

Chapter 3: The Ideals of the Saints - Height

Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) once shared a story with inspiring morals: One dark night, a large departmental store was broken into, but the thief did not take away anything of value. Interestingly, what the intruder did was to swap the price labels on the goods. The next day when the door of the store opened, jewelry worth tens of thousands of dollars were now priced at a few cents, while common and affordable product now cost several hundred times their usual price! If the company had not discovered this prank early, business would be ruined— the mall would be flooded with customers for a short time because of the absurd price of valuables, but it would never be able to go on operating.

The “company” that in the story was the national church of Denmark. The thief would be the people of society in general – while they did not steal anything, they messed up the values of everything and made the worthy worthless, and vice versa. This was an extremely serious matter! Thieves who messed with our heart’s values are the worst kind of intruder to have. A society with its values turned topsy-turvy would not remain stable for very long, but what if the majority agreed with the perverted values? Kierkegaard was often called the “Crazy Dane” by detractors but from his enlightened perspective, the masses were the ones who were really insane.

Ideals and Self-Awareness

The choices we make in life often determine our success or failure. Our values influence these choices, in the form of ideals that drive us. “Further, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you. Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh. For it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh.” (Philippians 3:1-3)

According to a lifeguard, the greatest challenge in their job was dealing with people who struggled madly while they were being rescued. If only they would calm down and stop thrashing about, the lifeguards would have a much easier time getting them to safety. This is exactly the same problem that arises when a person is shown the way to salvation. They fail to see how hopeless and corrupted their human nature was and insist on striving even harder with their own strength and ability. If they refuse to recognise their true situation, they would never be able to realise how much they need salvation. “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners - of whom I am the worst.” (1 Timothy 1:15). If they do not see this reality, how would they be able to embrace salvation? They would not understand the dire straits they were in and take Christ’s offer of salvation for granted because of their lack of knowledge of the truth.

Paul wrote again to the Church to emphasise his point not because he wanted to be long-winded and repetitive, but because it was essential for the preservation of believers’ faith: “So I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have.” (2 Peter 1:12). Humans tend to be attracted to new and interesting things and averse to repetitive ones that they have already known, but the heart of a true shepherd compels him to repeatedly remind the sheep and help them to remember so they do not inadvertently fall into danger.

Guard Against Thieves of Faith

Here, Paul raised three points of caution:

1. Beware of Dogs

The Jews pride themselves on their bloodline and look down on other races. The referred to non-Jew gentiles as “dogs” – not in the sense of man’s best friend as we view the canines today, but as objects of disgust. Jesus Christ had different standards, however, and to Him, “dogs” referred to those who stood firmly outside the gates of salvation and stubbornly reject the Gospel: “Do not give dogs what is sacred”, He said (Matthew 7:6). The Lord turned the mockery of those who emphasised on bloodlines back on them. They were no different from racists who

treated people of other races like animals and looked solely at the supposed purity of people's biological lineage. Truth be told, in the globalised world we live in today, no one is of truly pure bloodline unless they were from primitive and isolated tribes that lived far from civilisation in dense jungles or remote islands.

Salvation does not discriminate based on race, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). The need for saving grace is the same across all peoples. The method of salvation that God prepared for every race was also the same. There was this funny story about a Caucasian missionary who learned Mandarin so he could evangelise to the people in China. During worship, he boastfully declared: "*Shen Ai Xi Ren!*" (God loves all westerners!). This took the congregation by surprise and there were many rolled eyes among the brethren. Then he said: "*Yin Wei Xi Ren Do Fan Le Zui!*" (because all westerners have sinned!) and the congregation burst out laughing. The evangelist had the same problem that plagued the Ephraimites - he had trouble with proper enunciation and always mispronounced "*Shi Ren*" (the world, or people of the world) as "*Xi Ren*" (westerner, i.e. white people) (ref. Judges 12:5-6). Nevertheless, all races need salvation, and we must abstain from holding one's own race above others. We Chinese share this problem too – our pride for our ancestry often leads us to look down on the spiritual "bloodline" that comes from God and reject the blood of Jesus Christ shed for us on the cross because He was viewed as a "westerner".

2. Beware of Evil-Doers

Evil-doers hurt people and break the law. Here, Paul was not referring to just criminals, since it was already common knowledge that we need to protect ourselves from crime. Such criminals are so commonplace that if we had to avoid them completely, we would have to depart from this world (ref. 1 Corinthians 5:10-11). The Lord Jesus Christ did not tell us to quickly leave this world, but to remain here to preach His word. What Paul meant was not to let just anybody into the communion of the Church. Who were these people to beware of? Paul cautions against associating with those "who claims to be a brother or sister but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler. Do not even eat with such people." These were the "wolves in sheepskins" that the Lord warned us against. The false prophets and false believers, the evil-doers whom the Lord "never knew them" (ref. Matthew 7:15, 23). Peter said of such people: "It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn their backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them." (2 Peter 2:21). They were the servants of the corrupt, fake teachers, and Antinomians who introduced gnostic theories that poisoned the Church. Such people regarded themselves to be spiritually superior beyond the scope of God's law. They revelled in eisegesis and read their own meanings into scripture, and abused the verse "not under the law, but under grace" (ref. Romans 6:14) as an excuse to do whatever they wanted, ignoring the subsequent verse that said: "Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace? By no means!" (ref. Romans 6:15-16).

Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821-1881) wrote in his work *The Brothers Karamazov* about the perils of atheism: "If there is no God, we can do anything." This was what the Antinomians proposed – "If there is no law, we can do anything!". It is not hard to imagine what the world would be like without moral boundaries. When the concept of good and evil is blurred, all that we do becomes evil. Let us remember that God is a God who upholds law and order.

3. Beware of Mutilators of the Flesh

Some Jewish believers brought circumcision into the Church and wanted fellow Christians to be circumcised like Jews. Such action would no doubt form a "Jewish clique" within the fellowship. Paul called these people "mutilators of the flesh" because the circumcision they promoted no longer carried its original meaning and was no different from carving themselves with knives (ref. Leviticus 21:5, 19:28) like how the Baalite prophets slashed themselves (1 Kings 18:28).

Paul told the Galatian believers: "if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from

grace. For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.”(Galatians 5:1-12). Circumcision was a sign that one was under the yoke of the law. Such believers were justified by following the law and not by faith, and have effectively denied the efficacy of Jesus’s precious blood shed on the cross for our salvation.

The greatest weakness a person can have is not knowing their own weakness. To overestimate one’s own ability and depend on one’s own strength for everything. The Lord God told us: “Let not the wise boast of their wisdom or the strong boast of their strength or the rich boast of their riches but let the one who boasts boast about this: that they have the understanding to know me, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight,” declares the Lord.” (Jeremiah 9:23-24). Abraham only began to turn to God when he had lost all hope of siring an offspring, and from there he got Isaac with Sarah (Romans 4:19-22). God then instituted the ceremony of circumcision as a mark of justification by faith. Abraham was not justified before and because of circumcision! If it were so, he could have boasted that he had done well on his own and how he chose to follow God’s command. He was already made righteous by his faith and the circumcision that followed was merely a mark of this faith. Thus, circumcision is neither the reason one is justified, nor was it a pre-requisite for grace. (Romans 4:9-12). Paul tells us: “A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a person’s praise is not from other people, but from God.” (Romans 2:28-29). From here, we can understand that true circumcision is not performed on the physical body, unlike the “mutilators of the flesh”, by a cleansing of one’s spirit. Paul reiterated this when he said: “In Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands. Your whole self, ruled by the flesh, was put off when you were circumcised by Christ” (Colossians 2:11). A person who is pure of heart is one who has had true circumcision. Such circumcision only occurs in Christ and prepares us to be ready to worship the Lord.

Don’t Rely On Your Own Strength Alone

Humans throughout history did not need technology to help them realise that they were separated from God. Neither can technology help to reconcile us to Him. After realising that they needed God, they started to devise ways to worship and commune with Him. However, the problem of sin still remained, and as long as it is not resolved, there will be an impassable barrier between man and God. Only Jesus Christ who died on the cross for us can redeem us from sin and enable those who believed to commune with the Holy Spirit. Paul taught that: “since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, His body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.” (Hebrews 10:19-22).

Jesus Christ, having ascended back to heaven, intercedes for us as our eternal high priest from His throne on God’s right. All that we have in God’s grace came from Christ and we have nothing to boast about. Paul told the Corinthians: “Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things - and the things that are not - to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before Him. It is because of Him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God - that is, our righteousness, holiness, and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: “Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.” (1 Corinthians 1:19-31)

“Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord” showed that salvation was solely the work of Christ and man had no part in its completion. It reminds us that our salvation in Christ is utterly reliable by God’s grace and cannot be separated from our very being (ref. Romans 8:31-39) nor can it be snatched away (John 10:29). As Paul says: “We

do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. 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.” (2 Corinthians 1:8-9). When faced with the threat of death and completely hopeless during his ministry, Paul learnt not to depend on himself, but “on God, who raises the dead”.

In the story about “the tiger and the fox”: a hungry tiger wanted to eat the fox he had caught for dinner. The fox rebutted the tiger, saying: “How audacious of you! Know you not that the emperor of heaven had installed me as the king of all beasts?” The tiger, of course, did not believe his boast, and the small stature of the fox further cemented his doubt. The fox challenged him: “I can see you do not believe me because I appear small and weak. Come, let us go into the woods and witness how the creatures of the jungle respond when they see me!” The tiger followed the fox and when the other animals saw them approaching, they either trembled in fear or fled for their lives. The fox proudly asked the tiger: “See how they run at the sight of me? Do you still think I was lying?” (from Zhan Guo Ce: Chu Ce, i.e. the “Stratagem of the Warring States: The State of Chu”). This was where the Chinese idiom “*Hu Jia Hu Wei*” (a fox assuming a tiger’s aura of power) arose. The idiom itself was rarely complimentary, but it did demonstrate the cleverness of the fox and his secret to self-preservation and has lessons we can learn from. As Christians, we too should boast because of Jesus, overcoming our enemies with His name and claiming victory for Him. But bear in mind where the power comes from – it is not our own strength – lest we deceive ourselves into thinking it is our personal success.

Boast? Of What?

“If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.” (Philippians 3:4-6). The Lord, head of the Church, saw the fundamental problem with Laodicea: “You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.” (Revelation 3:17-18).

Most People who fail can attribute it to misjudging the circumstances, overestimating their strength when they were actually weak, or thinking of themselves as capable of taking on any challenge when they actually did not have the ability to. Such “ignorance” would be the killing blow for them that leads to failure. Thus the Bible tells us: “If anyone thinks they are something when they are not, they deceive themselves.” (Galatians 6:3)

Spiritually, aside from knowing our own limits, we also must understand God’s will. How can a sinner meet God’s standard and become free from sin? How do we traverse the bottomless chasm that separates man from God? The ancient saint Job was: “blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil.” (Job 1:1). Yet his friends still questioned him: “What are mortals, that they could be pure, or those born of woman, that they could be righteous?” (Job 15:14). Indeed, such was the conundrum faced by people since ages past. The only correct answer was what Paul discovered through Jesus Christ: “Therefore, my friends, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through Him everyone who believes is set free from every sin, a justification you were not able to obtain under the Law of Moses.” (Acts 13:38-39). By the blood of Christ shed on the cross, we have the sole source of salvation, to be made righteous by God’s standards and be reconciled to God. Apart from this, no other means allow us to satisfy the law, and we cannot attain righteousness by our own strength.

Failing to Meet the Mark

Reflecting on his religious experience, Paul shared about how the flesh is incapable of achieving God’s requirements. Not only was he circumcised like any other Jew, but he was also circumcised strictly according to the word of scripture on the eighth

day as passed down from the patriarch Abraham (Genesis 21:4). No one gets to choose their birth parents, but parents can choose to guide their children on the right path to become godly believers. However, this does not replace faith, as faith is a personal thing. Paul also emphasised that he was not just a Jew, but one of the tribe of Benjamin, named after his ancestor Saul in memory of the first king. About six hundred years ago, the ten tribes of Israel, the northern nation, were captured by the Assyrian king (ref. 2 Kings 17:6, 18-24), and he colonised gentiles in Samaria. The people of Judah, the southern nation, looked down upon those who had Samaritan blood and this also led to the dilution of the ten tribes' bloodlines. The tribe of Benjamin and those who were in the southern nation of Judah were, however, able to trace their lineage back to their ancestors, thus this became something they could boast about.

Also, Paul was a Pharisee on the religious aspect. Most Christians did not have very positive views of Pharisees and equated them to symbols of legalism and hypocrisy. However, Pharisees were in fact people who were "set apart" for God. They observed the law and passed on the oral traditions of the patriarchs and were the strictest religious sect among the Jews. They proudly claimed to possess purer faith than the Sadducees as they believed in angels, resurrection, and the judgement to come. Paul was one of their most active and zealous members, as he himself admitted: "For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers." (Galatians 1:13-14). He demonstrated his zeal by following the teachings of his sect closely (Acts 24:14) and persecuted the "heresy" that was Christianity. All these were done in accordance to the word of the law so no one had the right to accuse him of breaking it, as he said: "I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day." (Acts 23:1)

What can we say about someone like Paul? Before God, all his actions were no greater than Adam's. When he and Eve "sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves" (Genesis 3:7), it was still not enough to cover their shame faced with the glory of God. Before God's righteous glory, "All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away." (Isaiah 64:6). Man cannot by their own ability please God no matter how hard they tried. Our deeds are like the "bed that is too short to stretch out on" and the "blanket too narrow to wrap around you." (cf. Isaiah 28:20). Peace and salvation cannot come from artificial religion created by the hands of man. The "three cautions" that Paul told the Church to beware of demonstrates why lineage, religious tradition, personal good deeds, and rituals like circumcision do not bring salvation. Only when we turn our eyes away from ourselves and look up towards God can we truly find saving grace.

Ideals and Cognition

"But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ" (Philippians 3:7-8). Knowing Yourself is Not Enough, you Need to Know Christ. Given our cultural background as Chinese, it is very easy for us to misinterpret this verse. Paul was not asking us to "transcend secular needs" - such a concept does not exist in the Bible's teachings. He was talking about the religious effort mentioned earlier. In his personal experience, he used to consider observing circumcision, making personal effort, and the following word of the law to be beneficial to himself. Now he knew that outside of Christ, all these were worthless. These were not sins or crimes, of course, but vain things that he mistook as being important.

C.S. Lewis (1898-1963) said: "A person never knows how evil he is until he tries to do good." They will then discover that all the good they do are in vain without Jesus Christ, who "through the eternal Spirit offered Himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!"

"Acts that lead to death" refer to empty religious rites. They are useless spiritually but allows one to boast in the flesh. While they are not crimes nor sins, such actions serve no real purpose. Why then did Paul consider them to be a loss if they don't

cause any harm? Imagine a virulent disease that spreads quickly, and only one drug is effective in treating it. The drug had been invented for quite some time but was not yet available in the market and people only knew about it from advertisements. In this time of need, the drug was finally shipped out and distributed. However, some people still doubted if it could really cure the disease as advertised. Others wondered if the stock circulating in the market were genuinely from the pharmaceutical manufacturer. There were even some who felt the actual product looked different from the advertised pictures and felt that the ones in the picture were real and the circulated one was fake. The trouble is, none of these people had tried the medicine yet, and were hesitant to try it. Many decided to wait for the “real thing” that looked exactly like the picture to arrive. They thought of the version in the picture as the only one beneficial to them, and the truth was it wouldn’t hurt them either. In fact, the ads have done a good job of making people aware of the cure. However, while they procrastinate and wait for their envisioned “genuine” cure, they have wasted precious time and delayed the treatment they needed as their conditions worsened. In this way, the harmless advertisements ended up causing them to suffer a loss.

The Bible tells us: “The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming - not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship.” A shadow can only show us that something is in a certain location, but it cannot allow us to truly know the object that cast it. Although both share certain similarities in shape, the shadow can never serve the purpose of the actual object. In the same manner, the law can only teach us about sin, but cannot free us from it. Things were different after the Son of God came: “But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, He sat down at the right hand of God, and since that time He waits for his enemies to be made His footstool. For by one sacrifice He has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.” (Hebrews 10:1, 12-14). Thus, if anyone were to attempt to rely on anything outside of Christ to attain salvation, he would suffer loss instead, because “Since they did not know the righteousness of God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness. Christ is the culmination of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.” (Romans 10:3-4). Human effort cannot satisfy the law. Only the method of salvation decreed by God, through Jesus Christ, can make one righteous.

Abandoning and Acquiring

Some say “good” is the enemy of “better”. The Webster’s Dictionary defines “enemy” as an opposing force or concept that can cause harm. Thus, when we hold on to good and ignore better, we lose the chance to be improved. Here, Paul declares that he now considered the past religious observances that he adhered to as his loss. Going a step further, all things outside of Christ are losses to him, because he knows Christ is the best, most perfect, and greatest goal he could strive for. Jesus taught that “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.” (Matthew 13:44). The man who sold all he had to buy the field made an educated choice based on factual evaluation, and not by the pessimistic view that “all things are empty”, for he did so “in his joy”. Giving up all one has to acquire something better is positive gain, unlike the pessimistic abandonment of what one owns, even one’s life, because life felt empty and meaningless.

