and allows the saints to commune with one another. By forgetting this principle, Elijah ostracized himself from the other servants of God and lost his power as a prophet. This was a consequence of his own flawed mindset and not the fault of anyone else. We can tell from the scriptures that his co-workers did not desert him. It was his own self-obsession that caused him to disregard them and fail to mobilise their help.

We must avoid overestimating the advantage of numbers and turn our strategy into a mathematical equation, but Elijah’s self-isolation is not the best strategy either. He attributed too much sway to the enemy and imagined that the entire nation was under the unopposable rule of Satan and his followers. In fact, the scenario he assumed was already a thing of the past. Obadiah, the chief steward of king Ahab’s household, secretly saved a hundred prophets of the Lord and provided for their needs in a safe haven (1 Kings 18:3-4). Later, during Jehu’s revolution, many of the people and soldiers rose up to support him. Three of Jezebel’s personal eunuchs were even among those who promptly responded to Jehu’s call and threw the cursed woman down into the streets where her body was smashed and trampled over by horses according to what God had decreed (2 Kings 9:30-33). As for the remnants of the Baal worshippers, the people were all too happy to follow Jehu’s lead to eradicate them for the Lord. It is clear from this event that no enemy is insurmountable before God.

Elijah had lost his faith in the sovereignty of God. Being in the presence of God alone is immeasurably superior to having the entire world's support. To dismiss God is the greatest misjudgment one can make! The prophet Habakkuk cried out to God in his darkest time because he did not forget God's sovereignty. He was able to sing in the night by faith and rejoice in the Lord, whereas Elijah, having looked away from God, was frightened even by his own shadow. It came to a point where Elijah saw himself as fighting the battle on his own and incapable of turning the tide. He thought that the truth would be extinguished without his holding on, and light would disappear from the world. His excuse for his cowardice and hiding was that he had to preserve God's truth. Many dictators who fled from angry mobs also held such flawed logic but imagine one of the mightiest of God's prophets thinking this way! He had forgotten that he had God's presence with him – what is a servant of God without God's presence?

In the end, Elijah denied even his own worth as a human being and felt that he had no purpose to continue his existence. He asked God to let him die: "I have had enough, Lord," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors." He had lost both the will to fight and the will to live when he was not even captured and imprisoned by the enemy! Notice the huge contrast between his attitude and Paul's? Paul, faced with a never-ending tide of oppression and persecution, knew our home in heaven was wonderful beyond compare and ready to receive him anytime, but still chose to remain on earth to lead the believers in their spiritual struggle to prosper the Gospel.

Restoring Lost Faith

God never fails. He demonstrated His sovereignty and showed Elijah that he had prepared a cord of three strands that was unbreakable. Despite Elijah's failures, He never gave up on Elijah and continued to use him to fulfill His will on earth before lifting him to heaven. Spiritually, God prepared Elisha to succeed Elijah's ministry. Politically, He anointed Jehu as the next king of Israel and to eliminate the worshippers of Baal. For their enemies, God arranged for Hazael to become the Aramean king. God installs the people He chooses in each role and sets up the environment for every event to play out. By His grace, He elected 7,000 of His own people, who had not ever knelt to or kissed Baal. God did not send forth just one person, but a massive cohort to do His will.

God is sovereign – even the gentile king Cyrus, before being born, had already been anointed to serve Him. The untamable Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, never expected himself to be an unwitting servant of God. God can use the winds as His messengers, and fire as His servants. He is the sovereign master of the universe and is the foremost authority in all matters.

A servant of God needs to learn the essential lesson of living and serving to glorify God. This is especially important when we are successful, lest we get overwhelmed by pride and end in failure. We must understand this: God does not need to use us, and neither will He use just us alone. This was the lesson learnt by Elijah.

Are you dejected? Are you lonely? Hang on to faith like Paul's – look upwards to the God whom you serve. He is the sovereign one in control of all things. Look at your co-workers around you, and look at yourself, the vessel of God. The master still has great use for you to bring His plans to fruition like how He used Elijah. God can turn your defeat into victory.

Chapter 2: The Love of the Saints - Width

In Sun-Tzu's Art of War, it is said: "Regard your soldiers as your children, and they will follow you into the deepest valleys; look upon them as your own beloved sons, and they will stand by you even unto death." It is of course a good thing if a military leader can manage to do so, but it is ultimately still just a method of conditioning soldiers to fight in a secular war, using "love" to motivate them to victory.

The Church is Jesus Christ's Army and Love is Its Banner (Proverbs 2:4, John 13:34-35)

Christians are children of God and are guided by the Holy Spirit. Emotionally, it is natural for them to love their heavenly father and their siblings in Christ. Ideologically, we follow the Lord's lead and take up His yoke to fulfill His command to love one another, while logically, love is a driving factor that enables us to be united against the same enemy, care for each other, and realise our maximum potential to achieve victory in the same way as a secular war.

Being of the same body of Christ, we ought to be "united in love" (Colossians 2:2) and not be separated. The Bible also tells us: "And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity." (Colossians 3:14). Whether for individuals or groups, love is a unifying force. Without it, the body of Christ will be scattered, and an individual's thoughts and personality would start to conflict with their actions. We are reminded as Christians to be prepared for the second coming of Jesus. As the world becomes shrouded in darkness, we must be "putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet." (1 Thessalonians 5:8). A breastplate in ancient days was a one-piece metal armour worn on the torso to protect a fighter, just like how love and faith are one. Love without faith is fake and hypocritical, while faith devoid of love is merely blindly repeated actions not guided by wisdom.

If we were to define what love is, we can find the best description in 1 Corinthians chapter 13. It clearly explains both passive and active love. Were we to summarise it further, the essence of love would be "not self-seeking". The moment we begin to seek our own benefit, it is no longer love that we are looking at. In this sense, a "selfish Christian" is a self-contradicting term, a hypothetical theory that cannot truly exist. Imagine if a person's body had a selfish limb that acted only for itself – is that even possible? In the same vein, how could a truly selfish church exist?

The Importance of Love

"Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind." (Philippians 2:1-2)

"Therefore" naturally and clearly marks this chapter as a continuation from the prior one. It also shows that the following verses would discuss "striving together as one for the faith of the Gospel". Only by being cohesive can there be sufficient power to break through obstacles. This principle is applicable not only to objects, but also in a war. The binding force for human being is love, and for the Church, this love is found in Jesus Christ.

One of the expressions of love is encouragement. In this world, the saints live to serve God and testify to His kingdom. In the great spiritual battle, the thing Satan least wants to see are spiritually successful Christians. He would try all methods to make us lose hope and feel depressed. For example, when the people of Judah returned to their homeland from captivity, they wanted to rebuild the temple and city walls, but Satan did his best to disrupt their work. Fortunately, God promptly intervened and sent His servants, the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, who "prophesied to the Jews in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel, who was over them." (Ezra 5:1-2, 6:14). A growing church experiencing struggles need fellow disciples who came before them, such as Barnabas, to "encourage them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts." (Acts 11:23). Such encouragement will spur believers' faith and motivate them to progress with greater determination and strength on the journey of faith.

People whose hearts and spirits have been hurt need comforting. This too, is a critical ministry. We often think of God's sovereignty, authority, and righteousness, but Paul reminds us that God is also the God who grants us all manner of comfort: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from" (2 Corinthians 1:3-4).

Comfort is not a ministry that is needed only by the weak. Even heroes of the faith sometimes need to be comforted. Paul himself once admitted to such an occasion: "For when we came into Macedonia, we had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn - conflicts on the outside, fears within. But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming but also by the comfort you had given him. He told us about your longing for me, your deep sorrow, your ardent concern for me, so that my joy was greater than ever." (2 Corinthians 7:5-7). Titus's message brought from Corinth, which could have asked for comfort for those who were punished for their sins, was answered by Paul as such: "Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow." It was obvious how great Paul's love and concern for the Church was!

Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-1892) was a servant of God full of faith and talent. Yet even he worried when he was ill, alone, and living in poverty. He wallowed in self-pity until a fellow believer visited him in hospital. Surprised at his downtrodden state, the brother in Christ was saddened. He immediately went home and brought all his property deeds and share certificates and laid them out before Spurgeon, and said: "Pastor, I owe everything that I have today to you because you led me to know God. These are the blessings He bestowed upon me. If you want them, they are all yours!" Spurgeon was deeply touched and came to realise that God was faithful and his loyal service was not in vain. Who said comforting others was not an important ministry?

The communion that saints enjoy in the Holy Spirit, "*Koinonia*", is an amazing fellowship connection. The word has connotations of sharing and unity. In 1628, the English physician William Harvey (1537-1657) wrote in his well-known thesis "*De Motu Cordis et Sanguinis in Animalibus*" (An Anatomical Disquisition On the Motion of the Heart and Blood in Animals) about the then revolutionary discovery of how blood circulates in the human body via a complex network of blood vessels to reach every limb and organ. As parts of the body of Christ, we too share the same life and noble heavenly bloodline between us through the same Holy Spirit, thus we love and care for one another in fellowship.

This is what was meant by "If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it." (1 Corinthians 12:25-26). A marathon runner hangs his medals around his neck, but it was his legs that won him those awards. Would the legs then complain of unfairness? Of course not! He is one complete person, and the entirety of his body enjoys the glory of his win. This is the basic concept that forms the foundation for love in unity.

It is natural for people to express the same acts of sympathy and empathy towards a shared experience. There is no complex theory behind this reaction, nor is there a need for one. When a hand is injured, the brain receives a signal to feel pain and activates various defense mechanisms, and the person would take action to tend to the hurt hand. The leg, under normal circumstances, would not be laughing at the hand and doing nothing. It would rush into action to carry the person towards help. Such coordinated effort is critical for a person's safety and well-being. Modern medicine has shown us that leprosy, while a terrible disease, does not kill a person directly. Instead, it incapacitates the nerves' ability to feel sensations, so that the patients would not be immediately aware and respond even if they had lost a limb to injury, thus endangering themselves unknowingly.

"Compassion" is a concept in Buddhism, which sees it as a composite of love and sympathy. In Buddhist teachings, the greatest love is love shared with all living beings, and the greatest act of sympathy is to deliver all living beings from the cycle of suffering. This meant to desire the happiness of all living beings and to want to

save them from suffering whenever it is encountered, as in the Buddhist saying, “The hunger of others is my hunger, and the drowning of others as me drowning”. A leper in the previous example who has no feelings in his limbs cannot even feel his own pain and injuries, let alone that of others?

It is a historical fact that collectively, Christians were and still are active in promoting acts of love and sympathy that have benefitted the world much, especially for fellow believers. However, there is no shortage of individual Christians who have lost their love and sympathy for others, “Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold,” (Matthew 24:12). We have all heard of people being cheated for doing good and lose their faith in others because their love was abused and not reciprocated. Another reason for the loss is inaction, when one does not perform acts of love and sympathy for a long time, one loses the will or ability to do so. The Bible tells us about the sin of omission: “If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn’t do it, it is sin for them.” (James 4:17). All sins share one common characteristic – the gradual loss of conscience in the heart, like those who have become numb to pain because their hearts have been “seared as with a hot iron” (1 Timothy 4:2). The sin of omission leads to a hardened heart. When grief, apathy, and disappointment kills all love in the heart, it is the person himself who suffers the most.

