

Blessed Fellowship

Contents

Prologue

Preamble

Chapter 1: The Faith of the Saints – Depth

Faith in the Sovereignty of God

Faith in Co-Labourers in the Lord

Faith in One's Personal Value

Appendix: A Leader Who Lost His Faith

Chapter 2: The Love of the Saints – Width

The Importance of Love

Role Models of Love

The Source of All Love

Love in Action

Chapter 3: The Ideals of the Saints – Height

Ideals and Self-Awareness

Ideals and Cognition

Ideals and Direction

Ideals and Action

Chapter 4: The Perseverance of the Saints - Length

The Importance of Perseverance

The Foundation of Perseverance

The Power of Perseverance

The Models of Perseverance

Perseverance and Contentment

Perseverance and Fellowship

A Church that Practices Perseverance

Epilogue

Prologue

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

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

In this book, one can also read about many incidents, from the Bible and external sources. Famous quotes on faith from the past and present and from various parts of the world guide readers to apply profound doctrines in their daily lives. Most importantly, the book demonstrates how Paul, despite being incarcerated, continued to bear witness for the Gospel, care for the Church, show concern for the co-workers' labour, and maintain the noble pursuit of God's will. In his long-suffering service to the Lord, his joy never once waned. All these are evidence that the Gospel transforms and builds our character, that the values we are taught in the Bible are not empty proclamations, but practical principles that we can use and apply in our daily living. The above are but a few snippets about the inspiration I have drawn from this book, and I believe readers would reap a plethora of benefits in the faith from their own reading.

Stephen C. T. Chan
Summer of 1996

Preamble

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

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

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

In the Analects (Lun Yu) of Confucius, it is said that “Gentlemen are open-hearted, cheerful, and upright, whereas the villainous are calculative, underhanded, and burdened with worries” (The Analects, Shu Er (“Transmission”), Part 7). Confucius was teaching his students that to be happy, one must have the heart of a gentleman (Jun Zi).

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

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

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

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

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

The Chinese quote ‘It takes ten years to grow a tree, but a hundred years to grow a person’ comes to mind here. How similar are we to trees! To grow tall and expansive, a tree must be firmly rooted and be able to withstand the hostile elements and the test of time. This has to do with two characteristics of plants: negative geotropism drives the tree to grow upwards, away from the ground regardless of the strength of gravity, while phototaxis leads the tree to turn towards light and away from shade and darkness. Aren't those amazing characteristics? Are they not also characteristics that believers and church workers must

have? However, as human beings we do not have these characteristics by nature, and only receive them upon our first act of faith to accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour. Only with God's grace can we continue to keep and hone these characteristics and turn them into living testimonies for the Lord. You should, and can, experience such growth. This is the hope and faith that would encourage you to finish reading this book – and I am sure you will.

Chapter 1: The Faith of the Saints - Depth

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Faith in the Sovereignty of God

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

1. Paul's Faith in God's Sovereignty

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

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

And thus it was done, even though it seemed impossible. The

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

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

Memories of Philippi

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

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

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

Thus the first little church in Philippi was formed, a fruit borne of suffering, which grew to become the home base of evangelism to Europe. The growth of this church stood in testimony of God's sovereignty and influenced the spread of the Gospel for a long time to come. God demonstrated His sovereignty in Asia Minor by "keeping" and "not allowing" the footsteps of Paul to proceed towards Asia (Acts 16:6-7). God's sovereignty was likewise manifested in the vision Paul had of the Macedonian Call while in Troas, in the gathering at the riverside outside the city gate and the invitation to stay at the newly baptized Lydia's home, in the exorcism in Philippi and subsequent accusation, suffering, and imprisonment, and in the sudden earthquake that shook not only the ground but also the hearts of many. It was God's sovereignty in action that led them step by step to meet Lydia by the river, and to have fellowship in Lydia's home. Each incident was a link that joined together to form a chain of events. We usually think of chains as a symbol of bondage, but this chain had instead freed many. How amazing God's work is!

Sweet memories are the assets of our souls and the basis of our faith in God. The Philippian Church was a beautiful memory for Paul and his pride and joy. "I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the Gospel from the first day until now" (Philippians 1:3-5). Paul was not a religious worker who saw his duties as a job. He was wholeheartedly committed to prayer and evangelism. Like the high priest in the Old Testament, with the 12 tribes of Israel represented by the gems on his breastplate, Paul always remembered them and prayed for

them daily before our heavenly Father. He said: “Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?” (2 Corinthians 11:28-29). It was clear that Paul was a man with a burden for God’s work. He held prayer in high regard, diligently interceding for believers and upholding God’s Church. In his prayers, he remembered the Galatian Church, troubled by legalism in their ignorance, to the extent that they were “trying to pervert the Gospel of Christ” (Galatians 1:7). He prayed hard for the Corinthian Church, plagued by infighting between cliques and the believers’ immoral behaviour. He intervened before God on behalf of the Ephesian Church, for them to know the one true God and to realise that the inheritance waiting for them in heaven is glorious, and to act with love (Ephesians 1:17-20, 3:16-21). When the time came to pray for the church in Philippi, however, his worries were replaced with joy and praise for God gushed forth from his heart. Paul’s shining opinion of the church shows us how outstanding the faith of the believers in Philippi was.

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

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

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

We live in sin and are bound by it. Like Paul and Silas who were bound by chains in the prison, we could not set ourselves free. Only the

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

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

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

We have been saved by God's grace and become as one body. Therefore we ought to remember those in prison as if we were together with them in prison (Hebrews 13:3). Those who fight the beautiful battle for the Gospel are not alone, for we are by their side and share their burden. This is beyond human feelings and camaraderie, for the caring rapport comes from the grace of our Head in heaven. The apostle Paul said: "God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:8). Even though Paul did not have any personal acquaintance with the Philippians, his deep concern for them was evident. He said: "And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day

of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ - to the glory and praise of God" (Philippians 1:9-11). The spiritual gifts of the saints are not some kind of natural talent from birth nor from learning in life but gifts from the Holy Spirit according to His will (1 Corinthians 12:11). Similarly, how much faith each believer has is dependent on how much God has bestowed upon him or her (Romans 12:3). God's will guides the life of each individual, and He desires for believers to grow into spiritual maturity to fulfill His ministries and His will on earth as it is in heaven.

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

Paul's Ideal of a Church that Grows

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

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

Living by the Lord to Glorify God: Believers cannot bear the fruit of righteousness on their own. Only with a new life in Christ and staying connected to Him like the branches to the grapevine can we do so. "I am

the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing... This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples" (John 15:5, 8). The grape branches have nothing to boast about, for its purpose of existence is not for itself, but to produce the new wine that cheers both God and humans (Judges 9:13) so that people are edified, and God is glorified. The Philippian church is, of course, still far from being the ideal church, but Paul believed in the sovereignty of God and the leadership of Christ as the Church's Head. The Lord will protect and the Lord will fulfill. He mentioned "until the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:6), pointing to Jesus as the "...horn of salvation for us" (Luke 1:69) who will rescue us from the enemy's hands. He is Christ, the King of glory (Philippians 1:10), and we will partake of His kingdom by His side when He returns.

3. The Prophets' Faith in God's Sovereignty

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

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

sends lightning with the rain and brings out the wind from His storehouses” (Jeremiah 10:10-13). The storms around Jeremiah shook the houses to their very foundations and threatened to uproot great trees, but he knew that God was in control.

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

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

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

Faith in Co-Labourers in the Lord

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

Inseparable

Inmates in a prison are forcibly separated from the community at large and their movement is closely monitored and restricted (rehabilitation as a goal was a relatively recent development in

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

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

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

An evangelist had served in Africa for many years, and his wife and two daughters were all buried there after they died. When he retired at an old and frail age, he returned to New York. At the harbour, he was met by a huge welcome party! He soon realised that it was not him that they were welcoming home, but Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919), 26th

President of the United States, who happened to be returning from a hunting trip in Africa on the same ship. The elderly gospel warrior quietly disembarked with his luggage and suddenly felt a sad loneliness that he had never experienced even when in the wilderness of Africa. That night, he wept in his hotel room, and was so overwhelmed that he could not pray. Suddenly, from nowhere in the quiet night, he heard the voice of God telling him: "My child, you are not even home yet!"