Alexander the Great was once caught in a long stalemate in a battle against a powerful opponent. He made a decisive order for his generals and men to throw away all the war loot that they have taken. Seeing the abandoned riches, the enemy’s forces fought among themselves for it. Because of their infighting, Alexander’s army won the battle and got back everything they disposed and more. If they had been unwilling to let go of the treasures they won, they would most likely have lost the battle and everything they had, including their lives and nation. From this perspective, the riches that they carried with them at the time were really to their loss.

If someone for no reason “sees everything as garbage” and throws them away, something is very wrong with this person’s values. However, if the goal was to “gain Christ”, than that is noble and truly wise. Things like knowledge and wealth are not bad things, but they would lead to our loss if we put them before Christ in our priorities. This includes even our morals – those who deem themselves righteous because of their morals would fail to grasp eternal life. What was supposed to be

good thus turned into something that caused loss and hindered the pursuit of something better. The Chinese have a saying – if the Ganoderma fungus grows on your door frame, get rid of it no matter how good it looks. Ganoderma (“*Ling Zhi*”) is a type of beautiful and valuable medicinal fungus, but if it grows on your doorframe and blocks everyone from going in and out freely, it becomes an obstacle that needs to be gotten rid of.

During His time on earth, the Christ “proclaimed good news to the poor, freedom for the prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, set the oppressed free, and proclaimed the year of the Lord’s favour.” (Luke 4:18-19). Everyone who was bound by sin and captive to the devil would leave joyfully after meeting Him and being set free. Unfortunately, there was this young man who had an impeccable record of good deeds, a man who observed God’s law faithfully and was already at the threshold of heaven’s gates, who “went away sadly” (Matthew 19:16-26, Mark 10:17-27 ; Luke 18:18-27). Even with all his faith, he could not bear to give up his worldly riches to follow Christ. Thus, his riches became his loss as they prevented him from knowing the Saviour.

During Jesus’s ministry on earth, His preaching was full of power and “the crowds were amazed at His teaching” (Matthew 7:28-29). Even those sent to arrest Him were hesitant to take Him. Yet the elite amongst the people, those teachers of the law, said “Have any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed in Him? No! But this mob that knows nothing of the law - there is a curse on them.” (John 7:48-49). Clearly, they were blinded by their knowledge of the law and self-righteously held themselves in high regard. Their knowledge became an obstacle that they refused to relinquish, and they could never come to know Christ. Then there were those who “loved human praise more than praise from God.” (John 12:42-43). They were afraid the religious leaders would cast them out from the synagogue if they acknowledged Christ. They were likewise unable to receive Christ because they could not let go of their desire for human recognition.

Regret without Repentance

Jesus reminded His disciples many times about the difference between “letting go” and “following”. He showed the doubters that those who put their comforts and familial ties before the Lord were “looking back” and unable to let go (Luke 9:57-62). Throughout church history, there were no lack of people who could have been part of the cloud of glorious witnesses for Christ but missed the opportunity because of hesitance to let go. What they were left with was endless regret for losing the chance to partake in Christ’s eternal glory. Secular obsession blinds us from seeing the glory of the Lord and prevents us from serving God wholeheartedly. It drives us to live without heavenly ideals and as our transient lives come to an end, we live in depression knowing we have lost an eternal blessing. Of course, we also have to understand that all we do arose from God’s grace that calls to us, not because of our own strength or ability. Being able to know that the Lord is our greatest treasure comes from God’s love which attracts us to Him, such that we are able to recognise that all else are “as garbage” and willingly abandon them to follow Him.

Albert Einstein (1879-1955) once attended a dinner gathering where the girl sitting next to him asked what he did for a living. He replied: “I devote myself to the study of physics.” The girl looked at him in disbelief, noticing his head of white hair, and said: “You are still studying physics at your age? I had already finished studying it a year ago!”. The girl’s understanding of the word “study” was obviously miles apart from Einstein’s. The degree of perception and understanding we have of something is what defines how we respond to it. Only someone who by God’s grace knows the beauty of the Lord surpasses all things can exclaim like Peter: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” (John 6:65, 68). Such decisive commitment that persists in one’s life even unto martyrdom is far beyond what most people can even dream off. It is only possible through the working of the Holy Spirit in one’s heart.

While it seems that the price for following Christ is prohibitively high, the price for rejecting Him is far greater. If we refuse to abandon that which is a loss to us, we will end up being abandoned by Him and lose the blessings meant for us. “See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his

inheritance rights as the oldest son. Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. Even though he sought the blessing with tears, he could not change what he had done.” (Hebrews 12:16-17). What a huge loss that would be! “For Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica.” (2 Timothy 4:10). Demas abandoned Paul, who suffered for the Lord, to pursue worldly riches. He left his mark as a shameful man and would regret in eternity for his serious misjudgement! Look at how different Paul’s choices were.

The Effect of a Transformed Ideal

“And be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ - the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. I want to know Christ - yes, to know the power of His resurrection and participation in His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.” (Philippians 3:9-11). What Paul stood to gain was not the things that he thought were “to his benefit” in the past. He no longer goes after personal gain as his ideals have transcended beyond the things of the world, because Paul had gotten Christ.

Under the law, people strive to observe its rules in order to please God. But “... whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For He who said, “You shall not commit adultery,” also said, “You shall not murder.” If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.” (James 2:10-11). To be able to comply with 612 out of the 613 rules of the law was already a laudable achievement, yet even someone who manages this is still considered a lawbreaker and thus imperfect. Jesus told His disciples: “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment.... You shall not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart... Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.’ But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all... Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” Charity, fasting and prayers should also be done with the right mindset, not to show off before man but to please God (Matthew 5:17 to 6:18).

Humans only expect the right behaviour, but God expects the motives behind the actions to be right too. Unfortunately, the legalistic followers of the law only care about the word of the law and not the spirit. The scribes and Pharisees in the New Testament were typical examples of such people. They pick on the wording of the law and oppress others with it. Till this day, Judaism continues to place heavy emphasis on the word of the law, sometimes to ridiculous and laughable extents. For example, keeping the Sabbath involves many tedious rules, such as not lighting any fire. Even the lamps in the synagogue must only be lit by gentiles paid to do the job on the Sabbath. Food preparation and the slaughtering of cattle for meat have to be approved by rabbis. Divorce certificates must be written by hand, word by word, because the law states it to be “writing a divorce letter”. There was the story about a man travelling on a train who saw the rabbi sitting opposite placing a bottle of water underneath his seat. Out of curiosity, the man asked the rabbi the reason for doing so. The rabbi to him: “Today is the Sabbath and travel is not allowed. However, I have urgent matters to attend to, and it is written in the law that travel on water is permissible.” (cf. Acts 1:12 ; Numbers 35:5 ; Joshua 3:4). The distance one is allowed to walk on Sabbath is approximately 1.1 kilometres or three quarters of a mile but travelling over water is an exception. Under most circumstances, it was obvious that this meant travelling on an aquatic vessel like a boat or ship, but the rabbi came up with the incredible idea of putting water beneath his seat. He had clearly misinterpreted the law skilfully to suit his needs. While it sounds funny when we hear the story, we realise the sadness of the state of affairs when we think deeper. It is clear evidence that man cannot truly obey the law.

A Conclusion on the Law

The law’s only function is to prove that humans cannot obey it. It teaches us to understand our sins and points us towards Jesus Christ, who died for us on the cross and bore our curse so that the law is made complete. “For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse, as it is written: “Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law. Clearly no one who

relies on the law is justified before God, because “the righteous will live by faith.” (Galatians 3:9-11). Only when we try to comply with the law do we realise that we could not. Not only are we unable to fulfill most of its requirements, but we are also in fact unable to fulfill any of them. Not a single day passes where we are truly able to keep to the law without mistakes. The curse of the law cannot be removed by human power. Only the Lord who died on the cross for us could do so: “So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.” (Galatians 3:24-25).

The law leads us towards death, step by step, approaching closer to Calvary each day. It seals our despair in trying hopelessly to obey it, and we lose faith in the religious teachers of the law and in ourselves. Sinners discover new hope in the Lord of life who died for us on the cross, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.” We leave our own efforts at the foot of the cross and exchange it for faith: “So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith” (Galatians 2:20, 3:26). This allowed us to discard the soiled robes of the law and put on the image of Jesus Christ. When God sees one who truly follows Christ, God sees Christ in the person. In Jesus Christ we have the joy of the Lord and grace freely given to us. Under the law, man had no other choice but to try to obey the law to please God, because we were under the yoke of the law. When we believe in Jesus Christ, we become the children of God and live in His joy. We now aim to please Him and fulfill His will because we are His children, not because we were forced to do so by the law: “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).

Separation and Connection

In Christ we are sanctified, made righteous before God, and saved from His wrathful curse. Sanctification means to be set apart from the world and from sin to be with God (1 Corinthians 6:11). This is a moral motivation we get from being made righteous in faith. It does not come from our human ability but from the Holy Spirit’s indwelling and are the fruit that we bear through being sanctified (Romans 6:22, 8:9-10). The Bible refers to Christians as “saints”. This does not imply any supernatural transcendence, divine wisdom, mysterious lifestyle, or perfect morality. It simply means we have been separated from the world and made holy by and for God.

Those who are set apart will be connected to God, and only those who have been set apart can connect to God. This is what Christ meant when He said: “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.” (John 15:5). It is the life of Christ that enables saints to bear fruit through their connection to God. The fruit flows with juice that is the grace of the Holy Spirit. Like the life blood of humans that deliver nutrients, it nourishes and grows our spirit. To “remain in the Lord” is in fact *Koinonia*, that is, fellowship, and also means to “partake of”. It is an actual experience and does not just exist in our knowledge. To “know” the Lord goes beyond just doctrinal knowledge and must be reflected in our lives and experiences. We must apply the power of the Lord into our daily life and ministry. The Bible says: “Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because whoever suffers in the body is done with sin. As a result, they do not live the rest of their earthly lives for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God.” (1 Peter 4:1-2). This becomes the new goal and ideal in life for Christians to pursue.

That being said, Christ’s passion, death, and resurrection happened so far back in history, how are we supposed to “remain in” and be with Him? Are we supposed to nail ourselves to a cross to emulate the Lord? Obviously, crucifixion does not exist anymore as a form of death sentence, and even in the days of the Roman Empire, it was up to the judge and not the saints to decide if they wanted to be hung the cross. Our connection to Christ then, happens in the spirit, by our obedience of God’s will like the Lord did, and to bear the same sufferings. Paul said: “Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions, for the sake of His body, which is the church.” (Colossians 1:24).

St. Francis of Assisi (1181-1226) found that he had stigmata on his body – the same marks of injury that Christ sustained. We cannot explain or replicate his experience,

but it is not necessary for us to do so. What we need to strive for is to let Christ's sacrifice and resurrection be reflected in our lives as we die to sin and live again for grace as sanctified believers. This is impossible by our own power. Only the power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ can enable us to live as new creations.

Beautiful Aspirations

Aspirations and ideals invariably arise from human expectations and plans. However, for Christians, our aspirations come from our new lives, and goes beyond any goals that humans can think of. These ideals are "led by the Spirit of God" (Romans 8:14) and we are driven towards them by the Holy Spirit. Only those who have a new life will have such new aspirations, which in turn enables them to lead new lives. The Bible tells us that those who are in Christ have the hope of resurrection and glory. It is this hope that upholds their faith to obey God's will and live lives that are different from the people of the world.

Ever since the times of the Old Testament, saints have been empowered by the Holy Spirit to see visions of that distant glory. In times of great suffering, Job proclaimed: "I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end He will stand on the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God" (Job 19:25-26). The Psalmist says: "Yet I am always with You; You hold me by my right hand. You guide me with Your counsel, and afterward You will take me into glory. Whom have I in heaven but You? And earth has nothing I desire besides You. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever." (Psalm 73:23-26). Filled with the Holy Spirit, David declared: "I keep my eyes always on the Lord. With Him at my right hand, I will not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure, because You will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, nor will you let Your faithful one see decay." (Psalm 16:8-10).

During Pentecost, Peter preached to the Church on the resurrection of Christ (ref. Acts 2:22-32) and showed them that the Church is connected to and led by its head, Jesus Christ. Abraham and other early saints "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. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own." (Hebrews 11:13-14). They persevered in faith and remained strong in suffering so that they "might gain an even better resurrection." (Hebrews 11:35), knowing that what awaits them far exceeds anything that can be had in this world. They knew "if we are children, then we are heirs - heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in His sufferings in order that we may also share in His glory." (Romans 8:17).

We can only enter God's glory if our bodies have been resurrected and transformed. Prior to that, we must be made alive in the spirit, to be brought to life from the deathly state of sin in which we live. "But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of His Spirit who lives in you." (Romans 8:10-11).

In this world, even Christians live in bodies that are destined to die, but our spirits would be brought back to life as the first fruits of the Holy Spirit. Though we suffer in this world, we can look forward to the hope of glorious resurrection, the "redemption of our bodies" (Romans 8:23), "But each in turn: Christ, the first fruits; then, when He comes, those who belong to Him." (1 Corinthians 15:23). The Bible informs us that during His second coming, the risen Lord would "...come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever." (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17)

Through this short verse, we can see the great love Christ has for His people. When He came to this world to save us, He did not send angels to do the work, but personally descended in the Incarnation to complete our redemption. His second coming has nothing to do with the redemption of our sins, but to save those who

belong to Him (Hebrews 9:28). The Son of God comes again to personally welcome us home to eternal glory. If we were expecting an honoured guest from afar, we certainly would not send a chauffeur or servant to pick him up from the airport, harbour, or train station, or tell him to hire a taxi on his own. This would make the guest feel unwelcomed and is very impolite. The right thing to do would be to personally receive him at his place of arrival. This is why Christ would personally descend from heaven – how honoured for us that He would come all the way to welcome us, His redeemed saints? Jesus told His disciples: “And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.” (John 14:3). We would certainly not host our honoured guest in the servants’ quarters, so Christ would also certainly not leave us by the roadside to find our own way home or house us in a shack! How about letting us live with the holy angels who serve Him? Isn’t that good enough? No! The Lord wants us to be with Him forever! Of course, being “with Him” does not mean we must be physically in the same spatial location as the Lord at all times. It instead describes a degree of closeness and glory that we enjoy with the Lord. Even the apostle Paul found it impossible to describe appropriately enough with words and could only say: “it is better by far”.

What would our resurrected forms look like? The Bible does not say, probably because our limited wisdom and capacity now would not be able to understand. It simply tells us that we would be different from what we are now. Of course, we are sure we would not regress and become quadrupedal animals, nor are we going to become some odd five-eyed creature. Imagine a seed – when it sprouts into a sapling, its form becomes entirely different. Plants and animals alike are living creatures, but the forms taken by plant life is extremely different from that of animal life like humans, birds, beasts, and fishes, who also differ from one another. In the same way, “the splendour of the heavenly bodies is one kind, and the splendour of the earthly bodies is another.” Paul explains it as: “The sun has one kind of splendour, the moon another and the stars another; and star differs from star in splendour. So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.” (1 Corinthians 15:35-44)

We can see from Paul’s words that our resurrected bodies would be utterly different from our current ones. It would be imperishable and strong, unaffected by disease, corruption, and disabilities. Just the glorious form of our future bodies alone is enough to satisfy our wildest dreams. In eternity, we would witness Lazarus without sores, Paul with bright and healthy eyes, Elisha with a full head of hair, and Methuselah in vibrant youth. We might wonder – what if our ancestors appeared younger than us? And what about the conundrum that the Sadducees posed about the woman who married seven times (ref. Matthew 22:23-32)? Who would her “real” husband be? This would be even more complicated with King Solomon and his queen and a thousand wives and concubines. How about earthly conflicts? If we had not settled those disputes on earth, would there be a “sequel” of the drama when we reach heaven? And since we would all have new forms, would we even be able to recognise each other? All these are not the most important matter, and the Bible does not touch on them. The most important thing to know is that Christ would be the centre of our attention in heaven, and all of us would praise and worship Him (Revelation 21:22-23, 22:3).

Ideals and Direction

“Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 3:12-14). If we are moving towards a direction, it meant we have yet to arrive at our destination. Why would Paul admit such a thing? As a leader, shouldn’t he be presenting himself as greater than human? In Paul’s days, the Roman emperors made statues of themselves for people to worship. Philosophers of stoicism tried to appear indifferent and hide their emotional vulnerability. Most leaders would seize every opportunity to demonstrate their bravery, wisdom, saintliness, and greatness. Yet Paul was different. When they were in Lystra, Paul

and Barnabas performed a miracle and was regarded by the locals as living gods. They wanted to offer bulls and wreaths to them as sacrifices. At the risk of being stoned, Paul told them: "Friends, why are you doing this? we too are only human like you." (Acts 14:8-20). Paul did not put up any pretence of divinity. Now, he tells the Philippians that he had not yet arrived at the goal, meaning he was imperfect like them. Would this not affect his authority as a leader and ruin his spiritual image in the believers' eyes?

