

Unexpected Life of Abundance



Nagwa Abdou

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Introduction

Reading and writing were never of interest to me. I always enjoyed working with my hands and discovering what I can do with them. I love (and loved) to taking classes such as, cooking, using clay to make sculptures, learning to knit, crochet, or even quilting. Throughout the years, I learned many new hobbies and had great ideas. I started to enjoy reading and writing when I was in my mid-forties and I never stopped. At the same time, I discovered my love for reading and writing and expressing my thoughts on paper. I also discovered my love for drawing. I took classes to improve on my drawings and it became one of my enjoyable hobbies.

Our Lord is amazingly loving, kind, and patient with all of us because He knows how hard life is and how confusing it can be. God's love extends to everyone because He came for every human being, rich or poor, to those who devote their lives to Him and to those who despise Him. Therefore, as a Christian woman, I felt the need to write this book to express my passion about God's love for us and to emphasize the importance of realizing who our mighty God is.

Many do not believe in God because they never had the opportunity to know Him. Others refuse to believe in God because of the pain and injustice that is part of this world in which we live. Yet, others do not believe in Him because their ego is in the way and they refuse to give God control over their lives.

Through this book, I will try to help answer some of the most common questions about God, including:

- ❖ Does God really care?
- ❖ Did He used to care but not now?

- ❖ Did He simply knit us in our mother's womb then left us to face life on our own?
- ❖ How does God know us?
- ❖ Does God favor some and not others?
- ❖ How does God spread His love among us?

The fact is that when we are away from our Creator, we amount to nothing and we end up destroying not only ourselves, but also the people we love and influence.

My story with God is a happy one and I would like to share some of it with you, my friend. Like everyone else, I still have my share of trials and tribulations. Through these challenges, I learned how waiting patiently, remaining grateful, and glorifying God can help me to overcome many of life's challenges.

The day I discovered what God's plan is for me and why I had to go through what I could not comprehend, great joy filled my heart and because of God's grace, peace and joy are still part of my life. I realized that my life challenges helped me become more spiritual, and in turn, this helped my family and friends, and most importantly me. These challenges made me seek God and get to know Him, grow in wisdom and the fear of God, and have a personal relationship with the Lord.

- ❖ Does God require that we struggle, get hurt, and/or go through tribulations?

In order to pass an exam, it is important to study the appropriate material. Likewise, in order to answer this question, we must have complete understanding of the subject. In order to pass the spiritual tests that life offers, we must first be successful in acquiring, at least, one virtue. In order to be successful in acquiring this virtue, we must first go through a test in that virtue. Once we understand

that concept, our endurance becomes greater and our willingness to succeed and work hard becomes worthwhile.

- ❖ How can we get closer to God?
- ❖ How does God know how to approach each one? Who is receptive to Him?

We have to realize that our Creator has the power to look at each heart for He knows us from the inside out. (*See Psalm 139*)

This book will serve as a tool for anyone who wants to understand why God would allow us to go through sufferings, tribulations, or undesirable circumstances even though He loves us and died to save us.

I hope and pray that this book touches your heart, but most of all, I pray that it will lead you to knowing God's plan for your life.

Sincerely,
Nagwa



PART ONE

Exploring the Lives of the Men of Faith

Abraham: The Ultimate Faith (Genesis 12-25)

"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God." (Romans 12:1-2)

The testing of faith is like refining a precious metal. For example, purifying gold requires lots of work, patience, and an extremely hot fire. Although God knows our hearts, He tests us and puts us through trials to reveal to us what our hearts are made of and what our priorities are. He wants to show us the measures we need to take to have a purified heart that will allow us to enjoy our relationship with our Creator.

The question then becomes what is the *ultimate faith*? It is the willingness to submit our lives to the will of God, regardless of the sacrifice(s) we might endure. This faith will be characterized by absolute obedience, dedication, joy, and a firm belief that God will always take care of us and our needs.

Our Lord Jesus Christ is the precious and pure gold. He gave His whole life as a sacrifice for our sins. He endured the ultimate suffering on the cross to bring salvation to humanity. He did that with absolute humility and love for the Father and His children; us.

"Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is His flesh..." (Hebrews 10:19-20)

Abraham is an excellent example of how to live the life of ultimate faith. God tested Abraham to see how much he loved Him. God allowed Abraham to experience unimaginable trials and hardships; however, Abraham humbly overcame all his trials and hardships. For example:

- God ordered Abram to leave his country and his father's house and to travel to a land that He will show him. Abraham obeyed (Genesis 12:1)
- Abram believed God's promises that his children will be as many as the stars of heaven and the sand of the sea shore, despite the fact that Sara was advanced in age (Genesis 22:17)
- Abraham obeyed God's request to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac (Genesis 22:2)
 - The son whom he longed for all his life
 - The son whom God gave him as a blessing
 - The son who was to fulfill God's promise to make his descendants as the stars of heaven and the sand of the sea shore

Therefore, Abraham is considered an excellent example of exceptional obedience. Abraham did what God asked him to do, regardless of the cost. When God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, Abraham did the following:

- Went up on the mountain (secluded himself)
- Built an altar (worshipped)
- Gathered the wood (labored)
- Put his son on the altar (obeyed)
- Raised his knife to kill him (believed)

Abraham had complete faith that God will provide a solution and that is how he passed the test and became God's friend whom God blessed beyond measure.

"But you, Israel, are my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the descendants of Abraham My friend." (Isaiah 41:8)

As children of God, who were bought by the precious blood of His son, God expects us to have the same faith as Abram. Faith and obedience will help us see our trials from a different perspective and, consequently, overcome these trials just as Abraham did.

God will call on some of us to leave their homes and follow His commandments, as we see in those who choose monastic life. The monks and nuns choose to become emotionally dead to the world. In choosing monastic life, monks and nuns aspire to dedicate their life to constantly improving their relationship with God. But even after giving up every worldly thing, they still face all sorts of tests and hardships (harsh environment, fighting with the devil, and loneliness, among others) However, faith and obedience help them overcome these tests and hardships and help them prevail in becoming righteous and holy.

God expects the same from us. He asks us to live in the world without being from the world. Like a ship that floats on the water of a vast sea, but does not have the sea water inside it, otherwise it will sink. Therefore, we too, should keep the worldly ways of life and the desires of wealth, fame, pleasure, and comfort out of our hearts. God wants us to carry our cross with our Lord Jesus Christ. He also wants us to obey His commandments to the fullest extent.

"Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him." (1 John 2:15)

This does not mean it is wrong to be successful, wealthy, famous ..., etc. Abraham was successful, wealthy, and famous, but godly. Therefore, when we live the life of faith and obedience, when we devote our lives to God in either a saccular or monastic life, and have the courage to say, *"Nevertheless not my will, but Yours, be done,"* God will provide us with everything we could possibly need, as He promised us

"But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." (Matthew 6:33)

Although each one of us has a different role in life, a different road to take, and a different test(s) to endure, the goal remains the same: to follow the example of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and to live a life of faith and obedience.

"So Jesus said to them, 'Because of your unbelief; for assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.'" (Matthew 17:20)

From nature, God gave us the example of the mustard seed, which is a very small seed that grows into a large tree. The mustard seed represents the small beginning of faith that God puts in all of us, which should expand as we grow closer to God. Therefore, it is up to each one of us to take care of this mustard seed, to feed it, irrigate it, and to give it the perfect light needed for its growth. When we do that, this seed (our faith) can grow up to a 15-foot tree, full maturity. This seed starts out as a very small seed, then a small mustard bush. But over time, with persistence, diligence, and perseverance it can turn into a large tree that bears the fruit of ultimate faith with absolute submission to God.

Let us experience God's word, love, and wisdom in our lives and follow His steps every day. Through the testing of our obedience to His commandments, God will provide the best outcome for us.

"To those who are called, sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in Jesus Christ: mercy, peace, and love be multiplied to you." (Jude 1:2)



*Lord what can I do to get close to You?
My hands are tied
My thoughts are scattered
Nothing I do seems right
What can I do to make You proud of me?
and
Draw me closer to You
So
God whispered and said
All things will amount to one word
“Love”
With love everything is possible
With it, you can move a mountain
and
Even God’s heart
To do what it takes on your own
Will amount to nothing in return
But with God, it will amount to many things!
Your heart will light more with His spirit
Your mind will fill more with His wisdom
Your walk will come closer to His
Your ears will be more receptive to Him
Then*

*All these things that you wish for
Will gradually appear
and
Multiply for you
From
Him only and His Holy Spirit to you!*

Joseph: The Man in the Pit
(Genesis 37-50)

“Behold, I am the Lord, the God of all flesh. Is there anything too hard for me?” (Jeremiah 32:27)

Before we talk about God’s plan for each one of us, let us start by talking about sin, which is the main cause of our problems. Sin caused by us or by others results from disobedience or rebellion against God’s law (Deuteronomy 9:7).

Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ shed His blood to cover each and every sin. When we disobey God’s law we separate ourselves from Him and become subject to eternal death if we do not repent *“... the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 6: 27)* True repentance will please God and He will forgive and no longer remember our sins. *“I, even I, am He who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more.” (Isaiah 43: 25)* Moreover, when we are receptive to God’s will, the Holy Spirit will be ignited in our hearts and will convict us when we do wrong. *“Nevertheless I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the helper will not come to you, but if I depart, I will send Him to you. And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment.” (John 16:7-8)*

Usually, we are happy and faithful when life is easy and agreeable with our plans. On the other hand, we panic when we find ourselves stuck in the pit either because of the wrong decisions we make or because of other situation(s) that we cannot control. When

we find ourselves in the pit, we usually rely on our limited resources and seek the help of others who too have limited resources as well. When we experience hardship or find ourselves in the pit, we allow negative feelings such as fear, frustration, discouragement, anger, and resentment, among others to overwhelm us and cloud our vision. Some of us might ask, "why is this happening to me?" Or "why does God allow this to happen?" Yet another might ask, "is God punishing me for one thing or another?" These negative feelings often make us doubt, complain, and grumble against God.

Our generation is not the only generation to struggle with these same questions. Since the beginning of creation, people have struggled with these very questions. Whereas many of us are satisfied with committing our lives to God and trusting Him, others rely instead on their own will to solve their problems. But if we trust that everything happens for a reason and if we remember who we are, who created us, and what our purpose in life is, we will live in peace; God's peace.

"Praise the Lord of hosts, for the Lord is good, for His mercy endures forever." (Jeremiah 33:11)

Let us take a moment to examine our heart of hearts. Do we have faith in God? Do we trust God? Are we joyful? And have we experienced God's peace that He promised to give to each one of us?

By design, we all are created on God's image, and God's plan for us from the beginning is to be happy, to prosper, and to live an abundant life. But unfortunately, due to our sin, we find ourselves full of stubbornness and disobedience. This gives Satan the opportunity to achieve his own plans. He will not stop trying to destroy the godly principles of society, our homes, or our churches.

So, do not give him this opportunity. Instead, trust that God can get you out of the pit you are in, in due time.

God can use any one of us if we surrender to Him and let Him use us for His purpose. He will strengthen our faith and increase our trust in Him, if we could learn to glorify Him in everything we do and endure our trials. The Holy Bible tells us the stories of many people who found themselves in the pit, physically or metaphorically. One of these stories is the life story of Joseph (Genesis 37-45). Although Joseph was a godly man, he endured many trials throughout his life. Joseph stayed faithful to God and trusted Him throughout, even when he was in the pit and in jail. In both incidences he was accused unjustly. Because he remained faithful, God rewarded him and blessed him tremendously.

Joseph's life shows us that God begins to shape our lives starting at very young age; teenage years in the case of Joseph. When Joseph was thrown in the pit at that young age, he learned early on to trust and depend on God. This experience, hard as it was, strengthened his faith and made him able to withstand other future trials and temptations. All of us, in one way or another, can relate to the story of Joseph. It is easy to see ourselves in one of these pits:

- Joseph never knew his mother; she died when he was a very young child
- Joseph was hated by his own siblings
- He was faced with deception
- He was forced to leave his birth place and move to a new land
- He faced many temptations
- He was falsely accused
- He had no way to defend himself
- He felt pain and was oppressed

Despite all of these hardships, Joseph's inner beauty shone through. With a godly heart, and despite of his young age, Joseph endured the ache of his broken heart, the longing to see his father, and many other injustices. Joseph endured because he:

- Trusted God and relied on Him
- Glorified God in everything he did
- Never grumbled or asked "why me?"
- Stayed faithful to God
- Never lost sight of the fact that God is good, loving, and merciful
- Never filled his heart with hate and doubt
- Had an attitude of forgiveness
- Refused to see himself as a victim
- Put God and others first
- He did not allow his life to revolve around himself
- Used his talents to serve God and not for his own gain
- Comforted others
- He challenged himself to be a better man

Because of Joseph's endurance and faithfulness, God blessed him beyond measure. Moreover, God changed the hearts of his brothers.