Not Alone

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

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

Inside his cell, all Paul was able to hear were the footsteps of the

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

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

Never to Fail

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

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

The religious leaders who opposed the disciples found what he said to be reasonable, and they saw that the disciples had next to no chance of success. By common logic, the fledgling Church had no feasible means to survive and grow. The leaders of the Church were

“unschooled, ordinary men” (Acts 4:13) who were caught in between the power play of the political and religious elite. They were persecuted constantly, and the future looked bleak for them. It would take a great miracle for them to even just continue to exist. Yet, this miracle came to be right before their eyes. Not only did the Church survive, but it grew at an exponential rate. On the very day the Church’s leaders were arrested, there were thousands of new believers who converted to faith: “But many who heard the message believed; so the number of men who believed grew to about five thousand” (Acts 4:4). This was clearly beyond human planning and ability and was the power of the Holy Spirit at work. Satan thought he had successfully murdered the Lord of life (Acts 3:15) on the cross. He did not understand that the Lord of life cannot be killed, and instead the cursed cross became the blessed symbol of God’s salvation for mankind. Till this day, when we see a cross, we are reminded that “unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds” (John 12:24).

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

A Noble Mindset

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

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

1. To Have a Big Heart

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

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

we know it is the reflection of a heart that loves God and emulates the heart of Christ.

Paul did not seek his own success, but that of the Church. “My church” and “my ministry” are but tiny circles we draw around ourselves. When God led the Israelites out of Egypt, He granted Moses’ request to appoint seventy elders from the people. “Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke with him, and he took some of the power of the Spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders. When the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied - but did not do so again. However, two men, whose names were Eldad and Medad, had remained in the camp. They were listed among the elders but did not go out to the tent. Yet the Spirit also rested on them, and they prophesied in the camp. A young man ran and told Moses, “Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.” Joshua son of Nun, who had been Moses’ aide since youth, spoke up and said, “Moses, my lord, stop them!” But Moses replied, “Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the Lord’s people were prophets and that the Lord would put His Spirit on them!” (Numbers 11:25-29).

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

We must never meet jealousy with jealousy, nor try to end conflict

with more conflict. Hate must not displace love, and carnal methods must not be used to achieve spiritual goals. Paul does not look at how different others were, and only focuses on the similarities. He does not look at the negative side of people, only at the positive outcomes they achieve. As long as the name of Christ is spread, we ought to rejoice. This is the heart of the Lord, and this is how we magnify God's name. Any ministry requires teamwork and sincere cooperation between the co-workers if we are to attain desirable results. This is more than just common sense – it is a spiritual principle.

2. Transcendental Pursuit

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

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

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

Here, we see the nobility and transcendence of Paul's purpose for continuing to stay alive! He did not seek his own benefit and glory, and only wished to manifest the glory of Christ through his life. Neither did he just want to demonstrate Christ's glory for a time – he wanted to commit all his life to magnify Christ's glory. He was determined not to bring shame to God's name, but in a fallen and evil world, he needed courage from above to live a life of truth. It is not easy to live differently from the social norm and this cannot be achieved by a cowardly person. It is not as simple as some spineless scholars of theology make it out to be, nor would a profit-driven, business-minded person want anything to do with such a life. Living this way means not bending to the winds of the times and standing tall as a pillar for God. Such "courage" involves freely letting go of one's losses and gains, and even life and death. When someone warned him that it was dangerous to go to Jerusalem, Paul's reply was: "I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me - the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace" (Acts 20:24).

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

Faith in One's Personal Value

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

1. Re-aligning Our Personal Values

We need to strike a balance in how we assess our self-worth. Self-importance may be a problem, but so is self-denigration. If we think we

are “extras” in this world, we would not be able to see the meaning of life. For example, many seniors find life bland and meaningless because they no longer feel needed by their children or society, and that they have become burdens for others.

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

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

The great Tang dynasty poet Li Bai was a proud and talented individual who said that “there is a purpose in my existence”. He did not bother to evaluate circumstances and was dejected his whole life. A constantly depressed alcoholic, he finally met his demise when he attempted to fish the moon out of a river in his drunkenness. He slipped and drowned in the water. One wonders if that incident was truly an accident or was it a cleverly orchestrated suicide. The vanity of his death held a certain artistic symbolism for many. Not so for Christians – Christians live for Christ according to God’s plan; thus our lives are not without meaning. We can honestly declare: “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21). When Paul said this, he did not imply that he was somebody. Rather, he knew that his life was for the glory of God and to manifest the image of Christ. Even though he knew clearly that if he died, his soul would leave his body to rest in glory and enjoy eternal blessings, and endure no more suffering, he saw his suffering as glory that “far outweighs” everything else (2 Corinthians 4:17); instead of thinking for his own well-being, his focus was on his mission. Thus he said: “If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know!” (Philippians 1:22). It was a tough decision between benefitting himself and fulfilling his mission from God.

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

2. The Pursuit to Realise One’s Values

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

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

to fight battles for the Lord and edify the Church. Interestingly, this dilemma is a necessary characteristic in a servant of the Lord.

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

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

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

obedient to Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:4-5).

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

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

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

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

“Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith” (Philippians 1:25). Paul’s faith drives his mission. He knew what he had to remain to do. Even though he did not belong to this world, he saw the need for him to stay here “with all of you”. This did not mean he stayed in the same physical premises, but was a reference to having the same mindset and status. His purpose of staying was “for your progress and joy in the faith”.

3. The Value of Joyful Ministry

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

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

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

foreigners and strangers on earth” (Hebrews 11:13). Faith needs an object – just as we place our faith in the glorious Christ for the heavenly glory that awaits us in heaven. Faith brings joy to those who believe, both during the wait and when we finally receive what we have hoped for. A strong faith drives us to eagerly look forward to our heavenly reward.

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

4. The Value of Fellowship in the Lord

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

It pollutes the fellowship and erects a barrier between the saints. The consequences of sin are judgement and punishment (1 Corinthians 4:21), and leads to shared grief in the body of Christ.

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

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

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

"In a manner worthy" refers to how the life of a Christian bears testimony to Christ's goodness before others and lights the way for them. One of my brothers in Christ who worked at a hospital shared a challenge he faced at work. He had a subordinate who claimed to be "Christian". This person had terrible work performance but loved to share his "testimony" during work hours. Sometimes, while on duty in the emergency room, he would even neglect his work to talk about the Gospel with the patients' families. My brother in Christ eventually felt enough was enough, and told him to finish his work properly before going around to share his so called "testimony"! Actions speak louder

than words, and it has been said that “a sermon preached from your own doorstep is the most effective”. What we do must align with the teachings of Christ in the Gospel, and our actions must align with what we preach. Christians who preach one thing yet do another are in fact the greatest barrier to the spread of the Gospel.

The Gospel Battle

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

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

5. Putting Faith Into Practice

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

war.

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

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

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

Of course, a war cannot be fought without real action. The Chinese have long had the problem of indulging in philosophical musings and discussions of no practical use. John Dewey (1859-1952) was invited to lecture in China between 1919 and 1921 as a “foreign sage”. He noticed that many Chinese academics of the time enjoyed talking about idealism, activism, and saving the nation, but made no real effort to realise their goals. In his article for the “Asia” journal, he made

fun of the Chinese's love for "indoor activism", which was all empty rhetoric. Those people at the time did not believe they could really do anything about the circumstances, nor were they interested to do anything.

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

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

John Wesley (1703-1791) was one who emphasised the importance of unity. He used the encounter between Jehu and the people of Jehonadab son of Rekab as an example. Jehonadab was a unique specimen even amongst the greatest weirdos of his time. He gave his people a commandment that said "Neither you nor your descendants must ever drink wine. Also you must never build houses, sow seed or plant vineyards; you must never have any of these things but must always live in tents. Then you will live a long time in the land where you are nomads" (Jeremiah 35:6-7). Jehu's magnanimous heart was able to accommodate his strangeness. While cleansing the household of Ahab for the Lord, "...he came upon Jehonadab son of Rekab, who was on his way to meet him. Jehu greeted him and said, "Are you in accord with me, as I am with you?" "I am," Jehonadab answered. "If so," said Jehu, "give me your hand." So he did, and Jehu

helped him up into the chariot. Jehu said, "Come with me and see my zeal for the Lord." Then he had him ride along in his chariot" (2 Kings 10:15-16). Jehu did not make things complicated for Jehonadab. This is also the attitude we should have as Christians, so that we can unite for the Gospel instead of combing through every little difference between ourselves and fellow believers.