Perfecting the Goodness

This was the real Paul – he was contented to be known as an ordinary man, which was what made him greater than other men, a role model for other believers, inspired by the Holy Spirit in his writings.

1. True Self-Knowledge Demonstrates Wisdom

Greek philosophers promoted self-awareness. The problem of the ignorant was that they did not know they were ignorant. Many mistakes and even tragedies happen because we think we know something which we do not. Therefore, self-awareness or self-knowledge is a sign of wisdom. Even the best Christians among us might not match up to half of Paul's achievements, but how many of us actually realise that and know we have "not arrived" and were imperfect? We often behave like "know-it-all"s and imagine we are the perfect specimen of humanity – how laughable yet terrifying! One sad example was the shaven Samson. He awoke from his sleep and thought, "I'll go out as before and shake myself free." But he did not know that the Lord had left him." (Judges 16:20). In the end, his eyes were gouged out by his enemies and he lost his life even though he took many Philistines down with him. Thus Paul reminds us: "If anyone thinks they are something when they are not, they deceive themselves." (Galatians 6:3).

1. True Self-Knowledge is Honest

Some people like to live behind a mask and refuse to show their true selves before others. These people are not comfortable to deal with and it becomes worse when the mask they wear is a spiritual one. Such was the reprimanding the Lord Jesus Christ made against the scribes and Pharisees. They dress themselves in religious robes and wear enlarged versions of the scriptures, but they were "like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness." (Matthew 23:27-28).

Honesty was a simple and basic virtue to uphold. As long as we do not try to deceive or deliberately mislead, we are already being honest. Twisted and crafty human nature, however, meant that even this basic virtue was hard to come across. The Emperor's New Clothes was a classical story that showed us how humans would choose to put honesty aside for the sake of vanity. The mighty emperor walked around in public fully naked, but in his mind, he was proudly showing off his "new robes". Many supposedly "moral" or "spiritual" men in the crowd did not dare to call him out and played along, pretending also to admire the beauty of his imaginary new clothes. In the end, the entire nation made fools of themselves, saying nice things about the emperor's new clothes even though they saw nothing. Only the children, in their innocence, spoke the truth about the emperor's nude state. Modern psychology tells us to respect ourselves above all, which can lead to people not considering deception to be shameful if it can earn respect from others and boost self-esteem. This is the same as Adam and Eve's feeble attempt to hide their nudity with tiny fig leaves. Paul, on the other hand, was wise in not being ashamed to reveal his true nature to others.

3. True Self-Knowledge Makes One Humble

A frog living at the bottom of the well would not have experienced the sea before. Its understanding of water would then be limited to the fresh water in the well as there was no comparison. When we compare a white shirt to the snow, we would find that the shirt was closer to a very light shade of yellow or grey than white. From that contrast, we can tell that the shirt's colour was not as pure as we thought. Job was

known to be “blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil.” (Job 1:1). But when he got to know God better, he realised his own true colours and proclaimed: “My ears had heard of You but now my eyes have seen You. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.” (Job 42:6). The prophet Isaiah, after seeing God, cried out: “Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.” Paul was “faultless” as far as “righteousness based on the law” was concerned (Philippians 3:6), but he knew that he did not “already obtain all this or arrived at his goal”. He called himself “the worst sinner” (1 Timothy 1:15). The more self-knowledge one has, the humbler one becomes.

4. True Self-Knowledge is Based on a Higher Standard

The problem with most people was that “they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves” (2 Corinthians 10:12), of course they wouldn’t find anything wrong! Such people would always be satisfied with themselves. Imagine if an architect or carpenter worked this way – it would be totally unacceptable because they did not use any proper standards of measurement. Many things in this world cannot be tangibly defined, such as beauty, justice, and goodness. No human hand can draw a perfect straight line or circle without correctly calibrated instruments, and it is more so when it comes to things like character. John Milton (1608-1674) said: “Good and evil we know in the field of this world grow up together almost inseparably”. That was exactly the problem with the lies of the devil and the culture of the secular world. Without an absolute standard of measurement, we cannot identify our shortcomings. Trying to find a suitable benchmark from amongst humans would invariably end in disappointment, because the Bible had already told us: “There is no one righteous, not even one” (Romans 3:10). Only Jesus Christ is a perfect man for us to emulate. Any other human would have their inadequacy exposed on God’s righteous balance.

5. True Self-Knowledge Brings Improvement

Clearly, if we already possess something, than we no longer need to pursue it. If we were perfect, there would be no more room for improvement. The Chinese poet and calligrapher Gong Zizhen (aka. Ding An) wrote in a philosophically inspiring poem: “The flowers were half-bloomed and the moon was not full.” Anyone with some knowledge of nature would know - once a flower blooms fully, it would soon wither and fall. Similarly, a full moon meant that it would begin to wane in its next phase. When we become content with our current state and think we cannot improve further, we start to breed pride and self-importance even though we were still far from perfect. This way, we stop learning and growing, and our decline begins.

Confucius was a lifelong learner. Despite his age, he sought to improve himself every day of his life. Unlike a stagnant swamp, an ever-flowing river does not flood easily, as it constantly carries volumes of water towards the endless sea. This is what was meant by: “The Heavens are in motion ceaselessly; The enlightened exert themselves constantly” in the *Yi Jing* (i.e., *The Canon of Changes*).

Jesus pointed His disciples to the higher standard to follow: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Matthew 5:48) and reminded them: “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.” (John 14:9). This was because “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of His being” (Hebrews 1:3). The more one knows the Lord, the more one would want to emulate Him as they see their own imperfection. Paul told the believers: “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.” (1 Corinthians 11:1). With Christ as the higher standard that we measure ourselves against, we can press on to pursue endless improvement until we are like Him. Only God has no room for improvement – and that is because He is perfection itself. Who is like God?

Today, the greatest problem for God when He deals with mankind is probably our false contentment. Tozer said to God: “I want to want You; I long to be filled with longing; I thirst to be made thirstier still.” (*The Pursuit of God*). This was a prayer seeking improvement and growth from a person who understands that he had plenty of room for improvement. He also knew that he was not fully aware of his insufficiency and asked God to show it to him, like what the psalmist described as: “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God.” (Psalm

42:1, 63:1). Tozer's works had spiritually edified countless readers, and his life story is a role model for us to emulate in the pursuit of growth. Despite having no more than primary school education, Tozer became a pastor by the age of twenty-two. Apart from writing many inspiring books and essays for the brethren, he was also an avid researcher of the works of Shakespeare and Emerson, demonstrating his desire for continual development and growth in his life.

The Measurement of Growth

Jesus Christ is the living benchmark for Christians to emulate. However, His plans for each of us differs, since he had called us from a variety of different backgrounds. Thus, the goals that He had set for us also differ from person to person, and each of us presses on "to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me." This is the goal we have to reach if we wanted to please God. Let us look at Jesus's Parable of the Talents from the Gospel of Matthew chapter 25. The master gave his servants 5 talents (or 5 bags of gold in some translations), 2 talents, and 1 talent respectively. The master obviously knew their capabilities and assign the talents (gold) according to their talents (ability). When the time came for accounting, the master did not reprimand the servant who managed to earn two talents with the original two, but neither would he be happy if the servant who had five only earned three or four talents in profit. In the same vein, he would expect the servant with one talent to at least earn another one. We can see that the master had different expectations for each of them based on their ability, but the common principle here was "that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me", i.e. to give their one hundred percent to achieve the planned goal. Different vessels had different absolute capacities, but they have the capacity to be similarly filled to the brim.

"As you come to Him, the living Stone - rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to Him - you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." (1 Peter 2:4-5). Using the construction of a building as an analogy, God is like an architect who had plans for the building of the Church and for each stone (saint) to "be like pillars carved to adorn a palace" (Psalm 144:12). The building would be perfected again and again until it satisfies "that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me" so that every room is connected in the Lord and the entire house is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone." No matter how great and successful we think ourselves to be, we can never please God if we do not press on towards this goal. What God wants is a result that aligns with His "blueprint", "that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me".

The Necessity of Practical Application

Ideals and imaginations are all workings of the mind. However, ideals have the potential to be realised if we prepare for them. Simply put, ideals are not empty musings. They lead to practical application. An ideal that is realised is no longer just an aspiration, but a tangible accomplishment. Paul had one noble and singular ideal and he shared with us on the steps to realise it:

1. Only One Thing

Xun Zi (Xun Kuang), the Chinese Confucian philosopher, said in his Exhortation to Learning ("Quan Xue Pian"): "Those who wander on twisting paths do not arrive at their destination, and those who serve two kings are not tolerated by either. The eyes cannot focus on two objects at the same time, and the ears cannot listen in on two sounds at once." This reminds us that we need to be attentive to what we are doing instead of trying to move in two directions at once or to serve two masters, just as the eyes cannot split its focus between two objects, nor can the ears listen carefully to two sounds at the same time. Spurgeon tells us not to "try to fire two arrows at the same time from a bow". Paul focused on only one thing in his entire life: to love and serve God "with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his mind and with all his strength." He told the Galatian brethren: "Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ." He knew who chose and saved him, where his faith was and who he served. He was certain about his mission: "Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not

even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me.” (1 Corinthians 4:2-4).

2. Forgetting What is Behind and Pressing On Towards What is Ahead

Yesterday is the anchor of our ideals. While it offers us shelter, it can sometimes impede our advancement towards the goal. Joshua's success in Jericho gave him confidence, but in Ai, he met with failure because of Achan's sin. (Joshua 6:1 to 8:29). Don't let yesterday's glory become today's obstacle. On the other hand, past failures can similarly become barriers to our spiritual progression. If one had sinned against God, persecuted the Church, or was a chief among sinners, one needs to learn to forgive oneself so that we can press on to be used by God. Whether it was our past strengths or weaknesses that hinder us, yesterday had already been removed by God's hand and no amount of remembrance can bring it back. We ought to focus on the future. The almighty Lord is beyond time and can see all things. He knows what is awaiting in eternity and we only need to do our best.

3. Towards the Goal

Christians must have a life goal and a mission. Paul describes it like a sporting competition: “Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.” (1 Corinthians 9:25-27). Here, he was referring to the well-known Isthmian Games at Corinth. It was one of ancient Greece's four major sporting events and was held every four years. Athletes who aim to win in the games must discipline themselves and adjust their lifestyles in many ways if they wanted to achieve their goals. In the same manner, a Christian must work hard towards his or her life goal, moving in one spiritual direction and not be diverted somewhere else by the inclinations of the flesh and carnal desires. We must also avoid being indecisive and having no firm stand on the things we do. It was once said that “those who do not know what they lived for are better off dead.”

4. Going All Out to Reach the Goal

A straight line is the quickest route between two points and any detours or roundabouts would only take up more time and energy. In a race, having good speed and stamina is the key. The Bible tells us: “let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us,” (Hebrews 12:1). A runner has to minimise the weight he is carrying in order to maximise his speed and stamina. Anxiety is a weighty burden that slows us down – no one can be fleet-footed when full of worries and we ought to cast it to God (1 Peter 5:7). Cultural and racial bias can also become baggage in the same way and needs to be put down (cf. Acts 10:9-15) if we want to be speedy on the route prepared for us by the Lord. Finally, sin entangles our feet and stumbles us along the way, so we must identify and deal with our sins if we want to progress like what the psalmist described: “I run in the path of Your commands, for You have broadened my understanding.” (Psalm 119:32).

The Prize for Which Christ Had Called Me

Hope is the power of the heart that enabled us to persevere through difficulties and suffering (1 Thessalonians 1:3). Jacob served Laban for seven tough years to get Rachel, but they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her. (Genesis 29:20). The Lord Jesus Christ “...endured the cross and scorned its shame” (Hebrews 12:2) to complete our redemption and lay the foundations of the Church. The saints have the glorious hope that motivates them to live godly lives: “Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at His coming.” (1 Peter 1:13). Peter exhorts them: “So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with Him.” When Paul was at the end of his life, soon to commit his soul into God's embrace, he knew he was closer than ever to his goal and prize: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of

righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day - and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.” (2 Timothy 4:7-8). The crown of righteousness was glorious and incorruptible, unlike the crowns of sporting champions which can wither and decay. In this race, the referee is the righteous Lord God who not only observes our external actions but also our internal motives. He alone knows if we have completed the race according to the rules.

A Mature Will

“All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained.” (Philippians 3:15-16). Like a concerned parent, the apostle Paul hopes for his “children” to grow up strong and complete, to become “adults” in their will and ideals. A child that never grows up would bring endless worry to his parents and it would be the same for Paul with his spiritual children. The author of Hebrews tells the believers: “In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.” (Hebrews 5:12-14). This showed the author’s hope for them to “move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God.” (Hebrews 6:1)

An infant on milk clearly would not have any ideals and aspirations. All it knows would be to satisfy its hunger. While the Lord Jesus Christ consumed food and drinks in His time in the world, He told His disciples: “My food is to do the will of Him who sent me and to finish His work.” (John 4:34). Adults eat solid food for strength to continue working, as a means to achieve the end instead of being the goal itself. This is the key differentiator between spiritual infancy and maturity. Believers who had not grown up in the faith cannot consume “solid food”. They do not have the ability to digest and absorb God’s word into their lives and live according to God’s will. However, having gained spiritual life, the believer would thirst and hunger for God’s word. This is where the false teachers come in. They claim to have the word of God and want to “share” it with others. These people are often popular, but they do not have true knowledge of God’s word and the situation soon turns into a case of the blind leading the blind. They do indeed share a lot, but what they share are broken fragments filled with their own interpretations that do not convey God’s message correctly. Such people are the uninvited tares that grow in the field, not the wheat we want to grow. Worse still, the lackeys of the devil may also attempt to poison the hearts of God’s children in this manner. The actions of these false prophets divide the Church and push the footsteps of the believers in many different directions. In such cases, we need to discern and follow the direction pointed out by the Holy Spirit.

Paul wanted God’s Church to be able to grow spiritually, to be nurtured and equipped in God’s way of truth: “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, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming.” (Ephesians 4:13-14). Children see things differently from adults. Paul shared that: “When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me.” (1 Corinthians 13:11). Apart from Adam, all of us had a childhood. Looking back, we would notice that as children, our focus was on ourselves, and we were unable to plan for the future or make rational judgment. Believers who are infants in the faith likewise exhibit “spiritual childishness”. No family or society consists exclusively of adults. There would always be a number of children. Even a church as spiritually mature as that in Philippi would have some members who were spiritual infants. This is normal and inevitable in a growing community. God patiently guides them as a loving shepherd: “He tends His flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in His arms and carries them close to His heart; He gently leads those that have young.” (Isaiah 40:11). We can observe here that sheep in different stages of growth need to be cared for in different ways.

A Unified Direction

Paul encourages mature believers to stand firm with a strong will to glorify God and fulfill God's commands as the central goal of their lives. As a spiritual leader, Paul can long for others to share his views and perception and be a role model to guide them, but he would not be able to ensure they have the same abundant life that he had. He could not force others to be like him. Likewise, as long as one does not sin or offend God, and is morally sound, we ought to accommodate different opinions and behaviour. If we have differing views with others, we should pray for God to guide them in His own time so that they can see more clearly. How God does that is not for us to decide and we cannot expect God to use means dictated by us. God might bestow special grace to grant him wisdom, open his eyes to see the truth like how He enabled Hagar to find the well of water (Genesis 21:19), or "remove the scales" from his eyes like what He did for Saul so he could see again (Acts 9:18). God can also shut all doors except the one He wants him to go through (ref. Acts 16:6-10), showing him the right way to proceed after preventing him from going in a certain way. Sometimes, all it takes is a little time and patient to perceive God's instructions, but no matter, what the circumstances, leaders have the duty to lovingly pray for and guide fellow believers (Ephesians 3:14-21)

When Paul said, "Only let us live up to what we have already attained.", it was not a call to compromise. The Israelites could have stopped along the way during the Exodus and just build a settlement wherever they were instead of seeking out the Promised Land, but they pushed on. This is in fact a motivational call to do the best one could at the current stage. The Lord said of Philadelphia's church: "I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name." (Revelation 3:8). "Little strength" was of course insignificant, but we do not wait until we have enough strength before we forged ahead. Rather, we use whatever strength we have at the time to push forward little by little, and our strength would grow along the way. As we progress along the Lord's way, He would open the necessary doors for us and let us grow from strength to strength. The widow at Zarephath had only a small bit of flour and olive oil left. She was extremely poor, but not poor enough that she was completely unable to help God's prophet. God knows her circumstances – He did not ask beyond her means and only wanted her to make a small loaf of bread for the prophet (1 Kings 17:13-16). The widow complied and discovered that her flour and oil never ran out after she baked the bread for Elijah, and she and her family survived the famine. God reveals His truth to us so that we have hope and a direction to work towards. The Bible tells us: "The path of the righteous is like the morning sun, shining ever brighter till the full light of day." (Proverbs 4:18).