Many scholars compare the life of Joseph to the life of our Lord Jesus Christ. Both Jesus and Joseph:

- Had godly characters from an early age
- Received a robe from their fathers. While Joseph received a physical robe, Jesus received from His Father a robe of flesh.
- Were greatly loved by their fathers
- Were hated and envied by their brothers
- Followed God's plan, no matter how difficult it was
- Felt the presence of God in their lives at all times
- Were tempted

- Were plotted against
- Were sold for the price of a slave
- Were arrested unjustly
- Forgave those who harmed them
- Were made to suffer
- Ministered to guilty men
- Went from suffering to glory
- Provided peace, protection, and plenty to others
- Became servants for others
- Became saviors for many

"Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!" (Psalm 46:10)

There is no escape from the pit(s) of this life, be it small or large. We are faced daily with news about war, bad weather, famines, and disasters. We hear about problems in our neighborhood, incurable illnesses, lay-offs, death of family members or close friends ... and numerous other problems. However, in all these

"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, even though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea." (Psalm 46:1-2)

Joseph's father, Jacob, experienced many tribulations because of his wrongdoing. Jacob angered his own father, Isaac; and his brother Esau, among others. But after he met our Lord face to face, he became a godly man and tried to live a better life. But the consequences of his past mistakes of parenting were brought to the forefront when his sons led him to believe, for many years, that his beloved son Joseph had been killed. This news led to too many years of sorrow and consequently, a true repentance from the heart.

Although Jacob's suffering was not initiated by God, God used it to purify Jacob's heart and bring him to a higher level of spirituality.

"That the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ." (1 Peter 1:7)

In God's due time, Jacob's life was transformed in front of his own eyes and God provided him with more than he could ever imagine:

- The revelation that Joseph was alive
- The repentance of his sons
- The safe return of Benjamin from Egypt
- Simeon was freed from jail
- His family was saved from the famine
- God blessed his family in Egypt

"And we know that all things work together for the good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren." (Roman 8: 29)

Sometimes we do not understand the reason(s) for the trial(s) or hardships we are going through. Sometimes it seems that God is keeping us in the dark. Sometimes Satan leads us to believe he is in control by letting us believe that whatever we are going through is because we do not trust and/or believe in God and His love for us. Despite these thoughts and feelings, we must walk in the light and trust that God is just and in control. That His wisdom is beyond our understanding, that He will never give us more than what we can handle, and that He will do what is right and profitable for us as He

promised, *“This poor man cried out, and the Lord heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles.” (Psalm 34: 6)*



*The Man in the Pit
He fell in the pit
Doesn't matter how
The pit is surrounded by darkness
The walls are very steep
The solid ground feels beyond his reach
The sky looks so far away
The night seems with no end
Is there any way to climb up to the top?
Is the dark cloud his thinking?
Is the dirt his doubt?
How long can he last?
Can he overcome?
Is there a way out?
Why does he fall in deep silence?
Is his spirit still alive in him?
Please
Don't lose hope so quickly
Don't fill your heart with doubt
Who do you trust, and who do you rely on?
Do you rely on your own understanding?
Does it get you anywhere?
Who should you rely on?*

*Start climbing
Start shouting
Never lose hope
Did you call on Him Yet?
God
Are You listening to his cry?
Are You there to comfort him? Or
Are You waiting for him to call on You?
Are You waiting to make him strong?
Lord,
Don't delay in coming
Give him a sign that You are with him
No matter how long he will endure
Lord
You will be the source of his comfort
For there will be many pits in his way
And
He needs to know that You are the only one here*

3

Job: The Self-righteous Man (The book of Job)

“Behold, happy is the man whom God corrects; Therefore do not despise the chastening of the Almighty. For He bruises, but He binds up; He wounds, but His hands make whole.” (Job 5:17-18)

When you are sad or distressed, reach for the Book of Job. I always do. You will soon realize that, compared with Job, you are in a much better situation. The Book of Job is an excellent example of how God is in control of every situation that affects our lives. This book also is an assurance that our struggles will pass in the right time according to God’s plan. Moreover, if we pay attention to the will of God in our lives and continue to praise Him, these hard experiences might teach us a new lesson(s), give us a better perspective, and ultimately add new blessings to our lives.

Many people brag about the many blessings God gave/gives them; such as wealth and success, among others as if they had achieved that on their own. Often, this leads people to overlook the opportunity to thank God and to see His work in them as they get closer to Him through thanksgiving. When we solely desire God’s blessing and fail to commit to a relationship with Him or to serve others this gives Satan an opportunity to insert ungodly thoughts and feelings in our hearts in order to separate us further from God.

In the Book of Job, we learn that Satan was jealous from Job and wanted to destroy him, because he was a righteous man.

Despite God's love for Job, He allowed Satan to test him. We often wonder why God do such a thing to us.

The Lord said to Satan, "Have you considered My servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, one who fears God and shuns evil?" (Job 1:8)

Although Job was a righteous man, God knew that he had a measure of self-righteousness. So God wanted to take away these feelings of self-righteousness before Job destroyed himself by pride or by being negligent in his relationship with God. The story of Job teaches us that God will never test His children with more than they can handle. It also shows us that in suffering God is not turning against us rather, in His wisdom, He directs us to those things that are acceptable and spiritually are more profitable to our lives.

God allowed Satan to take away everything Job had, except his wife. In one day, job lost all of his children and wealth. However, in spite of this great tragedy and trial, Job said, *"Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."* (Job 1:21)

In his time of need and great suffering, Job's wife looked at him with shame and said to him, *"Do you still hold to your integrity? Curse God and die!"* (Job 2:9) She was foolish in offering this bad advice and she had no mercy on Job. Additionally, although his three best friends came to comfort him, they instead accused him of disobeying God and that his disobedience is the reason he lost everything. Job called them "miserable comforters."

However, Job became depressed, troubled, and full of sadness. He was unable to understand why the just God he knew and experienced in his own life had become unjust and turned against him. Job continued to believe he was righteous and did nothing to displease God. So he said, *“My soul loathes my life; I will give free course my complaint, I will speak in the bitterness of my soul. I will say to God, ‘Do not condemn me; show me why you contend with me.’”* (Job 10:1-2)

Although Satan did all he could to make Job lose hope in God, Job kept asking God to speak to him so that he could understand God’s ways/plan and be comforted. Mistakenly, Job felt that God turned against him for no reason. What he neglected to see was that God was forcing him to acknowledge the problem of his own undisputed righteousness, since Job *“was righteous in his own eyes.”* (Job 32:1)

Finally, Elihu, one of Job’s friends, told Job, *“Behold, God is great, and we do not know Him; nor can the number of His years be discovered.”* (Job 36:26) Elihu was trying to explain that God is just and that Job should not speak to God foolishly because man cannot understand God and His wisdom. When God finally spoke to Job, he began to understand how wrong and foolish he was. He confessed his lack of understanding and repented from his rebellion against God.

“My son, if you receive my words, and treasure my commands within you, so that you incline your ear to wisdom, and apply you heart to understanding.” (Proverb 2: 1-2)

O Lord, despite all we try to do to gain wisdom and knowledge about you, we can never understand all your ways. But, no matter how righteous we think we are God, we thank

you from our hearts because we know that everything you do for us is for our own benefit, whether we understand it or not.

God, you sometimes allow Satan to test us. These tests help us purify our hearts so you can give us the blessings of wisdom and knowledge when we acknowledge our shortcomings and repent. You desire to cleanse our hearts from all kind of sins, and to give us strength and patience to face life's trials and tribulations.

Therefore, please oh God, teach us never to doubt your love for us and not to question your wisdom; rather how to thank you for everything, concerning everything, and in everything that you give us. Help us remember that you are loving, kind, and full of wisdom. We ask you Lord to grant us patience and perseverance so that we can prevail over every trial and tribulation.



*Away from you my Lord
Satan rejoices to see
That my heart is away from Thee
He rushes to welcome me
With many sins in hand
For without You, my Lord
Anything can happen
For my soul is weak and confused
And in need of You
Please give me Your grace my Lord
So that I can be revived
And open my eyes to see
All Your wonderful plans for me*

David: The Man after God's Heart
(1 Samuel 16 – 1 Kings 2)

*“For the Lord will not forsake His people, for His great name’s sake, because it has pleased the Lord to make you His people.”
(1 Samuel 12:22)*

Although the children of Israel rejected God as their king and wanted a king to rule over them like the surrounding nations, God listened to them and appointed a king for them; Saul. Saul was a humble man and he followed God’s plan. However, soon after his anointment as a king he became an arrogant and prideful man along with many other shortcomings. God rejected Saul when he allowed pride to fill his heart and became disobedient to God and feared the people of Israel more than he feared God. Therefore, God asked Samuel to look for another king, one whose heart is receptive to Him and is full of humility!

God did not look at the physical appearance of Jesse’s oldest son, Eliab, even though Samuel assumed he was the right one for the job. Mistakenly, Samuel thought that a person who is physically strong must be the right fit for the job. We often do the same mistake. Physical appearance plays an important role in every aspect of our society. We worry about having the right car, a large house, and expensive clothes, among others. Moreover, we often judge people based on these or similar criteria because we focus only on the outside image. But God’s ways are different than ours. While we look at the outward appearance, *“the Lord looks at the heart.” (1 Samuel 16:7)*

Through God's wisdom, David, the youngest son of Jesse, was appointed king. It was critical for Samuel to anoint David with the Holy Spirit because, without the Holy Spirit, David would be left to accomplish God's will with his limited human abilities. Without the Holy Spirit David would have accomplished part of rather than the entire will of God. *"Then Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the midst of his brothers; and the Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward. And Samuel arose and went to Ramah."* (1 Samuel 16:13)

As soon as David was anointed, God gave him a seemingly impossible task to accomplish. Defeating Goliath who was undefeatable and who was taunting and ridiculing Israel. God did this to remind David of his own past victory when he defeated the lion and the bear with God's help. David needed that reminder to help him overcome Goliath. *"And David said, 'The LORD who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, He will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine.'* And Saul said to David, 'Go, and may the LORD be with you.'" (1 Samuel 17:37) David was able to defeat the giant because he could see *"the power of God,"* whereas others could not. Because the Israelites fixed their eyes on the power of Goliath instead of the power of God, they faltered and failed.

Our lives are full of different kinds of *Goliath*. In other words, our lives are full of different challenges and fears. Our Goliath could be a fear of flying or a fear of speaking your opinion. Our Goliath can also be a bad habit (smoking, excessive drinking, gossiping, etc) that is negatively impacting our lives. We all need to overcome and defeat our Goliath. We need to be like David and face our giant, calling on God to help

us to conquer our weakness and trusting that He will be right beside us.

Many people believe that they will be happy if life is steady and without ups and downs and if all their wants and needs are fulfilled. But that is not what life is like. Life is full of good and bad experiences; health and illness; successes and failures; prosperity and need; and so on. Without going through challenging experiences or hard times, we might not be able to appreciate the good experiences or to understand the meaning of happiness and how eternal life with God will be like. Moreover, if we do not face some challenges in our lives, we might never desire or strive to get closer to God and to be with Him in heaven, which is our ultimate goal. Therefore, it is up to us to keep our eyes on our creator and follow His steps and direction otherwise, we might wonder away from the His will as Saul did.

Mistakenly, we sometime believe that we must be perfect and without blemish to be able to walk with God and to strive to do His will. Because David had a heart for God and strived to do His will, God worked with him, in spite of his mistakes and shortcomings and prepared him to lead His people, the Israelites. In contrast, Saul, who God chose first as a king for Israel, allowed his heart to be filled with jealousy towards David. His priority became how and when to kill David rather than fulfilling the will of God. Interestingly, the closer Saul came to killing David, the closer was the relationship between David and God. David realized that throughout the challenging period of the stormy relationship between him and Saul, God was preparing him to rule over His own people.

Sometimes God tells us that something is off limits, but we test the waters anyway. When nothing happens to us, we

foolishly assume that we are above God's standard, only to discover that consequences are waiting for us just outside the door. We need to remember that the consequences of sins are not limited to those who commit them, but our sins may also affect the people around us. When David lost his focus and his relationship with God became tepid, he...

- Lost hope and started to fear Saul
- Started to listen to other people's advice
- Continued his deceit and cover-ups
- Lost his self-control
- Did not go to battle with his army (did not do his job)
- Had a sexual relation with a married woman, who later became pregnant (consequence of sin on other people)
- Sent the woman's husband to the front lines to make sure he got killed in battle; indirectly murdering him (consequence of sin on other people)

However, David acknowledged his sins and repented and told Nathan the prophet, *"I have sinned against the Lord."* Nathan told David that the Lord forgave him and would not let him die in his sins. However, because his sins gave the enemies of the Lord the opportunity to blaspheme against Him, the child conceived by David's adulterous act would not survive. (2 Samuel 12: 13)

David grew in the fear of the Lord and followed God's plan for his life. This does not mean David lived a blameless life. Despite of David's several wrongdoings and stumbles, he always acknowledge his wrong doing, confessed his sins, and came back to the Lord with all his heart. Therefore, God called David a man after God's own heart. David's sinful past (having an affair, sending the woman's husband to his death, and having a child born from an adulterous relationship) may puzzle some

of us, but God looked at David's heart, his desire, and his willingness to follow Him. Every time David stumbled he was able to stand back up because his heart's desire was to be with God.

God has different plans for each one of us. While God might not call us from shepherding sheep to ruling a nation like He did with David, God always intends the best for us. *"Happy is the man who finds wisdom, and the man who gains understanding."* (Proverbs 3:13) Let us make it a habit to desire spiritual growth, to be godly, to serve the Lord, and be guided by Him throughout our life. Little by little, we will notice the gradual changes in ourselves and in the world around us. And, the more we get closer to the Lord the more we will become:

- Better spouses
- Better parents
- Better coworkers
- Better human beings
- Able to stand against temptations
- Able to be strong in difficult and challenging situations; that is the ups and downs of life
- Able to see our shortcomings and sins
- Able, with a humble heart, to confess our sins and try to do better

I pray that we all invite the Lord to come to our hearts and to let Him guide us to the ideal plan for our lives so that we can be pleasing to Him and become who God has desired us to be; a people after His own heart.