6. The Victory of the Suffering Fellowship

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

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

7. The Practical Role Model

Paul was not known to be one who was glib tongued. He had suffered much for the sake of the Gospel. Christ is the pioneer of our salvation (Hebrews 2:10, 6:20). He did not come in the flesh to enjoy the luxury of a prince but served as a suffering servant who went through many grueling trials (1 Peter 2:1). Paul was put in chains for spreading the Gospel and survived many battles and ordeals. He continued to follow Christ and emulate His example despite all that he had been put through. The triumphant Christ had ascended back to heaven. In His place, He sent the Holy Spirit to be our counselor and instructed us to carry on the Great Commission, the battle for the truth of the Gospel until His glorious return in the end times.

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

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

Appendix: A Leader Who Lost His Faith

From Victory to Defeat: A Crisis of Faith

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

Crisis of the Successful.

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

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

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

Like many modern politicians, despite her strong words and appearance of determination, she was devoid of confidence and substance. Jezebel was a woman without morals and principles. Such a person would never truly have the courage to avenge her prophets of Baal against a mighty prophet of God (ref. 2 Kings 9:30-31). The harlot knew that Elijah had the support of the people, so instead of decisively sending an assassin to kill Elijah, she sent a messenger to deliver empty threats with the intention to beat a hasty retreat after saving some face.

If Elijah had not fled, Jezebel probably would have. She had already packed her belongings in preparation to flee back to her family home in Sidon and was even ready to travel by sea with the seafaring expertise of her fellow Phoenicians if need be. When God's prophet Elijah triumphantly returned, what did Jezebel do? She was aware that he was back, yet she quietly hid in the palace and did nothing while Elijah chastised her husband Ahab (1 Kings 21:20-29)! She may sound aggressive with her words, but her heart was actually filled with fear. If Elijah had seized this opportunity, he could have wiped out idolatry in the nation and brought a great revival to Israel. Instead, he failed to discern the true circumstances and turned the chance for victory into defeat!

The Fugitive Hero

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

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

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

The Affliction and the Cure

For all his weaknesses, Elijah was nevertheless still a servant of God. God's presence came upon him on Mount Horeb, the "Mountain of God", where he was closest yet furthest from God at the same time. In his weakness, he failed to find God, but God cared about his weakness and found him. "What are you doing here, Elijah?" God asked. God's questions always carried deeper meanings. When Adam fell to sin, the Lord asked him: "Where are you?" (Genesis 3:9). When Cain murdered Abel and hid his corpse, God asked him: "Where is your brother Abel?" (Genesis 4:9). God's information network had not failed when He asked those questions. He was reminding those people of the situation they were in, and the question to Elijah was no different.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Look at how Elijah viewed his co-workers. Indeed, he was their spiritual leader, but he has forgotten that they were the ones who laboured with him atop Mount Carmel to repair the Lord's altar. Who prepared the firewood for the sacrifice? Who dug the trenches and brought the water? Who stood firmly with him at the river Kishon against

the 450 prophets of Baal from the king's palace? None of these were accomplished by one man alone. When a leader forgets his co-workers, he becomes a commander with no man under his lead. What kind of a leader would that be? "I am the only one left" is a thought that arises from self-isolation. Even today, there are people who think they are always right, and anyone with a different opinion from them is wrong. This was Elijah's issue – he thought he held the key to certain divine secrets and discounted everyone else in Israel who served God. The Apostles' Creed tells us that the Holy Spirit lives in our hearts and allows the saints to commune with one another. By forgetting this principle, Elijah isolated himself from the other servants of God and lost his power as a prophet. This was a consequence of his own flawed mindset and not the fault of anyone else. We can tell from the scriptures that his co-workers did not desert him. It was his own self-obsession that caused him to disregard them and fail to mobilise their help.

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

Elijah had lost his faith in the sovereignty of God. Being in the presence of God alone is immeasurably superior to having the entire world's support. To dismiss God is the greatest misjudgment one can make! The prophet Habakkuk cried out to God in his darkest time because he did not forget God's sovereignty. He was able to sing in the night by faith and rejoice in the Lord, whereas Elijah, having looked away from God, was frightened even by his own shadow. It came to a point where Elijah saw himself as fighting the battle on his own and incapable of turning the tide. He thought that the truth would be extinguished without his holding on, and light would disappear from the world. His

excuse for his cowardice and hiding was that he had to preserve God's truth. Many dictators who fled from angry mobs also held such flawed logic but imagine one of the mightiest of God's prophets thinking this way! He had forgotten that he had God's presence with him – what is a servant of God without God's presence?

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

Restoring Lost Faith

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

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

A servant of God needs to learn the essential lesson of living and serving to glorify God. This is especially important when we are successful, lest we get overwhelmed by pride and end in failure. We

must understand this: God does not need to use us, and neither will He use just us alone. This was the lesson learnt by Elijah.

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

Chapter 2: The Love of the Saints - Width

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

The Church is Jesus Christ's Army and Love is Its Banner

(Proverbs 2:4, John 13:34-35)

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

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

If we were to define what love is, we can find the best description in 1 Corinthians chapter 13. It clearly explains both passive and active love. Were we to summarise it further, the essence of love would be "not self-seeking". The moment we begin to seek our own benefit, it is no longer love that we are looking at. In this sense, a "selfish Christian" is a self-contradicting term, a hypothetical theory that cannot truly exist.

Imagine if a person's body had a selfish limb that acted only for itself – is that even possible? In the same vein, how could a truly selfish church exist?

The Importance of Love

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

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

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

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

Corinthians 1:3-4).

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

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

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

This is what is meant by the verse "If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it" (1

Corinthians 12:25-26). A marathon runner hangs his medals around his neck, but it was his legs that won him those awards. Would the legs then complain of unfairness? Of course not! He is one complete person, and the entirety of his body enjoys the glory of his win. This is the basic concept that forms the foundation for love in unity.

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

"Compassion" is a concept in Buddhism, which sees it as a composite of love and sympathy. In Buddhist teachings, the greatest love is love shared with all living beings, and the greatest act of sympathy is to deliver all living beings from the cycle of suffering. This means to desire the happiness of all living beings and to want to save them from suffering whenever it is encountered, as in the Buddhist saying, "the hunger of others is my hunger, and the drowning of others is my drowning". A leper in the previous example who has no feelings in his limbs cannot even feel his own pain and injuries, let alone that of others.

It is a historical fact that collectively, Christians were and still are active in promoting acts of love and sympathy that have benefited the world much, especially fellow believers. However, there is no shortage of individual Christians who have lost their love and sympathy for others, as prophesied by our Lord, "Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold" (Matthew 24:12). We have all heard of people cheated for doing good and as a result, have lost their faith in others because their love was abused and not reciprocated. Another reason for the lack of love is inaction. When one has not performed acts of love and sympathy for a long time, one loses the will or ability to do so. The Bible tells us about the sin of omission: "If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them" (James

4:17). All sins share one common characteristic – the gradual loss of conscience in the heart, like those who have become numb to pain because their hearts have been “seared as with a hot iron” (1 Timothy 4:2). The sin of omission leads to a hardened heart. When grief, apathy, and disappointment kills all the love in the heart, it is the person himself who suffers the most.

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

The Fundamental Characteristics

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

1. Sharing the Same Ideals

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

Once upon a time, a man paid a visit to a wise sage. Upon seeing him, the sage pointed at him and loudly asked: “Why did you bring so many people with you?” The confused man turned around and saw nobody. The sage was actually referring to the influences of many different people that he had absorbed into his thoughts, through listening to their speeches or reading their works. His mind was weighed down by these influences. It is thus just as important to know how to forget certain things as it is to learn and remember other things. Christians do not just seek personal salvation. They must also organise their thoughts and knowledge to align and unite with the fellowship. By the power of God’s word, Paul urges fellow believers to free themselves of their mental

bondage by taking “captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5). It is saddening to see that many Christians who have received Christ for many years are still held back from following God’s will by the old pagan beliefs and practices that they had picked up in the past.

2. Sharing the Same Love

This is to identify with others emotionally, not only in relationships, but also in other matters as well, so that we all love and support the same good things. The truth is the foundation for love, “because of the truth, which lives in us and will be with us forever” (John 2:2). Were we not saved to love the same Lord Jesus Christ, we would only have fragile carnal love born solely from worldly emotions which does not follow any standards and does not last. In an orchestra, each member must play their instrument in harmony with the whole according to the conductor’s directions. If everyone played by their own rhythm, the group would not be able to produce beautiful musical performances. Likewise, we all look towards Jesus Christ, our “pioneer and perfecter of faith” (Hebrews 12:2), as our conductor of love.