Ideals and Action

"Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do. For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things." (Philippians 3:17-19)

During his term as Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force in Europe, Dwight David Eisenhower (1890-1969) demonstrated the art of leadership to his men. He placed a rope on the table and asked them to try pushing it forward from the tail end. All of them found it to be exceedingly difficult to move the rope. He then took the other end and pulled it along easily. This, he told them, was leadership. When a good shepherd brings His flock out for grazing, "He goes on ahead of them, and His sheep follow Him because they know His voice." (John 10:4). This is leadership by example. The shepherd would have explored any unfamiliar terrain ahead and scouted out any dangerous places before letting the sheep move on. He knows the limits of the flock's ability to navigate the surroundings and is ready to help the sheep when necessary.

The apostle Paul was an example of a good shepherd. He was unlike the false shepherds who led the religious elite of Israel. They "only take care of themselves and eat the curds, clothe themselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals" (Ezekiel 34:1-6). Paul was appointed by God to tend to His sheep, and he does so with willing joy and is an "example to the flock" (1 Peter 5:2-3). In doing so, he

emulates the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, so that the believers can in turn learn to emulate Christ by watching him.

There was a pastor who was very enthusiastic in accumulating earthly wealth and neglected spiritual matters. One day, he suddenly gave a very good sermon about the second coming of Christ on the pulpit. The congregation whispered to one another: "when the Lord returns, wouldn't all the antiques and valuables that he had hoarded become worthless junk?" Noticing their lack of attention, he lost his interest and motivation to deliver his message.

Paul does not agree with the forming of exclusive cliques among believers. He was uninterested even in becoming a member of supposedly spiritual "clubs" of religious elites. Paul exhorted all believers to emulate him, not just a select circle of elite believers. He did not exclude anyone from his "clique" – all were welcome. Also, Paul encourages the believers to "keep your eyes on those who live as we do". During the course of the gospel ministry, there were no doubt co-workers who came onboard earlier to work with Paul. After they heard of the Gospel, their lives and values changed and they lived a new lifestyle. Their faith was not simply verbal, but visible through their actions and beliefs. Paul was proud of these early fruit and confident that they would have good testimonies for other believers to follow. This was something that Paul could be sure of only because he knew them well.

The Lord Jesus Christ, as the greatest teacher of all, was particularly concerned about setting up good role models. Even on the night He was betrayed, His love for the traitor never waned. In an expression of His love for them, He personally washed the disciples' feet and told them: "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you." (John 13:15). Peter, as one of the disciples present, was deeply impressed by the Lord's example. Years later, he recalled the suffering of the Lord during His Passion and wrote: "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). As one of the leading teachers of the Church, Paul believed strongly in the importance of demonstrating God's teachings through living examples. The longest place he ministered to was Ephesus, where he remained for three years. The church there knew him well, and he wrote to the elders: "In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" (Acts 20:35).

Testimony by Example

Some call Christianity a "contagion of love". Those who witness Christians in action would be "infected" with God's love. Paul said: "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners - of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display His immense patience as an example for those who would believe in Him and receive eternal life." (1 Timothy 1:15-16). This is the fundamental principle in the spreading of salvation. Paul encouraged Timothy, who was serving as a teacher of God's word: "Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity." (1 Timothy 4:12). He also told Titus to: "In everything set them an example by doing what is good" (Titus 2: 7). Paul believes that the examples that believers set both at home and in church have powerful impact. Thus, he made sure that the elders and deacons under his care behaved as good role models. One of the things he expects of them was that their children must also be believers – "If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?" (1 Timothy 3:1-13, Titus 1:5-9). His reminder shows us the importance of a good example. While role models are no substitute for salvation, they show us how one who is saved behaves. That is to say, if one does not demonstrate good works, one does not bear the mark of salvation.

Paul then speaks about enemies of the cross. What did he mean by that? He was of course not saying there were people who opposed actual crosses and sought to destroy any cross they came across. Although such things have happened before, they did not take place during the time Paul wrote his epistle to the Philippians. The truth was, Christians at the time had not even adopted the cross as the outward symbol of the Church. Moreover, destroying physical crosses was hardly any kind of evil sin. Even though Christ's redemptive work was fulfilled on a cross, physical

crosses do nothing to save anyone. What Paul meant were the people who opposed the cross of Jesus Christ in their actions and words. These could even be people who proclaim the power of the cross and sing hymns about it, but their deeds reflected the exact opposite of what Christ would have done. This was the most severe offense against the cross.

Paul was not interested in needless debate. He was more concerned with the matters of life and death. If not, he would not have patiently reiterated again and again, even “with tears”, and even when people got irritated with his repetition. We can picture how Paul, who was usually capable of enduring the worst sufferings and persecution, being reduced to tears as he wrote the letter (or dictated it to an assistant who wrote it for him)! What for? Like the Crying Prophet Jeremiah, he thought of the tragic end of those who rebelled against God: “Oh, that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears! I would weep day and night for the slain of my people.” (Jeremiah 9:1). This was the destiny awaiting those who opposed the cross of Jesus Christ. (Hebrews 2:3)

Even though Paul was imprisoned because of the truth of Christ, he was not weeping for himself. Neither was he crying because the truth was hindered. He was in fact shedding his tears for his enemies, because they knew not what they were doing! Paul’s tears of love for his enemies has so much in common with the heart of the Lord Jesus Christ! When Christ was on earth, He wept for those who were against Him, because they were clueless about the impending doom that befalls all who opposed God.

The End of the Enemies

Most people would be more than happy to see their enemies’ downfall. In one story, a young initiate went to visit his religious master, who was regarded as a wise sage. He asked: “If somebody insulted me, scolded me, hated me, cursed me, and hit me, what should I do?” The wise sage replied: “You must bear with him, give way to him, avoid him, and respect him, because behold his end!” The last four words revealed the reason the sage told his student to be patient and endure – to gloat as the enemy eventually gets a taste of his own medicine and meets his doom. What a terrifying scheme to use on one’s enemies!

The Bible teaches us: “Do not gloat when your enemy falls; when they stumble, do not let your heart rejoice” (Proverbs 24:17). This was the attitude Christ held towards His enemies. A fellow believer once told me how he was oppressed and persecuted in various inhumane ways for his faith. After he finished, I asked if he bore a grudge against those who made him suffer. He replied that he doesn’t, because when we have the love of Christ, there is no room in our hearts for hate. Paul’s experience in Philippi does a great job to explain this amazing love. Paul and Silas were illegally beaten up for spreading the Gospel. The vicious prison wardens put them in the deepest dungeons, but they sang praise to God at night. Suddenly, there was a great earthquake and all the gates in the prison were shaken open and the shackles of the prisoners fell off. The warden thought the prisoners had all escaped and he would be held responsible for breaching his duty. In his fear, he sought to kill himself with his sword. Paul did not mock him and say: “You oppressor of God’s servants! Look how soon your retribution has arrived!” Instead, Paul stopped him from committing suicide and shared the Gospel with him so that he can find eternal life (Acts 16:22-34). This is what a true ambassador of the Gospel would do!

The opponents of Christ on His road to the cross were unable to personally harm Him. However, they could oppose Him but rejecting the truth of the Gospel. This was a dangerous act of self-termination by refusing the only path of salvation, and leads to the sad and terrible end of eternal damnation.

Marks of the Enemy

Not all enemies of the cross would resort to violence, fire, weapons, and chains to oppose and hurt the Church. Some of them might infiltrate the Church and try to destroy it from inside out. These people carry the marks of the Anti-Christ:

1. Emphasis on the Flesh

“Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things.”. “Stomach” in the original text was “torso”, just as the term was used in Psalms 16:9 and 31:9. Here, it meant all kinds of sensory luxury and indulgence, including gluttony. The festivals of pagans often focused on such debauchery. Even today, we have people who set up altars with plenty of rich food to be eaten after making offerings to their ancestors and gods. The Chinese also have a saying, “to make offerings to the god of the five organs”, which meant to sate one’s hunger. While the idiom was often used jokingly, it pointed toward the truth too. People whose god is their stomach also referred to religious workers who saw their role as a job for survival. They were never truly called by God and do not hold any sense of mission. Some of them were not even responsible towards their duties nor sought to improve themselves. They were charlatans who worked in the church simply to reap benefits for themselves. In Hokkien, Christians were called “*Jia Kao Eh*”, i.e. people who fed by their religion (the term probably arose in reference to consuming the Holy Communion). However, these false teachers literally “ate the Church”. They were typically popular in church social circles and climbed up the church hierarchy quickly, but their hearts pander after worldly pursuits on earth.

Then there were those who chose to fast selectively or abstain from eating certain foods, thinking of it as a rite of self-purification that pleased God. This was without a doubt another form of treating their stomachs as their god. Even today, many religions still have such a practice. The Bible was clear about this: “But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do.” (1 Corinthians 8:8). And: “You say, “Food for the stomach and the stomach for food, and God will destroy them both.” The body, however, is not meant for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.” (1 Corinthians 6:13). How foolish it is to ignore the incorruptible spiritual things to focus on things on earth that would eventually decay! We all know that no matter how tasty any food was, we would soon forget about it after it has been consumed. Why not work towards eternal life instead?

2. Taking Shame to be Glory

How we act often depends on our personal values. Any person who considers shame to be glory is exhibiting dissonant values and akin to an insane man. The Gnostics regarded themselves to be highly spiritual and beyond the standards of the world. As a result, they revel in carnal indulgences and opposed established morals. Instead of feeling ashamed, they saw it as great glory. Such people continue to be very common in today’s world. Like what the Bible recorded about the turmoil in Judah near its fall: “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter.” (Isaiah 5:20). The Corinthians were a particularly litigious church where its members frequently accused and fought with each other. The real problem behind the conflict was values that have been twisted and confused. They take their disputes “before the ungodly for judgment instead of before the Lord’s people”. It was obvious that they placed worldly status and benefits above their identity as Christ’s saints and members of His body and asked to be judged by those “whose way of life is scorned in the church”. (1 Corinthians 6:1, 4). Their emphasis on worldly wisdom and power was what made them shameful. Some of them even bullied and insulted the poor among God’s elect, not knowing that they were “to inherit the kingdom He promised those who love Him”. On the other hand, they side with and pander to the rich bullies who sully the name of the Lord. (James 2:1-8). This was again another way in which false believers miss the mark on proper values and put on shame as their glory.

3. Focused on Earthly Matters

Our hearts rest where our riches are. About this, the Bible said: “Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.” (Colossians 3:1-4). Those who focus upon and long for the riches of the earth have one huge problem: they have never experienced the heavenly life of being “raised with Christ”, and thus have no hope for eternal life in heaven.

Are false prophets and teachers diabolic creatures with horned heads and cloven hooves for feet? Certainly not! They are more likely to be good-looking people who dress well. Many were also eloquent and charismatic, and much loved by those around them. Peter warned believers that such people would: "...exploit you with fabricated stories. Their condemnation has long been hanging over them, and their destruction has not been sleeping... With eyes full of adultery, they never stop sinning; they seduce the unstable; they are experts in greed - an accursed brood!" (2 Peter 2:3, 14). This is not just an issue of weak morals, but because one does not have the hope of eternal life. Remember how Peter thrice denied the Lord? How different was that from Judas's betrayal? What sets him apart from Judas was this: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." (John 6:68-71). Peter knew Jesus was the Lord and Saviour, but Judas only knew the wealth of the world. Someone who had been saved would focus on the Lord in heaven while one who is not saved focuses on the pursuits of the earthly realm. They do not have heavenly like and are in fact enemies of Christ. As long as the old life still lives and had not experienced the cross, one has no connection to Christ. There are those who claim to be Christians but are uninterested in heavenly matters. When you try to discuss heaven and eternity with them, they would divert the conversation towards earth and the wealth, success, and status to be had. Nothing they say relates to heaven, except for the token "thanks be to God", which makes the conversation even more awkward. Such is the mark of a person who does not belong to God.

An African tribal believer who arrived in America was hosted by a fellow Christian. The American brought him to one of the largest malls and introduced him to many expensive luxury goods. After the outing, he asked the tribal Christian for his opinion on the experience. To his surprise, the reply was: "I have never seen so many useless things in my life!" Things that some view as useless are must-have symbols of success to many. Those who desire them aim to enhance their social status or satisfy their vanity, while those who find them useless have totally no interest in the objects. All the wealth and luxury that we accumulate in this world will not follow us into eternity when we pass on, and are not true wealth (Luke 12:21). When the Lord returns, "the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare". Thus, what Christians really need to do is "look forward to the day of God and speed its coming." (2 Peter 3:10-12).

Citizens of Heaven

We are citizens of heaven, and we "eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables Him to bring everything under His control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like His glorious body." (Philippians 3:20-21). Caesar Augustus (63 BC – 14 AD, ref. Luke 2:1), whose real name was Gaius Octavius, ascended the imperial throne of Rome in 27 AD to become its first emperor. He appointed the capital of Macedonia, Philippi, as a Roman colony directly under the rule of Rome's government. People living there were given privileges of Roman citizenship. Thus, while geographically separate, people born in Philippi were considered Roman citizens (ref. Acts 16:12, 37, 22:25, 29).

A Glorious Destiny

Our heavenly "nationality" is more glorious than any earthly citizenship. From the moment we believe in Christ, we have been "chosen out of this world" by Him (John 15: 19) and no longer belong to the world. As the people of heaven, we cannot serve two masters at the same time, and must focus on matters of heavenly importance. Our loyalty and faith must always be in Jesus Christ, no matter the price we have to pay or the opinions and reactions of others to our faith (ref. 1 Corinthians 3:23, 4:2-5). To be faithful to God, Moses had to give up his Egyptian citizenship and the luxury and riches that he enjoyed, including his chance to succeed the throne of Egypt. "He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt because he was looking ahead to his reward. By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger; he persevered because he saw him who is invisible." (Hebrews 11:25-27).

Martin Luther considers Christians to have "dual citizenship", as both the people of heaven and citizens of our nation on earth. As such, we submit to the authority of our

earthly rulers, for Christ said: "So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." (Matthew 22:21). However, we must ensure that spiritually we remain as "pure virgins" (2 Corinthians 11:2), faithful to Christ alone. Only when we find our sense of belonging in heaven can we build the right values and direction.

The Glorious Hope

Hope is the power that sustains us on the journey to heaven, that enables us to have joy amidst suffering. Hope is not a moral value, by the joy it produces leads us to live moral lives. This is why unhappy people become restless and negative because they do not know what they were living for. The mentality of "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." (1 Corinthians 15:32-34) and many other sinful behaviours arise from the absence of hope. The Lord tells us that a faithful servant "gives the other servants their food at the proper time" as instructed by the master, but a wicked servant says to himself "My master is staying away a long time" and he then begins to beat his fellow servants and to eat and drink with drunkards. (Matthew 24:45-52). The wicked servant might talk about the second coming of Jesus in front of people, but his mind thinks otherwise and his behaviour reflects these thoughts. His deviant faith would lead to two bad spiritual fruit: He would hate those whom he ought to love, because he does not have the love of the Lord, and would even attack his co-workers. At the same time, he would love those who do not deserve love, and associate with "drunkards", revelling in wilful debauchery. Such a servant has abandoned his status as a child of the light to walk with the children of darkness.

The Bible tells us: "You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober." (1 Thessalonians 5:5-9). Throughout church history, God had raised numerous loyal servants who "gives the other servants their food at the proper time" and brought revival and renewal that changed the times. These were people who waited longingly for the Lord's return. They were well-read in the Bible and upheld the name of Christ at the centre of their lives. However, they were not doomsday prophets who fabricated end times schedules to fool the gullible. Contrary to them were those who proclaimed eschatological beliefs but exclude Christ from their teachings. These were opportunists who exploited the state of world affairs to create sensational cults. They were mostly morally corrupt people who did not live heavenly lives, let alone having knowledge of heavenly wisdom! Jenkin Lloyd-Jones (1843-1918) once said: "You cannot place magnificent hope within a tiny soul". We must be renewed by the Lord so that our vision is expanded before we are able to see the hope of heaven. Of course, such a feat is beyond human comprehension.

The Glorious End

Christians await with hope for a specific goal – the glorious return of the beloved Lord they serve – Jesus Christ. Not only are they looking forward to the end times when all evil would be wiped out, nor are they just hoping for a beautiful new world. Most important to them is that they would partake of it in the Lord: "But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells

To live in an eternal kingdom would require one to have an eternal body. As the Bible tells us: "I declare to you, brothers and sisters, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable." (1 Corinthians 15: 50) and "The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever." (1 John 2:17). The Bible was clear to us that God's kingdom was prepared for those who love Him and follow His will (ref. Matthew 7:21, 1 Corinthians 2:9).

When Jesus comes again, the dead saints will be resurrected and the living saints would be transformed. They will shed this lowly and fallen body and assume a glorious new form: "When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory." (1 Corinthians 15:42, 44, 51-54). Such a new body is not formless like some imagine, the Bible did not elaborate on what it would be like, and we cannot perceive this new form in our mortal bodies. However, it is said to be similar to Christ's own

glorious body. This alone is enough for us to await thankfully and with full confidence.