True love and sympathy is expressed in action. Simply feeling loving or sympathetic but doing nothing to help will eventually extinguish all traces of love in a person. The only thing needed for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing. Thus, we need to put our good thoughts and feelings into action, and our actions must be guided by the correct mindset. The will and the action are inseparable just as the soul and body are one, “As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.” (James 2:26). We cannot see the soul but can infer its existence from the body’s actions. Different behaviour also reflect what sort of a soul one has, which determines his true qualities as a human being

The Fundamental Characteristics

What should a believer’s heart be like? There are four characteristics to have:

1. Sharing the Same Ideals

This means believers must share the same ideals of the new life they received from Christ. They ought to commit themselves to Christ as living offerings“ and be “transformed in heart and mind” so they can live for Christ and know His will. This means to “be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.” (Romans 12:12)

Once upon a time, a man paid a visit to a wise sage. Upon seeing him, the sage pointed at him and loudly asked: “why did you bring so many people with you?” The confused man turned around and saw nobody. The sage was actually referring to the influences of many different people that he had absorbed into his thoughts, through listening to their speeches or reading their works. All these influences became a baggage weighing down his mind. It is thus just as important to know how to forget certain things as it is to learn and memorise others. Christians do not simply seek salvation for themselves. They must also organise their thoughts and knowledge to align and unite with the fellowship. By the power of God’s word, Paul helps fellow believers to free themselves of their mental bondage, to: “...take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.” (2 Corinthians 10:5). It is saddening to see that many Christians who have received Christ for many years were still held back from following God’s will by the old pagan beliefs and practices that they had picked up in the past.

2. Sharing the Same Love

This is to identify with others emotionally, not only to people, but for other matters as well, so that we all love and support the same good things. The truth is the foundation for love, “because of the truth, which lives in us and will be with us forever” (John 2:2). Were we not saved to love the same Lord Jesus Christ, we would only have fragile carnal love born solely from worldly emotions which does not follow any standards and does not last. In an orchestra, each member must play their instrument in harmony with the whole according to the conductor’s directions. If

everyone played by their own rhythm, the group would not be able to produce beautiful musical performances. Likewise, we all look towards Jesus Christ, our “pioneer and perfecter of faith” (Hebrews 12:2), as our conductor of love.

The amazing love of friendship between David and Jonathan was a wonderful example. Saul could never understand Jonathan’s love for David. In fact, it was unbearable for him. He angrily told Jonathan: “You son of a perverse and rebellious woman! Don’t I know that you have sided with the son of Jesse to your own shame and to the shame of the mother who bore you? As long as the son of Jesse lives on this earth, neither you nor your kingdom will be established. Now send someone to bring him to me, for he must die!” (1 Samuel 20:30-31). Jonathan did not seek to preserve himself nor his inheritance of Saul’s kingdom. He was of one heart with David and that angered Saul, who wanted to build a family dynasty. He felt that his son had lost his mind and did not care about the continued success of their family and thus had to be eliminated. David and Jonathan was of the same loving mind for the good of their nation. David had the opportunity to slay Saul but stayed his hand because he was concerned for the kingdom of God and God’s name and glory. This kind of shared love for a selfless good is beautiful and necessary for harmony and success.

3. Sharing the Same Mind and Spirit

Christians are “united with the Lord” and “is one with Him in spirit.” (1 Corinthians 6:17). Thus it is natural that fellow believers would share a common mind and spirit, “For through Him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.” (Ephesians 2:18). Paul shares the “same Holy Spirit” and walks in the “same footsteps” as his co-workers (2 Corinthians 12:18), for “do two walk together unless they have agreed to do so?” (Amos 3:3). Thus, sharing in the same spirit is the foundation for co-workers to work together. God is almighty – none can oppose His will, but astonishingly, He chose to be of one heart with His children and agree with their prayers. Jesus told His disciples: “Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.” (Matthew 18:19). Paul encouraged the squabbling Corinthian church to “strive for full restoration, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you.” (2 Corinthians 13:11). In this fallen world, very few things can please God, but Psalm 133:1 reminds us: “How good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity!”. God is pleased when His children are of one united heart.

4. Sharing the Same Will and United in One Purpose

Having the same direction and purpose is an invaluable quality for a fellowship! Christians were not called to run about blindly with no direction (ref. 1 Corinthians 9:27), both as a group and as individuals. We must set our direction and not be swept about by trends and times. In fact, we ought to lead the times and give direction to our generation. Sin tries to hold us in bondage and turn us into confused lost sheep: “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.” (Isaiah 53:6). As followers of Christ, we follow the light of the world and no longer “walk in darkness” as we have the “light of life” (John 8:12). We must share this with others “to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in Christ.” (Acts 26:18).

The goal of the Church in this world is to fulfill His Great Commission by testifying for and bringing glory to His name. Evangelism is to “bring the Gospel to all peoples” so that they can become Christ’s disciples, “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” (Matthew 28:19-20). Christians do not have personal ambitions or self-centred directions to lead others to themselves, but to lead them to Christ. This is the only hope in Paul’s heart. He expressed that this is all that is needed for him to have joy and comfort in his heart. What a magnificent will and purpose! He did not pursue his personal success, fame, power, or wealth, and only wishes to see the Church grow in God’s love.

The Path to Betterment

How do we grow in the love of Christ? Simply put, there are two don'ts and two do's: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others." (Philippians 2:3-4)

1. Do Not Form Cliques

Humans tend to gravitate towards others who identify with the same things, so that there can be common topics and compatible views. This leads to the "us" vs "them" mentality. This is quite natural and is not really a mistake, but we need to cleanse it with the fires of the Holy Spirit so that those who are together in the Lord are as one body, sharing the same Holy Spirit, promises, salvation, and kingdom (ref. Ephesians 2:18-19) and identifying with the will of the Lord as our common direction.

Within large cliques, there tend to be several smaller ones who pursue their own agenda. When there are gains to be had, conflicts would arise. In the Corinthian church, people were taking sides and proclaiming: "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ." Paul pointed out to them that this was not right: "Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul?" (1 Corinthians 1:12-13).

Only Christ had died for us on the cross and His resurrection completed our salvation. No one else aside from Christ can be our saviour, and we were baptised in His name. Not only must we not declare that we "belong to so and so", we must also refrain from claiming that we are the only ones who belong to Christ and discount other believers. Such behaviour is a mark of cults who twist the Gospel.

Paul then said of those who boast of their affiliation to renowned people, "Are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere humans?" (1 Corinthians 3:3-4). That is not in harmony with the character of Christ – some people claim to be spiritual and enjoyed praising and talking about certain famous individuals. They have effectively formed a clique outside the body of Christ and identified themselves with a different spiritual leader, a sure sign of attachment to the flesh. After a person is born, he soon acquires personal awareness and goes through the process of socialisation. The person starts to differentiate between "me/us" and "them". There is nothing wrong with this development, but it becomes problematic when the line defining "us" and "them" is used to separate other believers in the body of Christ.

2. Do Not Chase After Vain Glory

Vanity is a property applicable to things that are unreal, impractical, transient, and does not come from the eternal God. It happens when one decides to usurp the position of leadership and glory from the Lord. They want power but not responsibility for themselves and defy God's sovereignty. The Bible reminds us: "It is not good to eat too much honey, nor is it honourable to search out matters that are too deep." (Proverbs 25:27). Humans have a natural inclination to flock towards vain power and glory like bees to honey.

A spiritual leader who was tempted several times by the devil managed to shrug off the disturbances and remain focused on his prayers and meditation. That was until the devil whispered into his ears: "Your co-worker has been appointed as the bishop!". That was when he snapped out of his prayer and asked, "Why wasn't it me that was appointed?" Even those who express disdain for worldly position could still lust after spiritual titles. Simon Magus, the sorcerer, attempted to purchase the gifts of the Holy Spirit with money (ref. Acts 8:9-24). During the middle ages, the Roman Catholic Church named the rampant sin of transacting in spiritual titles and benefits "simony" after him. Unfortunately, Simon's "descendants" were numerous and continues to plague the Church till this day. Only by serving God with a pure heart can we truly receive praise that is not from other people, but from God (Romans 2:29) and be crowned with a crown that truly lasts forever (1 Corinthians 9:25, 1 Peter 5:4, 2 Timothy 4:8).

3. Regard Others As Better Than Oneself

Confucius advised his students to avoid befriending inferiors. Wouldn't that make their pool of potential friends very small? Interestingly, one of the strengths of

Confucius was his eye for talent in others. The ability to recognise flaws in others does not make one a sage. Instead, it is a sign of an unwell mind. Confucius wrote in his analects: "In a trio, there is definitely one who can teach me something. Enlighten yourself with their wisdom and correct yourself if you share their flaws." This is to say that when one associates with others, one ought to learn from their strengths and change oneself if one has similar weaknesses as them. These are words of great wisdom worthy of our reflection. If Confucius could discern the good in others, then we should have no trouble doing the same with God's guidance. We just need to know how to tell the difference.

Looking down on others is a signature flaw of the Pharisees. Refusing to admit that someone else is better than oneself, or actually being incapable of seeing others' strengths is a serious spiritual affliction. We lose many potential role models to emulate and improve ourselves. Despise for others is also often the cause of conflict.

Martin Luther (1483-1546) was a religious revolutionary raised by the Lord. John Calvin (1509-1564) was a second-generation leader of the reformatory revolution Luther started. He served in Geneva and French-speaking territories and had never met Luther all his life. Luther was very impressed with Calvin's analytical and persuasive ability after reading his works. He felt Calvin's essays could make God's truth clearer for readers to understand and solve many conflicts in the Church. Calvin, too, had much respect for Luther. There were many who regarded Luther to be stubborn and bordering on being barbaric in his choice of words. Calvin was of course familiar with how Luther wrote, and he said: "I will still consider Martin Luther a great servant of God even if he calls me the devil to my face!" This is a good example of people who can see past the surface to recognise the true strength of others.

George Whitefield (1714-1770), one of the founders of the modern evangelical movement, is an early and strong proponent of open-air gospel rallies. He was introduced to Christianity by John Wesley (1703-1791) and respected Wesley his entire life. Even though the two parted ways due to differences in doctrinal views, they continued to hold high regard for each other. Whitefield passed away before Wesley, and when asked if he would encounter him again in heaven, Wesley replied: "Of course I won't meet him! He would be in a position much closer to the Lord's throne than me." Of course, everyone has their weaknesses and flaws, but to be able to see the good and strength in others is to be able to look at things from alternative angles. If we do not recognise the good in others who are better, we will never be able to truly intercede for them in prayer. The ability to recognise that others are better than ourselves is also a sign of growing in love, and united the Church, bringing the community of believers towards revival.