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

3. Sharing the Same Mind and Spirit

Christians are “united with the Lord” and “is one with Him in spirit” (1 Corinthians 6:17). Thus it is natural that fellow believers would share a

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

4. Sharing the Same Will and United in One Purpose

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

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

success, fame, power, or wealth, and only desired to see the Church grow in God's love.

The Path to Betterment

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

1. Do Not Form Cliques

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

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

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

Paul then said of those who boast of their affiliation to renowned people, "Are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere humans?" (1 Corinthians 3:3-4). That is not in harmony with the character of Christ – some people claim to be spiritual and enjoyed praising and talking about certain famous individuals. They have effectively formed a clique outside the body of Christ and identified themselves with a different spiritual

leader, a sure sign of attachment to the flesh. After a person is born, he soon acquires personal awareness and goes through the process of socialisation. The person starts to differentiate between “me/us” and “them”. There is nothing wrong with this development, but it becomes problematic when the line defining “us” and “them” is used to separate other believers in the body of Christ.

2. Do Not Chase After Vain Glory

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

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

3. Regard Others As Better Than Oneself

Confucius advised his students to avoid befriending inferiors. Wouldn’t that make their pool of potential friends very small? Interestingly, one of the strengths of Confucius was his eye for talent in others. The ability to recognise flaws in others does not make one a sage. Instead, it is a sign of an unwell mind. Confucius wrote in his analects: “In a trio, there is definitely one who can teach me something. Enlighten yourself with their wisdom and correct yourself if you share

their flaws.” This is to say that when one associates with others, one ought to learn from their strengths and change oneself if one has similar weaknesses as them. These are words of great wisdom worthy of our reflection. If Confucius could discern the good in others, then we should have no trouble doing the same with God’s guidance. We just need to know how to tell the difference.

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

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

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

4. Be Concerned About Other's Needs

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

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

The recent New Age Movement teaches such a flawed concept. They advise their adherents to love themselves before others – and claim that this was Jesus' teaching! Isn't that strange? To support their claims, they would cite Mark 12:28-31 and Matthew 22:37-40 where Jesus told the teachers of the law and His disciples: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.” “See? How could you love others like yourself if you do not love yourself first?” They would argue. It is clear that they have misinterpreted the Lord's words. Jesus was explaining two commandments, not three. The third that they imagined, to love oneself first, is natural human behaviour and does not have to be taught, and thus they could be seen as the devil trying to twist God's teachings.

The Bible warns us of this in the end times: “But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God” (2 Timothy 3:1-4). From this text, we see that people's focus would be entirely on three things:

themselves, money, and debauchery (in the original text, they have turned into self-lovers, money-lovers, and debauchery-lovers). How pitiable it is to live like this! Let us pray for God to prevent His children from ever coming to such a dangerous state and help them to see the needs of others and render their help.

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

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

Role Models of Love

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

We all have heard someone tell us: "What is a good person?"

Whoever treats me well is a good person!" Such words display scepticism towards the state of the world but are no doubt true in some way. Most people in this world would think like this. Moreover, it is difficult to give a definition to what makes a person "good". The more beautiful something is, the harder it is to portray. We all know that beauty is hard to define, even though we often exclaim "Wow, how beautiful!" when we see something nice. Beauty, like goodness, is difficult to define in absolute terms. The Bible tells us God is love: "This is how God showed His love among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him" (1 John 4:8-9). "No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is Himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made Him known" (John 1:18).

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

The Heart of a Loving Person

Role models lead by action, and actions must be driven by the heart. To emulate Jesus' actions, we must first emulate His heart. The heart of Christ was about love. Jesus described Himself as "gentle and humble in heart" (Matthew 10:29), but He was not here to show us how humble He was. Humility was only part of the method or process in imparting His teachings. Without love, humility is imperfect, but with love humility comes naturally. When faced with others who are superior in ability or intellect, one might have no choice but to act humbly. Such

humility stems from objective fact and has nothing to do with love. On the other hand, a person of high status who kneels at the bedside of the sick to pray for them, who serves his servants and even enemies, does not do so because the other party is superior to them in status, nor are these people more capable or wise, but because of humility born from love.

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

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

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

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

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

Christ's Humility

The mercy of Christ led Him to humble (Tapeinosis) Himself and empty (Kenosis) Himself of His heavenly glory to come and live among us. A person who had never enjoyed wealth would never truly know the pain of falling into poverty. In the same vein, because humanity did not have the same divine glory as Christ did before He came to us, we would never be able to understand how painful it was for Him to humble Himself and take the image of a man. It is impossible for us to truly know how great the sacrifice He made was. Charles Wesley (1707-1788), celebrated English hymnist, expressed his amazement for God's mercy and praised this incredible love in his hymn "And Can It Be That I Should Gain?". "He left His Father's throne above, so free, so infinite His grace; Emptied Himself of all but love And bled for Adam's helpless race; 'Tis mercy all, immense and free; For, O my God, it found out me."

Zechariah, filled with the Holy Spirit, prophesied the birth of the Son of God into our world: "because of the tender mercy of our God, by

which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace” (Luke 1:78-79). We were not saved because we deserved to be, but because of God’s “tender mercy”. This is one of the earliest examples of a hymn in the New Testament and describes how Christ humbled Himself in the Incarnation so He could come amongst us and redeem us from our sins. In His humility, He gave up His divine glory and took the image of a servant. In those ancient days, servants and slaves were expected to unquestioningly obey their masters. As the sole authority who gave the law, Christ lowered Himself instead to come under the law, “to take the image of a servant”, so that the law was made complete. During this time, He allowed Himself to be temporarily “burdened by a yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1).

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

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

The poem made reference to Luke 12:37, “he will dress himself to serve, will have them recline at the table and will come and wait on them” The most glorious Lord, above all His creation, became a man for the sake of love. He told us: “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark

10:45). His love was made manifest in His humility, when He was willing to lower Himself to serve sinners. The Bible tells us: "I will bring him near and he will come close to Me - for who is he who will devote himself to be close to Me?" declares the Lord" (Jeremiah 30:21).

To Become the Image of Man

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

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

Imagine an ugly, small, weak, and stinky bug that you observe daily. Such bugs are short-lived, hatching in the morning and often not living long enough to see the sunset. They lead a confused life and lack any real understanding of the surroundings, and hardly have any memories worth keeping in their short lifespan. Imagine again that you suddenly become one of these bugs one day (who, in their tiny minds, think very highly of themselves), living amongst their kind and community. How shameful and humbling it would be! How would you tolerate living this way? This was exactly what Jesus experienced when He came to this world. The only difference is that being God, His descension into the image of man is an even steeper drop than man becoming bug. How can we still have the pride to harbour obsession for personal glory? We ought to be thankful for the grace we have received,

as the psalmist David said: “What is mankind that You are mindful of them, human beings that You care for them?” (Psalm 8:4). If we really understood the sacrifice Jesus made to save us, we would all be prostrating and laying down our crowns before the throne of God like the twenty-four elders in heaven, worshipping and praising Him forever (Revelation 4:10-11). All the grace that came upon us through the Incarnation flowed from the unfathomable love of God, beyond our understanding and imagination.

He Humbled Himself

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

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

from whom people hide their faces He was despised, and we held Him in low esteem” (Isaiah 53:2-3).

Willing Submission

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

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

Moreover, His “...origins are from of old, from ancient times” (Micah 5:2). The Lord had been around way before Abraham was born (John 8:56). Even though King David addressed Him as Lord in his psalms, He still obeyed His earthly parents. The very Lord who established the law acted according to it and was circumcised on the 8th day after His birth. He obeyed the rituals of cleansing and made His offerings to the Lord as dictated by the law. When He reached the age of twelve, He travelled to Jerusalem with His parents for the Passover (ref. Luke 2:21-24, 41-42). Even though He was without sin, He received baptism by John the Baptist at the river Jordan, to “fulfill all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15). When He reached maturity at thirty, He began His ministry (Luke 3:23). Although He was the Son of God and the Lord of the Temple, He submitted to the unjust authorities and the religious rules. He paid His taxes (using a coin in the mouth a fish caught by Peter at His instruction) for the maintenance of the temple (Matthew 17:24-27).

During His final moments before the crucifixion, He prayed under immense grief in the garden of Gethsemane, where He “offered up

prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save Him from death”, but He ultimately submitted willingly to God’s will and accepted the “bitter cup”: “and, once made perfect, He became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey Him” (Matthew 26:36-46, Hebrews 5:7-9).