It is a promise of the Lord's love for us, for God will "along with Him, graciously give us all things". His love for us is so profound that it is like how He loves Himself (Romans 8:32, Ephesians 5:29). Thus, the new body He has prepared for us would be nothing less than the best and most perfect, emulating His own perfection. The Gospel of Luke demonstrated that the Lord Jesus Christ was not restricted by time and space. He could appear anywhere and anytime at will and come and go as He pleases (Luke 24:13-43). How amazing! He did not need subsistence but was also able to eat and drink if He wanted. When He arrived, He did not need the door to be opened for Him (John 20:23). The very same apostle John wrote in Revelation that even though He cannot be restricted, He does not force His way into people's hearts and waits for them to open up to Him (ref. Revelation 3:20). Our resurrected bodies would share at least some of these characteristics manifested by the risen Lord. Knowing this, we need not worry.

Pillage, jealousy, pride, and other evil thoughts and actions cannot exist in God's kingdom. The Bible also mentions that the children of God would experience "freedom and glory", and our redeemed bodies would not groan under the weight of sin any more. Creation itself "will be liberated from its bondage to decay" (Romans 8:18-25). The world we live in now is in decay because of the sin of fallen mankind. In the same way, the new world that we await would be renewed in God's infinite glory. The law of decay would be made impotent and abolished, and there will be no more degeneration, age, and death in the perfect new world. Such is the magnificence that we cannot even imagine it!

The Lord, "by the power that enables Him to bring everything under His control", has put in place for us that which even our most advanced science and technology could not. This is not achieved by human effort – only the Lord can transform our hearts. Following and obeying He who created and rules over all things. Who had risen from the dead and turned our rebellion into submission, leads us out of corruption into perfection. Thanks be to God – this is our faith and hope in the Lord Jesus Christ, as a fellow believer puts it: "When one has life in Jesus, one has infinite hope."

The Perseverance of the Saints - Length

Zeng Zi said that: "Perfect virtue is the burden which he considers it is his to sustain;-- is it not heavy? Only with death does his course stop; is it not long?" (*The Analects of Confucius* "Taibo"!). This meant that a virtuous man must walk the way of kindness ("ren") in life. Such is the duty of an intellectual. One's ambition must also be far-reaching and persevering. Zeng Zi was not the ideal successor to spread Confucian teachings - Confucius found him to be dull. However, all the bright students have left either to become court officials or run successful businesses, and his favourite pupil Yan Hui had passed away prematurely. The only one left to succeed him was the dull but determined Zeng Zi. Through his perseverance and moral values, Zeng Zi prospered Confucianism. If a person can put in so much effort to realise their aspirations in this transient world, how much more then would the apostles pour into their work when their hopes are of eternity in Christ? Eternity is endless, and thus perseverance is essential in achieving anything significant in eternity.

A short letter like the one to the Philippian church can be easily read in a few minutes, but it took Paul many years of life experience to be able to write the message. As we read the epistle, we can sense the joy leaping between his words, even though Paul had suffered a lot and his wisdom was the result of many tears and blood, bearing fruit through great perseverance. Life is full of trials and challenges, much more so for Christians, which is why we must persevere. Many ministries succeeded because of perseverance. Christian perseverance is different from worldly endurance, for we have the hope of eternity in heaven and our motivations are not of this world, but from the Holy Spirit who helps us to bear spiritual fruit (cf. Galatians 5:22); Moreover, Christians do not press on as individuals, but as a fellowship of believers who all uphold the perseverance, united with one common vision. Thus, our perseverance is stronger and can push on for much longer.

The Importance of Perseverance

"Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends!" (Philippians 4:1). Modern sociologists and psychologists have found that joy and satisfaction comes from several conditions being met: 1. A loving marriage, 2. Financial abundance, 3. Good health and reputation, 4. A successful career, and 5. An ideal environment. I do not think anyone would disagree that these conditions can bring joy and satisfaction. However, by these criteria, Paul should be very unhappy indeed —He had no family, being single (or widowed). We can see this from what he told the Corinthians: "Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do." (1 Corinthians 7:8). Paul was not greedy and did not receive a high salary from the churches. He "kept himself from being a burden" and did not readily accept provisions from the churches but instead gave willing of his limited resources to support them. He also worked at times to raise money by making tents to provide for his and his team's needs. (ref. Acts 18:3, 20:33-34; 1 Corinthians 4: 12; 2 Thessalonians 3:8). They were often in material want and many co-workers departed from the ministry as a result. Due to malnourishment, his health was constantly poor. In fact, he was physically older than his true age because of that, and his eyes were especially badly affected (ref. Galatians

4:13, 15, 6:11; Romans 16:22); His ministry was never smooth, and people opposed him and even likened him to an unwelcome plague (ref. Acts 24:5). Truth be told, his work was full of difficulties and danger (ref. 2 Corinthians 11:23-27); His living circumstances were even worse, being shackled in prison. Could things be any worse for Paul (Philippians 1:13)?

He described his team's life to the Corinthians: "To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly. We have become the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world - right up to this moment." (1 Corinthians 4: 11-13). Such living conditions would sound horrible to anyone, but Paul was able to press on. Even when others felt sad for him, he was able to remain joyful! His satisfaction seemed inexplicable but we can tell that it flowed from the joy in his heart and enabled him to persevere, for "Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before Him He endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." (Hebrews 12:2). As an apostle of the Lord, he was emulating Christ in the fulfilment of His divine plans.

In prison, Paul thought about the Philippian church and how God miraculously intervened with the Macedonian vision that brought him to Europe and led to the birth of the Philippian church. It was a spiritually healthy church even though Paul met with some troubles during evangelism. He was arrested, beaten, and imprisoned. All his sufferings were like what Christ had said: "A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby was born, she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world." (John 16:21). For his perseverance, the Philippian church became his joy, comfort, and glory. Now, it has also become the strength that upholds him. Imagine a mother in a poor family who gave all her life to care for her children. She suffered herself to give the children her best. This was what the Chinese meant by "Women may be physically weak, but they are powerful as mothers". Where did that strength come from? Because she sees the future when her children are grown up – and they are her hope. In the same way, Paul and the Philippian church was connected via the same vision and hope in the Lord.

Perseverance Comes from Hope

Paul's love and hope for the churches can often be seen in his words to them. He did not expect a salary and did not avoid tough or dangerous work. He never complained and gave of all he had, even his life, for the churches. All he wanted to see was their growth and for them to remain on the straight and narrow path of salvation. He said: "For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when He comes? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy." (1 Thessalonians 2:19-20). A crown was a symbol of glory, a sign of success in one's endeavour and a reward from the Lord. Paul did not aim for shoddy results which did not require much from him. He knew who he believed in and he gave his best to attain the most ideal results even if he had to suffer. With his higher expectations of his own work, he had to persevere far more than others.

No parent would like to see their children fail. In the same manner, farmers would not want their crops to fail too. Servants of the Lord like Paul do not seek human praise, but for real ministry impact. As long as the recipients are edified spiritually, it does not matter whether Paul is liked. Paul then tells the Ephesian church leaders: "For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God... Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears." (Acts 20:25, 27, 31). Paul's efforts were to ensure bountiful fruits during the harvest. Many of the key truths in the Bible like this are expressed using agricultural metaphors. To the Corinthians, Paul said: "For we are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building." (1 Corinthians 3:9). Here, he was referring to the production of food. John the Baptist said of the Lord Jesus Christ: "His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will clear His threshing floor, gathering His wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire." (Matthew 3:12). Every truly loyal servant of the Lord wants the harvest to be full of grains and not empty husks. They want the Lord's storehouses to be packed full – the grains are like the saved, who will be lifted into heaven and be spared the tribulations of the end times: "Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous." (Psalm 1:4-5).

The Lord's servants know who they serve, and they will be accountable to Him for the souls that they look after. Actions that please humans and achievements that look grand and majestic will turn out to be empty and worthless husks on judgement day. Not only are they not pleasing to God – they hinder the salvation of others. Paul describes his own ministry attitude as such: "For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. On the contrary, we speak as those approved by God to be entrusted with the Gospel. We are not trying to please people but God, who tests our hearts. You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed - God is our witness. We were not looking for praise from people, not from you or anyone else, even though as apostles of Christ we could have asserted our authority. 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 2:3-8). "Love" here refers to pure caring love without condition. Paul does not view himself as an employee paid to work, nor does he bear any selfish desires in his love for the brethren. Filled with

the love of God, His servants are only concerned with real outcomes so that they can answer for their accounts before God. We often see many ministries that seem to achieve exponential growth overnight, but if the co-workers are not serious in persevering with their work and building a strong foundation for the ministry, it can also similarly collapse overnight.

How to Persevere and Stand Firm

1. Spread the true Gospel that gives new life to people. "...the Gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand." (Matthew 7: 24-27; 1 Corinthians 15:1). Teachings that come from humans are like foundations built on loose sand.

2. Uphold and persevere in the truth. Even mighty warriors of the Lord like Samson met with failure when he was not alert and allowed himself to veer from the will of God. As he no longer set himself apart as holy for God, he died in shame. Thus: "Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong." (1 Corinthians 16:13)

3. Stand firm in God's grace. We are saved because of His grace, and not because of our own works nor the law. "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery." (Galatians 5:1) and "...this is the true grace of God. Stand fast in it." (1 Peter 5:12).

4. Have well-grounded faith. We cannot resist Satan on our own and can only do so through faith in God that connects us to the living Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and His victory over death. In his hymn, Martin Luther wrote: "A mighty fortress is our God... And though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us... That Word above all earthly powers no thanks to them abideth;" Believers "stand firm by the faith" (2 Corinthians 1:24; Colossians 4:12).

5. Be strong of will. It is very difficult for someone to help a person who has weak will and drifts with the tide, thus the Bible reminds us: "Stand firm then" (Ephesians 6:14; 2 Thessalonians 6:15). Even the best equipment from the Holy Spirit is useless to a warrior who turns and runs. Many wars were lost simply because of the lack of a strong will to stand firm against the enemy.

6. Be alert and fully sober. Pride robs us of alertness and leads to failure. "So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!" (1 Corinthians 10:12).

7. Be of one heart and mind. "Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken." (Ecclesiastes 4:12). The power of unity is more than simply the sum of its parts – it exceeds that by many times. Thus "Five of you will chase a hundred, and a hundred of you will chase ten thousand, and your enemies will fall by the sword before you." (Leviticus 26:8). This is the result of unity. I pray that the Lord will touch the churches to "stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the Gospel" (Philippians 1:27).

The Church cannot avoid persecution in this world. Because of God's love, Paul wishes for the churches to stand firm and lose no believer to the enemy. He said to them: "Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?" (2 Corinthians 11:29). May every child of God stand firm and persevere in Christ and win victories for Him until the day we see His face.

The Foundation of Perseverance

"I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you, my true companion, help these women since they have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life." (Philippians 4:2-3).

During China's Five Dynasties period, the Khan of Azha (the Tuyuhun tribes near Mt. Yinshan) was dying and called his younger brother and twenty sons to his deathbed. He asked for an arrow from each of his sons and gave one to his brother Muliyan, telling him to break it. Muliyan snapped the arrow with ease and the Khan had a servant bind the remaining nineteen arrows into a bundle, which he again asked Muliyan to break. Muliyan

replied that he was not able to. This demonstrated the principle that a single cord was easy to break, but many cords twined together was hard to, i.e. unity is strength.

The children of the world is wise in worldly things, but the children of the light are united in spiritual matters. The Lord Jesus Christ 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). This affirmative promise from the Lord speaks volumes about strength in unity! The Bible also mentioned matrimonial unity. When a husband respects his wife, "...nothing will hinder your prayers." (1 Peter 3:7). This shows us that a couple that is not of one heart will not have their prayers answered by God – a very common problem in many Christian families.

Unfortunately, we can always count on Satan to stir up trouble in the world. Even in churches, petty problems often arise over small matters that have nothing to do with faith and spiritual living, nor have they anything to do with morals. Such dissent is born of personal differences and disagreements. We know that God allows us to have different personalities and opinions, just as the human body has many organs and limbs that serve different purposes. God created us as such in His wisdom, but humans desire to enforce conformity upon others who are different. They could not stand anyone else having differing views from themselves. In order to make others comply with their expectations, they create more conflicts.

The Philippian church had two sisters in Christ, Euodia and Syntyche, who were in conflict with each other. Both of them were true believers who only wanted the best for the church. Neither was their disagreement a matter of a backsliding believer versus a faithful one. Paul said of them: "...these women... have contended at my side in the cause of the Gospel". They had bore the yoke of Christ together with Paul (ref. Matthew 11:28, 30) and were children of God who obeyed God's will and did God's work. They were spiritually healthy believers and their "names are in the book of life". Sadly, despite all that, they were unable to be of one heart with each other in the Lord. How they would live with each other in heaven is a question for the future, but it is heart-breaking now that they are caught up with infighting when they ought to be comrades-in-arms at the Gospel frontlines. The devil is happiest when he sees co-workers attacking one another, for it destroys the testimony of God's family. "Loving one another" (ref. John 13:35) is the hallmark of God's family, but it has instead become "fighting one another." What more can we say? The devil is sniggering in glee while the angels are silent with grief.

Historically, many church schisms were founded upon inconsequential differences which had nothing to do with faith and heresy. For example, some Christians believed Jesus was born on 25 February, some 06 January, or in the month of May. The Bible did not have any clear record about His birthday, and neither did Mary, His mother, say anything about it. This showed that it was not important for us to identify the day of His birth in this world. On the other hand, we are told "He was with God in the beginning." (John 1:1-2) , "His (whose) origins are from of old, from ancient times." (Micah 5:2). Moreover, no matter which date they argued for, all parties agreed that the Son of God was incarnated in our world to bring salvation for all mankind. The Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches also had a longstanding disagreement – should Easter be celebrated on the first Sunday after the first full moon following the spring equinox, or be fixed on Passover regardless of whether it was a Sunday? However, they all agreed on key principles such as Christ as the Lord of life: "it was impossible for death to keep its hold on Him." (Acts 2:24), and His sovereignty: "through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by His resurrection from the dead" (Romans 1:4). They were also in agreement that "He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification." (Romans 4: 25). While the churches were arguing over petty differences, the Muslim armies have been spreading their faith around the world. Sadly, when the crusaders finally conquered Constantinople in the Fourth Crusade, the busied themselves with in looting and sacking the city!

It is critical to deal with discrimination against one another in the church and bring the brethren to unity in the Lord. Paul did not elaborate on what the two women were fighting over, nor did he take sides. He merely requested for the church to help them. Perhaps both of them were wrong, but neither required significant intervention in their problems. However, if things were allowed to continue down the current path, this conflict between two persons could grow and become a conflict between rival factions and affect the harmony and wellbeing of the church.

Paul's letter to the Philippians was addressed to the "overseers and deacons" (Philippians 1:1). The plural form indicated that there were at least two such elders. Thus, the "true companion" he mentioned would be one of these elders. He also mentioned other unnamed "co-workers" who are remembered by God. This church did not wait for their pastor to serve them, but instead worked together, suffered together, and fought for the Gospel together. This is proof that their names were recorded in the "Book of Life" (Revelations 3:5, 20:12, 15, 13:8, 21:27). All who were named in the book were the elect of God, saved by Christ and partaking in His kingdom and ministry. They do not belong to the world and were hated by it. Because of this, they should all the more be harmoniously united, for they belonged to the same Lord and faced the same enemy. Only then can they prevent any breaches in their defences against the enemy's forces and stand firm in the Lord.

In its battle with Satan, the Church needs more than individual heroes. While the faith and perseverance of each individual is important, it needs to be bolstered with harmony and unity. By upholding one another, believers can greatly improve their chances of victory in spiritual battles. In his compilation of military stratagems, Wuzi wrote: "A nation that is not united must not go to war, an army that is not united must not go to the frontlines, a frontline that is not united must not engage the enemy. Where there is no unity, there can be no victory. In order for a wise ruler to achieve anything with his people, he must first unite them." It was clear in his writings that unity was the key to victory. The model prayer taught to the disciples by the Lord goes: "Our Father, who art in heaven... thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." There is no doubt that God's will in heaven does not meet with obstacles, because the saints and angels there do not engage in conflict. "Our" denotes that believers are of one life in the Lord and must pursue harmonious unity as one heart. Therefore, the foundation of the Church lies in unity, and unity comes from having our names recorded together in the Book of Life. All we need is our spiritual life that comes from heaven – why are we still fighting with our own brethren over petty matters and picking on the splinters in their eyes?

The Power of Perseverance

"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:4-7).

What kind of a person was Paul? Many think of him as someone who was unsmiling and stern – the typical Chinese impression of geniuses, holy men, and sages. We apply our own cultural impressions upon him, who came from a vastly different culture, and use it to reinforce the impression he gave to some in the Bible: "...but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing." (2 Corinthians 10:10). Such a description made people imagine Paul as someone whose looks were unlikeable and whose words were offensive. His co-worker Luke once witnessed someone falling asleep during Paul's sermon and falling to his death from the third storey. (Acts 20:7-12) Even though they eventually raised him from the dead by God's power, this event seemed to hint that Paul's preaching was boring and uninteresting. Paul further reinforced this image of his when he told the Ephesians: "Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving." (Ephesians 5:4). Modern readers might think of Paul as someone who knew little about homiletics and feel he should include humour in his sermons to retain the audience's attention. Just look at how popular comedians were in the entertainment industry! Because of this, there is no lack of people who consider Paul to be a killjoy and stoic.