4. Be Concerned About Other's Needs

There is nothing unusual about looking after oneself and it is not wrong to do so. But it is an entirely different matter if one only looked after oneself to the exclusion of others. When we know what is right but refuse to do it, that is when evil starts to breed in our lives. Looking after others inevitably requires sacrificing something for ourselves, whereas looking exclusively after ourselves is the opposite. We often have 1,001 excuses for refusing to "rescue those being led away to death" or "hold back those staggering toward slaughter." (cf. Proverbs 24:11-12). We must know that such selfishness is something which does not please God, who knows our hearts.

Ironically, selfishness is actually a form of love. It is a narrow love that focuses only on oneself. On the most positive note, selfishness is a sign of immaturity, just like how new-born babies are only aware of their own needs. In a society of adults, such people would find it hard to survive and would be disliked wherever they went. Oddly enough, a lot of people and even Christians are stuck in such a situation where they can only see themselves.

The recent New Age Movement teaches such a flawed concept. They advised their adherents to love themselves before others – and claimed that this was Jesus' teaching! Isn't that strange? To support their claims, they would cite Mark 12:28-31 and Matthew 22:37-40 where Jesus told the teachers of the law and His disciples: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your

mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' "See? How could you love others like yourself if you did not love yourself first?" They would argue. It is clear that that had misinterpreted the Lord's words. Jesus was explaining two commandments, not three. The third that they imagined, to love oneself first, was natural human behaviour and did not have to be taught, and thus could be seen as the devil trying to twist God's teachings.

The Bible warned us that there will be perilous days in the end times: "But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, 4 treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God." (2 Timothy 3:1-4). By this point, the people's focus would be entirely on three things: themselves, money, and debauchery (in the original text, they have turned into self-lovers, money-lovers, and debauchery-lovers). How pitiable it is to live like this! Let us pray for God to prevent His children from ever coming to such a dangerous state and help them to see the needs of others and render their help.

Imagine a burning mansion with many people inside who need to be rescued. The people outside would be divided between two different mindsets: the self-preserving ones who would just watch from afar and hope that the fire would burn more fiercely to give them a good show, and those who care about others and have sympathy for others' plight, would not hesitate to do their part to bravely fight the fire and save the trapped victims.

Mordecai's words to Esther is a golden truth that we ought to consider even today: "Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:13-14). Mordecai was saying that: 1. We must know God has put plans in place according to His will. We cannot claim any credit for success nor stay out of the matter. 2. The devil does not play favourites with the believers. No one is safe from his machinations and we must stay united to overcome him. 3. We must think and act in unity, and help one another, because what affects one affects all. 4. We must grab the opportunity to demonstrate our love in action instead of waiting for someone else to do it. Even today, Christians like us must be aware of these principles that Mordecai revealed to Esther. Caring for the needs of others would turn any crisis in the Church into a new opportunity for revival.

Role Models of Love

“In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to His own advantage; rather, He made Himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to death - even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2:5-8).

We all have heard someone tell us: “What is a good person? Whoever treats me well is a good person!” Such words display scepticism towards of the state of the world but are no doubt true in some way. Most people in this world would think like this. Moreover, it is difficult to give a definition to what makes a person “good”.

The more beautiful something is, the harder it is to portray. We all know that beauty is hard to define, even though we often exclaim “wow, how beautiful!” when we see something nice. Beauty, like goodness, is difficult to define in absolute terms. The Bible tells us God is love: “This is how God showed His love among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him.” (1 John 4:8-9). “” (John 1:18). “No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is Himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made Him known.” (John 1:18).

Love is a concept that needs an object of affection for it to be expressed. How do we demonstrate that God is love? God loves the world – we are the object of His love. God’s act of love was sending His only begotten Son Jesus Christ to our world. Mankind “were dead in your transgressions and sins” (Ephesians 2:1) and needs to be liberated from the power of death. Only through Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross for our sins and His resurrection as the first fruit of salvation can we be so saved. Thus, God sacrificed His beloved Son to fulfill salvation for us. Those who believed would become His children and lead many other children (other believers) into God’s glory. This was the manifestation of God’s boundless love. There were many who used other people to experiment with their theories and policies, but would never think of taking the lead to test their ideas on themselves. However, God was not like them. In His love and through Jesus Christ, He set a role model for us: “To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.” (1 Peter 2:21). Theories do not prove or demonstrate anything, but tangible role models are able to show us the truth by personal example. This is what the Incarnation was about.

The Heart of a Loving Person

Role models lead by action, and actions must be driven by the heart. To emulate Jesus’ actions, we must first emulate His heart. The heart of Christ was about love. Jesus described Himself as “gentle and humble in heart” (Matthew 10:29), but He was not here to show us how humble He was. Humility was only part of the method or process in delivering His teachings. Without love, humility is imperfect, but with love humility comes naturally. When faced with others who are superior in ability or intellect, one might have no choice but to act humbly. Such humility stems from objective fact and has nothing to do with love. On the other hand, a person of high status who kneels at the bedside of the sick to pray for them, who serves his servants and even enemies, does not do so because the other party was superior to them in status, nor were these people more capable or wise, but because of humility born from love.

This brings us to the scene where the Lord washed the feet of His disciples: ““You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet.” (John 13:1-17). Was this true humility? Yes indeed, and great is such humility. Jesus Christ set Himself as a role model for love and humility. He wants the disciples, including today’s believers like you and I, to follow the example He set and demonstrate God’s amazing long-lasting and all-encompassing love. He even washed the feet of Judas, whom He knew was destined to betray Him!

There is nothing to shout about when servants serve their master, because that is their duty, as defined by the word "servant". On the other hand, when the glorious Lord, the beloved rabbi of the disciples, serves His servants, sinners, and enemies, is something to be amazed about. This is the true essence of the Gospel, the manifestation of a humility that could only come from love. Christ bore the "image of God" because he is equally glorious and magnificent as God the Father, having the very same divine nature. That is to say, He is God. He had proclaimed that "I and the Father are one." (John 10:30). The Jewish teachers took hold of these words and accused Him of blasphemy. Arianism and similar cults refused to acknowledge the nature of Christ as co-equal to God ("*homo-ousios*"). They claimed that Christ's nature was only "similar" ("*homoi-ousios*") to God, being a "lesser" deity. The acknowledgement of Christ's full divinity is the key to salvation, the thin line that separates redemption and eternal damnation and true believers from cultists.

Jesus Christ "did not consider equality with God something to be used to His own advantage". "Advantage" in this case referred to seizing control and possession (*harpagmos*). In pagan culture, it was unimaginable for anyone to willingly relinquish power and glory. Aging rulers would retain their stranglehold on power, with the rulership becoming more outdated or corrupted the longer they stayed, until they passed away or are overthrown,

Even the Olympian gods in classic Greek mythology were usurpers who seized power from their despotic predecessors, the Titans, who ruled the universe with an iron fist before them. The leader of the Titans was Cronus, known as Saturn in Roman mythology, the son of Uranus, god of the sky. After Zeus, king of the Olympians, assumed his rulership following The Titans' defeat, he established his own tyrannical rule over his siblings and fellow Olympians through violence and the power of his weapon, the thunderbolts. How similar this was to political struggles on earth!

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is beyond human imagination. He does not despise the worthlessness of fallen humanity just because He has divine glory equal to God. In the vast cosmos that God created, humans and the planet earth are but insignificant specks of dust: "Surely the nations are like a drop in a bucket; they are regarded as dust on the scales... Before Him all the nations are as nothing; they are regarded by him as worthless and less than nothing." (Isaiah 40:15, 17). Even though we have next to no value, God "...sits enthroned on high, who stoops down to look on the heavens and the earth?" (Psalm 113:5-6) and observes the needs of mankind. This demonstrates God's amazing humility, that He monitors and cares for the unclean and sinful people in His mercy and reaches out to save them.

Christ's Humility

The mercy of Christ led Him to humble (*Tapeinosis*) Himself and empty (*Kenosis*) Himself of His heavenly glory to come and live among us. A person who had never enjoyed wealth would never truly know the pain of falling into poverty. In the same vein, because humanity did not have the same divine glory as Christ did before He came to us, we would never be able to understand how painful it was for Him to humble Himself and take the image of a man. It is impossible for us to truly know how great the sacrifice He made was. Charles Wesley (1707-1788), celebrated English hymnist, expressed his amazement for God's mercy and praised this incredible love in his hymn: "And Can It Be That I Should Gain?".

"He left His Father's throne above,
So free, so infinite His grace;
Emptied Himself of all but love
And bled for Adam's helpless race;
'Tis mercy all, immense and free;
For, O my God, it found out me.

Zechariah, filled with the Holy Spirit, prophesied of the birth of the Son of God to our world: "because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace." (Luke 1:78-79). We were not saved because we deserved to be, but because of God's "tender mercy". This was one of the earliest examples of a hymn in the New Testament and described how Christ

humbled Himself in the Incarnation so He could come amongst us and redeem us from our sins. In His humility, he gave up His divine glory and took the image of a servant. In those ancient days, servants and slaves were expected to unquestioningly obey their masters. As the sole authority who makes the law, Christ lowered Himself to instead come under the law, "to take the image of a servant", so that the law was made complete. During this time, He allowed Himself to be temporarily "burdened by a yoke of slavery." (Galatians 5:1).

English poet George Herbert (1593-1633) wrote a poem, "Love", that depicted how Christ allowed Himself to become our servant for the sake of love:

Love bade me welcome.
Yet my soul drew back, Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack,
From my first entrance in, Drew nearer to me,
sweetly questioning, If I lacked any thing.
A guest, I answered, worthy to be here:
Love said, You shall be he.
I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my dear, I cannot look on thee.
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
Who made the eyes but I?
Truth Lord, but I have marred them:
let my shame, Go where it doth deserve.
And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?
My dear, then I will serve.
You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:
So I did sit and eat.

The poem took reference from Luke 12:37, "he will dress himself to serve, will have them recline at the table and will come and wait on them.". The most glorious Lord, above all His creation, became a man for the sake of love. He told us: "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10:45). His love was made manifest in His humility, when He was willing to lower Himself to serve sinners. The Bible tells us: "I will bring him near and he will come close to Me - for who is he who will devote himself to be close to Me?" declares the Lord." (Jeremiah 30:21).

To Become the Image of Man

The identity of Christ in the Incarnation was one of a "servant". Not only did He lower His status by becoming a servant, He also lowered His image by becoming "man". We are all humans and so were our ancestors. Everyone we know around us are likewise human beings. Thus, we fail to comprehend what it is like for God to become man with our limit experiences, knowledge, and cognition. We would never know how much He had to humble Himself when the infinite God put on the image of a finite mortal man.