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

Unto Death

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

in a way that far exceeds our expectations and imagination.

He Died on the Cross

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

The main charge the Jews had against Jesus was blasphemy, the penalty of which according to the law is death by stoning. But because of multiple considerations, the Jewish leaders decided to politicise the matter and get Jesus executed in the Roman method of crucifixion. Researchers have theorised that because trees were common in Palestine, Jesus could possibly have been crucified on a horizontal beam fastened across a tree trunk to create a makeshift cross. This was why the Bible recorded: “They spit on him and took the staff and struck him on the head again and again” (Matthew 27:30), because He was hung at a height within reach. In this way, the Saviour bore our sins for us and was cursed and insulted in our place. “He himself bore our sins” in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness” (1 Peter 2:24). He Himself was sinless and flawless, the true lamb of the Passover (1 Corinthians 5:7). The Jews had killed the Lord of life in the cruellest and most insulting manner on the day of Passover as destined by God’s will. Jesus accepted this plan because of His love for mankind and shed His “precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect” (1 Peter 1:19) on the cross. Those who believe in Him are saved, like what was pre-symbolised in the night before the Exodus – those who smeared the blood of a lamb on their door posts were preserved from the angel of death.

During the Exodus, the Israelites complained incessantly to God because of the tough journey. God sent venomous snakes to attack them – these snakes did not just cause superficial wounds, but also carried deadly poison in their bites. Those who were bitten were sure to die, like the wages of sin is in death, but God instructed them on the only way to be saved: He told Moses to craft a bronze snake and put it atop a pole. Anyone who was bitten who looked at the bronze snake would be

cured. This was pre-symbolic of how those who believe in the crucified Christ would gain eternal life. Thanks be to God, “just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in Him” (John 3:14-16). “This is how God showed His love among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:9-10).

The Risen Christ

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

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

God Raised Jesus to the Highest

The Bible clearly states that God exalted Jesus to the highest place. The Bible explains: “What does “He ascended” mean except that

He also descended to the lower, earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe” (Ephesians 4:9-10). Peter taught about the death and resurrection of Jesus: “This man was handed over to you by God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put Him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised Him from the dead, freeing Him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on Him” (Acts 2:23-24), showing that His death was predestined by God’s will and not incidental. His resurrection and ascension to the highest were also all in God’s sovereign plan.

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

Jesus, Name Above All Names

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

YHWH (LORD) said to my Adon (Lord): “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet” (Acts 2:34-35, Psalm 110:1). Jesus used this verse to test the Pharisees when He was on

earth and to demonstrate His divinity. However, all of them failed the test. He then told them: "Where I go, you cannot come" (John 8:21). When he said: "I and the Father are one", the Jews did not get what He was telling them and accused Him of blasphemy (John 10:30). In the end, the enemies were left speechless when He was "appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead" (Romans 1:4) and started trying to cover up the truth. Their actions proved that He is indeed God and worthy of the supreme name.

Jesus Christ is Lord

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

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

Jesus was actually a pretty common name. In the Bible, there were at least twelve persons in the Old Testament with that name and nine in the New Testament. In modern day Latin American countries, there are also many named Jesus (pronounced like Hai-Suo). However, only one Jesus is the Son of God who incarnated in the image of man.

He was born in Bethlehem and referred to as Jesus of Nazareth in His adulthood. He loved mankind, obeyed God, humbled Himself, and sacrificed Himself. God raised Him from the dead and exalted Him to the highest. He became a servant to us in this world, yet He is the most magnificent and glorious Lord, to whom all knees will bow and all mouths will praise.

Glory to the Heavenly Father

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

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

The very first question in the Shorter Westminster Catechism is "What is the chief end of man?", and the answer is "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever." Jesus did not just explain the truth to us. He left us His personal example for us to emulate, to teach us to glorify God and edify man. "Righteousness goes before Him and prepares the way for His steps" (Psalm 85:13). What amazing love! "He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our

justification” (Romans 4:25). “In bringing many sons and daughters to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he suffered” (Hebrews 2:10).

The Source of All Love

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

The Work of the Holy Spirit

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

For those who submit to the rule of evil spirits, Scripture says, “The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so” (Romans 8:7), but those who submit to Christ have been reconciled to God and are members of the kingdom of light. Their new object of loyalty is God and they belong to Him. They “...are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him.” (Acts 5:32). Such people listen carefully for God’s will and follow Him as His “obedient children” (1 Peter 1:14).

Children are not like business partners, nor is their relationship with God that of teacher and student. It is a relationship of life and spirit, irrevocable and immutable. “The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by Him we cry, “Abba, Father” (Romans 8:15). Why then does Paul tell us to “continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling”? Fear and trembling can be interpreted from several angles. When a humble human stands before

God, who is holy, righteous, authoritative, and sovereign, it is natural for fear and reverence to come from the heart. It can also be a reminder to be cautious and meticulous, and be concerned about the critical commission we received, lest we fail to fulfill our mission. A person touched by grace knows that all he has comes from God. As a steward of God's resources, one must always be fearful of failing in one's duty and strive to perform one's tasks to the best. In another sense, the fear could also be of punishment if one is judged sinful and unworthy, for "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hebrews 10:31). It is only natural that a sinful person would have such fear.

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

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

Emulating Christ

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

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

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

Man Shall Not Boast

How then can man still boast about good deeds? To dedicate oneself to good works is part of a Christian’s duty, like what Jesus said: “apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). The secret to bearing good fruit is in Christ Himself. Since the age of enlightenment, modern people have only grown disappointed with the illusion of free will – as biological creatures, we are all subject to physiological factors beyond our will to control. Food, sleep, neurological systems, the functionality of our organs, and our affections and senses can all influence our will. In this case, what kind of free will are we even talking about? On top of all these, environmental factors also push our will in different directions. In a social circle for example, those who mix with positive peers tend to become more positive and those who associate with negative peers pick up their negative behaviour. Our education and learned habits determine our personality, cultural inclinations, and thought patterns to a good extent. All these means humans would never have truly independent free will. Can Lazarus, rotting in his grave and wrapped tightly in his shroud, choose by his own free will to come out of the grave and walk? Only when he heard the voice of the Son of God did he live again and was free to choose his actions. The only thing humans can do is to listen

to and obey the commands of the Lord. Only then would they be able to break out of their shrouds and remove the stone blocking their tombs and walk out into the light (ref. John 11:1-44). The Lord's words are spirit and life. They raise the dead from their graves and grant them new life so that they can obey His will from their hearts and fulfill His beautiful plans for them.

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

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

Zacchaeus showed us what true repentance is, "Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with

those in need” (Ephesians 4:28). Only someone who is contented can understand that they have extras that can be shared with others. We must not keep clawing things towards ourselves, but also think about others who do not have enough. Jesus’ love was made manifest from the heart of Zacchaeus through these actions.

God’s Transforming Power

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

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

Light of the World

“Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation. Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life” (Philippians 2:14-16). Modern society has convenient transport networks, magnificent skyscrapers, bustling malls and markets, and all sorts of goods and services for every need. However, while the rich and affluent enjoy all

these modern benefits, the poor continue to suffer hunger, and many do not even have proper clothes. Nowadays, it is not uncommon to see people lusting after money, going back on promises, betraying friends, and disobeying parents. Morals have been pushed aside for the pursuit of lust and freedom, and promiscuity and homosexuality are becoming more rampant and accepted. This can be said of almost every city. However, this was actually the situation of the Roman empire recorded by Roman historians in the first century!

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

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

in the Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:10-12). It is thus a blessed sign that we belong to the kingdom of heaven if we are being persecuted for our faith.

Set Apart from the World

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

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

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

The Lord Jesus Christ is the sun, while the Church is like the moon. The moon is only a huge, barren rock that cannot emit light on its own. The moonlight that we see is reflected light from the sun. The

darker the land is at night, the brighter the moon appears, and people love the beautiful light of the full moon. Sometimes, the moon's light becomes dimmer, or completely disappears. That is because the earth's shadow sometimes block the light travelling between the sun and moon. Of course, clouds in the atmosphere can also prevent moonlight from reaching us. The situation of the Church is no different. Cultural and geographical differences, personal emotions, and other factors can become shadows that block the light of the Church and prevent her from reflecting the beauty of Christ, thus reducing or corrupting her influence on the world, which can lead to people becoming disappointed and discouraged with the Church.