*When God Choose His Bride
He will cover her with many jewels
He will feed her from the food of heaven
He will fill her heart with godly desires
He will never leave her in need of anything
He will make her feel beautiful inside*

So

*His bride will seek Him in her heart
She will desire all that He commands
All she wants is to be with Him
Eagerly and gladly following Him
Now the time has come to ask!
Are you ready to follow my steps?
Can you carry the cross with Me?
Are you willing to suffer for me?*

So

*She answers with no hesitation!
You are who my heart desires
You are the only One for me
I will follow You wherever You go
I will gladly be Your servant
I will put smiles on Your face
I will endure my pains with joy*

*I will give You everything I have
I will not question Your way for me
I will be as sweet incense in front of You
What can be more beautiful for God to hear!
That the one He loves is willing to endure
And
Be with Him for eternity*

Jonah: The Man Who Ran Away from God
(The Book of Jonah)

"Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me." (Revelation 3:20)

Many people wonder whether God is hiding Himself from them. Is He aware of what is happening in the world? Does He approve or even care? Has He forsaken His children? Lots of questions, which, sometimes, may sound reasonable given all what is happening in the world; poverty, famines, natural disasters, and brutality of man against fellow man, among others. The reality however is that God is around us and is protecting us. He has a great desire to speak to all of us, but are we listening or are we consumed by what is happening around us? God *is* love; therefore, He will never stop loving us or caring for us. It is against His nature. We are His children whom He suffered and died for, and rose from the dead in order to save.

Hearing God's voice, listening to His advice, and having an intimate conversation with Him is something many of us long for. God constantly communicates with us although His voice and method of communication varies among people and during different circumstances. The Holy Bible displays the many examples of God's ways of communication with His people. God had a personal relationship and communicated with many people in the bible, such as Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Job, and Moses, among others.

"Oh, that My people would listen to Me, that Israel would walk in My ways!" (Psalm 81:13)

- Many prophets received divine inspiration and communicated God's message to the people, such as Samuel, Elijah, Jonah, Jeremiah, and others
- God reveals Himself through nature, such as the wind, the sea, the animals, and fire
- His angels come down and to speak on His behalf, as when the angel came to rescue Lot and his family from Sodom and Gomorrah, or when the angel announced the births of the Lord Jesus Christ and the birth of John the Baptist to Zacharias.

In addition to these miraculous and personal encounters with God, the Holy Bible is full of God's word, which we can rely on in our lives. These include His commandments, prophecies, personal testimony, the life of our Lord Jesus Christ on earth, and the instruction to live a holy life, among others.

Therefore, we must be attentive to all the opportunities to communicate with God, read His word, and get to know Him better. In doing so, we will be able to recognize His voice easier. One of the great stories in the Old Testament is the story of Jonah and how God communicated with him.

"Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying 'Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me.' But Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord ..." (Jonah 1:1-3)

Jonah was a minor prophet; an ordinary man who had no special qualifications other than being chosen by God to speak God's word to His people. Prophets are usually faithful in speaking God's word and not their own. They speak God's message without fear or concern for their welfare. However, the book of Jonah is the story of a prophet who ignored God's call to go and preach His

word. We also read about the many ways God used to get Jonah's attention. Because of Jonah's zeal for Israel he had difficulty obeying God's request to go and warn the city of Nineveh; a city inhabited by Gentiles. Jonah decided to run away from God's presence instead of having any part of saving the people of Nineveh. Thus, he fled from God and hopped on a boat to go to Tarshish.

On first glance, it might be amazing or even unbelievable to see someone running away from God. But if we think about it, that is what we Christians do every time we commit sin and ignore our transgressions. We who were baptized in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ do not follow God's commandments and teaching. Instead of listening to His voice and obeying His commandments, we run away from Him; just as Jonah did.

"But the Lord sent out a great wind on the sea, there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship was about to be broken up. Then the mariners were afraid; and every man cried out to his god..." (Jonah 1:4-5)

God speaks to us in many ways. Sometimes He speaks to us softly in order to comfort us and other times loudly in order to warn us. For example, He speaks to us through the voice of a gentle breathe, the wind, the waves of the sea, the Holy Spirit in us, or the word of the Holy Bible or a sermon. Moreover, He speaks to us through the problems we face every day or the tribulations that we get from time to time. But sadly, most of us still do not recognize His voice. We close our eyes and ears and we miss the opportunity to listen to His voice.

"Hear now this, O foolish people, and without understanding; which have eyes, and see not; which have ears, and hear not." (Jeremiah 5:21)

When the sea became turbulent because of Jonah's disobedience, the mariners, "*the nonbelievers*," saw what was happening to the sea and realized that this is a warning sign from a deity. They started praying to their own gods in hopes of finding out why this was happening. But Jonah ignored the storm and went down into the lowest part of the ship to sleep. He fell fast asleep and ignored the storm that was threatening his lives and the lives of the people on the ship. Then God spoke to Jonah through the people on the ship: "*Arise, call on your God; perhaps your God will consider us, so that we may not perish.*" (Jonah 1:6)

The men were exceedingly afraid when they heard that Jonah was a prophet and he fled from the presence of his God. They said to him "*What shall we do to you that the sea may be calm for us?*" (Jonah 1:11) Let us carefully examine what happened with these mariners. These people did not know the true God but:

- They were attentive to His voice
- They tried to find out why He was angry
- They prayed to their gods
- They did not want to harm Jonah, even after all he had done to them
- They feared the Lord exceedingly, believed in Him, and offered Him a sacrifice

Sometimes we consider ourselves more righteous than other people, especially the non-believers. We neglect to understand that God loves all His children, believers and nonbelievers, and He welcomes everyone who wants to come back to Him. God will speak to everyone in the hopes of opening their eyes so they can realize His love for them. Therefore, instead of considering ourselves more righteous, we should pray that God may open their eyes and ears to see him

and hear voice and pray that He may also make our eyes and ears more sensitive to recognize Him and His voice.

Although Jonah was a prophet, he was not attentive to the word and will of God in his life. He thought that dying is the only way out of the problem of preaching the gentiles. But the Lord did not wish for Jonah's life to perish. He wanted Jonah to understand God's ways and love for all the people, believers and non-believers. Therefore, God prepared a great fish to swallow him and thereby saved him to fulfil his mission; warning the people of Nineveh.

The big fish was another way God used to communicate His love towards Jonah. God was trying to get Jonah's attention to understand that He is still with him and He did not forsake him despite of his disobedience. We too, sometimes we see God's hand even when we are away from Him. He tries to remind us of His unfailing love for us. This is another way by which how God communicates with us.

After Jonah cried, prayed, and fasted in the fish's belly for three days, God forgave all his transgression and disobedience. The Lord spoke to him through the Holy Spirit in him *"Yet I will look again toward your holy temple."* (Jonah 2:4)

"Then God saw their works that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said he would bring upon them, and He did not do it." (Jonah 3:10)

Not only did Jonah run away and hide from God's calling, he also was displeased and angry that God forgave the people of Nineveh after they repented from their evil ways. God communicated again with Jonah using another way of

communication. God prepared a plant and made it grow to come up above Jonah, to protect him from the heat of the sun. Jonah was very grateful and he slept under the shade of the plant.

"But as morning dawned the next day, God prepared a worm, and it so damaged the plant that it withered." (Jonah 4:7)

Here we see another example of communication through nature. The plant yielded to God's command and grew and covered Jonah. And at dawn, God let the worm come and eat the plant, to teach Jonah a special lesson and to remind him that:

- God is gracious and merciful and expects His children to have the same love and compassion
- God can be patient with His children
- God wants all His children to be saved
- God sends us many messages hoping to protect us from our ego
- God can put us through many tests and tribulations to get our attention and so He can save us

The worm was God's voice to Jonah saying that the worm was very tiny, but it was able to destroy the plant. The analogy is that even small wickedness or sins in our lives will cause the heart to be blind to God's words and deaf to His voice. Sin will destroy our relationship with God and His Holy Spirit in us, if we allow it to do so.

"The voice of joy and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, and the voice of those who will say: 'Praise the Lord of hosts, for the Lord is good, for His mercy endures forever' - and of those who will bring the sacrifice of praise into the house of the Lord. For I will cause the captives of the land to return as at the first," says the Lord." (Jeremiah 33:11)

God hears, God sees, God is aware, and He is always ready to come and help us. And we, as His people, need to trust Him, have faith, and listen to His voice. We must listen for His hidden messages to us and pray that someday we will have eternal life with Him.



*My gift to you
To always walk away with Me
To see Me everywhere you go
To hear My voice every time I call
To love Me with all your heart
To give all what you have to be close to Me
To help anyone walk in your way
To call on Me even when I am right here with you
To be My daughter always and forever
To quiet your mind so that peace will cover you
To grant you your wish that you be close to Me
To give you grace that will be pleasing to you
To come to My table with joyful heart
To love Me more than you love Me now*

6

Paul: Draw me Near to Your Heart

(The Book of Acts 7-28)

"The Lord is near to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him in truth. He will fulfill the desire of those who fear Him; He also will hear their cry and save them." (Psalm 145:18-19)

We all have egos, but the problem begins when our egos are so large! In many cases these large egos take over and draw us away from God. As we grow from childhood to adolescence or adulthood our lives become filled with ideas, hopes, dreams, and plans for our future. Almost all of us at times feel that everything is so clear, our plans are the right thing for us, and all these plans are achievable. Until we meet the Lord face-to-face and He tells us that He has a different plan for our lives. When we allow God through the Holy Spirit that lives in us to take charge of our lives, our goals and plans change according to His will and our goal becomes not how to achieve what we decided to be good for us, rather our goal becomes how to follow Him, being near to Him, and being guided by Him.

The life of St. Paul is the best example of obedience and willingness to do the will of God. Also, it is a model in dedication, love, and faith. St. Paul demonstrated to all of us how someone can be transformed from opposing God, hating Christians, and persecuting the church to a person who committed the rest of his life to serve the Lord and to build the body of Christ; the church.

"Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, according to the faith of God's elect and the acknowledgment of

the truth which accords with godliness, in hope of eternal life which God, who cannot lie, promised before time began." (Titus 1:1-2)

The following is a brief biography of St. Paul

- From the tribe of Benjamin
- Born in Tarsus of Cilicia
- Circumcised on the 8th day
- Hebrew true and true (Philippians 3:5)
- His father was a Hebrew with Roman citizenship (indicative of high social status)
- A very exceptional student of the Old Testament
- Lived all his young life by the letter of the law
- Had zeal for God but went about it the wrong way, by taking matters in his own hands
- Played a great part in the death of St. Stephen and many other saints
- Came to Damascus seeking to persecute more Christians
- Believed in Christ when he was called
- Preached to the Jews and the Gentiles
- Wrote 14 of the 27 books of the New Testament

The Lord had a different plan for St. Paul's life and met him face-to-face to let him know that he has been chosen to serve the Lord in a way different than what St. Paul pictured. St. Paul did not become a disciple or a saint immediately after meeting our Lord Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus. First he accepted the change of the plan without argument. Then he was baptized and filled with the Holy Spirit and finally he agreed to follow and serve the Lord Jesus Christ. After he agreed to serve, we see that St. Paul put his priorities in the correct order. He prayed for guidance and forgiveness, he humbled himself, he changed his way of life, he obeyed God's plan and voice, and

spent five years getting to know Jesus Christ personally. It was only afterwards that he started evangelizing the Lord's message of salvation.

"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them." (Ephesians 2:8-10)

The life journey of St. Paul and the many letters that he wrote in the New Testament teach us so many lessons on how to draw near to God's heart. The closer St. Paul's relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, the more he came to understand that:

- Practicing and fulfilling the smallest details of the law only satisfied his conscious; however, these practices did not create or improve his personal relationship with God
- We are saved entirely by God
- Without love we do not stand a chance of being close to God
- We can only reach God's grace through faith
- Commitment to God allows us to bear fruits

St. Paul's life was transformed after following Christ. His zeal and courage were utilized to fulfill God's plans; preaching the gospel to the Jews and the Gentiles, rather than fulfilling Paul's own plan to persecute the church! St. Paul traveled to many places, faced many challenges, his faith was tested, he was persecuted and humiliated, and finally he was martyred for preaching the word of God.

"Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out

another way? For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also." (James 2:25-26)

By faith we believe in God, hope for an eternal life with Him, trust in Jesus Christ and His promises, and rely on the Holy Spirit to guide us throughout our life. We should never neglect to read God's word, to serve Him, and to spread His word to others. If our love springs from Jesus Christ, we must love one another and invite them to come to the Lord as one body.

Lord, I am pouring out my heart to You Lord to draw me near to You. Your words open my eyes to see what Your true love means to me, and all You have done and are still doing for me.

May the Lord grant each and every one of us a life with Him for His glory.