He went through the entire process of human conception, from a foetus, to when He was born as a baby, till He grew up like a normal man. As God, He has infinite power, but now He was limited by human stamina and ability, and subject to fatigue, hunger, and other weaknesses. The eternal and omnipresent God allowed Himself to be subject to the limits and influence of time and space. He no longer could be in several places at once and had to walk, take a boat, or ride a donkey to cover the distances to reach His destinations. His body was vulnerable to the climate of the changing seasons, and He was tempted in the flesh like all of us: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are - yet He did not sin." (Hebrews 4:15).

Imagine an ugly, small, weak, and stinky bug that you observe daily. Such bugs are short-lived, hatching in the morning and often not living long enough to see the sunset. They lead a confused lives and lack any real understanding of the surroundings, and hardly have any memories worth keeping in their short lifespan. Imagine again that you suddenly become one of these bugs one day (who, in their tiny minds, think very highly of themselves), living amongst their kind and community. How shameful and humbling it would be! How would you tolerate living

this way? This was exactly what Jesus experienced when He came to this world. The only difference was that being God, His descension into the image of man was an even steeper drop than man becoming bug. How can we still have the pride to harbour obsession for personal glory? We ought to be thankful for the grace we have received, as what the psalmist David said: “what is mankind that You are mindful of them, human beings that You care for them?” (Psalm 8:4). If we really understood the sacrifice Jesus made to save us, we would all be prostrating and laying down our crowns before the throne of God like the twenty-four elders in heaven, worshipping and praising Him forever (Revelation 4:10-11). All the grace that came upon us through the Incarnation flowed from the unfathomable love of God, beyond our understanding and imagination.

He Humbled Himself

Everybody wants to be respected and to achieve great things in life, but the Lord chose the opposite path for the salvation of mankind. He did not choose to be born in the royal palace or a noble family. In fact, people were not even aware that genealogically, He was a direct descendant of King David! He did not choose to be born as a Roman conqueror but became a conquered Jew who did not even have a nation to call His own. He did not become a celebrity living in Jerusalem or a high-ranking priest (ref. Hebrews 7:14). Instead, He chose to be born in the then impoverished and remote city of Nazareth in Galilee. Just listen to what people say when they here of His birthplace: “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” (John 1:46). Academically, people were surprised at His knowledge as He was not formally schooled: “How did this man get such learning without having been taught?” (John 7:15) while professionally, they doubted Him as no prophets were ever produced in Galilee: “Are you from Galilee, too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee.” (John 7:52). In their bid to mock and dismiss Him, they had even ignored the fact that the prophet Jonah was in fact born in Galilee! To then, Jesus was nothing more than a carpenter’s son who had succeeded His father’s trade (Matthew 13:55, Mark 6:3).

The Jews who did not believe Him told Him: “We are not illegitimate children” (John 8:41). They were really implying something more insidious, a scandalous doubt cast over the Lord’s earthly conception. John in particular emphasised the Incarnation: “In the beginning there was the Word”. He dutifully recorded the hurtful words and actions of those who opposed the incarnated Lord to give us a glimpse of the suffering that Christ went through. All this humility was part of the sacrifices He made for loving us, as the prophet described: “He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to Him, nothing in His appearance that we should desire Him. He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces He was despised, and we held Him in low esteem.” (Isaiah 53:2-3)

Willing Submission

As the master and creator of the universe, God was respected and obeyed by all creation: “The Lord has established His throne in heaven, and His kingdom rules over all... Praise the Lord, all His heavenly hosts, you his servants who do his will.” (Psalm 103:19-21) and “Let all God’s angels worship Him... He makes his angels spirits, and His servants flames of fire” (Hebrews 1:6-7)

Aside from times when He performed miracles, most of the time when Christ was on earth was lived like any other ordinary person. He too was subject to laws of nature such as hunger. When the devil tempted Him during His fast, He was aware of the need to eat. When asked to leap from a high building, He knew that gravity would cause Him to get hurt. Laughably, the devil actually tried to make Jesus worship him, promising a reward of all the world’s riches! The reason Satan was able to use these things in his temptation of the Lord was because in His incarnated form, He was willingly subject to the laws of nature like any other human and had human needs. By obeying God’s will and not seeking anything other than God, He overcame the devil’s temptation.

Moreover, His “...origins are from of old, from ancient times” (Micah 5:2). The Lord had been around way before Abraham was born (John 8:56). Even though King David addressed Him as Lord in his psalms, He still obeyed His earthly parents. The

very Lord who established the law acted according to it and was circumcised on the 8th day after His birth. He obeyed the rituals of cleansing and made His offerings to the Lord as dictated by the law. When He reached the age of twelve, He travelled to Jerusalem with His parents for the Passover (ref. Luke 2:21-24, 41-42). Even though He was without sin, He received baptism at the river Jordan, to “fulfill all righteousness” required by the law (Matthew 3:15). When He reached maturity at thirty, He began His ministry (Luke 3:23). Although He was the Son of God and the Lord of the Temple, He submitted to the unjust authorities and the religious rules. He paid His taxes (using a coin in the mouth a fish caught by Peter at His instruction) for the maintenance of the temple (Matthew 17:24-27).

During His final moments before the crucifixion, He prayed under immense grief in the garden of Gethsemane, where He “offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save Him from death”, but He ultimately submitted willingly to God’s will and accepted the “bitter cup”: “and, once made perfect, He became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey Him” (Matthew 26:36-46, Hebrews 5:7-9).

How utter and complete His submission to God was! At Gethsemane, He did not resist or protest when He was arrested. Neither did He asked God the Father to send “twelve legions of angels” to rescue Him (Matthew 26:53-54). “He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so He did not open His mouth. By oppression and judgment He was taken away” (Isaiah 53:7-8, Acts 8:33). He submitted to the authorities established by God because of His obedience to God (ref. John 19:10-11). He was judged at the residence of the high priest and before Pontius Pilate and King Herod (Luke 22:54 to 23:25, Matthew 26:57-68) and He put up with all of them in His obedience to God. Peter, who personally witnessed the suffering of Christ, said: “When they hurled their insults at Him, He did not retaliate; when He suffered, He made no threats. Instead, He entrusted Himself to Him who judges justly.” (1 Peter 2:23). It was true submission that Christ had demonstrated.

Unto Death

Jesus submitted to God unto death. His death was not because He had no choice. Not only was it because of His love for humanity, but also because He was willingly submitting to God’s will. Death is an inevitable fact of life, but we cannot view human mortality in the same way as we view Christ’s death. Christ is God, and cannot die, for God is perfect and immutable. Those who can die are not God. The Son of God died only because of His love for us and His submission to God the Father, so that His sacrifice can satisfy the price of justice for God’s righteousness and redeem humanity from God’s wrath. Only a sinless person like the Son of God can fulfill this sacrifice by taking on the image of man, and His role in the plan of salvation cannot be replaced by anyone else, for all of us have fallen to sin. Jesus’s death for sinners is an exchange of “the righteous for the unrighteous” (1 Peter 3:18). The most amazing thing about salvation is that Jesus died not just for people who were righteous, but also those who were undeserving of His grace. This was unlike the common mentality most people have. Christ died for us “when we were still powerless, sinners, and enemies of God” (ref. Romans 5:6-10). Jesus’s love of us and submission to God were unconditional. He loves the unloveable and those who do not know love in a way that far exceeds our expectations and imagination.

He Died on the Cross

We often say it is important that our death is timely and appropriate – to have a certain meaningful place and reason for dying. This has an especially profound meaning when applied to the death of Jesus. Jesus died on the cross, a cruel execution device of the Romans. It was used only against the dastardliest criminals, and Roman citizens were exempt from being subjected to this mode of execution. The Jewish law also described such a death sentence as: “anyone who is hung on a pole is under God’s curse” (Galatians 3:13, Deuteronomy 21:23)

The main charge the Jews had against Jesus was blasphemy, whose penalty according to the law is death by stoning. But because of multiple considerations, the Jewish leaders decided to politicise the matter and get Jesus executed in the Roman method of crucifixion. Researchers have theorised that because trees were common in Palestine, Jesus could possibly have been crucified on a horizontal beam fastened

across a tree trunk to create a makeshift cross. This was why the Bible recorded: "They spit on him and took the staff and struck him on the head again and again." (Matthew 27:30), because He was hung at a height within reach. In this way, the Saviour bore our sins for us and was cursed and insulted in our place. "He himself bore our sins" in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness." (1 Peter 2:24). He Himself was sinless and flawless, the true lamb of the Passover (1 Corinthians 5:7). The Jews had killed the Lord of life in the cruellest and most insulting manner on the day of Passover as destined by God's will. Jesus accepted this plan because of His love for mankind and shed His "precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect." (1 Peter 1:19) on the cross. Those who believed in Him were saved, like what was pre-symbolised in the night before the Exodus – those who smeared the blood of a lamb on their door posts were preserved from the angel of death.

During the Exodus, the Israelites complained incessantly to God because of the tough journey. God sent venomous snakes to attack them – these snakes did not just cause superficial wounds, but also carried deadly poison in their bites. Those who were bitten were sure to die, like the wages of sin that end in death, but God instructed them on the only way to be saved: He told Moses to craft a bronze snake and put it atop a pole. Anyone who was bitten who looked at the bronze snake would be cured. This was pre-symbolic of how those who believed in the crucified Christ would gain eternal life. Thanks be to God, "just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in Him." (John 3:14-16). "This is how God showed His love among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins." (1 John 4:9-10).

The Risen Christ

"Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (Philippians 2:9-11). On the first Pentecost, the disciples received the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and were empowered to witness for the resurrection of the Lord. Soon, Peter was declaring in the temple: "You killed the author of life, but God raised Him from the dead. We are witnesses of this." (Acts 3:15). Death was not supposed to be a part of true life, like what Peter said on Pentecost, "it was impossible for death to keep its hold on Him" (Acts 2:24). The life of Jesus Christ was immortal. Death was a result of sin, and being sinless, death had no power over Christ. Jesus became the first fruit of resurrection. His life did not end in the tomb because He is risen and victorious over death!

C.S. Lewis (1898-1963) described Christ's resurrection as a process of "descend, descend, rise", like a pearl-diver: "One may think of a diver, first reducing himself to nakedness, then glancing in mid-air, then gone with a splash, vanishing rushing down through green and warm water into black and cold water, down through increasing pressure into the deathlike region of ooze and slime and old decay; then up again, back to colour and light, his lungs almost bursting, till suddenly he breaks the surface again, holding in his hand the dripping, precious thing he went down to recover. He and it are both coloured now that they have come up into the light: down below, where it lay colourless in the dark, he lost his colour too". The prized trophy that was recovered, the pearl, was humanity, connected to nature and the universe itself.

God Raised Jesus to the Highest

The Bible clearly states that God exalted Jesus to the highest place. The Bible explains: "What does "He ascended" mean except that He also descended to the lower, earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe." (Ephesians 4:9-10) Peter taught about the death and resurrection of Jesus: "This man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put Him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised Him from the dead, freeing Him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on Him." (Acts 2:23-24), showing that His death was predestined by God's will

and not incidental. His resurrection and ascension to the highest were also all in God's sovereign plans.