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

Arise and Shine

In our current generation, science has advanced our material comforts to a high standard, yet society is breaking down and giving way to moral decadence, a “warped and crooked generation” as the Bible calls it. This is the time when the Church must stand up and shine for the Lord as His blessed people of Zion. “Arise, shine... See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the Lord rises upon you and His glory appears over you” (Isaiah 60:1-2). Christians must remain upright when every one else gives in to deception and twisted truths. We must be honest and just, setting good examples in this fallen and rebellious world. We have to keep our paths straight so we cannot be accused of wrong doing. The deeper the darkness is, the brighter we must shine! Love is the most important character of Christians. Love reflects God's nature, signals the presence of His family, and shows others that we are the disciples of the Lord. This is why God's children have to love one another. Complaints often stem from feeling harmed, disadvantaged, or unjustly treated and arguments arise from competition, self-righteousness, and personal interest. In a nutshell, the root of conflict lies in aversion to loss and competition for personal gain. It is all about “self”!

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

Prepared for Rejection

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

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

It is not how discerning believers are, that they can perceive minute details in all manner of things, but God the Father who “give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know Him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which He has called you, the riches of His glorious inheritance in His holy people” (Ephesians 1:17-18, 1

Corinthians 2:10-11). It is not how courageous believers are that allows them to evangelise bravely to the crowds, sacrifice themselves to love God and man, or even face martyrdom without fear, but God who "... strengthen you with power through His Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith... being rooted and established in love" (Ephesians 3:16-17). Here, "strengthen you", "dwell in your heart", and make you all point to God working through those who belong to Him. Humans are but worthless vessels on their own and ought not to boast about themselves. Such immense and amazing love! Even though we are unworthy, God still chose us to be the vessels to complete His divine works.

Ministering in Love

"As you hold firmly to the word of life. And then I will be able to boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labour in vain. But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. So you too should be glad and rejoice with me" (Philippians 2:16-18). A dedicated artist would invest his entire life in his works of art and make every effort to ensure that they are perfectly crafted. When the artist produces a masterpiece, he would take care of it with his life. This is the key difference between an artist and an art producer without dedication, and between a true shepherd and a hired hand. Co-workers in the Church take this a step further. The Lord's co-workers pour their entire lives into His work, and do not just regard their ministries as a job or career. They know the object of their service are living people; thus their love and feelings are likewise integrated into their work. Paul told the Corinthian church, "for we are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building" (1 Corinthians 3:9). He did not view the Church as a project or a building and knew well that the Church is the congregation of God's elect, made up of living people capable of feeling and responding to love. He had high hopes for them. To the Thessalonian church, he said: "Instead, we were like young children among you. Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the Gospel of God but our lives as well" (1 Thessalonians 2:7-8). He also told them: "For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into His kingdom and glory" (1 Thessalonians 2:11-12).

Persevering Love

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

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

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

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

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

Love in Action

"I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you. I have no one else like him, who will show genuine concern for your welfare" (Philippians 2:19-20). In his poem "Musings of Spring", the great Chinese poet Du Fu wrote: "War beacons have blazed on for three months, and a family letter is now worth more than ten thousand gold ingots." Wouldn't that make ink and paper merchants and postmen ludicrously rich? He was of course not saying that writing materials or postage services were literally costing thousands in gold. Family letters in war times were more valuable than gold because of the love and assurance they carried. At the time, the An Lushan Rebellion ravaged the nation and communications between different regions was all but impossible. The lack of communication added to the concern and yearning for one's friends and family. Even though one may also show care and concern for people they did know personally, nothing beats the desire to hear from one's loved ones in such turbulent times. Thus, a letter from his family was what the poet desired the most.

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

In those days, a prisoner was isolated from the outside world and rarely had companions. Paul was fortunate that there were several brethren in Christ who were incarcerated with him. In his epistle, he mentioned Timothy and Epaphroditus (Philippians 2:25). Paul had great tasks for Timothy. Out of his concern for the brethren, he sent Timothy, who had been attending to his needs, to support the church in Philippi.

In fact, he hoped in the Lord for him to arrive there sooner! Paul loved the Church far more than he loved himself and wanted Timothy to be with them as soon as possible. Why? He wanted badly to know how they were doing!

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

How to Have Both Reliance and Concern

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

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

The love of the Lord drives him to demonstrate his concern for the brethren. Timothy, who "will show genuine concern for your welfare", was of one mind with Paul and the best person to send to help the brethren. Paul desired for Timothy to reach the Philippians soon so that he could get news about them and the Church. Timothy, knowing Paul's wishes, would also make haste to return to him with comforting updates.

He certainly would not wander off to appreciate the scenery along the way or let his journey be held back by matters of the secular world.

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

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

Life Connections

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

Christians are not expected to purge themselves of human feelings. Rather, they are expected to cleanse and purify such feelings in the Holy Spirit so that they transcend beyond carnal emotions. Some fathers and sons have no love between them and it is not unheard of for parents and children to kill each other. The spiritual love in Christ exceeds the earthly love of this world. The epistle to the Philippians

begins with “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the command of God our Saviour and of Christ Jesus our hope, to Timothy my true son in the faith” (Philippians 1:1). This defines Paul and Timothy’s relationship in the ministry as co-workers, which is also sustained by God’s love. We have all heard of Paul’s epistles, but has anyone ever heard of “Timothy’s epistles”? Although the letters were not written by Timothy, Paul includes him as a co-worker in the love of Christ. He was of one heart and mind with his young co-labourer in the Lord and led the way for Timothy. Paul’s heart-warming mentoring of Timothy is an example for us to follow. He testifies to the strength of Timothy and recommended him to the Church. Nowadays, how often do we hear people making positive references for others? Perhaps this would be a simple way to get the revival of the Church started. It is something that we can practice right away. In his old age, Peter wrote of Mark as “my son Mark” (1 Peter 5:13). This is the same Mark who was the cousin of Barnabas (Colossians 4:10) who deserted Paul and Barnabas at Pamphylia (Acts 15:36-39) and caused Paul and Barnabas to argue and part ways (Acts 15:36-39). God granted a second chance to this young man who gave up half way to turn back to His service, and Paul was deeply impressed by Mark’s ministry in his late years. Not only was Paul’s trust for him restored, he became one of the most beloved co-workers of Paul, referring to him as “helpful to me in my ministry” (2 Timothy 4:11). Mark was also one of the co-workers who journeyed with Paul in the last days of his life. Peter, Barnabas, and Paul must have had a lot of positive influence on Mark for him to have such an amazing transformation, just like how Moses guided Joshua , Samuel 安 and Jonathan’s friendship towards David, and Elijah’s mentorship of Elisha. All these were examples of different types of relationships that brought a positive change to the people involved and prepared them to become future leaders.

The Succession of Ministry

Whether we approach the matter from a ecclesiastical or historical perspective, it is undeniable that nurturing the next generation of leaders is critical for the succession of the Church. Clearly, Saul was a terrible role model for David, but the way he treated David could still serve as a negative example, so that we do not repeat his mistakes. David was a man who was pleasing to the heart of God, the new leader that God had anointed to succeed the throne of Israel. Despite that, Saul, his father-in-law who was supposed to behave as a fatherly figure to David, was jealous of him and could not tolerate his existence. As the reigning monarch, Saul ought to have rewarded David for winning the war. But

Saul was an exception to the rule. When David returned victorious, adorned with praise and glory by the people, Saul allowed himself to be taken over by the evil one. Like a furious demon, Saul lost his senses to envy and behaved as if he were from the enemies' camp. He refused to say a good word about David and treated him terribly. On the other hand, David, God's anointed one, did not challenge Saul for the throne nor try to seize power. Even when he had the chance to dispose of Saul, he spared his life. He put up with Saul's persecution and went into hiding for more than 10 years. David was the perfect example of a candidate for kingship. He had great aspirations but was not ambitious for power. He was upright and courageous but did not act on impulse. When Saul was still able to accommodate him, he served Saul loyally, "humbling himself under God's mighty hand" (ref. 1 Peter 5:6). His loyalty was to his king (installed by God) and his nation, and when the time came, God lifted him up high.

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

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

true love and concern that touches many hearts!