Near Your Heart

*Where would I be without Your love for me?
Loving You is my life's desire
I love the way You love me
I feel You with me in every step I take
I hear You whisper to me, "You are a child of mine"
When sadness covers me I see You rushing to comfort me
I love You Lord more than my heart can bear
It comforts me that You can see what is there
And
How my soul is addicted to You
I miss You although You are near to me
And
My tears can nearly comfort me
Near Your heart where I always want be
And
You are the only one who can grant my wish for me*

Part I Summary

In this part we briefly discussed the life journey of six men of faith. These men lived at different times and places. They had different backgrounds, different socioeconomic statuses, and of different age, among others. However, they all had some things in common. They all had weaknesses and all of them strived to stay faithful and have a personal relationship with God, regardless of their circumstances.

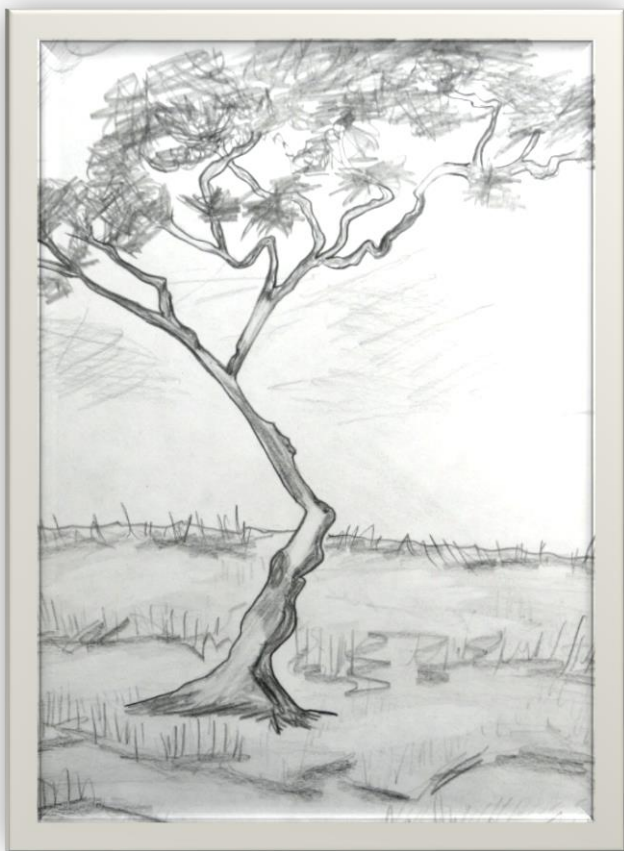
- Abraham was an excellent example of the humble and obedient servant so much so that God called “God’s friend.” Abraham’s faith went through many ups and downs, but through it all he remained faithful and committed to his relationship with God. Abraham had moments of fear, doubt, and did not wait for the fulfillment of God’s promise. For example, when a famine spread throughout the land he took his wife Sarai to Egypt without asking God for advice. However, because of his faithfulness God saved both of them from a very hard experience (Genesis 12:10-20). Also, despite of God’s promise to Abraham that he and Sarai would have a son, he was impatient and listened to Sarai’s advice to go to Hagar to have that child (Genesis 16). But God remained true to His promise and Abraham and Sarai begot Isaac; the son of the promise.
- In his youth, Joseph was not wise in his dealing with his older brothers. His lack of wisdom and somewhat arrogance made his brothers hate him and waited for a chance to get rid of him. God put Joseph through many trials to purify his heart and his soul so he can save many lives from the famine, including the lives of his father Jacob and his brothers.
- Job was a righteous man whom God called “*a perfect and upright man.*” (Genesis 1:8) However, despite of his

righteousness, Job thought highly of himself and gave himself more credit than what was deserved. Therefore, God allowed Satan to test him in order to humble his heart. Job acknowledged his mistakes and God continued to bless him *“So the Lord blessed the later end of Job more than his beginning ...”* (Job 42:12)

- Although David had a heart for God and a desire to follow the Lord, David was not perfect either. He committed adultery, and caused the death of an innocent man, among other sins. However, because he acknowledged his guilt, confessed his sins, and repented with a pure heart, God forgave his sins and the Messiah was born from the line of David.
- Jonah was a foolish and self-centered man. He thought that he can solve his problem by running away from God. He did not think of others and their salvations because he did not want the Gentiles to receive God’s mercy and forgiveness. He thought, mistakenly, that these are privileges to be enjoyed only by the Israelites. However, God used him in spite of his weakness and foolishness to save the Ninevites.
- Finally, we learned about St. Paul and how much he loved God albeit in his own way. He thought that religious rituals and rules will please God. He did not understand that hating and killing others is not God’s way because God is love. Again, because of his faithfulness, God taught him how to love his enemies. St. Paul preached the gospel to the Gentiles; the people he thought were his enemies.

Therefore, in spite of their weaknesses, they gained favor with God because they allowed God to help them, guide them, and to transform their hearts. Let us all strive to have a relationship with God and to allow Him to transform our hearts

so that, as with these men of faith, if we fall we stand up again
and God can call us friends, perfect, and upright!



PART TWO

Exploring our Own Spiritual Life

Grace in the Eyes of the Lord

Then Judah said, “What shall we say to my lord? What shall we speak? Or how shall we clear ourselves? God has found out the iniquity of your servants; here we are, my lord's slaves, both we and he also with whom the cup where found.” (Genesis 44:16)

The words of repentance are music to the Lord's ears. Our Lord longs to hear these words from all of us; His children, especially from those who were lost and have been found.

God's tender heart is full of love towards His children. However, some might argue, if that is true, why does He treat us harshly from time to time? The answer is simple. If we are not living according to His will and ignoring His whispers to change our ways and repent, He might resort to harsh treatment to get our attention. God wants us to understand that we must repent in order to be forgiven and accepted by Him. Repentance starts by 1) acknowledging our sins, 2) repenting from sins because they separate us from God, and 3) by judging ourselves always before being judged by Him.

We often hear about the “*grace of God*.” But what does that mean? The grace of God means His free and unconditional love, mercy, forgiveness, blessing, peace and kindness that surround us until we meet Him in His kingdom. He gives all these freely to everyone, not because we deserve it or we did anything to acquire it, but because of His abundant love and generosity; His grace.

In The Old Testament we see that God chose to bestow His grace on some of His people, for He could see their heart and their desire to walk with Him.

- Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord because he was humble and obedient
“But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord.” (Genesis 6:8)
- Abraham obeyed and followed God's instruction and departed with his family as the Lord had instructed him
“Now the Lord had said to Abram: ‘Get out of your country, from your family and from your father’s house, to a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you And make your name great; And you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, And I will curse him who curses you; And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’ So Abram departed as the Lord had spoken to him, and Lot went with him. And Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.” (Genesis 12:1-4)
- Jacob found grace after he repented and struggled with God to receive his blessing. *“Then Jacob was left alone; and a Man wrestled with him until the breaking of day. Now when He saw that He did not prevail against him, He touched the socket of his hip; and the socket of Jacob’s hip was out of joint as He wrestled with him. And He said, ‘Let Me go, for the day breaks.’ But he said, ‘I will not let You go unless You bless me!’ So He said to him, ‘What is your name?’ He said, ‘Jacob.’ And He said, ‘Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed.’”* (Genesis 32:24-28)
- Joseph found grace in the eyes of the Lord because he sought the Lord all his life
“The Lord was with Joseph, and he was a successful man; and he was in the house of his master the Egyptian.” (Genesis 39:2)

In the New Testament, after the death of the Lord Jesus Christ for our sins and His resurrection, the grace of God became available and free to everyone and was never held back due to our sins. This is because God desires that we are all saved and victorious over sins through the gift of His grace. *“And of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace. For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”* (John 1:16-17)

In order to live by the grace of God and to reach the goal of salvation and victory over sins, we must follow God's plan for our lives. For example:

- Grace is like a big check of money that was given to us freely. In order to enjoy the free cash, we must follow some instructions, such as drive to the bank, fill out some forms, wait in line ... etc
- Also, grace is like the gift of pregnancy to a woman. But the joy of giving birth to a child is preceded by labor pain and followed by a lot of patience and dedication to care for this child
- Moreover, grace is like a seed that is inserted in every one of us. *"Do not neglect the gift that is in you ..."* (1Timothy 4:14) But in order for us to feel and enjoy this grace, our life must undergo some transformation by 1) the purification through baptism, 2) the partaking of communion, 3) the rejection of our ungodly life, 4) striving to do good deeds, and 5) spreading the good news; God's word

"For I bear them witness that they have zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God." (Romans 10:2-3)

We need to realize that our own self-righteousness amounts to nothing in God's eyes, and that we cannot obtain salvation by our works. The only acceptable righteousness to God is the one provided by our Lord Jesus Christ, and we can obtain salvation only through Him.

"So those that entered, male and female of all flesh, went in as God had commanded him; and the Lord shut him in. Now the flood was on the earth forty days. The water increased and lifted up the ark, and it rose high above the earth." (Genesis 7:16-17)

Noah's ark had only one door through which he, his family, and all the animals walked through and were saved. Likewise, Jesus Christ is our door to salvation and only through that door we will be saved. The door in Noah's ark was available for everyone to enter, but the 8 people saved were those who chose to go through the door and into the ark. The rest perished in the flood. To obtain worldly happiness, people try to get it on their own by being self-reliant and being satisfied with the way they are until life is over. It was like that at the time of Noah and we still do the same mistake. The choice is still ours, we can either choose self-reliance or grace through Jesus Christ.

Finally, why does God allow us to backslide? Backsliding happens to all of us, even to righteous people, because of our sinful nature. Sometimes God allows Satan to test us. His purpose is not to inflict suffering; rather He seeks to strengthen our faith and to increase our desire to be with Him. He also allows us to be tested to remind us that we are not righteous on our own, but only through His grace.

May the Lord's grace fills our hearts with joy and peace and lead us to walk with Him always.



*I love you and you are mine
I love you deeper than the sea
Stronger than the wind
Higher than the sky
Brighter than the sun light
And
I would never let you out of My sight
For
You are very precious to Me
You are My beautiful creation
You are everything I long for
And
Some day you will be with Me forever
And
I will cover you with all My treasure
And
I will dress you with beautiful coat of many colors
And
All of the world will see
How much you are special to Me*

8

Spiritual Growth

My Role and God's Role

“And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles.” (Acts 2:42-43)

Many of us hope and pray that we may improve and grow in our spiritual relationship with God. However, sometimes, this hope and desire are demolished or flattened and we end up disappointed and discouraged. When this happens, we should ask ourselves:

- Are we on the right path?
- Are we trying to overcome the problem(s) of our past by ourselves?
- Are we working hard to improve our relationship with God? Are we giving it all we have?

There is a wonderful lesson to learn from watching babies grow. In the beginning babies are totally dependent on their mothers and fathers, but they gradually become independent as they grow. We can always see the curiosity in babies' eyes as they approach an unknown object and when they reach out to touch it for the first time. From babies we also learn that the more we mature, the more we change the way we see things. For example, what a 3-month old baby sees as just a colorful object on the ground becomes a beautiful beach ball to play with and enjoy as a 2-year-old. As they grow and become adults, they will share this beach ball with their children. The same applies to us as we grow spiritually. Our relationship with God is vague and unclear at the beginning of our spiritual journey, but it becomes clearer day after day as we grow

spiritually until we reach God's intended goal for us; constant spiritual growth.

Often, we get discouraged when we see ourselves and others fall time and again in reaching our goal of spiritual maturity, in spite of our numerous attempts. Sometimes, that makes us afraid to try to become closer to God because we might think that God is not approachable or a mature relationship with Him is impossible. But we all must be careful because discouragement is one of the effective weapons Satan uses to separate us from God. Satan always points at our sins, our weaknesses, and our failed attempts to mature spiritually and, consequently we feel discouraged. Unfortunately, we all fall in this trap. We fail to recognize that, throughout the Holy Bible, God has given us many examples of how He loves and accepts the sinners.

We also do a lot of things in our daily and spiritual lives that dampen the Holy Spirit in our hearts and interfere with His work in guiding us to spiritual maturity. We must rely on God's grace to overcome our fear of failure. Instead of fear, we must realize that trusting and having faith in God will be our driving force to getting close to Him.

"Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth; walk in the way of your heart, and in the sight of your eyes; but know that for all these God will bring you into judgment." (Ecclesiastes 11:9)

Some of us know some basic things about Christianity and enjoy listening to sermons and or sing praises. However, some of us never grow spiritually. Often times the reason is our unwillingness to put in the effort or commitment needed for spiritual growth. Others might not have a strong foundation of faith and quickly feel defeated before they even begin to try.

When we live with a short-sighted vision that focuses only on our earthly life with worries and commitments only to our jobs, our loved ones, or accumulation of wealth, we may achieve our goals in these areas but will have no sense of fulfillment. As we run through life in this way sooner or later we grow older and no longer have the job that was taking most of our time and our children are grown and have left home. We then realize that we are just surviving and our life lacks the joy and peace that comes only from the Lord.

We often rely on our own knowledge and understanding or good works to achieve spiritual maturity and growth. However, without allowing the Holy Spirit to work in us by avoiding dampening His works in our hearts, and depending on it to correct us, guide us, and encourage us when we fall, we will end up lacking and disappointed no matter how hard we try on our own. Therefore, we have a role and the Holy Spirit has a role in our spiritual growth. We ask, obey and submit, and the Holy Spirit provides.