In the original text, "coarse joking" (*eutrapelia*) referred to sarcastic or obscene talk that should not be part of a believer's vocabulary. The Bible teaches us that: "Then those who feared the Lord talked with each other, and the Lord listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in His presence concerning those who feared the Lord and honoured His name." (Malachi 3:16). Christ Himself said: "But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken." (Matthew 12:36). This is certainly not the same as the standards of propriety followed by the entertainment industry. If we don't want any inappropriate speech to be recorded in God's books, the best prevention is not to say them.

Of course, the Bible does not ban us from experiencing joy. Of the Holy Spirit's fruits we can bear, there is "love", followed immediately by "joy", then peace and forbearance" and the other fruits (Galatians 5:22). We are also encouraged to "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn." (Romans 12:15). The saints can enjoy good things and be happy just as the Lord Himself was filled with joy (ref. Luke 10:21). They can also be like the apostles, "rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name." (Acts 5:41) and "leap for joy" (Luke 6:23)! They also rejoice with the hosts of heaven when sinners are saved and the kingdom of God is expanded. How can it be wrong when Christ Himself so instructed (ref. Luke 15:6)?

For obvious reasons, nobody in their right mind rejoices and leaps about cheerfully all day long. The joy spoken of here refers to that which comes from being with the Lord, a peaceful and gentle stream that flows slowly but without end from our fulfilled hearts. The Bible tells us: "The Lord will guide you always; He will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail." (Isaiah 58:11). What a beautiful scene! "rejoicing in the Lord" is not affected by any external factor. Neither has it anything to do with wealth. It comes simply from being joined with the lord: "That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither— whatever they do prospers." (Psalm 1:3). Learning to depend on God is the highest artform. It transforms perseverance into enjoyment like the miraculous tree that made bitter water in Marah sweet (ref. Exodus 15:23-26) .

True Strength is Humble

Pagan culture is full of examples of the strong lording over the weak. Strength is power and gentleness is weakness to them. In Homer's epic poem the Iliad, Zeus lectures the Olympian gods: "Then you will see how far I am strongest of all the immortals. Come, you gods, make this endeavour, that you all may learn this. Let down out of the sky a cord of gold; lay hold of it all you who are gods and all who are goddesses, yet not even so can you drag down Zeus from the sky to the ground, not Zeus the high lord of counsel, though you try until you grow weary. Yet whenever I might strongly be minded to pull you, I could drag you up, earth and all and sea and all with you..." Such primitive and barbaric boasting was certainly not befitting one whose titles include All-father and Supreme Ruler. The philosophy of stoicism dictated that men must not demonstrate gentleness and weak feelings, nor to weep in front of others. But what Jesus taught was the opposite – He was the almighty Lord, "sustaining all things by His powerful word" (Hebrews 1: 3). A single word from Him was sufficient to calm the raging sea (ref. Matthew 8:23-27). He rose from the dead and claimed victory over death (ref. Romans 1:4). Through all these feats no man could accomplish, He demonstrated that He was the almighty God. Yet when he came to our world, "When they hurled their insults at Him, He did not retaliate; when He suffered, He made no threats." (1 Peter 2:23). "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so He did not open His mouth." (Acts 8:32). He was gentle and humble (ref. Matthew 11:29), yet in Gethsemane he showed His absolute power. Simply by answering "I am He" (John 18:6), the fully armed men sent to arrest Him fell backwards. If he so desired, he could ask His heavenly Father to send more than twelve legions of angels for Him to command (ref. Matthew 26:53), but He chose to obey His Father's will to fulfill salvation for the world on the cross. Three days later, He rose from the dead, "When He ascended on high, He took many captives and gave gifts to His people." (Ephesians 4:8).

The disciples of Christ were not called to fight with the people of the world. They were instructed to emulate His gentleness. Jesus told the disciples: "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." (Matthew 5:5). In a world where everyone is trying to conquer more ground for themselves through violence, Christ taught His disciples that gentleness is the way to ultimate victory. This is the humility of the strong, the sign of a mighty man who has conquered Himself (ref. Proverbs 16:32, 18:19). He showed that there was His heart was filled with truth, and that "He entrusted Himself to Him who judges justly" (1 Peter 2:23).

Looking Forward to Christ's Return

The hope of Christ's second coming brings great motivation to the saints and revival to the Church. In a world full of suffering that oppresses Christians, His followers know that "I wait for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning." (Psalm 130:6). Because for those who revere His name "the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays." (Malachi 4:2; Luke 1:78). Thus, the believers are empowered by the hope that Christ will soon be returning in glory.

The Bible compares the coming of the kingdom of heaven to a great harvest: "See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near." (James 5:7-9). This was why Paul can say about the believers: "Therefore, among God's churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring." (2 Thessalonians 1:4, 5). The Lord will wipe away all our tears when we finally meet Him. Looking forward to His return spurs believers to work hard in anticipation of the coming glory: "Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain." (1 Corinthians 15:58). This motivates the saints to press on in the race towards the goal even when their arms and legs are soft with fatigue and gives them a clear destination to strive towards instead of aiming blindly. It guides them to live godly lives and train their eyes on the Lord alone and not fight amongst themselves in dissent, as the Bible says: "The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armour of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh." (Romans 13:12-14)

St. Augustine (354-430) was once a carefree youth. He was as wild as he was talented and did not watch his morals. Despite wanting to change, he was powerless to do so until he was inspired by the Lord to repent and live a renewed life: "All who have this hope in Him purify themselves, just as He is pure." (1 John 3:3). This led to him eventually becoming one of the most respected church fathers.

In Philippians 4:5 we are told: "The Lord is near." 2 Timothy 4:17 tells us that the Lord stands at our side and gives us strength. All these give us the power to stand firm and persevere until the day He comes again.

Faithful Reliance and Prayers

In his autumn years, Albert Einstein (1879-1955) spent most of his time at the Institute for Advanced Studies. Following the conclusion of the Second World War, his theories expanded beyond the realm of physics. Some people felt that since 1933, Einstein had not been making any academic contribution, but others felt that his contributions during this period were greater than ever before. One fine day while Einstein was taking a walk in the campus of Princeton University, he encountered an academic who asked him about nuclear energy. He wanted to know what other sources of power could be explored as an alternative. Einstein answered with a serious look on his face: "the power of prayer!" While we hesitate to agree that Einstein's theological views were orthodox, we cannot deny that he has a clear understanding of God's immeasurable power. Prayer is not simply a belief in God, but also belief in His power, for "without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to Him must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him." (Hebrews 11:6).

Sadly, many Christians actually do not understand the power of prayer. When praying to God for help, we must commit entirely into His hands and stop worrying. There was a story about a man from the countryside who took a train ride for the first time in his life. He kept carrying his luggage and refused to put it down after boarding. When someone told him he could put his things down, he said: "The train is already carrying so many people and all their belongings, wouldn't it weigh down the train if I also put my things down?" People today are of course much more knowledgeable about such things, but many continue to carry their hearts' burdens when they board an aeroplane, ship, or train and refuse to put them down. This includes some Christians who are troubled by their worries.

I once wrote a poem while I was filled with worry. I titled it "Why Worry? Simply Pray."

When misfortunes gather under the storm of life,
And jackals surround you baying in the dark.
Remember the words of comfort —
Why worry? Simply pray.

When David faced the wrath and insolence of his enemies,
Like the deadly waves gushing from a raging river.
The Lord had break him free —
And no net be able to capture him.
Why worry? Simply pray (Psalm 124).

When Paul stood at the weathered stern of his ship,
The Sun, Moon and stars hid their rays.
The gloomy storm cackled at him from beyond the ship's rail,
Yet the spirit of the chained man was free.
Why worry? Simply pray.

Children of God must look out for the evil one's deception,
That twists God's word and ruins faith.
What use is prayer, it says. Just continue worrying.
Yet the faithful witness replied —
Why worry? I can simply pray!

"Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God." (Philippians 4:6). "Do not" and "but" here sounds easy enough to follow. It meant that we need only to pray to God and drop all worries. The many nights of insomnia that we went through were all for nothing. We are told to "Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you." (1 Peter 5:7). Who would suspect our

merciful and loving God's love and concern for us? Every star in the night sky seemed to be God's angels watching over us tirelessly. It is wise to shed our worries to Him, for he is able to handle all our burdens for us. Modern medical science has shown that prayers are wonderful for relieving stress, and people who pray usually live longer than those who do not. Indeed, trusting in God and handing over your worries takes the burden off of our hearts and give believers the power to persevere and experience joy.

Peace from God

Before He departed from our world, the Lord Jesus Christ told the disciples that He would die on the cross. The flock that remains would be vulnerable and persecuted, but he promised to send the Holy Spirit as their counsellor and comforted them: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." (John 14:27). He then said: "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." (John 16:33). Jesus was clearly not referring to the worldly peace we are familiar with. He said we would have suffering, but at the same time we would have peace from God. Isn't that contradictory? But such is the "peace of God, which transcends all understanding" – peace is found in where we least expect it.

The worldly view of peace is the absence of suffering, a smooth sailing life, a harmonious family, and comfortable and enjoyable days. Thus, when there is peace, there is no suffering, and vice versa. Yet the Lord tells us that the saints would experience both concurrently. We did not have to wait till we are in heaven to enjoy God's peace. It follows us even as we are enduring the suffering of this world. This was certainly not how a typical person would think of peace. In this respect, the saints are like the Israelites during the Exodus – even as they struggle for survival in the barren wilderness, their hearts were resting in the hope of the Promised Land.

Our peace lies in the Lord Jesus Christ. Imagine yourself living in a wintry land surrounded by snow and cold winds but protected by a house with heating systems and double-glazed windows. As you sit by the blazing fireplace, you look out of the glass into the terrible blizzard outside. No matter how it raged, the snowstorm would not affect you in any way. Were you not living in an icy land? Yes, but you are also living inside a well-protected house with temperature control that keeps out the cold. This is what the Bible meant when it tells us: "The name of the Lord is a fortified tower; the righteous run to it and are safe." (Proverbs 18:10). To be clear, the Lord never ever said that peace existed outside of Him. Of course, non-believers would not understand such peace until they taste it for themselves. Such peace is genuine peace, unlike the peace and calmness that some force themselves to exhibit even though their hearts were racing with stress. True peace is more than an external appearance. It has no fear, no worry, and is guarded by the Lord. As the Bible says: "You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in You." (Isaiah 26:3). True peace flows like a stream from the heart. It is constant and stable and does not change even in the midst of suffering, continuing to persevere in the Lord.

Models of Perseverance

"Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable - if anything is excellent or praiseworthy - think about such things." (Philippians 4:8)

We often hear people say, "No news is good news". This saying summarizes how people think of public media. Whether it is print or digital media, no one would report about planes flying normally on routine flights, but the moment a plane crashes, the incident would hog the headlines. Similarly, no journalist would report about a normal family, but sensational news about dysfunctional families would be plastered all over the papers. It is like there is nothing good worth reporting in the news anymore.

If future generations researched about how we lived today, they would reference records from our time to understand us better. However, they are quite likely to conclude that we lived like civilized beasts! Twisted values today have numbed us to the trap we have fallen into – we have become entangled in pessimism, disillusion, and debauchery. Much of this can be attributed to the kind of media we are being fed today. While we cannot deny that this is the unfortunate truth, we must remember that we can also do the opposite – the media can be used to spread positive messages too. Doomsday messages and sensational scandals may attract more attention and generate more media revenue, but such unhealthy broadcasts do nothing good for the wellbeing of society.

Christians are Messengers

Christ told the disciples: "And the Gospel must first be preached to all nations" (Mark 13:10). The disciples are thus the first messengers tasked to spread the Gospel. Christians are the light's medium, conveying the Good News and life testimonies around the world to witness for God with words and actions. Our thoughts are the origin of our actions (ref. Matthew 12:35), so saints need to be "transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:2). Only when we follow God's standards, which differ from that of the world, can we be able to fulfill His will on earth; Therefore, Christians must: "Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things." (Colossians 3:2). The apostle reminds the children of God to put their worldly lives to death and live a new life that thinks and focuses on the right things so they can stand firm in Christ.

The right thoughts we must have include:

1. Truthful thoughts. Christians must not engage in deceitful speech or live deceptive lives (ref. Ephesians 4:24-25). Our thoughts must be aligned with our words and not convey false information, i.e. lies. Also, what we do and say before others must be the same as what we do or say in private, and we must also not give the impression that we are someone who we are not. If we fail to observe truthfulness, we are behaving as hypocrites. Since "no lie comes from the truth" (1 John 2:21), true believers must avoid propagating any falsehoods.

2. Respectable thoughts. Respectable also means noble. The Lord told the prophet Jeremiah the importance of having the right mindset:

"If you utter worthy, not worthless, words, you will be my spokesman. Let this people turn to you, but you must not turn to them. I will make you a wall to this people..." (Jeremiah 15:19-20). Mass media today has turned us into mindless zombies. We are no longer able to differentiate between the respectable and the deplorable. Well-built but dim-witted athletes are seen as icons of sporting excellence, and artistes who lead degenerate lives become celebrated superstars! Believers must understand what is truly respectable and noble, and not be led by the nose by so called "prosperity theology" to think that wealth equals divine blessings and respectability. All that does is promote a culture that worships material wealth.

3. Righteous thoughts. The Bible says: "The one who does what is right is righteous, just as He is righteous." (1 John 3:7). Paul calls the Lord Jesus Christ the "Righteous One" (Acts 22:14, 7: 52; 1 John 2:1), while the Lord's way is called the "Way of Righteousness" (2 Peter 2:21). Righteousness means to be right and adequate in all we do, but in today's church, we often see Christians who refuse to act righteously or even belittle the righteous. The style themselves as legalistic believers and criticise others self-righteously or view them as enemies. The situation got even worse ever since psychology became a convenient excuse for many things. The truth was, not having a benchmark for what is right will cause great loss and confusion in God's household. Even though righteous acts are not the reason we are saved, we must continue to act righteously in emulation of Christ, doing "good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." (Ephesians 2:10).

4. Clean thoughts. We were saved and cleansed by the Lord's precious blood so "Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness" (2 Timothy 2:19). Because of this, the Bible reminds us to "just as He who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do;" (1 Peter 1:15). Clean thoughts teach us to separate the pure and the unclean. In *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the Daguan Yuan gardens were majestically constructed and almost every key character in the story was supposedly intelligent and exceedingly handsome or pretty. The grand setting they lived in was also the envy of many. Only the character Liu Xiang Lian, who did not subscribe to the pretentious ways of the rich and powerful, was able to tell that: "Besides the stone lions at the entrance, this whole Daguan Yuan has not a single clean spot!" The beauty of Daguan Yuan was only superficial, and the servant Jiao Da was the only righteous and clear-headed person tending to the gardens and mansions occupied by a bunch of wastrels. Eventually, the Jia Clan who owned the place fell into disfavour with the emperor, and their riches were raided and confiscated. Having clean thoughts allow the saints to transcend beyond the filth of a fallen world and live heavenly lives.

5. Lovable thoughts. Lovable thoughts are pleasing and acceptable to others. The Bible tells us: "Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good." (Romans 12:9). Thus, the saints must not simply accept all that comes to us. We must learn to be discerning, accepting only what is acceptable to God and loving only that which is pleasing to Him.

6. Thoughts about things with good name. It is recorded in the Bible: "A good name is more desirable than great riches; to be esteemed is better than silver or gold." (Proverbs 22:1). While the verse did not set any standards for what defines a good name, it confirmed the value of having a good name. Anyone who values good name would be cautious with their speech and behaviour, and refrain from doing anything that was immoral or unethical. They would also not pursue short-term gains. Believers who have received the mark of God should also know that: "Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness." (2

Timothy 2:19), lest they sully God's holy name (ref. 2 Thessalonians 1:12; ref. Romans 2: 24), just as we would think of the father of the house when we look at the family, people outside the church would think of God when they look at Christians (Ephesians 3:15). The Chinese understood this well and knew that one's shame would affect the entire family and its head. In this manner, the good name of believers bring praise and glory to God. The Bible was not specific about which actions qualified as good or shameful but provided general principles: "if anything is excellent or praiseworthy - think about such things". This meant we should keep in our minds all encouraging words and good deeds, and anything that was edifying and positive.

We must never leave our minds blank like an empty desert. If we do not fill our minds with good thoughts, negative ones, like weeds in an untended garden, would soon occupy our minds: "For as he thinks in his heart, so is he." (Proverbs 23:7). If we look at the prosperity of the wicked as success, we would soon be filled with resentment and jealousy, thus we must not "fret because of those who are evil or be envious of those who do wrong;" (Psalm 37:1). It is not uncommon to see the prosperity of the wicked and afterwards find it hard to maintain one's gaze upon God's righteous way. One might even start to rage against God and indulge in self-pity: "Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and have washed my hands in innocence. All day long I have been afflicted, and every morning brings new punishments. " (Psalm 73:2-14). We might start to question: "Why me?" and open our hearts to despair.