Here, it is said that God "exalted" Jesus Christ. We understand little about the mysteries of the Holy Trinity, so we do not know what might have happened if Jesus chose to do the opposite of submitting to God's plan. Such a conjecture is in fact disrespectful to God. However, based on what we already know, that the Son loves mankind and cares about our needs, then His submission to the Father to fulfill our salvation would be the inevitable outcome. God the Father exalted Christ to the highest and raised Him from the grave, placing Him "higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe" so that "the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God." (Romans 8:21). Through this act, God "restores everything" (Acts 3:21). Such is the hope of all saints across the generations and the same hope that we look forward to until this day.

Jesus, Name Above All Names

Peter declared victoriously: "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah." (Acts 2:36). He was telling the people that the Son of God has resumed His original glory in heaven. His name is "the Name above all names" (Kyrios), which was how people in the old testament reverently addressed God and translated as LORD in English. The etymological root of the word Lord was from hlafweard, or loaf-ward, meaning the person who controlled and watched over the bread, or, more bluntly, he who controls our stomachs. In a sense, "Lord" demonstrates power relevant to this world and life. To differentiate it from God's sovereign lordship, it is rendered in all caps, LORD, when used to refer to God.

YHWH (LORD) said to my Adon (Lord): "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet." (Acts 2:34-35, Psalm 110:1). Jesus used this verse to test the Pharisees when He was on earth and to demonstrate His divinity. However, all of them failed the test. He then told them: "Where I go, you cannot come." (John 8:21). When he said: "I and the Father are one.", the Jews did not get what He was telling them and accused Him of blasphemy (John 10:30). In the end, the enemies were left speechless when He was "appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead" (Romans 1:4) and started trying to cover up the truth. Their actions proved that He was indeed God and worthy of the supreme name.

Jesus Christ is Lord

Jesus was call "Saviour" twenty-four times in the New Testament and called "Lord" over 670 times. This showed His sovereignty over all creation and is worshipped and obeyed by them (ref. Hebrews 2:9). For believers, what Christ expects from us is absolute submission of our lives to His sovereignty.

Under the rule of the Roman empire in the first century, the Roman emperor was regarded as the supreme authority regardless of his character or ability. Not satisfied with just being a ruler of humans, they deified themselves and built statues to be worshipped by their citizens and those under Roman rule. Naturally, to call Jesus Lord and refuse to bow to the statues of the emperors was considered contemptuous and disloyal. Under such circumstances, to hold on to one's faith meant to give up on worldly benefits. It was clearly an unwise move that was neither profitable nor advantageous, and no one could make such a sacrifice without being moved by the Holy Spirit: "no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus be cursed," and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit." (1 Corinthians 12:3). The urging of the Holy Spirit is what enables believers to pay such a costly price for their faith, to proclaim their faith before others for the sake of eternal life even if it meant losing their mortal lives. The Bible is clear that "If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved." (Romans 10:9-10). God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead is also God who raises sinners from death into a new and vibrant live (ref. Ephesians 2:1-5). Our new lives all flow forth from the very same Holy Spirit.

Jesus was actually a pretty common name. In the Bible, there were at least twelve persons in the Old Testament with that name and nine in the New Testament. In modern day Latin American countries, there are also many named Jesus (pronounced like *Hai-Su*). However, only one Jesus is the Son of God who incarnated in the image of man. He was born in Bethlehem and referred to as Jesus of Nazareth in His adulthood. He loved mankind, obeyed God, humbled Himself, and sacrificed Himself. God raised Him from the dead and exalted Him to the highest. He became a servant to us in this world, yet He is the most magnificent and glorious Lord, to whom all knees bow and all mouths praise.

Glory to the Heavenly Father

Jesus Christ performed numerous miracles when He was in this world. To human eyes, He was probably an ideal candidate for a position of leadership. If only He were willing to compromise, He could have been adorned with royal purple robes. Yet He was unlike any human. He declared: "I am not seeking glory for myself; but there is one who seeks it, and he is the judge." (John 8:50). A true leader does not seek glory for himself, and a glory-seeker is no true leader, fated to fail even if they assume leadership, as the Lord says: "If I glorify myself, my glory means nothing. My Father, whom you claim as your God, is the one who glorifies me." (John 8:54). Only such mentality allows one to see beyond circumstances and comments to pursue the only essential goal - the glory of God and serving the Lord.

Jesus's miracles were not His ultimate goal. Neither were preaching, healing, and casting out demons. It can even be said that loving others, sacrificing for them, and resurrection were not His true goals either. His one and only true goal was to "bring glory to God the Father". Nowadays, we often try to please people or show off our capabilities to earn fame and glory. A person who is adored and followed by many, and who have performed many acts of love and goodness, is usually considered successfully by human standards. However, the goals of these people had been misplaced. If the motive was not about God, all the good deeds and success would be for naught before God. Pray for God to survey our hearts and help us to emulate Christ with pure motives, to focus on bringing glory to God our heavenly Father.

The very first question in the Shorter Westminster Catechism was "What is the chief end of man?", and the answer was "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever." Jesus did not just explain the truth to us. He left us His personal example for us to emulate, to teach us to glorify God and edify man. "Righteousness goes before Him and prepares the way for His steps." (Psalm 85:13). What amazing love! "He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification." (Romans 4:25). "In bringing many sons and daughters to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he suffered." (Hebrews 2:10)

The Source of All Love

"Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed - not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence - continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill His good purpose." (Philippians 2:12-13). Paul suddenly changed his topic to admonish his audience about submission and the importance of submission in our salvation. Those who believe we are saved by acts or who expect others to submit to themselves might find this verse exceedingly appealing. Is that really what this verse was about? How then do we submit to God? We can see from the subsequent sentence that we not only must emulate Christ's loving submission to God, but to draw on this Christ-like submission to let the Holy Spirit work in us towards our sanctification.

The Work of the Holy Spirit

Those who do not believe in Christ: "followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient." (Ephesians 2:2)

For those who submit to the rule of evil spirits, "The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so." (Romans 8:7), but those who submit to Christ have been reconciled to God and are members of the

kingdom of light. Their new object of loyalty is God and they belong to Him. They "... are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him." (Acts 5:32). Such people listen carefully for God's will and follow Him as His "obedient children" (1 Peter 1:14).

Children are not like business partners, nor is their relationship with God that of teacher and student. It is a relationship of life and spirit, irrevocable and immutable. "The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to son-ship. And by Him we cry, "Abba, Father." (Romans 8:15). Why then does Paul tell us to "continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling"? Fear and trembling can be interpreted from several angles. When a humble human stands before God, who is holy, righteous, authoritative, and sovereign, it is natural for fear and reverence to come from the heart. It can also be a reminder to be cautious and meticulous, and be concerned about the critical commission we received, lest we fail to fulfill our mission. A person touched by grace knows that all He has comes from God. As a steward of God's resources, one must always be fearful of failing in one's duty and strive to perform one's tasks to the best. In another sense, the fear could also be towards punishment if one were judged sinful and unworthy, for "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." It is only natural that a sinful person would have such fear.

To be clear, Paul was not referring to fear of punishment here. "For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God." (Romans 8:14). These people were not unbelieving outsiders but God's children. In this case, why was there still the need to "continue to work out your salvation"? Were they not yet saved?

The word salvation in the Bible does not refer exclusively to our eternal redemption from sin. It can also point towards healing and protection from danger. For example, when Peter said: "Like new-born babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation" (1 Peter 2:2), he was telling new believers to thirst for the word of God and be continually edified in the journey to follow Christ. But why did "salvation" come after "growing up" instead of the other way round? Who starts to become alive only after growing up? Don't we all grow because we are alive? Only when we have life do we grow and growing up is a sign of having life. It shows that we are whole and complete. Paul said that: "for I know that through your prayers and God's provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance." (Philippians 1:19). No one would question Paul's faith in his own salvation. It was obvious that here, he was referring to deliverance from danger and capture. Thus, salvation does not mean only being reborn in the spirit, but also to our process of sanctification to be more like Christ.

Emulating Christ

Rebirth is the beginning of a new life, and is completed immediately, but sanctification is a gradual and lifelong journey. The Westminster Shorter Catechism defines it as: "Sanctification is the work of God's free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness".

In short, sanctification means to be set aside for God. His will is for His elect to "be conformed to the image of his Son" (Romans 8:29). Unfortunately, because of the fallen nature of mankind, we are normally unable to obey what God expects of us. Thus, those who have acquired new life and new character from God must follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit so that they bear a multitude of spiritual fruit and become more and more like Christ.

A "new person" who belongs to God would no longer find enjoyment in the sinful life that leads to death. They seek release from the bondage of sin and the flesh to achieve the true freedom of salvation. From God's perspective, "...we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." (Ephesians 2:10). On the surface, it all seems like human effort, but God is the true director behind the scenes, and the believers are "led by the Spirit of God" (Romans 8:14). God was fulfilling His beautiful work in our lives together with us. From this we can understand that Paul was advising believers to be

cautious and alert about how they act and behave as a person who has received salvation, to live a sanctified life that manifests the image of salvation before others.

Man Shall Not Boast

How then can man still boast about good deeds? To dedicate oneself to good works is part of a Christian's duty, like what Jesus said: "apart from me you can do nothing." (John 15:5). The secret to bearing good fruit is in Christ Himself. Since the age of enlightenment, modern people have only grown disappointed with the illusion of free will – as biological creatures, we are all subject to physiological factors beyond our will to control. Food, sleep, neurological systems, the functionality of our organs, and our affection and senses can all influence our will. In this case, what kind of free will are we even talking about? On top of all these, environmental factors also push our will in different directions. In a social circle for example, those who mix with positive peers tend to become more positive and those who associate with negative peers pick up their negative behaviour. Our education and learned habits determine our personality, cultural inclinations, and thought patterns to a good extent. All these meant humans would never have truly independent free will. Can Lazarus, rotting in his grave and wrapped tightly in his shroud, choose by his own free will to come out of the grave and walk? Only when he heard the voice of the Son of God did he live again and was free to choose his actions. The only thing humans can do is to listen to and obey the commands of the Lord. Only then would they be able to break out of their shrouds and remove the stone blocking their tombs and walk out into the light (ref. John 11:1-44). The Lord's words are spirit and life. They raise the dead from their graves and grant them new life so that they can obey His will from their hearts and fulfill His beautiful plans for them.

A "normal" person, an old creation, relies on carnal wisdom learnt from the world. "Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic."(James 3:15). They do not love God nor other people in His kingdom. Only someone who has the new life in Christ can do so, because: "God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us." (Romans 5:5). They no longer make decisions based around themselves, but always think about God and other people, because the Spirit of God working in them gives them the power to love others.