There is no end to spiritual growth and maturity. The more we grow the more we realize that we need to learn more and grow some more; just like babies. Therefore, we need to realize and work on achieving the following:

- We will never reach the state of spiritual growth without allowing the Holy Spirit to work in us
- We should have a desire to commit our lives to God's special purpose and plan for each one of us
- We should separate ourselves from the worldly temptations; we should be in the world but not from the world
- We must follow God and allow the Holy Spirit to work in us, that He may change our hearts and attitude and strengthen us to conquer any obstacles in our way

"I delight to do Your will, O my God, and Your law is within my heart." (Psalm 40:8)

In the Old Testament, only the High priest was allowed to enter the Holy of Holies once a year on the day of the Atonement. Only the high priest and only once a year was he allowed to be in the presence of God to offer the blood of animals as a sacrifice for his sins and the sins of the people.

"But into the second part the high priest went alone once a year, not without blood, which he offered for himself and for the people's sins committed in ignorance." (Hebrews 9:7)

Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ was the ultimate sacrifice and His blood has given us victory over death. So now, we have an open invitation every day to come and visit with the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. We can spend as much time as we please with Him and have a wonderful fellowship with Him. That is the key for a daily spiritual growth and maturity. Unfortunately, many people turn down His invitation for a football game, reading/watching the news, and going out with a friend, among others.

To allow God to work in us we should:

- Make it a daily habit to read, study, and understand the Word of God
- Practice Christ-like qualities daily, such as being kind, loving, tender hearted, patient, and the list can go on and on
- Pray daily because prayers help us and strengthen us throughout the day
- Constantly change our attitude and allow ourselves to be teachable and being rebuked and/or corrected by the Word of God

- Forgive others; resolve any issues that may be troubling us and hindering our relationship with God
- Confess our sins in order to move our spiritual life forward and put it on the right path
- Partake of the communion in order to gain strength and blessings from the Lord
- Recognize our talents/gifts and determine where and how to use them for the glory of God
- Trust that God is working in us for our benefit and for the benefit of others.

"So He answered and said, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.'" (Luke 10:27)

God does not want us to become righteous, full of wisdom and equipped with our own power in order to come to Him. On the contrary, He loves the weak, the sinner, and the one in need of His help. Therefore, let it be our goal and passion to get to know God more and more every day until we become one in Him and feel and recognize His blessing in our lives. Only then will His grace allow us to overcome any obstacle we might encounter on our way to Him.

"Though the Lord is on high, yet He regards the lowly; but the proud He knows from afar." (Psalm 138:6)



*The Power of the Cross
When I look at Your cross
My eyes gush with tears
And
My heart becomes faint within me
To see my Lord suffering
To see my Lord in anguish
But
In the midst of my sadness
I remind myself and say
What a blessed moment
What a blessed day
When You have conquered death away
When You captured Satan and tied him up
When You revealed yourself to everyone
When You sat back on your throne again
Everyone cheered
Everyone rejoiced
Lord
You took the blame for me
You claimed me as Your child
You changed my life forever
You gave me all the love that I need*

*You spared me from ultimate despair
You love me to the point of death
You opened the gate for me to have a new life with You
So
I rejoice again
For my hope is to be with You
Thank you Lord
For loving me so much*

Dare to Dream

The Lord reigns; let the people tremble! He dwells between the cherubim; let the earth be moved! The Lord is great in Zion, and He is high above all the peoples. Let them praise Your great and awesome name--He is Holy." (Psalm 99:1-3)

Dreams! Dreams are the blueprints for a better life. Dreams encourage us to achieve greater things. When our dreams are according to God's will, He will convert them into reality. Nothing will stop us as long as we have faith and trust that nothing is impossible with God. "*Jesus looked at them and said, 'with man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God.'*" (Mark 10:27)

So, are you willing to dream?

On a personal level, we may dream of overcoming the many obstacles and challenges that are preventing us from having a deep, personal relationship with God; such as sin, guilt, fear, ... etc. We may also hope and dream that our children love the Lord with all their hearts and faithfully follow His steps. On a broader level, we may dream for a prospering church that can help and aid those in need locally and elsewhere, or an outreaching church where many people would be invited to participate in the Divine Liturgy, or maybe even a faithful society where sin is not rampant or unrestrained.

God wants His children to dream and to dream big. He wants us to prosper, to succeed in all we do, and to recognize and use all our gifts and talents for His glory. God does not want us to be lukewarm, but He expects us to be passionate in pursuing our

dreams; our godly dreams. He wants us to cling to Him and to carry our cross and follow Him.

"Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me." (John 15:4)

There are many examples in the Holy Bible that teach us about what God expects from His children.

1- God wants our lives to be fruitful

"Now in the morning, as He returned to the city, He was hungry. And seeing a fig tree by the road, He came to it and found nothing on it but leaves, and said to it, 'Let no fruit grow on you ever again.' And immediately the fig tree withered away." (Matthew 21:18-19)

Although it was not the season for the fig to appear, Jesus knew that this fig tree would be fruitless. Fig trees have small knobs, the size of green almonds, growing along the leaves. These small knobs were eaten by the peasants and other hungry people. If in the spring (approximately the time Jesus saw this fig tree) the tree does not have these knobs, then the tree will be fruitless in the summer. Our lives should not be like a fig tree full of leaves (appearance, good jobs, wealth, beauty ... etc) but without figs. We should guard and protect our little green knobs (little faith) that will eventually grow and become a delicious fruit with nurturing and in the due season. We also should guard our small godly dreams that will mature and become true in its due season according to the will of God.

2- God wants us to be faithful servants

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a man traveling to a far country, who called his own servants and delivered his goods to them." (Matthew 25:14)

God gives each one of us different talents and gifts according to our own ability. The faithful servant in the story of Matthew chapter 25 invested and worked with all the talents he received and brought fruits; whereas, the foolish one ignored and hid the talents he received and brought nothing. Therefore the master said,

"For everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away." (Matthew 25:29)

We too, should dream big godly dreams on how to work with and invest in our talents to bear fruits, both worldly and spiritual fruits. Not doing anything or ignoring our talents and dreams is the same as wasting our life away; just as the foolish servant who overlooked the amazing talents God gave him to further His kingdom.

3- God does not want us to be lukewarm

"And to the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write, 'These things says the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God: 'I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth.'" (Revelation 3:14-16)

In the book of Revelation, Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ showed us an example of a church (or a person), who is lukewarm, neither cold nor hot. Indifferent! The church of *Laodicea* was the only church, among the seven churches mentioned in the book of Revelation that received no commendation. Being indifferent at work, with family, and in spiritual life will lead to a fruitless life and

unfulfilled dreams. Christ asked this church to repent and be zealous to have a share in the throne of Christ.

It is scary to be lukewarm like the church of *Laodicea*. It is scary to come to His throne and hear Him say I have no commendation for you because you were lukewarm; because we had no hunger or thirst for His will or words. Yet God still asks us to rid ourselves from our wickedness and repent; only then will He guide us through the work of the Holy Spirit, which lives in our hearts.

"And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work." (2 Corinthians 9:8)

Finally, dare to dream godly dreams. Dream to grow spiritually, to know more about God's ways, to be a godly example for your children and others, and, more importantly, dream of living a life that glorifies God's name. Dream to be like the church of *Smyrna*; which gracefully bore her sufferings. The church of *Smyrna* was not found deficient and was promised the crown of life (Revelation 2:8-11). Or the church of *Philadelphia*; which persevered in the faith, kept the word of Christ, and honored His name. Likewise, the church of *Philadelphia* was not found deficient and was promised a place in God's presence, a new name, and the New Jerusalem (Revelation 3:7-13).



*Foolish mind
Foolish one who ignores
All
What he learns through the years
For
Just a moment of pleasure
He
Is willing to risk everything
For the glow will fade away
And
Slip silently and disappear
And
Tears and agony will replace
And
His spirit will be full of sorrow
And
Weep out of separation
His heart will be filled with pain
And
Live with it through the years
His bones will shake and aches
And
Wonder why his in distress*

*For
He forgets that without the Lord
His life will never be the same again*

Seeking Wisdom

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction." (Proverbs 1:7)

When God created us, He gave each one of us a certain measure of wisdom so we can differentiate between right and wrong and hopefully follow the best course of action for our lives according to God's plan. However, sometimes we improperly use this gift and become wise in our own eyes. When that happens, we acquire our own and personal wisdom, which will dictate what is right and what is wrong, rather than what is right or wrong according to God's plan for our lives. This personal rather than godly wisdom will negatively impact our faith and our life and consequently, will separate us from God and His plans for us.

Wisdom is like a precious stone, a pearl that is hidden from the eyes. Some people might go to extreme measures to find it and own it. Many people work so hard to acquire a great deal of knowledge in order to become wise.

"Take my instruction and not silver, and knowledge rather than choicest gold. For wisdom is better than jewels; And all desirable things cannot compare with her." (Proverbs 8:10, 11)

Knowledge is different than wisdom. Knowledge is acquired through education, reading, work experience, and personal experience, among others. It is important to obtain earthly knowledge to improve our careers, personal and family lives, and our future. Wisdom, however, is a gift only God can provide. Without godly wisdom, there will be greater probabilities of making

wrong choices, heartache, disappointments, and suffering. It is best; therefore, if we have both knowledge and wisdom.

"My people are destroyed from lack of knowledge." (Hosea 4:6)

"Coral and jasper are not worthy of mention; the price of wisdom is beyond rubies." (Job 28:18)

When we talk about wisdom, the first person to come to mind is King Solomon.

When Solomon was ordained king after the death of his father David, he offered God one thousand burnt offerings. Afterward, God appeared to him in a dream and asked him to choose anything and God will grant it to him. *"At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, 'Ask! What shall I give you?'"* (1 Kings 3:5) Solomon asked God for an understanding heart in order to judge the people of Israel. Not only did God grant his wish, but also God gave him an abundance of wealth and honor more than anyone else in the history of humanity. Moreover, all the people of Israel feared and honored him for they saw that the wisdom of God was on him.

When Solomon was a young king, he loved the Lord with all his heart. He was the first king to build a house for the Lord. He also was the first king to build a wall around Jerusalem (1 Kings 3:1). Unfortunately, Solomon disobeyed the Lord and married 700 foreign wives and acquired 300 concubines. These foreign wives turned his heart away from God and he started to worship their own handmade gods. Moreover, he became self-centered and that turned the hearts of the people against him. At this juncture, Solomon's heart lacked the most important commandment Jesus Christ taught us: *"... You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. this is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your*

neighbor as yourself.” (Matthew 22:37-39) Sadly, God became angry with Solomon and tore the kingdom away from him. *“Therefore the Lord said to Solomon, ‘Because you have done this, and have not kept My covenant and My statutes, which I have commanded you, I will surely tear the kingdom away from you and give it to your servant.’”* (1 Kings 11:11) After that King Solomon fell from the glory God gave him as the wisest and wealthiest man on Earth. When Solomon repented and revived his relationship with God he declared that all the power, wisdom, prestige, and pleasure will never satisfy us if they were obtained and practiced apart from God. What he meant by that is: we can never be truly happy if we are living away from God.

Now, if you can have the same opportunity Solomon had and the Lord appeared to you and asked you that same question “... *‘Ask! What shall I give you?’*” (1 Kings 3:5), what kind of answer you will give?

Are you going to ask for better health, for wealth, a happy life, world peace, or any other personal wish? Would you like Him to choose for you since you do not always know what is best for you? Or are you going to ask Him for wisdom?

“Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God. How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out.” (Romans 11:33)

In the New Testament, Jesus reminded us that wisdom comes from realizing the importance of caring for our souls and from being led by the inner voice within us; the Holy Spirit. Jesus reminded Martha (Luke 10:38-42) that learning at His feet is a wiser choice and a much more important decision for her spiritual growth than preparing a dinner meal for the guests. This does not mean that we should not cook or eat rather; it means not to miss the

opportunity to worship or to have a personal relationship or fellowship with God because we are busy doing earthly tasks. Also, in the parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:16-21), Jesus reminded us that collecting and accumulating material wealth, without paying attention to our spiritual life will eventually make us lose the ability to improve our relationship with Him because our hearts will be taken by the temporary joy and comfort brought by wealth and by the pleasure of the world.

"Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandment, for this is man's all. For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil." (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14)

What do we do then to acquire wisdom?

- Ask God to grant you wisdom (Philippians 4:6)
- Study the words of God (2 Timothy 2:6)
- Maintain intimate relationship with God (Colossians 4:1)
- Listen to a truly wise man for instruction (1 Timothy 4:13)
- Search out the best way to live according to the Will of God (Colossians 4:6)
- Use and do not waste your precious gifts (1 Timothy 4:14)
- Open yourselves to others and you will receive more in return (Titus 3:15)
- Be alert and careful not to act foolishly (Titus 3:3)
- Risk everything to acquire the hidden treasure (Matthew 13:44)

The Lord is the only provider of wisdom and understanding. So let us seek His words in our daily life and submit to His will in us. Let us take a serious look at our hearts and ask ourselves: what is the most important thing in our life? Is it honoring Him? Is it the loving and the love of others? Or is it the fulfillment of our own desires?

"I have taught you in the way of wisdom; I have led you in the right paths. When you walk, your steps will not be hindered and when you run, you will not stumble." (Proverbs 4:11-12)



*God's wisdom
Let God's wisdom fill your heart
Treasure every word she will say
And never let any slip away
Or evil thoughts will replace
And dwell in and steel your faith
So never forget and never sleep
And
He will be your eyes in the dark
He will never make you stumble
He will lead you in the right path
And most of all
He will make you stand through the storm
And in that you will never be alone*

Faith versus Fear

"Oh, fear the Lord, you His saints! There is no want to those who fear Him." (Psalm 34:9)

God put fear in our hearts for a reason. He did this so we might chose to honor and revere Him, to detect outside danger, to be warned that we are away from Him, and to realize that inner peace only comes from having a close relationship with Him.