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

Thanks be to God, we now enjoy many modern conveniences that were not available during Paul’s time. However, we must still continue to emulate Paul’s heart of concern. Concern for one another can help us overcome many perils and obstacles, while indifference within the Church can become the greatest barrier to ministry. News from the mission fields sent by the missionaries is also important. It carries a special value for the Church, helping to encourage and edify fellow believers with the testimonies. Missionaries must thus avoid viewing report writing as a burden – some have even shared that they sometimes feel tempted to just pad the reports with extra words or fabricated stories. In the commercialised world today, statistics and numbers have become a heavy burden even for ministry co-workers. Many struggled just to produce numerical results to fulfill work requirements. Some ministry sponsors may even tie the amount of funding they give to the ministry statistics, as if they were business investors seeking a return, or insist that their name or brand must be featured in the reports and publicity materials. Such expectations are all misguided – what missionaries need are love and support for them to sustain their work. Paul did not rest or take holidays, but neither did he write ministry reports for the Philippian church. Whenever he sent news to them or asked for updates, he was doing it out of a much more noble reason – his love for the brethren.

Accommodate One Another

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

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

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

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

By common logic, members of a poor church would most probably live like beggars and go around asking for alms. Yet Paul appeared to live in relative comfort, such that even the Roman governor Felix “was hoping that Paul would offer him a bribe” (Acts 24:26). Paul was of

course not one to resort to bribery, but Felix, deducing from his experience as a seasoned official, thought that Paul was a rich man based on his appearance. Later, Epaphroditus brought money for Paul and the ministry. Did that make him a wealthy man then? Certainly not – he did not act all high and mighty and order Paul and the co-workers around just because he brought them much needed funds. He humbly stayed by Paul's side and attended to his needs and served together with Paul as soldiers of the Gospel.

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

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

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

Love, Care, and Respect

"So then, welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honour

people like him, because he almost died for the work of Christ. He risked his life to make up for the help you yourselves could not give me” (Philippians 2:29-30)

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

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

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

recovered by God's grace and was able to travel back to Philippi. In the eyes of Paul, Epaphroditus was a glorious victor who succeeded in his mission and was ready to return triumphant! Paul was worried that the brethren in Philippi might not understand the spiritual significance of Epaphroditus's recovery and still be embroiled in worldly concepts of success, which was why he wrote to teach them about the victory of this faithful hero.

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

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

Chapter 3: The Ideals of the Saints - Height

Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) once shared a story with inspiring morals: One dark night, a large shopping mall 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 mall opened, jewellery worth tens of thousands of dollars were now priced at a few dollars, while common and affordable products now cost several hundred times their usual price! If the company had not discovered this prank early, business in the mall would become unsustainable – 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 at such a huge loss.

The “company” that owned the mall 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 in the mall and made the things of worth worthless, and vice versa. This was an extremely serious matter! Thieves who messed with our heart’s values are the worst kind of intruders to have. A society with its values turned topsy-turvy would not remain stable for very long, but what if the majority agree with the perverted values? Kierkegaard was often called the “Crazy Dane” by detractors but from his enlightened perspective, the masses are the ones who are 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 struggle madly while they are 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 is and

insist on striving even harder with their own strength and ability. If they refuse to recognise their true state, 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 are 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 is 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 ideas and averse to repeated thoughts 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. They 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 stand firmly outside the gates of salvation and stubbornly reject the Gospel: “Do not give dogs what is sacred” (Matthew 7:6). The Lord turned the mockery of those who emphasised 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 are from primitive and isolated tribes that live 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 is also the same. There is this funny story about a Caucasian missionary who learned Mandarin so he could evangelise the people in China. During worship, he cheerfully 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 refrain 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 is 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 avoid them completely, we would have to depart from this world (ref. 1 Corinthians 5:10). 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 we are to beware of? Paul cautions against associating with any person "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." (1Corinthians 5:11) These are the "wolves in sheepskins" that the Lord warned us against, the false prophets and false believers, the evil-doers whom the Lord said he "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 above 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 sought to be 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 one’s own weakness, and 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 is 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", but 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 are 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)

The statement "Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord" shows 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 secure 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 tiger wanted to eat the fox he had caught for dinner. The fox rebuked 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 is where the Chinese idiom "Hu Jia Hu Wei" (a fox assuming a tiger's aura of power) arose. The idiom itself is rarely complimentary, but it demonstrates the cleverness of the fox and his secret to self-preservation and has lessons we can learn from. As Christians, we too should boast of Jesus when 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, the 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). In 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 in the religious aspect. Most Christians did not have very positive views of Pharisees and equated them with 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 Adam 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, everyone has "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 try. Our deeds are like the "bed that is too short to stretch out on" and the

“blanket too narrow to wrap around you” (ref. 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 following 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!” (Hebrews 9:14)

“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 genuine 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 the better, we lose the chance to improve. 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, the perfect, and the 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 feels 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 had 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 is supposed to be good has turned into something that caused loss and hinders the pursuit of something better. If the Ganoderma fungus grows on your door frame, get rid of it no matter how good it looks, as a Chinese saying goes. 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, 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 held captive by the devil would leave joyfully after meeting Him, who set them 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 family 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 the 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 arise from God's grace, 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 "garbage" and we 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 of. 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 went after personal gain as his ideals 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 is 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 picked on the wording of the law and oppressed 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 a 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 replied: “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” (ref. 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 is 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 know 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" (Galatians 2:20). 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 3:26). This allows 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 has no other choice but to try to obey the law to please God, as he is 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 are 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 is 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 delivers 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 in 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 to 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 by 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 her 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 will 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), and “... 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 are 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 we are 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. Instead it 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, which 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 appear 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 means 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 is that they do not know they are 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 are imperfect? We often behave like know-it-alls 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. That is why the Lord Jesus Christ rebuked the scribes and Pharisees sharply. They dressed themselves in religious robes and wore 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 is 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 is hard to come across. The Emperor's New Clothes is a classical story that shows 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 tell him the truth 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 no clothes. 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 is no comparison. When we compare a white shirt to the snow, we would find that the shirt is closer to a very light shade of yellow or grey than white. From that contrast, we can tell that the colour of the shirt is 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 is 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 is 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 has 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 are half-bloomed and the moon is 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 means 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 are 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 is meant by the saying (in the Yi Jing (i.e. the Canon of Changes): “The Heavens are in motion ceaselessly; the enlightened exert themselves constantly”.

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 is 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 understood 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 expressed 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 calls us from a variety of different backgrounds. Thus, the goals that He sets 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 want 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 assigned 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 earned only 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 have 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 has 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 to realise them. Simply put, ideals are not empty musings. They lead to practical applications. 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 into 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 is our past strengths or weaknesses that hinder us, yesterday has 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 aimed 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 let his attention be diverted by the inclinations of the flesh and carnal desires. We must also avoid being undecided 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 (ref. 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 exhorted 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 and he said confidently: "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 is 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 told 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 the infant 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 difference between spiritual infancy and maturity. Believers who have 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: “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 encouraged 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 longed for others to share his views and perception and desired to 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 them wisdom, open their eyes to see the truth like how He enabled Hagar to find the well of water (Genesis 21:19), or “remove the scales” from their 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 them to go through (ref. Acts 16:6-10), showing them the right way to proceed after preventing them from going in a certain way. Sometimes, all it takes is a little time and patience 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" is of course insignificant, but we do not wait until we have enough strength before we forge 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 is 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 did so with willing joy and was an “example to the flock” (1 Peter 5:2-3). In doing so, he emulated the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, so that the believers could 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 did 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 encouraged 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 on board earlier to work with Paul. After they heard of the Gospel, their lives and values changed and they led 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 be 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 by example. 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: "In everything set them an example by doing what is good" (Titus 2: 7). Paul believed 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 expected 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 were the exact opposite of what Christ would have done. This was the most severe offence 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 and action greatly demonstrated 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 could 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 by rejecting the truth of the Gospel. This was a dangerous act of self-termination by refusing the only path of salvation, and led 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", the same term 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 satisfy one's hunger. While the idiom is often used jokingly, it points toward the truth too. People whose god is their stomach also refers to religious workers who see their role as a job for survival. They were never truly called by God and do not have any sense of mission. Some of them are not even responsible towards their duties

nor seek to improve themselves. They are charlatans who work in the church simply to reap benefits for themselves. In Hokkien, Christians were called “Jia Kao Eh”, i.e. people who eat from the Church (the term probably arose in reference to partaking in the Holy Communion). However, these false teachers literally “ate the Church”. They are typically popular in church social circles and climb 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 is without a doubt another form of treating their stomachs as their god. Even today, many religions still have such a practice. The Bible is 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 is, 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 revelled 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 her members frequently accused and fought with one another. The real problem behind the conflict was values that have been twisted and confused. They took 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 sided with and pandered to the rich bullies who sullied the name of the Lord—(James 2:1-8). This is 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 are 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. These people have weak morals, but worse still, they have no 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 life and are in fact, enemies of Christ. As long as the old life still lives and one has 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 Augustine (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 what 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 considered Christians have “dual citizenship”, as 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 have 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 our journey to heaven, that enables us to have joy amidst suffering. Hope is not a moral value, but 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 are living for. The mentality “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 fruits: 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 has raised numerous faithful servants who gave “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 these faithful servants were those who proclaimed eschatological beliefs but exclude Christ from their teachings. These were opportunists who exploited the state of world affairs to form 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" (2 Peter 3:13).