The life of an "old creation" revolves around constantly grasping and snatching from others, and they perceive such actions as normal. Like Jacob who grasped the heel of Esau at birth, they want to grab everything in the world for themselves. Without the light of the Holy Spirit, they become complacent and pride themselves on these petty achievements. Before Zacchaeus accepted Christ as Lord and Saviour, he was busy with enriching himself through cheating others every day, and he labelled his actions "serving the people". He was probably quite popular in synagogue gatherings for his wealth, but he did not understand what was wrong with his actions. That was until he met Jesus at the entrance to Jericho. He was enlightened by the Lord's acceptance and declared: "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." (Luke 19:1-10). As a chief tax collector, an official position in a high place, what he did in the past was shameful and corrupt, tantamount to theft and robbery. Now, he has repented and admitted he was a "sheep thief", and was willing to repay four times the number of sheep he had stolen (ref. Exodus 22:1, 2 Samuel 12:6). Some might ask him: "why are you doing this?" His reply was probably: "I am a worthless lowlife for stealing from you. Now I shall make amends according to the law with four times of what I have taken and beg for your forgiveness."

Zacchaeus showed us what true repentance was, "Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need." (Ephesians 4:28). Only someone who is contented can understand that they have extras that can be shared with others. We must not keep clawing things towards ourselves, but also think about others who do not have enough. Jesus's love was made manifest from the heart of Zacchaeus through these actions.

God's Transforming Power

The experience of most believers would be enough to show us how fallen and corrupt human nature is. Even after we have accepted Christ, it does not mean that we have become invulnerable to temptation, and we must strive to remain pure for God. In his younger days, St. Augustine (354-430) was known for his talent and eloquence. He could conquer many people with his words, but he could not submit his own heart. He pursued the truth but was often misdirected. It was the grace of God that led the prodigal son back onto the righteous path. The Spirit of God worked in him and made him into a precious and godly vessel suitable for God's use. From then, he dedicated himself to serve the Lord's will and bring blessings to the Church by establishing the foundation for believers to properly understand our faith.

We do not dare to boast about our own success after we have seen God's awesome works. Neither would we want to continue looking up towards other humans. We know the corruption of our human nature and that we were no more than specks of dust, such that we willingly acknowledge: "not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God." (2 Corinthians 3:5). Humans are merely lowly and fragile clay vessels. Paul tells us: "But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us." (2 Corinthians 4:7). When we bow down before God in worship, we would be surprised at His willingness to use worthless vessels like us to be the witnesses to His glorious works as He continues to direct the history of the Church.

Light of the World

"Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, "children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation." Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life." (Philippians 2:14-16). Modern society has convenient transport networks, magnificent skyscrapers, bustling malls and markets, and all sorts of goods and services for every need. However, while the rich and affluent enjoy all these modern benefits, the poor continue to suffer hunger, and many do not even have proper clothes. Nowadays, it is not uncommon to see people lusting after money, going back on promises, betraying friends, and disobeying parents. Morals have been pushed aside for the pursuit of lust and freedom, and promiscuity and homosexuality are becoming more rampant and accepted. This can be said of almost every city. However, this was actually the situation of the Roman empire recorded by Roman historians in the first century!

When Jesus came to this world, He was born in corrupt times and unfairly judged. He was sentenced to die on the cross, but on the third day after He was buried, He rose from the dead and ascended back to heaven. The Holy Spirit then came during Pentecost and the first Church was born. Christians who lived in those days grew in the Lord despite oppression. As sinners who have repented, their behaviour was starkly different from the norm. They did not steal, abstain from evil deeds, did not swear, loved one another, and loved their neighbours. There was no lust, drunkenness, debauchery, and idol worship in their communities. When the other people noticed how they lived, which differed from the typical social norms, "They are surprised that you do not join them in their reckless, wild living, and they heap abuse on you." (1 Peter 4:4). The believers were mocked and maligned and given the name "Christians".

Thus, the Christians did not call themselves as such, but were given the name by non-believers. There was no respect intended when the non-believers so named the children of God. In the Gospels, followers of Christ were usually called "disciples" (ref. Acts 6:1, 11:26) and referred to themselves as "saints" (2 Corinthians 1:1, Romans 12:13, Acts 9:13, 32). Collectively, they were also called "brethren" (1 Corinthians 1:10, Romans 1:13, Acts 1:16) or "those who belonged to the Way" (Acts 9:2). The Jews refused to acknowledge that Jesus was the Christ (i.e. Messiah, the Anointed). They instead called Him a ringleader of the Nazarene sect (Acts 24:5). The followers of Christ were first called Christians in Antioch (Acts 11:26), and was a term coined by gentiles to refer to them. The Bible mentioned the word "Christian" thrice, the other two occasions outside of Antioch were when King Agrippa sarcastically and condescendingly told Paul: "Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?" (Acts 26:28), and when Peter said: "However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name." (1 Peter 4:11-16). This showed that the term was gradually being

subsumed into mainstream use. Peter's words also reminded us of the Lord's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:10-12). It is thus a blessed sign that we belong to the kingdom of heaven if we are being persecuted for our faith.

Set Apart from the World

Christians were meant to be different from other people. Only then can we help others to become like us. God called Jeremiah to be His prophet in a dark and fallen generation and commanded him: "Let this people turn to you, but you must not turn to them." (Jeremiah 15:19). As the beneficiaries of God's grace, God had "opened our eyes and turned us from darkness to light" (ref. Acts 26:28). Thus, we must "live a life worthy of the calling you have received." (Ephesians 4:1).

Christians belong to the light and is not of this dark world, but we were not made to curse those who live in darkness. Our goal is to be separated from the darkness and to help others do so. How can we achieve that? The only way to part darkness is with light. When there is light, darkness would be pushed aside. The history of the world is filled with revolutionaries of all sorts. They accused the people in power, complained about the dire circumstances, and led revolutions against the corrupt establishment. Ironically, like the Chinese saying, "all crows are black", when it was their turn to ascend to power, they repeat or even worsen the very same darkness that they sought to overthrow. Why? Because their motives were not led by light in their hearts and they still lived in darkness. How can one who has not changed himself be able to change others?

Christians are the blessed elect who have the seeds of God's light in them: "You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden." (Matthew 5:14). The purpose of light is to illuminate the darkness and point the way to the destination. Our experience when we were still "old creations" teach us that humans cannot shine on their own. Even if we were to come together in unity, a cluster of darkness just becomes a greater expanse of darkness. Jesus tells us that only He is the light that can light our lives: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." (John 8:12).

The Lord Jesus Christ is the sun, while the Church is like the moon. The moon is only a huge, barren rock that cannot emit light on it's own. The moonlight that we see is reflected light from the sun. The darker the land is at night, the brighter the moon appears, and people love the beautiful light of the full moon. Sometimes, the moon's light becomes dimmer, or completely disappears. That is because the earth's shadow sometimes block the light travelling between the sun and moon. Of course, clouds in the atmosphere can also prevent moonlight from reaching us. The situation of the Church is no different. Cultural and geographical differences, personal emotions, and other factors can become shadows that block the light of the Church and prevent it from reflecting the beauty of Christ, thus reducing or corrupting its influence on the world, which can lead to people becoming disappointed and discouraged by the Church.

The Bible had never tried to hide the flaws of the Church, and neither does it condone these shortcomings. This is the nature of true light – when the sun rises, the moon can sometimes still be visible in the sky, but it would be little more than a pale disc in a corner of the sky that barely seems to shine at all. It is the same when Jesus comes – the sun of righteousness would outshine all else, and all eyes would be turned to Him. When the Church walks in the glorious light of the Lord, it too would be engulfed and hidden in the brightness like the moon under the morning sun.

Arise and Shine

In our current generation, science had advanced our material comforts to a high standard, yet society is breaking down and giving way to moral decadence, a "warped and crooked generation" as the Bible calls it. This is the time when the Church must stand up and shine for the Lord as His blessed people of Zion. "Arise, shine... See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the Lord rises upon you and His glory appears over you." (Isaiah 60:1-2). Christians

must remain upright when everyone else gives in to deception and twisted truths. We must be honest and just, setting good examples in the fallen and rebellious world. We have to keep our paths straight so we cannot be accused. The deeper the darkness is, the brighter we must shine! Love is the most important character of Christians. Love reflects God's nature, signals the presence of His family, and shows others that we are the disciples of the Lord. This is why God's children have to love one another. Complaints often stem from feeling harmed, disadvantaged, or owed and arguments arise from competition, self-righteousness, and personal benefits. In a nutshell, the root of conflict lies in aversion to loss and competition for profit. It was all about "self"!

All these would not happen if we loved one another! This is where Christians differ the most from those of the world. The Son of God was treated most unfairly when He was in this world, but He never complained about His grief and suffering, nor did He argue with others for His own benefit. He "entrusted Himself to Him who judges justly." (1 Peter 2:23). Christians live with good morals not because they want to be called saints or sages, or to receive praise and fame. They do so to "manifest the word of life" from God. They are the witnesses who shine for God in this world.

Prepared for Rejection

The Incarnation did not mean instant fulfilment of Christ's mission – many were still not changed in their hearts and the world remained fallen. "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." (John 1:5). The brightness of the moon is loved by poets and loathed by thieves. Thieves don't care about the beauty of moonlight. What they want are dark, moonless nights that shroud their criminal activities from prying eyes. A dark night is a time of celebration for those who profit from it, because light is what exposes their unsavoury deeds: "Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God." (John 3:19-21)

No matter how the people of the world react to the light we bring, Christians must stand firm in the Lord's commission. Paul knew very well that it was not about the ambitions of Christians that lead to success in God's work, but the presence of the Holy Spirit in believers' hearts. We cannot by ourselves emit the fragrances of the Lord – it comes only from knowing Him personally. Our light comes from God's glory reflected upon us. On our own, we live and act in darkness and give off no light. Thus, we shine for the Lord by the glory of the Lord.

It is not how discerning believers are, that they can perceive minute details in all manner of things, but God the Father who "give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know Him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which He has called you, the riches of His glorious inheritance in His holy people" (Ephesians 1:17-18, 1 Corinthians 2:10-11). It is not how courageous believers are that allows them to evangelise bravely to the crowds, sacrifice themselves to love God and man, or even face martyrdom without fear, but God who "...strengthen you with power through His Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith... being rooted and established in love" (Ephesians 3:16-17). Here, "strengthen you", "dwell in your heart", and "make you" all point to God working through those who belong to Him. Humans are but worthless vessels on their own and ought not to boast about themselves. Such immense and amazing love! Even though we were unworthy, God still chose us to be the vessels to complete His divine works.