Many of us walk through our daily lives fearing one thing or another. We might have fear of heights or narrow places, fear of drowning, fear of poverty, and fear of illness, among others. Sometimes our fixation on this fear may allow it to overwhelm our lives. This can make us lose control and become unable to function.

The more we allow fear to take over our lives, the more our lives will be full of unhappiness and doubt. We will find that:

- The more we worry about our health, the more health-related problems we might get
- The more we worry about others, the more anxieties we might gain
- The more we worry about our jobs, the more stress and stress-related illnesses we might get and the more failures we might encounter

"Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful." (John 14:27)

Ungodly fear is a spiritual force from Satan, because allowing fear to rule over our life is a sin. Fear and faith do not go together because they are two opposite forces. While faith can fill

our hearts with peace and joy, Satan will use fear as a weapon against us to take away our peace. He will use it to control our minds and emotions, to keep us in bondage, and to separate us from God. Therefore, we should not live in fear and should not allow it into our lives.

When Adam and Eve had a harmonious relationship with God; they were happy and peaceful. But when sin entered their lives, when Satan convinced them to sin against God, they were ashamed of themselves and afraid of facing God, so they hid from Him. *"Then the Lord God called to Adam and said to him, 'Where are you?' So he said 'I heard Your voice in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; and I hid myself.'"* (Genesis 3:9-10)

Nebuchadnezzar was a very rich and powerful king. But he was unhappy and very troubled because he relied on his own abilities, wealth, and power to succeed. When we depend on ourselves and our abilities only, we allow fear to come and dwell in our hearts. It is a delusion to think that we can be happy and fulfilled while we are away from God. Nebuchadnezzar suffered a great deal of pain and lost his mind for seven years. Until he came to his senses and realized and acknowledged God's greatness and power. And when he praised the Lord, he allowed himself to be healed and restored, which ultimately ended his painful experience.

"And at the end of the time, I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my understanding returned to me; and I blessed the most High and praised and honored Him who lives forever." (Daniel 4:34)

The question becomes *"what is faith?"* Faith is knowing, obeying, and believing God's words and promises. Only through faith can we destroy unhealthy fear and allow peace to enter into our lives. So why do God's children rely on themselves in times of fear? Why do

not they seek more of God's blessings? Why are we too weak in our faith and allow Satan to take control? Through prayers we can ask God to grant us peace, strengthen our faith, and give us the strength to triumph over our daily challenges. Just as Jacob wrestled with the angel of God to receive his blessing, we also need to be persistent in our prayers to receive our blessings and strength from the Lord.

Fear is not only for the unfaithful, sometimes faithful people have their moments of weakness and fearful situations. In the book of Genesis, we read about Abram's obedience and love for the Lord. Then suddenly we read about Abram lying to King Abimelech and telling him that Sarah (his wife) was his sister. Abram was afraid that the king might kill him to have Sarah for himself (Genesis 20). In the book of 1 Kings, we also read about Elijah the prophet, who obeyed and trusted God with zeal throughout his life. Then, suddenly, we read that he ran away from Jezebel in a moment of weakness and fear (1 Kings 19). *"And Ahab told Jezebel all Elijah had done. Also how he had executed all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah saying, 'So let the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this time.' And when he saw that, he arose and ran for his life."* (1 Kings 19:1-3) The New Testament tells the story about Peter when he saw Jesus walking on the water and wanted to go to Him. After Peter took few steps and walked on the water by faith, he suddenly became afraid and began to sink. He cried out for Jesus to save him (Matthew 14).

Even though God's children failed Him in the above examples, God took care of their needs and did not abandon them. God is faithful. He never leaves His children nor forsakes them when they are in their moment of doubt and fear. But He will rebuke, correct, guide, and lift them up until He brings them back to Him.

"For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind." (2 Timothy 1:7)

Finally, when we are faced with situations that cause us to have frustration and anxiety, we should not take the matter in our own hands. Rather, we should stop the cycle of fear and suffering by having faith in the Lord and by trusting and obeying His promises. Then, He will grant us his peace and will choose for us the instrument(s) necessary to accomplish His purpose.



Faith versus Fear

*I see Satan out to get me
He's watching all my moves
Trying to fill my mind with doubts
And to let me think there is no way out
Trying to put fear in my heart
To steal my faith away
But Lord
You have taught me no matter what
You're right here with me
To lead me to Your way
To free my soul from bondage
To cleanse all my sins
To light up my way to you
So... Lord
Let me humble myself
And
Fill my life with faith
Only then
Fear, doubt, anxiety
Will go away*

Facing the Blazing Fire But Not Alone

"Bless the lord, O my soul! O Lord my God, you are very great; You are clothed with honor and majesty, who cover Yourself with light as with a garment, who stretch out the heavens like a curtain. He lays the beams of His upper chambers in the waters, who makes the clouds His chariot, who walks on the wings of the wind, who makes His angels spirits, His ministers a flame of fire. You who laid the foundations of the earth so that it should not be moved forever."
(Psalm 104:1-5)

Life is unpredictable. One day it is full of joy and one day it is full of anxiety, fear, and uncertainty. We go through these cycles of ups and downs hoping that nothing will harm us. Usually, we tend to overlook our past experiences, whether they were pleasant or not.

When suffering, anxiety and/or uncertainty approach us; fear and disbelief will accompany it. This combination of negative feelings will make us feel fragile, unsure of ourselves and our goals, and desolate, among many other unhealthy feelings. These feelings should not be ridiculed or denied because our behavior and actions towards these feelings are the indicators of the level of our spiritual maturity in.

What do you usually do in the times of sufferings, anxiety and uncertainty? Do you think you are in charge and that you have the first and the last word, or do you allow God to interfere in your life? Some of us think that they are in charge and God is not paying attention to what is going on. They fail to realize however, that God holds absolute authority over everything in the universe, including us; especially us. He created the universe. He made man out of dust

and gave him life with His own breathe. God knows everyone of us by name. He knows our hearts and minds, and even the number of hairs on our heads.

“You have searched me, Lord, and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you, Lord, know it completely.” (Psalm 139:1-4)

“And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered.”
(Matthews 10:30)

Our world can change in a matter of a heartbeat. An unexpected phone call, sudden illness, and betrayal, among others can change everything in our lives. We can find ourselves dealing with situations that we cannot handle on our own. Unfortunately, we might end up with many bumps and bruises if we are not alert and careful during these turbulent times. Therefore, we must not wait for these moments to come in order to learn how to overcome them. On the contrary, we need to learn how to navigate through life and its unexpected circumstances in a godly way. We should try to change what we can change and move on with our lives instead of being paralyzed by situations we faced in the past. And finally, we should protect ourselves against these situations.

To know how to face life’s unexpected and sometimes unpleasant situations, we should know more about God and how He is in control. Therefore, it is imperative to read the Old and the New Testaments in order to have a broad knowledge of the mighty God; the loving God. We will also be made aware of what is yet to come; the new heaven, which is filled with love, kindness, peace, and harmony, and without pain and suffering.

God's passion is to dwell among His people and to wipe away their tears. He gives each one of us a special gift(s) out of His love for us to help us overcome the times of fear and anxiety. We should try to find out what is our gift(s), acknowledge these gifts, and then use them throughout life to overcome pain and suffering. Some of us are patient, some are bible scholars, some are prayer warriors, others are compassionate, and the list can go on. God also wants to teach us different lessons and to strengthen us in the hope that not only we might grow in our spiritual lives, but also, to know how to face unexpected circumstances. Therefore, when hurt strike we should ask ourselves: Can God deliver us? Do we believe that God has power over Satan? Do we trust that suffering can be turned into a blessing for us and others? The answers should be yes!

When a shepherd watches over his flock, he does not rest. He keeps his eyes on each one of them so no one can be harmed or taken out of his hand. When one gets hurt, he keeps him close, feeds him, cares for him, and carries him on his shoulders until he is strong enough to be set free. Likewise, God watches His children constantly and knows what man hides deep in his heart. He knows the perfect time to intervene in all of life's situations, and He is merciful and compassionate. He always does what is best for us in order to make us holy and does not give us more than we can handle.

"Oh, clap your hands, all you peoples! Shout to God with the voice of triumph! For the Lord Most High is awesome; He is a great king over all the earth. He will subdue the peoples under us and the nations under our feet." (Psalm 47:1-3).

In the Old Testament, the book of Daniel tells the story of the three young men who were carried from Jerusalem to the land of Babylon. During the time of their captivity; their faith and love

towards God never changed. On the contrary, their faith grew and it brought many blessings to them and to others. Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon at the time, made a great golden image of a god and set it up in all the Babylonian provinces. He sent a word that everyone should bow before the image. Those who refused would be cast immediately into a fiery furnace.

The king was informed that the three young men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, did not bow before the golden image and disobeyed the king. King Nebuchadnezzar became very angry and commanded his soldiers to bring the three young men to him. Then he ordered them to bow down to the gold image, but, again, they refused to worship anyone other than their true God. The king considered their faith stubbornness and deliberate disrespect to him. Therefore, he ordered that the heat of the furnace be increased seven times more than usual and for the three men to be cast into the furnace. The furnace was exceedingly hot that the flames consumed and killed the guards who throw the youth in the fire. After the three men were thrown in the fire, the king could not believe his eyes when he saw four, not three, men in the furnace and the fire did not harm any of them. The king realized that God has sent His angel to guard the three mens and thus, he came to the door and called out to the three men, "*Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out, and come here.*" (Daniel 3:26) When they came out, there was no sign of burns on either one of them and their cloths did not even smell of fire.

King Nebuchadnezzar said, "*Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego who sent His angel and delivered His servants who trust in Him.*" (Daniel 3:28) A decree was made to protect the Jews whose true God was able to deliver them from life's unexpected tribulations, even from the fiery furnace.

"I cry out with my whole heart; hear me, O Lord! I will keep your statutes. I cry out to You; save me, and I will keep Your testimonies. I rise before the dawning of the morning, and cry for help; I hope in Your word. My eyes are awake through the night watches that I may meditate on Your word." (Psalm 119:145-148)

Believing and having faith is an important key to solving any impossible situation. Yet we must prepare ourselves and should not wait until we face any of these impossible situations. Instead, we must train ourselves to read the Holy Bible, pray, do what is right in the sight of God, and have a relationship with Him. This will help us, step by step, to know God's plan for our lives and will fill us with peace in the midst of any storm.



Suffering

*Suffering makes life hard to handle
Through my tears and my fears, my hope is demolished
When it gets to be unbearable for me
I find no other way than to look at Your cross
Surviving through feeling Your pain
Suffering is not something far from You
You suffered since the day You were born
You never once complained
Through Your pain you made everyone happy
The blind, the lame, and leprous rejoiced
You carried the world all alone
When You had sorrow no one heard You
Beaten, wounded and hated by all
I see thorns pressing and tearing Your skin
I see nails hammered through Your hands and feet
I see a spear shooting deep
I see great suffering in the heart
How much agony You can bear
But You never gave up hope
For
God is always there for You
Carrying You all the way through*

*So
I should never give in or despair
For
You will never let go of my hand
Out of the blue someone will come through
To make my heart full of ease
And my soul will rejoice and be pleased
Thank you Lord*

Part II Summary

We all need to adopt a daily plan to explore our spiritual life. In order to explore our mind, heart, and soul, where we stand spiritually, and what we hope in and dream of achieving, we must allocate a time daily to be with God. It is important to acknowledge that we cannot go about discovering our spiritual life and working on growing spiritually in the midst of hectic times and while busy doing some other tasks. We discussed in part 1 many of the great bible characters who loved and trusted in the Lord. These people dedicated some of their time on a daily basis to nurture their relationship with the Lord. We too, must follow their examples and make a time to meet with God, to get to know Him, and to grow spiritually. I pray that we all follow David's example and say:

"Surely I will not go into the chamber of my house, Or go up to the comfort of my bed; I will not give sleep to my eyes Or slumber to my eyelids, Until I find a place for the Lord, A dwelling place for the Mighty One of Jacob." (Psalm 132:3-5)

We can start our day with a prayer thanking God for the new day, asking Him to keep us and our loved ones safe, to give us the opportunity to glorify His name in all we do, and most importantly, to ignite the Holy Spirit within us. Then we must dedicate time to reading the scripture. I thank God that we live in a time that offers the word of God in many languages and forms; the physical book of the bible, smart phone apps to read or to listen, and on the web also to read or listen. Finally, we need to meditate on the word of God and to seek wisdom and more understanding regarding the will of God in our lives so that we might be able to grow spiritually.

In Part II we saw how Joseph was receptive to God and His words and how the Lord loved him and was with him, especially during the times of his hardships. *"The Lord was with Joseph, and*

he was a successful man; and he was in the house of his master the Egyptian.” (Genesis 39: 2) Through the grace of God, which He has given to us for free, we can overcome many weaknesses and revive our faith so we can obey, trust, and submit to God’s will for us.