Good thoughts help to direct our hearts towards good works. When we see men and women of wisdom, we must reflect upon our own shortcomings strive to emulate their goodness. This helps us to grow our perseverance so that we will not be disheartened by suffering. Only then will we be able to stand firm for the Lord in every spiritual battle and win beautiful victories for Him. Just as a picture speaks a thousand words, Paul presents himself as the reflected image of Christ before the Church for believers to emulate.

The Living Role Model

"Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me or seen in me - put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you." (Philippians 4:9). Jesus Christ, the Son of God, incarnated in our world to manifest God's word recorded in the Bible: "Here I am - it is written about me in the scroll - I have come to do Your will, my God." (Hebrews 10:7; Psalm 40:6-8). Paul emulated Christ and was "appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher" for the Gospel (2 Timothy 1:11). Aside from proclaiming the Gospel of reconciliation, he was active in educating the saints. Anyone in education would agree that the best form of teaching was to be a role model yourself for the students. The teacher was not only a "3D" model for the students, but one that could think, act, and respond as a real person with behaviour that corresponded to the setting. Jesus said to Philip: "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father." (John 14:9) and Paul told the Corinthians to "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ." (1 Corinthians 11:1).

Paul frequently shared about how he behaved in front of others in different situations to provide a role model for the saints. This way, believers not only learn about the Bible's teachings from him, but also practice emulating his words and actions. Paul also did not just want the brethren to attend church, listen to God's word, and participate in fellowship activities. He benchmarked his success in education to the behaviour of the brethren in everyday life, on whether they put into practice what he had taught them by example.

Modern Christians seem to have a misconception about "justification by faith" taught by Paul. They think that all they had to do was to proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord, and they would have discharged their duty as a Christian and received the guarantee of eternal life in heaven. In fact, even some Christians in Paul's time had this mistaken perception. This was a result of selective reading. "Justification by faith" meant a person knew that he was caught in sin and unable to save himself by fulfilling God's law. As a result, he was guilt-ridden and had no peace or joy. But by the power of Christ who died on the cross for us and rose on the third day, he could be saved from sin and the curse of the law and made righteous by his faith in Him (Romans 4: 25; Acts 13:39). Those who were justified by faith now serve a new Lord – Jesus Christ and live a new life with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. A person so saved will live according to the will of the Lord and for the Lord. This was the true essence of the Gospel.

The resurrected Christ commanded the Church to go forth with the Great Commission – to spread the Gospel of life to all peoples so that they become disciples of the Lord, and "teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." (Matthew 28:19-20). The apostles who receive the Great Commission obeyed the Lord's instruction and passed the vision on to the subsequent generations of believers. They did not retain the promise of resurrection for themselves but shared it with the world. Christ promised the disciples: "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." Indeed, may the God of peace will be with you.

Perseverance and Contentment

"I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances." (Philippians 4:10-11)

Most people would be happy to receive presents, and Paul was no different. However, we must understand where the happiness comes from. Some people are happy just to receive gifts. Some are happier the more valuable the gift was and the more presents he got. As for whether it was morally right to accept the present and what the giver's intention was, it didn't matter. Such was the mindset of people who accepted bribes. For others, they did not look at the gift's value but the giver's meaning, as the Chinese saying goes: "A gift of goose down sent from thousands of miles away is light in weight but heavy in love and concern." This was also the kind of gift that touches Paul's heart.

When Paul received the Philippian church's love gift, he did not look at its material value. The items they sent may not cost a lot, but it showed him their love and concern. Their care for his needs was expressed through the gift and warmed his heart in the cold prison cell, and he felt like he was in heaven. This connection of love transcended their physical separation— a demonstration of the true meaning of fellowship and sharing. The wonderful feeling was a great encouragement for God's warrior to persevere in the battle despite all the suffering he went through.

Paul was aware that they had "no opportunity" to show their love previously. In those days, this opportunity referred to the winds and tides at the harbour, which affected whether the ships were able to head out to sea and deliver their cargo. Such an "opportunity" is beyond human control and entirely dependent on the whims of nature. This was why the Bible tells us: "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people ... " (Galatians 6:10). The apostle waited patiently for God's provision through the brethren to arrive during the time when there was no opportunity and did not use human means to chase or beg for it. In fact, Paul did not just accept gifts from anybody. For example, he rejected presents from the Corinthian church, which had many spiritual problems. Even the generous Macedonian church had to "urgently plead with Paul for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people.". Paul was not afraid of waiting and was not one to drift with the tides. He would not give way on his principles of how the church and the worker should serve each other.

On the other hand, we cannot discount the importance of material goods entirely. Loving sentiments alone do not make a good gift as a practical present should contain useful items. Since the gift was material in nature, it was of course better to send more and higher quality items, as often as possible. Paul knew the Philippian church loved him and understood the difficulties they faced in supplying his needs. He knew they always thought of him but were limited in their ability to send help. Knowing that someone thought about you and prayed with you was a very positive feeling. When one understands the difficulties faced by others in delivering help, one would also not wallow in self-pity and become aggrieved about not getting help.

It is of course also entirely possible for a materially affluent benefactor to forget about our needs. However, as long as we are content with what we have and not have excessive desires, we will be able to remain joyful in the midst of hardship.

Paul was a humble person and does not view himself as nobler than others. Neither did he view wealth as despicable nor avoid talking about money. In the Jin dynasty, there was a person called Wang Yan, who was an important court official. He was known for his refusal to engage in any conversation about money. Ironically, he was quite rich himself. One day, while he was asleep, his wife told their maid to string up many copper coins and wrap them around the bed poles. When he woke up, he was trapped behind the strings of coins and angrily shouted for his made to "get rid of that *blockage* !" ("qian" means money in Chinese. As he did not want to talk about "qian", he referred to the coins as "*Blockage*", which really can block The Way, and make one stumple). How pretentious!

Paul holds the meaning behind a gift in higher regard than its material value. His honesty with finances and his accountability when dealing with money was something we ought to learn from. Not only did he refrain from any dishonest behaviour, but he also avoided causing any suspicion that he may be dishonest, lest the opponents of the Gospel could attack his integrity. This was why he refused help from the Corinthians – even though they were rich, the source of their wealth was dubious, and they fought among themselves over a myriad of petty problems. Paul also did not want to get swept into the conflict between their factions if he accepted help from either side (ref. 2 Corinthians 12:13); Even when he was trying to raise funds to help other churches, he avoided asking directly so as not to put pressure on the brethren (ref. 1 Corinthians 16:2); He did not want anyone to feel forced to give (ref. 2 Corinthians 9:7), and did not ask for or accept donations from outside the church, preferring to gather funds exclusively from God's own people (ref. 2 Corinthians 8:5); Moreover, all love gifts sent to his ministry were to be handled by at least two honest and reliable co-workers, especially when it involved large amounts, and he avoided handling the gifts himself (ref. 2 Corinthians 8:18-23; 1 Corinthians 16:3). His principle

was: "For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of man." (2 Corinthians 8:21). What a sound policy this was!

Paul explained that he was not asking for sympathy. This was the pride of God's servant – he was no beggar asking for alms. His concern was for the glory of God and did not allow his needs to tarnish God's name. Some ministry workers receive plenty of donations but do not share Paul's principle of not accepting certain donations. They appear to have large and successful ministries, and live comfortable lives, but at what cost? Much of these came at the expense of God's glory and allowing His name to be stepped upon.

A servant of God need not hide his own poverty or brandish his wealth as a badge of virtue and divine blessings. It is not wrong for believers to be in want (ref. Romans 12:13), and the Lord of the Church sometimes allows this to happen so that love can manifest amongst the brethren, such as in the church in Jerusalem (ref. 1 Corinthians; Romans 15:31). God inspired Paul to raise funds from other churches to help them, and both Paul and the churches knew well that this was part of the fellowship of saints. Nobody who gave felt they were superior for being able to help, and everyone hoped that what they had gathered was enough to be of use to the needs of the fellow believers. The brethren who were receiving help also did not have to feel inferior – it is right and proper for believers to help one another, and contributions should not be seen as buying access to authority or status in the Church.

Paul lived a very simple life as he did not have a wife or children. Neither did he accumulate any savings for himself (ref. 2 Corinthians 12:14-15). No matter the times, he is content with simply having his basic needs met. This showed that he had a healthy spirit: "I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength." (Philippians 4:12-13)

Unfulfilled essential needs result in want, while unfulfilled luxury is greed. Oddly enough, both of these give us the same feeling of lacking despite being vastly different in nature.

The Pastor's Objection

A loyal and faithful pastor who was well-loved by the congregation received annual salary increments from his church. He thought to himself: "How am I going to use so much money?" However, he would always be able to finish spending his ever-increasing salary, and he never considered himself to have too much. After a few years of such increments, he suddenly realised that something was not right - his gratitude for God's provision had diminished. He started to worry about becoming a greedy jackal that preyed on the sheep if he fell to temptation. Thus, he raised an objection to the church's council of elders and deacons – they had to stop increasing his salary! Even though his salary no longer grew, he was filled with joy from serving the Lord.

Francis Bacon (1782-1871) once said that prosperity brings out evil while adversity magnifies virtue. The Bible tells us both adversity and prosperity are tests of our spiritual growth. When things are smooth and we are successful and prosperous, we need to maintain our internal purity and make sure we do not fall to temptation. In difficulty, adversity, and suffering, we must stand firm and learn to build our faith and perseverance. Unfortunately, like the Israelites in the wilderness, most of us tend to start complaining in adversity, and when we finally overcome the bad times and arrive in the promised Land of Canaan, we would be like Jeshurun: "Jeshurun grew fat and kicked; filled with food, they became heavy and sleek. They abandoned the God who made them and rejected the Rock their Saviour." (Deuteronomy 32:15).

This shows us how corrupted human nature is. The Israelites clearly failed the test, but even many great role models in the Old Testament were not able to overcome this trial. There is a Chinese couplet that says: "The sea absorbs all rivers like a magnanimous person; The cliff stands upright into the clouds like a man without desire." Magnanimity and the lack of carnal desires are both virtues, but how many people can aspire to achieve these ideals? The question here is: "how can we stand firm?"

Paul's Secret

We know very little about how Paul lived. Most historians would be more interested in recording and researching great wars and palace intrigue, especially wrongdoings and scandals. Someone like Paul would be an uninteresting and unimportant subject for them. Luke, the author of Acts, was more concerned with recording the work of the Holy Spirit and the spread of the Gospel rather than a political commentary or "A Biography of the

Apostle Paul". Even the letters written by Paul himself only mentioned his own daily life sparingly when necessary. Modern day readers like us with a completely different way of life would find it even more difficult to understand how Paul lived.

Even though there was no clear record, we can picture the adversity that Paul faced. His experiences in serving the Lord required him to have incredible perseverance. For example, he mentioned his tough finances here, but did not say anything about the whippings he received, the constant persecution, and the dangers he faced. Of course, we can clearly understand that hunger, being discriminated against, and lacking in essential needs are not enjoyable circumstances. Paul said of his situation: "To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly. We have become the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world—right up to this moment." (1 Corinthians 4:11-13). Paul's description conjures up the image of a homeless vagrant – dressed in tatter rags and covered in scars as he dragged his tired feet into the majestic church or beautiful modern skyscraper. Before he even entered the building, his smell would precede his arrival. How unbecoming! It would be a surprise if any security guard let him in instead of throwing him out. If a kind soul asked if he had eaten, Paul would probably tell him: "I am hungry and thirsty and had not eaten for the past two days!" Self-righteous people might, at this point, mock him and say: "By what then do you say that the Lord is your shepherd and you shall not want?" if you were truly His servant, surely, He would provide for you? Proponents of the "Prosperity Gospel" might even say that he met with failure and poverty because he was not faithful or was a heretic simply because to them, he did not receive God's blessings!

Paul was quick to caution the wealthy Corinthian church not to be ashamed of his down-and-out look: "I am writing this not to shame you but to warn you as my dear children. Even if you had ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. Therefore I urge you to imitate me." (1 Corinthians 4:14-16). He was telling them that suffering for Christ was not shameful. It is a wonderful and glorious testimony if one could stand firm during adversity. Paul was not only their "Acharya" (Sanskrit for teacher) but also their spiritual father. He does not request the believers to adopt a life of poverty, but he wishes for them to be able to hold on to faith even when in his kind of circumstances. Only those who can suffer for the Lord are able to serve Him.

Paul handled prosperity just as well as adversity. Many people who escaped suffering would start to behave like starved lice the moment they experience prosperity. They would suck hungrily for more "blood", resorting to corruption, coercion, and even extortion to accumulate more wealth for themselves. Paul was not such a person. His "prosperity" was relative to his difficult times. During better days, he made tents to earn his keep. His calloused hands would crack in the cold winds and bleed. The work did not bring in a lot of money for him: "You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions." (Acts 20: 34). Paul was not greedy. He earned little but it was more than enough for himself, and he shared what excess he had with his co-workers. His hands were always open – not to receive but to give, for others to take from. A generous person who cares for others' needs is always prosperous despite having less than the greedy because they do not always think they have too little for themselves. He counsels the believers: "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). Theft is similar to corruption and cheating; in that it is the result of greed and discontentment. To a believer, all one needs is Christ. Even when we do not earn much, we have enough to spare for others. Ultimately, what one truly needs to live is really very little: "But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that." It is a simple truth – anything beyond satiating our hunger and basic needs are a waste, and does not actually bring greater happiness or benefit: "But godliness with contentment is great gain" (1 Timothy 6:8, 6)

One thing to note is that Paul was not a follower of stoicism, a popular philosophy in those days. He was able to tolerate and persevere in any circumstances, overcoming all suffering. This was because he had a secret that we must learn: "I can do all this through Him who gives me strength". It was not his personal upbringing nor his own endurance or noble personality that enabled him to do so, but his reliance on God's strength. If he ever stops relying on God, he would be destined for failure (ref. 2 Corinthians 1:8).

How many people can actually deal with stress coming from all sides and not be crushed? Believers manage to do this because "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). Not because we are pillars of virtue, but because "in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us." (Romans 8: 37). Those who rely on their own virtues to live a simple and content life inevitably fail at some point. Even great men who are supposedly disciplined in wealth, determined in poverty, and unyielding against oppression often fail in the endeavour. It is not uncommon for the common people to be fooled by such facades of virtue without God – the war hero whom they had great respect for suddenly becomes a defector to the enemy, or the general they were following in the charge against the enemy turns at the last moment and flees from the battle. It is only "by He who gives me strength" was Paul able to tell the brethren: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." (2 Timothy 4:7). Certainly, Paul has mastered this simple yet difficult secret to rely on the Lord.

Perseverance and Fellowship

“Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid more than once when I was in need.” (Philippians 4:14-16)

“Suffering” is undeniably an unpopular word. Who would have thought that Paul saw it as “good”? Perhaps that was why Paul had few friends. Most people will try their best to avoid suffering. For example, people who were once your friends may leave you when you are in trouble. Suffering itself is not a beautiful thing, but it brings out the true friends who remain with you when others flee. Such is the beauty of suffering in that it reveals genuine friendships. Just as Paul was persecuted, so was the Philippian church who worked closely with him. Despite their own troubles, they continued to care for Paul – this is what was meant by suffering together in the Lord.

The Apostle John was exiled to Patmos in his old age. There, the Lord commanded him to write to the churches: “I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.” (Revelations 1:9). This was his crime. He did not commit any heinous injustice against anyone, and at close to a hundred years old, he was hardly a threat to anybody. Why then did they exile him to a barren island? It was because he could become a unifying force for Christians and had to be separated from other Christians to prevent them from uniting in fellowship. Christians who unite and suffer together uphold, encourage, and edify one another. This was a beautiful sight for all to behold and it was no surprise that Satan would go all out to stop it from happening.

Fortunately, the beautiful, united fellowship of saints cannot be prevented by physical separation. It was so with John and with Paul and all their brethren. Such beauty persists in memory and will never fade. It empowers God’s warriors to persevere for His kingdom against all suffering.

A Church that Practices Perseverance

The Philippian church is unique in its love and its concern for evangelistic outreach ministry. In his second evangelism trip, Paul went there in response to the Macedonian Call. Starting with Lydia and her family, the small group grew into a full-fledged church. Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke stayed there for several months, after which “...Paul and his companions had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue.” (Acts 17:1; ref. Acts 16:12-40). Luke and Timothy both stayed behind in Philippi, and Timothy set off to Tiberias to meet with Paul. (Acts 17:14) while Luke remained in Philippi for a longer time to continue the ministry there.

After Paul was forced to leave Philippi, the church there did not fall into inaction with the departure of the evangelist who brought them plenty of “trouble”. They have tasted the goodness of the Gospel, and while the concept of missions had yet to be formed, they remembered the ambassador of the Gospel who brought them the Good News. They continued to support Paul in all his needs. Why was that so? Was it because Paul was socially adept and managed to capture their hearts with his words, such that they felt obliged to help him? Was it because Paul was so good at doctoring ministry reports to reflect results that interested them? No. It was because they have received the blessings of the Gospel flowing from the cross, delivered to them by Paul, and they demonstrated their gratitude by “sending them on their way in a manner that honours God” (3 John 6). This was how the Philippian church co-laboured with the truth and became the first church in Europe to support long distance mission trips.