Ministering in Love

"As you hold firmly to the word of life. And then I will be able to boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labour in vain. But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. So you too should be glad and rejoice with me." (Philippians 2:16-18). A dedicated artist would invest his entire life in his works of art and make every effort to ensure that they are perfectly crafted. When the artist produces a masterpiece, he would take care of it with his life. This is the key difference between

and artist and an art producer without dedication, and between a true shepherd and a hired hand. Co-workers in the Church take this a step further. The Lord's co-workers pour their entire lives into His work, and do not just regard their ministries as a job or career. They know the object of their service are living people; thus their love and feelings are likewise integrated into their work. Paul told the Corinthian church, "for we are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building." (1 Corinthians 3:9). He does not view the Church as a project or a building property and knows well that the Church is the congregation of God's elect, made up of living people capable of feeling and responding to love. He has high hopes for them. To the Thessalonian church, he said: "Instead, we were like young children among you. Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the Gospel of God but our lives as well." (1 Thessalonians 2:7-8). He also told them: "For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into His kingdom and glory." (1 Thessalonians 2:11-12)

Persevering Love

The essay *Guan Zi* "Quan Xiu" by the military strategist Guan Zhong in the Spring and Autumn period in China wrote: "A ten-year plan is good for growing a tree, but an hundred –year long plan is good for nurturing a person." It taught that nurturing a person is a lifelong endeavour. Thus, the work of the Church is not for short term success but for sustainable growth. It is like parenting - we must not neglect giving our children proper guidance in the right values just to make them happy for now, or they would grow up to become problematic adults. Sadly, this is the problem with modern secular parenting.

Paul's love for the Church is based on God's eternal love. It is not based on human emotion nor aimed at pleasing people. His goal is to prepare believers for "the day of Christ". Working through human ability only creates outcomes that last about as long as a typical human lifespan and would pass in no time. However, servants of the Lord know they are accountable in eternity before Him whom they serve. If they were to be accountable before His throne, they would have to work hard and bring many souls into eternal blessings and everlasting life.

Duke Huan of Qi did not pay any heed to the wars raging across the nations and cared only about his personal creature comforts. He told his officials: "I have food enough for a thousand years, but I probably won't live beyond a hundred. Why wouldn't I enjoy life to the fullest and die a happy man?" Guan Zhong disagreed and advised him that living that way would make his life a sad and wasted one. He explained the acrimonious relationship between the warring states to Duke Huan and told him now was not the time to rest on the laurels. Guan Zhong encouraged him to fulfill his mission in life and do the necessary, and only rest and enjoy the fruit of his labour when the situation was stable (*Guan Zi* "Ba Xing" Ch. 22).

Paul was not interested in doing work that bore flowers without fruit, which were only good to look at and for attracting praises. He wasted tangible fruit, especially first fruit that could be offered on God's altar for His pleasure. As the worker, Paul never saw himself as the one deserving any glory. He only wished to dedicate his life to become one of the many accompanying offerings that glorify God. Offerings were typically accompanied with wine, but Paul willingly spilled his own blood for the Lord, using his life to bear the fruit he offered to the Lord. What a beautiful dedication!

Offerings were made with tangible goods. In the same way, our faith must not be about empty religious slogans. It must be expressed visibly in our lives if we were to make it a fragrant offering to the Lord. Paul willingly and cheerfully put his life on God's altar, and he wishes for his beloved Church to rejoice with him in their connection of love.

Love in Action

"I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you. I have no one else like him, who will show genuine concern for your welfare." (Philippians 2:19-20). In his poem "Musings of Spring", the

great Chinese poet Du Fu wrote: "War beacons have blazed on for three months, and a letter came from home is now worth more than ten thousand gold ingots." Wouldn't that make ink and paper merchants and postmen ludicrously rich? He was of course not saying that writing materials or postage services were literally costing thousands in gold. Family letters in war times were more valuable than gold because of the love and assurance they carried. At the time, the An Lushan Rebellion ravaged the nation and communications between different regions was all but impossible. The lack of communication added to the concern and yearning for one's friends and family. Even though one may also show care and concern for people they did know personally, nothing beats the desire to hear from one's loved ones in such turbulent times. Thus, a letter from his family was what the poet desired the most.

It had been four or five years since Paul was detained in Jerusalem, tried, appealed, and sent to Rome by ship. His separation from the church of Philippi was certainly more than three months! Even though all roads led to Rome and there was no war at the time, long distance travel in those days was often fraught with peril (ref. 2 Corinthians 11:26). Communication means in their time were also not as advanced as what we have now and it took a lot of effort for news to be conveyed across distances, which we would not imagine today. Of course Paul would miss the Church and be full of loving concern in the Lord for their well-being.

A prisoner is isolated from the outside world and rarely has companions. Paul was fortunate that there were several brethren in Christ who were incarcerated with him. In his epistle, he mentioned Timothy and Epaphroditus (Philippians 2:25). Paul had greater tasks for Timothy. Out of his concern for the brethren, he sent Timothy, who had been attending to his needs, to support the church in Philippi. In fact, he hoped in the Lord for him to arrive there sooner! Paul loved the Church far more than he loved himself and wanted Timothy to be with them as soon as possible. Why? He wanted badly to know how they were doing!

What deep and enduring love Paul had for the Church! He loved them even more than family. It was the united love that could only arise from God's household. "that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you" meant that Paul was only cheered after he knew about how the Philippian believers were doing. "Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?" (2 Corinthians 11:28-29). Even in jail, Paul thought of the Church and fellow brethren before himself and was worried for the brethren who were weak in faith. Some might then ask, didn't Paul say: "now I commit you to God and to the word of His grace" (Acts 20:32)? Did he not trust God's grace?

How to Have Both Reliance and Concern

As a matter of fact, trusting in God and committing someone to Him does not contradict with being concerned for the same person. Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-1892) explained the word "commit" as such: "when you have no help, look to God for help. When you have a lot of help, know that God is among your helpers. When you have nothing but God, God is your everything. When you have everything, know that God is also among all that you have." This is to say, no matter what the circumstances are, we must train our eyes upon God.

We must trust God to complete His plans in our lives in His own good time, but we can also show our concern and observe how God fulfils His will. In fact, we should contribute our part to bring God's will to fruition. We "have believed and am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day... Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you - guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us." (2 Timothy 1:12-14). Therefore, trust in God and showing concern for those we have entrusted to Him are not in conflict.

The love of the Lord drives him to demonstrate his concern for the brethren. Timothy, who "will show genuine concern for your welfare", was of one mind with Paul and the best person to send to help the brethren. Paul desires for Timothy to reach the Philippians soon so that he can get news about them and the Church. Timothy, knowing Paul's wishes, would also make haste to return to him with comforting updates. He certainly would not wander off to appreciate the scenery along the way or let his journey be held back by matters of the secular world.

Paul used parallelism to help the reader of his epistle to know that “interests of Jesus Christ” and his “concern for them” was in fact the same matter. The Church is Christ’s earthly body. As its head, Christ watches over it from heaven. Since all believers belong to Christ, then love for the believers and the Church is love for the body of Christ. Pursuing the “interests of Jesus Christ” thus means none other than this.

Paul would never forget how, on his way to Damascus as a non-believer, he threatened the followers of the Lord. His purpose for journeying to Damascus was none other than to persecute the Church. Suddenly, he was surrounded by a light from on high. Paul fell to the ground and heard a voice asking him: “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” (Acts 9:1-5). Even if Paul had encountered Jesus in person, his deeds up till this point would not have amounted to persecuting Him. However, his intent to persecute the Church was tantamount to persecuting Jesus Christ, the head of the Church. If someone gives you a pair of shoes as a gift, does it mean he only loves your feet? Similarly, love and concern for the Church is more than just loving the earthly Church. It is loving the entirety of Jesus Christ, the head of the Church in heaven. This is the only thing we can do on earth today for God.

Life Connections

“But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the Gospel. I hope, therefore, to send him as soon as I see how things go with me. And I am confident in the Lord that I myself will come soon.” (Philippians 2:22-24). Love in Christ is expressed through mutual concern and mutual trust. Timothy received his knowledge of the gospel truth from Paul and was spiritually his “son” in the faith. Paul regarded Timothy as his “true son” (ref. 1 Timothy 1:2, 2 Timothy 1:2). Of course, the father-son relationship is reciprocal and must be upheld by love from both sides.

Christians are not expected to purge themselves of human feelings. Rather, they are expected to cleanse and purify such feelings in the Holy Spirit so that they transcend beyond carnal emotions. Son fathers and sons have no love between them and it is not unheard of for parents and children to kill each other. The spiritual love in Christ exceeds the earthly love of this world. The epistle to the Philippians begins with “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the command of God our Saviour and of Christ Jesus our hope, to Timothy my true son in the faith” (Philippians 1:1). This defines Paul and Timothy’s relationship in the ministry as co-workers, which is also sustained by God’s love. We have all heard of Paul’s epistles, but has anyone ever heard of “Timothy’s epistles”? Although the letters were not written by Timothy, Paul includes him as a co-worker in the love of Christ. He was of one heart and mind with his young co-labourer in the Lord and led the way for Timothy. Paul’s heart-warming mentoring of Timothy is an example for us to follow. He testifies to the strength of Timothy and recommended him to the Church. Nowadays, how often do we hear people making positive references for others? Perhaps this would be a simple way to get the revival of the Church started. It is something that we can practice right away. In his old age, Peter wrote of Mark as “my son Mark” (1 Peter 5:13). This is the same Mark who was the cousin of Barnabas (Colossians 4:10) who deserted Paul and Barnabas at Pamphylia (Acts 15:36-39) and caused Paul and Barnabas to argue and part ways (Acts 15:36-39). God granted a second chance to this young man who gave up half way to turn back to His service, and Paul was deeply impressed by Mark’s ministry in his late years. Not only was Paul’s trust for him restored, he became one of the most beloved co-workers of Paul, referring to him as “helpful to me in my ministry” (2 Timothy 4:11). Mark was also one of the co-workers who journeyed with Paul in the last days of his life. Peter, Barnabas, and Paul must have had a lot of positive influence on Mark for him to have such an amazing transformation, just like how Moses guided Joshua and Samuel, Jonathan’s friendship towards David, and Elijah’s mentorship of Elisha. All these were examples of different types of relationships that brought a positive change to the people involved and prepared them to become future leaders.

The Succession of Ministry

Whether we approach the matter from an ecclesiastical or historical perspective, it is undeniable that nurturing the next generation of leaders is critical for the succession

of the Church. Clearly, Saul was a terrible role model for David, but the way he treated David could still serve as a negative example, so that we do not repeat his mistakes. David was a man who was pleasing to the heart of God, the new leader that God had anointed to succeed the throne of Israel. Despite that, Saul, his father-in-law who was supposed to behave as a fatherly figure to David, was jealous of him and could not tolerate his existence. As the reigning monarch, Saul ought to have rewarded David for winning the war. But Saul was an exception to the rule. When David returned victorious, adorned with praise and glory by the people, Saul allowed himself to be taken over by the evil one. Like a furious demon, Saul lost his senses to envy and behaved as if he were from the enemies' camp. He refused to say a good word about David and treated him terribly. On the other hand, David, God's anointed one, did not challenge Saul for the throne nor try to seize power. Even when he had the chance to dispose of Saul, he spared his life. He put up with Saul's persecution and went into hiding for more than 10 years. David was the perfect example of a candidate for kingship. He had great aspirations but was not ambitious for power. He was upright and courageous but did not act on impulse. When Saul was still able to accommodate him, he served Saul loyally, "humbling himself under God's mighty hand" (ref. 1 Peter 5:6). His loyalty was to his king and his nation installed by God, and when the time came, God lifted him up high.