After many blows and hardships, Job finally understood God’s message to him; God does not accept self-righteousness. Job’s faith and relationship with God allowed him to freely submit to the will of God. *“Then Job answered the Lord and said; ‘I know that You can do everything, and that no purpose of Yours can be withheld from You.’ You asked, ‘who is this who hides counsel without knowledge?’ Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.”* (Job 42: 1-3) Like Job, we too, can benefit greatly from our spiritual relationship with God. Not only that we will grow spiritually, but also we will get to understand and see things that are too wonderful which we did not know. Our lives might or might not have earthly happiness; however, as we grow spiritually we will be able to glorify God and His work in us and around us.

Abraham was a very wealthy man who never thought of building a home for himself and lived in a tent. Material things were not important to Abraham. He focused his life on his calling and on heavenly things.

“So Abram said to lot, please let there be no strife between you and me, and between my herdsmen and your herdsmen; for we are brethren. Is not the whole land before you? Please separate from me. If you take the left, then I will go to the right; or if you go to the right, I will go to the left.” (Genesis 13: 8-9)

As we grow spiritually, we will learn how to humble ourselves and to acknowledge God in everything we say or do. In

return, God will help us through our day and will bestow on us many spiritual and non-spiritual gifts.

The life of St. Paul was an example how God changed a man who had a different understanding of righteousness than that of God's. God Helped St. Paul and St. Paul responded and changed his understanding of righteousness. In return, God directed St. Paul's knowledge, zeal, and understanding to spread God's message among the Jews and Gentiles. *"Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering."* (Colossians 3: 12)

So yes, let us all dare to dream and let us be passionate in all what we do. For that is the will of God for all His children. Let us be faithful servants to our Father in heaven. May the Lord accept us and grant us His peace and joy that surpasses all understanding so that we can handle any hardship and to be able to stand up again if we fall.



PART THREE

God's Amazing Work in Us

God is Our Rock in the Wilderness

"Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, all ate the same spiritual food. And all drank the same spiritual drink. For they, drank of the spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Jesus." (1 Corinthians 10:1-4)

This passage tells us that in the wilderness, our Lord Jesus Christ was with the Israelites every step in the way. He led them through the uncertain roads and supplied them with manna, water, and shelter. He protected them from the hand of their enemies and, finally, delivered them to the Promised Land.

When I think of a huge rock, I think of an object of nature that is beautiful, solid, steady, unchangeable, reliable, and full of goodness among others. Moreover, when I think of a rock I usually imagine a spring day on a high mountain with beautiful pastures and a gentle breeze. I can see flocks of sheep grazing in the awesome dark green grass and the bright spring flowers filling the air with their pleasing fragrance. And I can also picture a flock of peaceful, comfortable and satisfied sheep, and I can see a group of gazelles grazing and running up and down the rock with sure footing.

We all need a rock to lean on. But, who is our rock? When we were children, we often leaned on our parents; they were our rocks. Our parents were the ones who provide our daily needs and loved us unconditionally. They encouraged us throughout our lives and protected us. Then, as we grew older, our role change. Our parents can no longer be our rock; rather, they become dependent on

us. Our relationship with God is similar yet different. As our parents, when we are young (physically and spiritually) God takes care of us and is our rock, but unlike our parents, He remains our rock forever and our role never changes. However, some people do not put all their trust in God and look for other earthly things to be their rocks and foundations. For example, some people may depend on their own strength, others depend on their financial stability, yet others may depend on family or friends.

In both the Old and New Testaments, rocks were a symbol of God because rocks are strong and immovable; stable! Even pagans thought of rocks as their gods, their fortress, defense, and shield. The desert of Sinai is considered one of the safest places because it was full of caves and many rock formations that were viewed as places of safety and protection.

In the Old Testament:

When Isaiah was encouraging the Israelites to return to their first love he said "*Listen to me, you who follow after righteousness, you who seek the Lord: look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the hole of the pit from which you were dug.*" (Isaiah 51:1)

In first Samuel (23:25-27) we also see how the hand of God was protecting David from Saul in the wilderness of Maon. When Saul tried to capture David by surrounding him, he went to the wrong side of the mountain and could not capture him. So David wrote, "*I will love you, O Lord, my strength. The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer; My God, my strength, in whom I will trust; my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.*" (Psalm 18:1-2)

In the New Testament:

Our Lord Jesus Christ said, *"Therefore whoever hears these sayings of mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock."* (Matthew 7:24-25) In the parable of the two builders, Jesus gave us a clear example on which rock we should build our house, which is a reference to our self, family, church, career...etc. If our house is built on a solid foundation; Jesus Christ, it will stand the rain, the flood, and any trouble that may come knocking on the door. The house might not stand these troubles if the foundation is a different rock other than Jesus Christ. Let us all examine our rocks and foundations and rebuild our lives if it is not built on the solid, unchangeable, and everlasting rock; Jesus Christ.

In Hebrews 13:8, St. Paul tells us that *"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever."* For Christ has given His body and His blood for the salvation of mankind. And He still gives unlimited amount of spiritual bread and water for those who are hungry and thirsty for a relationship with Him.

"Jesus said to them 'Did you never read in the scriptures: 'The stone which the builders rejected, has become the Chief cornerstone, this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes'? Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruit of it.'" (Matthew 21:42-43)

God wants us to make Him our rock and foundation. His love and grace are always available to those who can open the eyes and ears of their hearts and get past the devil's attempts of keeping us occupied with overwhelming difficulties in the world around us and in making us too exhausted to remember who our Rock is. God will fill us with an abundance of comfort if we lean and hold on to our rock when problems arise. In doing so, we will not be trapped in

despair by loss of health, loss of job, loss of wealth, and loss of hope among others, because nothing is too hopeless, too difficult, or too complicated for our God to handle. God is always present in our lives and He works in amazing and mysterious ways. To be comforted and assured of God's presence and amazing work, think of and try to picture God's work with the Israelites at the time of Exodus. Think of His ability to care, to comfort, to teach, and to deliver from numerous problems; Pharaoh, the sea, the desert, the lack of food and water, and the wild life in the desert. Think of the amazing work of Jesus Christ throughout His ministry. How He healed the sick, raised the dead, calmed the sea, fed the multitude, and, more importantly, how he carried our sins and died for us. And how He rose from the dead and granted salvation to all who believe. *"The Lord lives! Blessed be my rock! Let God be exalted, The Rock of my Salvation!"* (2 Samuel 22:47)

Finally, let us not neglect to renew your relationship with God every day, because He is our rock and our perfect God. Let us trust Him and walk in faith with Him to feed our inner self with the spiritual food that it needs.



You are my rock Lord

*I feel You whisper to me
"Keep your faith and Trust in me"*

And

Who can shake my faith in Thee Lord?

"My peace and grace will cover you

And

I will never leave nor forsake you"

My Lord

Who can take my peace away?

Will any other rock do?

Is there anyone who can be like Thee Lord?

Lord

Through my wilderness You showed me amazing things

You carried all my burdens

You provided me with all my needs

You never let me stumble

You never allowed the devil to prevail in me

You covered me with Your hand

You gave me Your spirit to work in me

Lord

You are the only rock for me

The Father's Love

"Then Jesus spoke to them again, saying, 'I am the light of the world, he who follows me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life.'" (John 8:12)

As I was growing up, and up until now, I was and am blessed with a wonderful dad. My dad modeled the qualities of our heavenly Father. He is an example of godliness, honesty, integrity, and responsibility. Through his tender love and care, my dad taught me a lot of things about our heavenly Father.

Fathers are very important in God's plan for a family. Fathers have a wonderful opportunity to encourage, teach, counsel and to role model the Christian behavior for their children. They do this out of the desire to be obedient servants to God and out of their great love for their children.

Sadly, many children grow up without good role models in their life, such as those in some of the single parent homes or those who have emotionally absent or abusive fathers. These children may go through life without having a good and nurturing relationship with their dads. Consequently, they grow up missing an integral life experience; the parental love experience. Therefore, they go through life longing for true love and acceptance. They desire to experience and understand unconditional love, which can only be provided by God.

Sadly, all what they know and experience is the world's love; the love that is always conditional. The love that does not satisfy the heart; that does not accept them the way they are and that pushes them to do everything possible to acquire it by focusing on

looks, intelligence, popularity, success, power, socio-economic status, connections, etc. Eventually, they become like a small boat in the middle of a wide ocean, completely at the mercy of the waves. This kind of love is often followed by much doubt, grief, misfortune, and heartache.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life." (John 3:16)

The more we read the Holy Bible, the more we learn about God's heart, which is burning with the desire for His children to return back to Him. He is the Father who knew us before we were conceived; He is the one who knitted us together in our mother's womb (Jeremiah 1:5). Our heavenly Father loves us unconditionally and desires for us to sit at His table and participate in His joy. He desires that we choose to have a relationship with Him.

Yet, He is the kind of Father who does not force His love on us. He gives us the freedom to make our own choice to either stay in the light with Him or in the darkness by ourselves. If we do not choose Him, he let go of us even though He knows the pain that this will cause Him and the risk that we might be lost to Him; but He respects our wishes regardless of how foolish they might be.

When God created the world He intended it to be perfect for us and full of true love, but sin brought pain and suffering that passed from generation to generation. Despite of Adam's sin, God keeps His arms stretched out to welcome us back home. He never withheld His blessings and never stopped thinking of us as His sons and daughters.

The unconditional love of our heavenly Father has been made clear when He chose to send His only beloved son, Jesus

Christ, to reveal and minister to us His Father's love and desire to be our Father. Jesus Christ took upon Himself the weight of our sin and made away for our salvation, and through His victory over sin and death we, once again, became His beloved children.

The parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) teaches us how much God loves all His children and how much He is longing for them to come home. The

Parable tells the story of a father who had two sons whom he loved dearly. Although the younger son was brought up in a good home with lots of love and wealth available to him, he desired to explore the world and enjoy his life as he thought fit. He wanted to be independent and to distance himself from his father's love, wisdom and influence. So he asked his father to divide his wealth and give him his share.

When the father granted him his request and gave him his share, the son went to a far away country where he could live without any regard for tomorrow, doing what the people of the world were doing and participating in their ungodly behavior. When what he had to offer to the world to be accepted by it ended, his share of his inheritance, the world no longer accepted him. He found himself without a home, without money, without food, and without recourses. He found himself with the swine of the world (unclean and unsaved). He was alone and so desperate to the point that he desired to eat what is offered to the swine. He kept spiraling down and when he was a step away from death, he remembered his father and his home and made the decision to go back. His father was waiting for him with open arms. How many people go through this road? How many make the right decision to return home to their loving father? And how many are lost forever?

Another story is the story of Judas and Peter. Both were among the twelve disciples of Jesus Christ. They spent three years with Jesus and both betrayed him; Judas sold him to the Jews and Peter denied him three times. However, Judas chose not to return to the father and chose death but Peter, in the midst of his despair, chose life and with many tears he returned to his father.

In the Parable of the prodigal son we read that the younger son returned home with a new heart, new understanding, and a new attitude (genuine repentance). We read that he was no longer a selfish son but someone who came to realize that living with his father was the best life in the world, and that he would rather be a servant in his father's house than be without his father. He was ready for confession and asking his father for forgiveness. What helped the younger son were his prior knowledge of his home (the word of God) and the benefit of having been in the presence of his father. It seems that some people have to lose everything in order to come to their senses.

As the younger son went through his journey and his trial, we need to look at how the father's heart endured his son's decision to leave and the possibility that he might never come back. Even though the younger son left his home with his portion of the inheritance, his father never stopped loving him and was ready to forgive him. Even if it might have seemed to the son that his father had forgotten him, the father's love for him never diminished. On the contrary, we can imagine his father's grieving and pleading with God to protect and help his son and to guide him to find his way home.

Now we can clearly see the true love of the father that is full of compassion "*And he arose and came to his Father, but when he*

was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion on him and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him." (Luke 16:20) Just like our heavenly Father, we see how the prodigal son's father rejoiced by the return of his son who was once dead, but was made alive again by the decision to return home to his father. We see how the father welcomed his son home before he even had a chance to apologize and how the father could not wait to start the celebration; to give his son a new life, a life in abundance. Therefore, the father asked his servant to: 1) kill the fatted calf (a symbol of Christ; the Lamb of God who was slain for the redemption of our sin), 2) dress his son with a robe of honor (the robe that covers our sin, Christ's righteousness), 3) put the ring of inheritance on his finger (a symbol of power and authority), and 4) put a footwear of prestige on his feet (a symbol of readiness to serve Jesus Christ).

It is easy to identify with the youngest son who was in need of healing and forgiveness. On the other hand, the older son who stayed home and served his father, did all what was required of him as a son, worked hard and fulfilled all his obligations, was a sinner too; he was lost while he was still home. When we look closely, we see how the older brother was angry, resentful, unkind, envious, bitter, and jealous toward his brother to the point that he could not enter to his father's house to participate in the celebration for the return of his brother.

"But he was angry and would not go in; therefore his father came out and pleaded with him" (Luke 16:28)

Once again we see the father's love for his older son was the same; he went out to him as he did with the younger son. He desired that his son enter the house and join the celebration, but he could not force him. In order for the older son to come in, he needed to come with a new attitude and understanding that the father's love is

abundant and he loves all his children equally, but might be differently.

Here, we come to wonder:

- Did he ever get persuaded by his father?
- Did he ever reconcile with his brother?