They did not simply give money in support of the ministry. Some people feel that if we don’t conduct mission work, we would appear to be less proactive and spiritual compared to churches that do. As a result, they usually summarily nominated a few missionary pastors to receive their support. This “trend” was not what drives the Philippian church. There was no trend to speak of as they were the very first church to do so by supporting Paul’s work and continuing to uphold him even when he had moved to Thessalonica. We know that Paul was not in Thessalonica for very long, only for “three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures” – perhaps for a month or two to three months at the most. The jealous Jewish leaders claimed Paul and his team had “caused trouble all over the world” and framed them as treasonous criminals who wanted to overthrow Caesar until Jason and others posted bond (Acts 17:1-10). His work there was thus short and unsuccessful, meaning he would not have any shining report to send to Philippi, but the Philippian church nevertheless continued to send round after round of support to Paul! Even though the members of the Philippian church were not imprisoned with Paul, their hearts were with him all along. They remembered the apostle of the Gospel and cared for him, praying for his well-being, visiting him, and supplying provisions for his needs. How much warmth and care there was in their actions! Such is the work of true gospel co-workers in the kingdom of God. They suffered together and have true fellowship. What a beautiful community it was!

In one battle before he ascended the throne of Israel, David led his army to pursue the Amalekites. A part of his soldiers were too tired to continue the chase, and it would slow down the entire army if they were forced to tag along and cause them to miss the window of opportunity for a decisive strike. David decided to leave them behind at Besor valley to guard and look after the equipment so those at the frontlines need not worry about the supplies, while at the same time also gaining speed as they would then have less to carry. By God's grace, they were victorious. David wanted to reward the soldiers and share the spoils. He gave everyone who participated in the battle an equal share regardless of whether they fought on the frontlines or stayed back to guard the supplies and made this a statute and ordinance for Israel from that day onwards. (1 Samuel 30:9-25)

The Philippian church did not participate directly in Paul's evangelistic ministry, but they faithfully offered strong support from the back and provided for the needs of Paul and his frontline co-workers. They were without a doubt closely involved in enabling the evangelistic workers to advance and suffered alongside Paul in his work. They gave of their money and efforts to support the ministry but did not fight for fame or status – how beautiful it was! When the servant of the Lord receives love offerings, as Paul said: "Not that I desire your gifts; what I desire is that more be credited to your account. I have received full payment and have more than enough. I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God." (Philippians 4:17-18)

Here, Paul emphasizes that he was not attracted by wealth and did not expect the Church to give him gifts or increase their support to him. The servant of God can declare: "I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing" (Acts 20:33). Yet some people nowadays encourage others to give to their cause but fail to put in healthy fundraising management measures. To the recipient, this can become a huge temptation, and some would end up pilfering the donations for themselves, thinking that "godliness is a means to financial gain." (1 Timothy 6:5). Such individuals inevitably go down the path of Balaam, turning the teaching of the truth into a profitable product or a tool for generating income. The corruption in the Church during the Middle Ages was largely due to such material greed. The prophet Hosea describes the religious corruption in Israel as such: "They (religious leaders) feed on the sins of my people and relish their wickedness." (Hosea 4:8). This showed how much a misguided religion can be cheapened to the extent of pursuing material wealth instead of spiritual abundance!

Financial honesty is a hallmark of God's servants. Just as we only fellowship with those who belong to God, we can only share our finances with those who follow the Lord. The evil ones would say: "cast lots with us; we will all share the loot" (Proverbs 1:14). If we accept the financial support of those outside the Church, it will become hard to bring them to the Lord, because they would see you as owing them a debt of goodwill. The Bible is clear about this: "the borrower is slave to the lender." (Proverbs 22:7). We will then become beholden to them as they become our "masters". Worse still if the money came from an unjust source. Ministry work done with such blood money will not receive God's blessing and the worker would even have to account for it before the Lord. Paul was firmly against such practices, as his interest was not in keeping himself fed and clothed, but for the believers to "enlarge the harvest of your righteousness." (2 Corinthians 9:10).

Our motive is key when it comes to giving. Only with the right desire can our offerings be pleasing to God and be "put on our accounts". Such giving is remembered by God and stored in our own heavenly treasure trove. Some people give to return favours or to please others. Some do it for fame and praise. All these come from our fallen human nature, such that everything that we do contains some degree of selfish agenda. We must also be responsible about who we give to, lest we inadvertently benefit cults, the greedy, and those who lack good financial management. Such giving is not a sign of a good steward and does nothing for our spiritual growth. Before God, both ignorance and disloyalty are both just as bad.

John Newton (1725-1807) was once the captain of a ship involved in the black slave trade that travelled between Africa and England. He later accepted Christ and became a pastor in Olney, England. Newton was known for the hymn he wrote – Amazing Grace, one of the most sang hymns around the world. He shared that when he arrived in heaven, he would expect to see three amazing things: "Those who I expect to be there would not be there, those who I thought would not be there are there, and most amazingly, I myself am there!". Perhaps there was one more amazing thing that he missed from his list – there could be many fruits on his account that he did not know were bore by him! We might just discover to our pleasant surprise that many people whom we do not personally know had come to the Lord because of us! While we may think it was a "system error" in the heavenly archives, these people were in fact saved because of our offerings to support ministries, our prayers, encouragement, and even good references we made for others. All these are beautiful fruits that we can bear for the Lord's kingdom.

Striking A Balance

These days, there are many churches that fatten themselves by encouraging believers to keep giving for all sorts of reasons. Such churches are an embarrassment to God and makes other churches and ministry co-workers unwilling to share about their legitimate ministry needs. Offerings and donations must go to the right recipients. As long as the recipient has a legitimate purpose for accepting the giving, it is not wrong. Paul regarded Epaphroditus' love offering to the Philippian church as a gift to God. In the New Testament Church, there is no priest class. However, as a servant of God, Paul was justified to "share in what is offered on the altar" (1 Corinthians 9:13; Hebrews 13:6). He was accountable to God and gave thanks for this blessing. George Whitefield (1714-1771) was widely regarded as the founder of the modern-day revival movement. Between 1738 and 1771, he made seven trans-Atlantic trips from England to the yet undeveloped colonies in North America. He was the vessel of God who lit the flames of revival in this land in what was called the Great Awakening.

During his second trip in 1739, Whitfield met Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) in Philadelphia. The 33-year-old Franklin ran a news press and several other businesses and was active and successful in the community and in local politics. He had published the sermons of Whitfield and had a great deal of respect for the pastor. Franklin enjoyed listening to Whitfield's preaching and saw him as an upright and honest man. In his autobiography, Franklin wrote of Whitfield: "Upon one of his arrivals from England at Boston, he wrote to me that he should come soon to Philadelphia, but knew not where he could lodge when there, as he understood his old kind Host Mr. Benezet was removed to Germantown. My Answer was: You know my house, if you can make shift with its scanty accommodations you will be most heartily welcome." He replied, that if I made that kind offer for Christ's sake, I should not miss of a reward. And I returned, Don't let me be mistaken; it was not for Christ's sake, but for your sake. One of our common acquaintances jocosely remarked, that knowing it to be the custom of the saints, when they received any favour, to shift the burden of the obligation from off their own shoulders and place it in heaven, I had contrived to fix it on earth."

Unfortunately for Franklin, despite all his great talents as a politician, inventor, and diplomat, he did not realise the value of receiving the servant of God for the sake of Christ, which would have made "a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God." He focused on providing human favours to his friend and missed the blessing in heaven when he forgot that he could have made it a fragrant sacrifice to God. Of course, this does not mean that we need not be thankful to those who help us in earthly ways. Franklin recalled in his autobiography: "He used indeed sometimes to pray for my conversion, but never had the satisfaction of believing that his prayers were heard. Ours was a mere civil friendship, sincere on both sides, and lasted to his death." What a pity it would be if this founding father of the United States did not have a place in heaven! A person's perception determines his results. While humans look at actions, God looks at motives. Thus it is very important to know who we were doing something for.

The Lord Jesus Christ said to His disciples: "Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet as a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and whoever welcomes a righteous person as a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward." (Matthew 10: 40-41). The apostle Paul had suffered much for the kingdom of God and the support of the churches were a great comfort to him. The significance of their support meant more than words could describe, and this "fragrance" in the love offering of the Philippians has lasted for generations till this day.

Giving is Not Done in Vain

"And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of His glory in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen." (Philippians 4:19-20)

Former US Vice-President James Danforth Quayle once visited an elementary school. There, he asked the students to spell "potato" on the black board. One of the students wrote "patato" and Quayle told him that was wrong, and promptly added an "e" to the end of the word. It is fortunate for us that he was not the author of the Webster's Dictionary. The TV reporters present recorded the entire scene and Quayle quickly became a laughing stock. The story of the misspelling of "potato" by the Vice-President became a part of America's collective memory ever since.

In ancient China, candidates in the imperial exams could be disqualified for writing the wrong characters, but today's Chinese no longer view writing mistakes as something to be embarrassed about. For example, some people often miswrite the character for donation ("juan") as the character for loss ("sun") as they look similar. Coincidentally, both convey some sense of losing one's property, except that a donation was willingly given away out of goodwill while a loss was involuntary and did not involve any kindness or ill will. Sadly, many people perceive a donation as a loss to themselves and refuse to give to help others.

"Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously." (2 Corinthians 9:6). This verse teaches us to view donations and offerings as the sowing of seeds. It is not a loss and instead would yield many times what we have let go of during harvest. In order to reap a good harvest, we first must scatter the seeds we have. A harvest cannot take place without the initial sowing. "One person gives

freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty. A generous person will prosper; whoever refreshes others will be refreshed." (Proverbs 11: 24-25). The Bible refers to 3 types of giving: offerings, donations, and alms. Offerings are given to superiors (to God) and denotes an act of respect and reverence. Donations are given to equals or the collective such as the fellowship of saints to contribute towards the provision of needs and is an act of love and willing support. Finally, alms are given to those less privileged than oneself, as an act of compassion and mercy. Regardless of the type of giving, we must avoid boasting about it and using such giving to promote our own status and reputation. All three are commonly known as "giving" where differentiation is not essential. As Christians, our giving and service must be guided by one key principle: "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human." (Colossians 3:23).

Some people feel that churches are behaving like profitable businesses when they ask members to give towards the ministry. They regard it as low-class behaviour and avoid even talking about it at the pulpit. Such a viewpoint is too extreme, for what is sowed on earth will be eventually harvested in heaven. It benefits the giver and the receiver alike and brings glory to God's name and is certainly not a loss for the giver (2 Corinthians 9:6-15). Giving is taught by the apostle Paul, inspired in us by the Holy Spirit, and duly recorded in the Bible. Even many of us put together could not match a tenth of Paul's faith, so why are we denouncing something that he himself encouraged? Moreover, offerings of love bring benefit to the needy and glory to God, so if we avoid doing it, wouldn't that then result in real loss for both man and God?

Imagine if we told farmers not to sow seeds in their land or stop them from doing so. The seeds would then rot in the barns and bring zero benefit for the sustenance of the people. What would the consequences be? As an agricultural nation, the emperors of ancient China paid great attention to the work that had to be done in spring. At the beginning of each year, a grand and solemn ceremony would be conducted to mark the commencement of sowing. Only with generous sowing and diligent work in the fields will we have good harvests to fill our barns and be free from worry of starving. The apostle must have thought of the same reason here: "Nevertheless, the one who receives instruction in the word should share all good things with their instructor... A man reaps what he sows. Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up..." (Galatians 6: 6-10). This did not refer only to material returns, but also bountiful spiritual blessings from God in all things.

Thanks be to God for raising the Philippian church as one that willingly sowed for Him. The Lord of the Church also raised different far-seeing leaders across history to spearhead the propagation of the Gospel. This brought harvest after harvest for the Lord's storehouses and brought glory to Him. "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God." (1 Corinthians 10:31). "To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen." When the fellowships of believers unite and support one another in the Lord, we are able to stand firm against those who oppose the Gospel, grow in faith, and emerge victorious as we await Christ's return. This is the wish of our Lord Jesus Christ and His apostles and generations of church leaders, and the faithful hope that we ought to nurture in our hearts.

Epilogue

"Greet all God's people in Christ Jesus. The brothers and sisters who are with me send greetings. All God's people here send you greetings, especially those who belong to Caesar's household. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen" (Philippians 4:21-23).

It is common for epistles (letters) to end with greetings. The apostle Paul was not an unfeeling person – in fact, he is full of love and care for fellow believers. He recalled to the elders of Ephesus: "Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears." (Acts 20:31) and told the Church to: "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn." (Romans 12:15). This was to remind them that caring for one another did not mean they could not show their emotions. Many of Paul's letters were dictated by him and written by an assistant. For example, the book of Romans was written on his behalf by Tertius (Romans 16:22), but he would fill in the last few lines as an expression of closeness or to highlight important points (e.g. Galatians 6:12-18; 1 Corinthians 16:21-24; Colossians 4:18; 2 Thessalonians 3:17). These letters were certainly not messages of ceremonial courtesy or bureaucratic articles that were written without much thought.

Paul opened his letter to the Philippians with an address "To all God's holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi" (Philippians 1:1). At the end, he again greets "all God's people in Christ Jesus". This refers to everyone who received the grace of Christ and was elected by Him to be set apart from the world. They were hated by the world because they believed in the same Lord and Saviour, shared the same faith, lived the same life and were of one body. This was the Church redeemed by Christ's precious blood, the mysterious body of Christ which had only one head – the supreme sovereign Jesus Christ, Lord of all creation. In the earthly Church, true believers of the Lord were each members of His body, united in Christ with all Christians in history past, present, and future. This universal Church was collectively the bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:22-30), which individual churches were not. The Bible has also never referred to individual believers as such but reminds us to keep ourselves pure and away from evil, to be presented "as a pure virgin to Him" (2 Corinthians 11:2). We ought to remain faithful to the Lord regardless of whether we are a man or woman.

Paul's life flowed with the abundance of Christ. He was more than a teacher, and everywhere he went, he attracted crowds to listen to his teaching. Even when he was shackled in prison, and of course could not go about to meet other people, he was still surrounded by "brothers and sisters who are with me". Throughout church history, we also have other great believers like him such as St. Jerome who lived in a cave, St. Anthony in the remote desert wilderness, and St. Francis of Assisi. All of them had a natural charisma that attracted others to them. They did not need to resort to human methods or material incentives to draw others to themselves. Today, we see many who turned their churches into a barren wilderness, but people like John the Baptist could turn even the wilderness into a place to worship God.

People were attracted to gather around Paul even in the prison, but this was more than just a prison fellowship. These believers included men and women, Jews and Romans, everyone who accepted Christ while in Rome. Their numbers were considerable. Paul highlighted that he was writing from "the household of Caesar". He was of course not so cheap as to boast using the name of a powerful mortal. Some may wonder: "why would someone from the royal family of Caesar become a Christian? Or did Paul only mean members of the imperial guards?" In those days, "household" referred to temples or residences. It included all members like the master, the mistress, their children and grandchildren, and even servants and retainers. Some people believed that the early church consisted only of people from the lower echelons of society. This was in fact far from the truth. Paul did mention "not many were of noble birth." (1 Corinthians 1: 26), but this did not mean there were none. It simply meant there were few of them, but they still formed part of the population of believers. The composition here was also specific to the church in the Corinthian region. As the Bible has recorded, the Gospel was spread to every level of society right from the beginning. There was no lack of esteemed individuals like Joseph of Arimathea, a respected councillor, and the wealthy Nicodemus (John 19:38-39), and Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of King Herod's household (Luke 8:3) amongst Jesus's followers. We might even be able to include the centurion who witnessed Jesus's crucifixion (Mark 15: 39). In Acts, we also see highly ranked individuals amongst the believers, like the eunuch who was an important treasury official of the Ethiopian queen (Acts 8:27), and Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment at Caesarea (Acts 10:1). There was also Manaen who was brought up with Herod the tetrarch, indicating his noble birth, who became one of the teachers and leaders of the church in Antioch (Acts 13:1), Sergius Paulus, a [Proconsul of Cyprus](#) (Acts 13:7-12), prominent women of Thessalonica (Acts 17:4) and Berea (Acts 17:12), and Erastus, director of public works of Corinth (Romans 16:23). These people of high status were all faithful Christians with strong foundations in the word of God. Is it thus far fetched to think that there would be members of royalty amongst the believers? Even though they were in positions of prominence, they did not enjoy any special treatment in the Church.

The Church does not view having people of high status in its flock as anything special, whereas these people saw being in God's Church as a great honour! It is therefore not unusual for members of Caesar's household to be church members. What made this amazing was that the reigning emperor at the time was Nero (circa 37-68 and ruling from 54-68), who was infamous for persecuting Christians. The Church is a congregation of the saved, and every member is equal before God. People cannot bring their high status into heaven, and the nobility do not bring their privileges along either, but neither are they prohibited from entering heaven's gates. Why then did Paul emphasize "especially those who belong to Caesar's household"? He was edifying the faith of the people of God and show them His sovereignty – to demonstrate to them the amazing grace that comes from the Lord to all.

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