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 is clear that God's kingdom has been 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 does 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 deep 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 perfect, emulating His own perfection. The Gospel of Luke demonstrated that the risen Lord Jesus Christ was not restricted by time and space. He could appear anywhere and anytime at will and come and go as He pleased (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, aging, 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 Him who created and rules over all things, who rose 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."

Chapter 4: The Perseverance of the Saints - Length

According to Zeng Zi, “Perfect virtue is the burden which he considers is his to sustain; is it not heavy? Only with death does his course stop; is it not long?” (The Analects of Confucius Book 8: Taibo, Chapter VII). This means 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 had 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 hope is on eternity with 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 (ref. Galatians 5:22); Moreover, Christians do not press on as individuals, but as a fellowship of believers who together uphold perseverance, united with one common vision. Thus, our perseverance is greater and we 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 result if several conditions are 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 (and 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 willingly 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 fraught with difficulties and dangers (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, keeping his eyes on “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 through 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 upheld him. Imagine a mother in a poor family who gave all her life to care for her children. She sacrificed herself to give the children her best. This is what the Chinese means by the saying “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 were connected through 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 were edified spiritually, it did not matter whether Paul was liked. Paul told 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). 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 from 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 did not view himself as an employee paid to work, nor did 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 give an account 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 Paul warned the believers: "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 or by keeping 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 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 it was written, "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 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 is easy to break, but many cords twined together is hard to break, i.e. unity is strength.

The children of the world are wise in worldly things, but the

children of the light are to be 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 impose 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 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 was heart-breaking then that they were 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 the date of His birthday, and neither did Mary, His mother, say anything about it. This shows that it is 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 doctrines such as Christ as the Lord of life: “it was impossible for death to keep its hold on Him” (Acts 2:24), and His divinity: “and who 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 had been spreading their faith around the world. Sadly, when the crusaders finally conquered Constantinople in the Fourth Crusade, they busied themselves with 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 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 did 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 is clear in his writings that unity is 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 with one heart. Therefore, the strength 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 to 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 has 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 are 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 fruit we can bear, there is “love”, followed immediately by “joy”, then “peace and forbearance” and the other fruit qualities (Galatians 5:22). We are also encouraged by Paul in his instruction “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 picture! “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 piece of wood 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 weep in front of others. But what Jesus taught is the opposite – He is 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). By all these feats which no man could accomplish, He

demonstrated that He is the almighty God. Yet when He came to our world, Peter wrote, “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 had 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 and Paul wrote, “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 the second coming of Christ 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). This is 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 could 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. As Paul said, "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 hope motivates the saints to press on in the race towards the goal even when their arms and legs are weak with fatigue and gives them a clear goal to strive towards instead of aiming blindly. It guides them to live godly lives and focus 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). He eventually became one of the most respected church fathers.

In Philippians 4:5 we are told: "The Lord is near." In 2 Timothy 4:17, Paul testified that that the Lord stood at his side and gave him strength. All these words of encouragement give us strength 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 had 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. The poem is entitled '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 shall set him free – and no net shall be able to capture him.

Why worry? Simply pray (Psalm 124).

When Paul stood at the weathered stern of his ship, the sun, the moon and stars hid their brilliance.

The gloomy storm cackled at him from beyond the ship rail, but the heart of the chained man was free.

Why worry? Simply pray.

The 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 means that we need only to pray to God and drop all worries. The many nights of insomnia that we go through are all for nothing. Peter wrote, “Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you” (1 Peter 5:7). Who would doubt 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 give our worries to Him, for He is able to bear 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 from our hearts and gives believers the strength 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 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 when 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 do 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 is 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 struggled 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 rages, the snowstorm would not affect you in any way. Are 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 means 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 exists 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 are 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 as one continues 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 read 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 were thus the first messengers tasked to spread the Gospel. Christians are the medium of light, conveying the Good News and life testimonies around the world to witness for God by 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 their minds on things above, and 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 with a renewed mind 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 we must 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 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. They are legalistic and criticise others self-righteously or view them as enemies. The situation has become worse ever since psychology became a convenient excuse for many things. The truth is, not having a benchmark for what is right causes 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 “every man 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 from the unclean. In the 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 seized 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 does not set any standards for what defines a good name, it affirms the value of having a good name. Anyone who values having a good name would be cautious with their speech and behaviour, and refrain from doing anything that is 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 judge the father of the house when we look at the family, people outside the church would judge God when they look at Christians (Ephesians 3:15). The Chinese understand this well and know 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 is not specific about which actions qualified as good or shameful but provides general principles: "if anything is excellent or praiseworthy - think about such things". This means we should keep in our minds all encouraging words and good deeds, and anything that is 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 and 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 presented 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 teaching tool is to be a role model yourself for the students. The teacher is not only a “3D” model for the students, but one that could think, act, and respond as a real person with behaviour that is appropriate 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 have to do is to proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord, then they have discharged their duty

as a Christian and will receive 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" means a person knows that he has sinned against God and is unable to save himself by fulfilling God's law. As a result, he is guilt-ridden and has 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 have been 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 is 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 received the Great Commission obeyed the Lord's instruction and passed the vision on to the subsequent generations of believers. They did not keep the promise of resurrection to 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" (Matthew 28:20).

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 is and the greater the number of presents. As to whether it is morally right to accept the present and what the giver's intention is, it doesn't matter. Such is the mindset of people who accept bribes. For others, they do not look at the value of gift but the giver's motivation, 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 the reason why the gift of the Philippians 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 might not have cost a lot, but this gift 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 determined 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 thinks about you and pray for you is 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 did 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 maid to “get rid of the eduwu!” (“qian” means money in Chinese. As he did not want to talk about “qian”, he referred to the coins as “eduwu”, which was a colloquial term for money during the Jin dynasty). How pretentious!

Paul held the meaning behind a gift in higher regard than its material value. His honesty with finances and his accountability when dealing with money is something we ought to learn from. Not only did he refrain from any dishonest behaviour, but he also avoided causing any suspicion of dishonesty, lest the opponents of the Gospel could attack his integrity. This was why he refused help from the Corinthians – even though they were rich, as 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 collecting without preparing them 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 is!

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 come at the expense of God's glory and allowing His name to be tarnished.

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 desires for essential needs result in want, while unfulfilled desires for luxuries lead to 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 in 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 tattered 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 did not request the believers to adopt a life of poverty, but he desired 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 satisfying 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 had stopped relying on God, he would have failed (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 became a defector to the enemy, or the general they were following in the charge against the enemy turned at the last moment and fled 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 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 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 is 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 is a beautiful sight for all to behold and it is 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 had 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 had 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 drove 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 had 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. Some 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 received the love offering, as he 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 emphasized 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 could 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 shows how much 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 wrong reasons for giving 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 good stewardship and does nothing for our spiritual growth. Before God, both ignorance and disloyalty are equally 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 sung 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 is one more amazing thing that he missed from his list – there could be many fruits on his account that he did not know were borne 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 our good testimonies. 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 make 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 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 was 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 “potato” 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 is willingly given away out of goodwill while a loss is involuntary and does 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 the faith of 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 talking about giving at the pulpit, 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 China is 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-sighted 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). 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 desire 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

Towards the end of the epistle, Paul wrote, “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 was full of love and care for fellow believers. He reminded 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 he also told the church at Rome, “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 the address “To all God’s holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi” (Philippians 1:1). At the end of the letter, he again addressed them, “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 has only one head – the supreme sovereign Jesus Christ, Lord of all creation. In the earthly Church, true believers of the Lord are each members of His body, united in Christ with all Christians in the past, present, and future. This universal Church is collectively the bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:22-30), which individual churches are 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 stooping so low 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, 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 recorded, the Gospel 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 16:24). 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 is 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 showing them His sovereignty – to demonstrate to them the amazing grace that comes from the Lord to all.

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