Leaders must be careful not to breed jealousy of their co-workers and successors. Instead of worrying about being usurped, leaders ought to actively nurture, teach, guide, and support those who demonstrate potential. This was the approach taken by Paul. Timothy, unknown and commanding no respect because of his youth, was highly acclaimed by Paul who encouraged him and recommended him to other co-workers, and even passed the baton of his mission to Timothy. Paul was an outstanding leader – gifted, upright, loving, and appreciated the strengths of his co-workers. He saw that Timothy pursued the interests of Christ and not his own benefit, and knew that Timothy cared for the Church, the body of Christ. Timothy was a faithful co-worker who laboured alongside Paul to spread the good news of salvation and expand the kingdom of the Lord. Such a person was the best candidate to become Paul's proxy and successor.

When Paul learnt that he would soon be released from prison, he sent Timothy to hurry to Philippi to obtain news about the Philippian church and to inform them of his release. He did not ask Timothy to remain in Philippi, but to quickly return with news of the Church, for he himself would be travelling there soon. During those days, transport was not well developed and the distance between Rome and Philippi was quite far. Paul knew that Timothy suffered from gastric problems, but his concern for the Church meant that he could hardly wait for the news to come back to him. Paul could have asked the Church to send any other co-worker to bring him the news, and he himself also told them: "And I am confident in the Lord that I myself will come soon" (Philippians 2:24), but his love for the Church made him feel all the more urgent. This is true love and concern that touches many hearts!

Not long ago, I paid a visit to a church that sent out many missionaries. The church has a mailbox dedicated to missionaries, and church members were encouraged to write letters of support to send to the missionaries. The addresses of various missionaries and an ample supply of stamps were made available next to the mailbox. What a well-organised way to express their love and concern for co-workers! Pioneer missionaries once described their ministry as miners descending into the dark pits, and the churches were the partners holding their safety rope. This was a very appropriate analogy, as we must remain alert and ensure that the "safety rope" of prayers and funding support does not "snap" and leave the missionaries stranded, nor must we leave the rope unattended. Once in a while, we also need to send vibrations along the rope to the missionaries so that knew we were still with them and they were not alone – which means to keep in touch often.

Thanks be to God; we now enjoy many modern conveniences that were not available during Paul's time. However, we must still continue to emulate Paul's heart of concern. Concern for one another can help us overcome many perils and obstacles, while indifference within the Church can become the greatest barrier to ministry. News from the gospel fields sent by the missionaries is also important. It carries a special value for the Church, helping to encourage and edify fellow believers with the testimonies. Missionaries must thus avoid viewing report writing as a burden – some have even shared that they sometimes feel tempted to just pad the reports with extra

words or fabricated stories. In the commercialised world today, statistics and numbers have become a heavy burden even for ministry co-workers. Many struggled just to produce numerical results to fulfill work requirements. Some ministry sponsors may even tie the amount of funding they give to the ministry statistics, as if they were business investors seeking a return, or insist that their name or brand must be featured in the reports and publicity materials. Such expectations are all misguided – what missionaries need are love and support for them to sustain their work. Paul does not rest or take holidays, but neither does he write ministry reports for the Philippian church. Whenever he sent news to them or asked for updates, he was doing it out of a much more noble reason – his love for the brethren.

Accommodate One Another

“But I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, co-worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs. For he longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill. Indeed he was ill, and almost died. But God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, to spare me sorrow upon sorrow. Therefore I am all the more eager to send him, so that when you see him again you may be glad and I may have less anxiety.” (Philippians 2:25-28).

Paul expressed that it was “necessary to send back Epaphroditus” to the brethren as he had recovered from illness. This was an especially good reason for sending him back – because the brethren were worried and his return would ease their concerns for his well-being and bring them joy. If you find this reasoning odd, there is something even stranger – Epaphroditus was not concerned about being stuck in a foreign place when he fell sick, nor was he even worried about his own sickness. All he was concerned about was worrying the Church when they knew he had taken ill. That is to say, he would rather bear the suffering himself than burden others with worry for his condition.

When children fall sick, they tend to make sure that everybody knew. Sometimes, their acting goes out of proportion just so they could catch the adults’ attention. Adults, on the other hand, usually keep their sickness to themselves – not because they were stoic, but because they did not want to make others worried. Such a mindset is not common amongst most people. To understand why Paul and Epaphroditus thought this way, we must understand the deep love and concern they hold for the brethren and vice versa.

Epaphroditus was a missionary from the Philippian church. He was tasked with bringing money to Paul and his co-workers to fund their needs. In those days, very few Christians were well-to-do and many were in fact living on the edge of poverty (ref. 1 Corinthians 1:26-28, 2 Corinthians 8:1-5). Fortunately, they were not so poor that they could not even spare a little for others, and they were morally upright even though they had little. They willingly gave to the ministry’s needs because they were compelled by the power of God’s love. This was something that outsiders would not be able to easily fathom.

By common logic, members of a poor church would most probably live like beggars and go around asking for alms. Yet Paul appeared to live in relative comfort, such that even the Roman governor Felix “was hoping that Paul would offer him a bribe” (Acts 24:26). Paul was of course not one to resort to bribery, but Felix, deducing from his experience as a seasoned official, thought that Paul was a rich man based on his appearance. Later, Epaphroditus brought money for Paul and the ministry. Did that make him a wealthy man then? Certainly not – he did not act all high and mighty and order Paul and the co-workers around just because he brought them much needed funds. He humbly stayed by Paul’s side and attended to his needs and served together with Paul as soldiers of the Gospel.

Even though Paul was a respected leader and an apostle of Christ, he did not care only about spiritual matters. He cared for his unwell colleagues with all his heart and was gravely worried for Epaphroditus’s health. Because of this personal experience, Paul was able to petition God for His mercy and healing. When Epaphroditus finally got well, Paul was able to put down the burden that weighed down his spirit. He thanked God for His mercy and healing upon the sick, and for the people caring for

the sick ones. In doing so, Paul demonstrated the love between members of the body of Christ.

Paul experienced the connection between brethren in Christ through caring for Epaphroditus and knew he was worried about the Philippian believers, who were his family in the Lord. Paul himself also got worried about how the Philippians were doing, so he told them: "it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus" and "I am all the more eager to send him". He knew that the brethren would only be relieved after seeing Epaphroditus before them, healthy and well. Only his return could untie the knot entangling their hearts and turn their sorrow into joy.

But, if Epaphroditus were gone, who would care for the elderly Paul who would be all alone? Paul would most certainly have told him: "Go without worry. Let the brethren in church see that you are well. I would be fine by myself!" Like his name implies, Epaphroditus was a beloved and likeable co-worker of Paul. He was trusted by the Church and sent to bring their aid to Paul and to look after him. When they heard that he had fallen sick, they were concerned and worried for him. Such a person is definitely not a "persona-non-grata" who no one welcomed. They would all be longing and happy to see him return because of his good character. I hope to see more of such people in our churches and for our brethren to nurture such love and concern for one another.

Love, Care, and Respect

"So then, welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honour people like him, because he almost died for the work of Christ. He risked his life to make up for the help you yourselves could not give me." (Philippians 2:29-30)

The ancient Romans held bravery in the highest regard, followed by eloquence. Warriors who slew many enemies and conquered new lands in major wars would be honoured when they returned victorious (*Triumphus*). They would display their captives and march in a grand procession along the streets to the cheer and celebration of the people until they reached the senate and were pelted with fragrant flowers along the way. The victorious general would be crowned with golden laurels and dressed in purple robes. Even those who won smaller victories would be ceremoniously welcomed home (*Ovatio*), receiving the praises and cheers of the people while they rode their horses down the streets. Eloquent debaters who convinced their opponents and audience in the senate halls were similarly celebrated. The audience would rise and applause in congratulation of their victory. This was where the English word "ovation" came from.

Christians were influenced by this cultural environment that they lived in and formed similar hero-worshipping ideologies towards renowned servants of God. Even today, many Christians would feel a special inspiration when they read biographies of our forerunners in the faith or listened to uplifting sermons or encouraging ministry reports. Such hero-worship sometimes get exaggerated and all kinds of incredible stories start popping up. Many personalities were artificially embellished this way to pander to "market demand" for spiritual heroes.

Who was Epaphroditus and what had he done for the Church? According to Paul, he helped Paul without regard for his own life. However, he obviously did not risk his own life to rescue Paul from a deadly situation. His task was to send much needed aid to Paul and his team. In the circumstances of those days, he was very likely overstressing his health to earn more income to support the ministry. Or he could be bravely evangelising and edifying fellow believers despite the then very real risk of being arrested, beaten, and jailed. Striving to fulfill the interests of Christ does not mean we must be in a role that could get us killed anytime, such as trying to evangelise to a tribe of cannibals and ending up as their dinner. Epaphroditus could be so dedicated to caring for Paul that he neglected his own health and fell gravely ill. If he had succumbed to the disease, he would still be considered a martyr and no less respectable than any other servant of God, because he died for the sake of the Lord's work. Fortunately, he recovered by God's grace and was able to travel back to Philippi. In the eyes of Paul, Epaphroditus was a glorious victor who succeeded in his mission and was ready to return triumphant! Paul was worried that the brethren in Philippi might not understand the spiritual significance of Epaphroditus's recovery

and still be embroiled in worldly concepts of success, which was why he wrote to teach them about the victory of this faithful hero.

Even though Epaphroditus was sent by the Philippian church (Philippians 2:25), his days serving alongside Paul were like “further studies” for him in the faith and was a critical stage of transformation in his life. The brethren must no longer regard him in the same manner before he left on his mission, and ought to: “welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honour people like him”. Perhaps some of the Philippians might question this and say: “Who is Epaphroditus to deserve such honour? He is just a young believer sent by us to serve Paul. He is at best an insignificant mission assistant!” But Paul emphasised “in the Lord” in his letter, reminding them that Epaphroditus was faithfully serving the interests of Christ and almost died for it. He deserved no less than any martyr of the Lord. Even though he was like the servant who only receive two bags of gold from the master, he invested and managed them faithfully and reaped a profit of another two bags of gold, a 100% gain just like the servant who was given five bags of gold! The Lord would certainly tell them the same words: “Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!” (Matthew 25:20-23). Every member of the body of Christ serves a different purpose, but the Lord evaluates our results by the same benchmark – faithfulness.

When we finally go home to heaven, we should not be surprised that the fellow believers we encounter in eternity are not those who held high status and great fame, but those who were ignored by others yet faithfully fulfilled their commission from the Lord, those whom Paul told us to “welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honour people like him”. Shouldn’t we be assessing our fellow brethren by the same standards set by Christ? And as for ourselves, have we met these standards yet?

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