In the Parable of the laborers (Matthew 20), the landowner paid the laborer who worked only one hour the same amount as those who worked all day. This should make us realize that our God does not define His love by who comes first or last; He is a generous God, who loves all His children and expects His children to be happy and content in His presence, and not envious with each other.

"I, the Lord, search the heart; I test the mind, even to give every man according to his way, and according to the fruit of his doings." (Jeremiah 17:10)

- Would not it be wonderful to be able to make God smile by returning back home and by being a true son or daughter to Him? Does a little criticism make me angry?
- Does a little rejection make me depressed?
- Does a little praise raise my spirit?
- Does a little success excite me?
- Do I still search for more?
- Do I keep leaving home away from my father?

We have to remember that in order to be in our Father's house we must be transformed to His image and choose not to live in the darkness, but choose to offer the same compassion He has offered to us. Therefore, choose to forgive others' offenses and choose to heal others' wounds. Be able to rejoice not because the problems of the world have been solved or all human pain and

suffering have come to an end but because one of His children was dead and now he is alive; he was lost and now he has been found.

May the Father's love cover you and lead you in His way that you may enjoy His presence in your heart and may someday allow you to inherit all the treasures that heaven can offer.



Father's Love

*A love that is tender and kind
A love that is sacred and divine
A love that is the one I long for
A love that will bring my heart in tears
A love that will fill my heart
A love that never changes or is worn out
A love that sacrificed His only Son for me
A love that strengthens me when I am weak
A love that makes me feel precious to Him
A love that teaches me to give all that I have
A love that is like the ocean which keeps growing
A love that will open my eyes to see His way
A love that always brings me down to my knees
A love that will never allow anyone to separate us from
Him*

No Fear in the Storm

"And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, 'The tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God.'"
(Revelation 21:3)

Our Lord is everywhere and yet when He wants to announce Himself to us; He sends His angels and His saints to let us know He is among us. Our God is an amazing God and His life on earth was a witness to His greatness and because of His love and mercy, He called us His children. Although we do not deserve to be; rather, servants of the living God, He lifts us up and calls us "beloved children." He always tries to draw us near to Him.

God's desire is to be our God and for His children to draw near to him and come back home. However; He will never force us to love Him. When He sees that our hearts are in need of His love and when we initiate the relationship with Him by taking the first few steps towards Him, He will take a million steps to close the gap between us.

"Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me." (Revelation 3:20) In this verse, God tells us that He is available and near, and when we open the door and invites Him in, He will be willing to enter (relationship), have supper (fellowship), and be our master (Guide), our friend (companionship), and our God. We have to take the initiative and start the process by 1) hearing the knock, 2) opening the door, 3) inviting the master, and 4) offering supper. However, the Lord Has

only one condition: we should give Him the best of what have, no matter how precious it is, and in return, He promises to give us all what He has in His kingdom.

It is so easy to be God's friend, yet not everyone asks or wants this friendship because we desire so many other things and seek as relationships without being acquainted with our feelings and needs and why do we desire or seek certain things or relationships, consequently. Sometimes, because of our ego and self-centeredness, we are eager to do everything on our own. Consequently, if we do not achieve our goals, we become angry, depressed, and life loses its luster and meaning.

God wants to remind us that we must give Him the most precious thing in our life, our self, in order to be His people. In return, He will give us a new heart and new mind that will allow us to invite Him. As we mentioned earlier, we have to take the initiative and He will finish the work, because on our own we cannot achieve that goal. That is why many people who try very hard to get closer to God on their own fail, because they do not realize that we are helpless without God.

Once we submit our life to God and allow Him to take control and be our leader, our life will never be the same. We see that clearly in the life of monks and nuns who chose celibate life and preferred to live in nunnery or monastery because civilian life became a distraction to their relationship with God. This does not mean we all have to be nuns and monks to be saved! God wants everyone to be saved within the parameters of the life He appointed for every one of us.

It is a common misconception that in order to be holy you must be a priest, bishop, pope, monk, nun, or a dedicated servant.

Moreover, some believe that these are the people who can endure trials and can stand in the face of the devils. The reason it is a misconception because, God treats all His children the same way. In several occasions throughout the scripture He emphasized that we must come to Him first, no matter who we are, and He will shower us with heavenly blessings. When we take this first step, He will come and open the gate and will lead us through and save us from life's trials and tribulations.

The more desire God sees in our heart to have a relationship with Him and to draw near to Him, the greater the ability and will He will grant us to endure life's trials and tribulations. He will be like a pillar of cloud to protect us; a column of fire to guide us, an ark to save us, and a tabernacle in the midst of our life.

God does not want His children to fight their own battle. He wants to fight these battles for us and with us as He did with Joshua, David, Daniel and Hannah. He will be always there for His people no matter who they are because He can see their hearts and desires. Let us all be wise and not let the devil fool us that he is our master, and that we cannot escape. This is what the devil knows: to scare, to frighten, to cheat, to distract, to play with our minds and our thoughts, and to make us desire earthly pleasure.

Now the question is: are you aware of the presence of God in your life? Are you willing to give yourself to him? Or are you waiting until it is too late and you have lost your eternity? God's love for us has been revealed and He is ready and willing to help His children anywhere and in any manner. All we need to do is to call on Him and He will fight with all His might and all the world will see that He is the God and the only God that you should desire.

"I smile at my enemies, because I rejoice in your salvation."
(1 Samuel 2:1)



Pray

With eyes full of tears ...

Happy tears for being in His presence

Sad tears for all you have done

Pray...

With praises and a thankful heart ...

For all He has done for us

For all He has forgiven you

For all He has blessed you with

Pray...

With compassion, always seeking ...

His words of guidance

His words of comfort

His words of blessing

Pray...

And ask diligently for ...

His strength to accomplish His will for you

Him to grant you His peace for the day

Pray...

And never neglect to pray for others ...

To be comforted by Him

To become close to Him

Pray...

And know ...
He will guide your words of prayer

The Clay and the Potter

"And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being." (Genesis 2:7)

Making pottery is one of my favorite hobbies; being able to create something beautiful with your own hands out of nothing is very exciting and rewarding. In creating a piece of pottery you use your hands, your mind, your heart/emotions, your skill, and your ability. No wonder God loves to create things with His own hand with the hope that the clay will yield to His touch and allow Him to get rid of the impurities and the imperfection in order to be perfect and meet His purpose?

Several passages in the Holy Bible describe God as the *Potter* and us as the *clay*:

- Jeremiah 18:5-6, God compares the work of the pottery with His work in us, *"Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying: 'O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter?' says the LORD. 'Look, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel!'"*
- Job 10:8-9 *"Your hands have made me and fashioned me, an intricate unity, yet You would destroy me. Remember, I pray, that You have made me like clay. And will You turn me into dust again?"*
- Romans 9:21, *"Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?"*

Clay is made by mixing earth and water together. In order to create

something from clay, you will need to have the perfect combination of both earth and water. Too much water will make the clay running, weak to hold together, and easy to break. Too little water will make the clay hard, too dry to work with, and easy to crumble. God loves to create original and beautiful pieces and He will apply pressure in shaping the clay. Unfortunately, sometimes we are unresponsive to His hand and complain when He applies pressure.

"But now, O Lord, You are our Father, and we are the clay, and you our potter, and all we are the work of Your hand" (Isaiah 64:8).

To be malleable and workable clay in God's hands, we need to live in perfect harmony and obedience to Him. We should keep ourselves in proper environments, watch and monitor the way we conducting ourselves, and turn away from our evil way. It is our choice to be responsive to God's hands.

God wants to shape our hearts and minds to create a precious piece of clay according to His will. For that, we should, as true Christians, keep ourselves moist and in good condition until God is ready to shape us and use us. Staying moist, malleable, and ready to be shaped is achieved by reading and meditating on the word of God and keeping it close to our hearts, by praying without ceasing, by being willing to serve Him and spreading His word, and by using our spiritual talents for God's glory.

"Do not be deceived: 'Evil Company corrupts good habits.' Awake to righteousness, and do not sin." (1 Corinthians 15:33-34)

We should not allow our hearts and minds to drift away from the source of the living water needed to keep the clay, us, malleable and workable. We should run away from the people and/or situations that might ruin and/or interfere with our spiritual walk, stay away from the worldly attractions and distractions

(ungodly behavior, entertainment, music, greed, etc) that will harden the hearts and minds and make them unyielding. God might resort to more kneading, pressing and shaping to work with these hardened hearts and minds.

"Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is." (1 John 3:2)

After shaping each piece of clay into a beautiful, unique and useful vessel, the potter makes the pieces ready to be fired up. For that, the potter will glaze each piece to protect it from the high heat necessary to finish the process. Then the potter places the pieces in the kiln on high heat for a certain amount of time in order to make each piece beautiful, strong, useful for the purpose it was created for, and to last for a long time. If the clay has impurities, it will not survive the intense fire and will shatter. The potter will either discard it, or will grind it to dust again, add water in order to make it moldable again, and recreate the clay piece again.

We must trust that God can see the good in us; which we sometimes do not see. He also sees the final beautiful and finished vessel. Therefore, He will never give up on us and will never stop working to shape us according to His will. He will soak the clay more and more; He will work it on the spinner; He will apply as much pressure as needed; He will remove the lumps and the foreign objects to allow His spirit to come in, and He will never let go until we are shaped into a beautiful vessel.

"Now he who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. And by this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us." (1 John 3:24).

Finally, when the pieces come out of the fire, they look very different than (to be omitted) before the fire. Amazingly, they are smaller and more beautiful; they shine, and are stronger. But, they are humble and ready to be used. May the Lord help us through our journey with Him and use each one of us for His own glory.



*When God chooses His child
He will fill his heart with many blessing
He will dress his soul with the treasures of heaven
He will never let him be in need of anything
He will make him feel like he is floating in heaven
He will let him see amazing things all day long
He will cover him in the time of trouble
He will bestow on him many smiles
He will never let go of His child*

The Holy Spirit in our Lives

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters." (Genesis 1:1-2)

To know who the Holy Spirit is we must understand and know who God is. God is the creator of the universe who cares deeply about us and desires to be part of our daily lives. In the beginning, God created man on His own image by His own breath. Man's ego and self-reliance caused him to fail into temptation, which led to man's destruction and death and his expulsion from heaven; from the presence of God.

God's heart desire is to have a relationship with His creation. So God continued to look for a man who lives according to His heart. God found Noah; an obedient and righteous servant. God talked to Noah, asked him to build an ark, and established a covenant with him, "*And as for Me, behold, I establish My covenant with you and with your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you; the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you, of all that go out of the Ark, every beast of the earth. Thus I establish My covenant with you never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood; never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.*" (Genesis 9:8-11). Because God hates sin, He destroyed the earth and its inhabitant by a great flood. But those who were in the ark, man and beast, were saved. God had an amazing plan in mind to defeat Satan, to be part of our lives, and bring us back home safe again.

In the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit came upon specific people for a specific purpose to guide, encourage, or direct such as: Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Samuel, the Judges, the kings, and some other prophets.

“The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;” (Isaiah 61:1)

We read in the New Testament that St. Mary, the mother of God, conceived by the Holy Spirit and gave birth to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

"Then Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I do not know a man?' And the angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy one who is to be born will be called the Son of God.'" (Luke 1:34-35)

During the baptism of our Lord, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended in bodily form like a dove upon Him in.

“When all the people were baptized, it came to pass that Jesus also was baptized; and while He prayed, the heaven was opened. And the Holy Spirit descended in bodily form like a dove upon Him, and a voice came from heaven which said, ‘You are My beloved Son; in You I am well pleased.’” (Luke 3:21-22)

We were not born with the Holy Spirit, but we acquire it. The crucifixion of our Lord Jesus Christ reconciled us with God and made us ready to accept the Holy Spirit in our hearts. In Christianity, we start by baptism that cleanses us from the original sin. In some denomination baptism is followed by anointment with

a holy oil; Myron oil to prepare the baptized to receive the Holy Spirit

"Nicodemus said to Him, 'How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?' Jesus answered, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.'" (John 3:4-5)

After our Lord Jesus Christ ascended to heaven, His disciples were faced with tremendous challenges. They were waiting for the day of the Pentecost to start their missions and to teach the Word of God throughout the world. It was on this blessed day that the Holy Spirit rushed like a mighty wind, filled the whole room where everyone gathered, and came on each one like tongues of fire. Everyone, being filled with the Spirit of God, gained strength and power, and began to speak with other tongues.

"But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me." (John 15:26)

There are many reasons why it is important to acquiring the Holy Spirit. Some of these reasons are as follows:

- To be in the presence of God at all times
- To know God intimately
- To guide us in many areas of struggle
- To give us power and strength against sin
- To help us understand the Holy Bible
- To grant us many fruits of the spirit according to God's grace
- To help us acquire Agape love for God and each other
- To counsel us about what God's plan is for us in order to give Him glory
- To help our service to be fruitful

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law." (Galatians 5:22-23)

The Holy Spirit desires to work in each one of us and to give us many blessings through the grace of God. When we are stubborn and resistant to the work of the Holy Spirit in us, we will be unable to enjoy the fruit of the Spirit listed up and we may end up losing not only on earth, but also eternally. So take a minute each day to reflect on how well you have been doing in your spiritual life.



When you found me

*I can never forget the moment when You came and found
me*

I was all alone, drowning in my sorrow

With dark clouds hanging over me

The wind tossing me on every side

And

My sins had me enchained

My suffering was overwhelming

Beaten and tortured by my enemies

And

They left me naked

And

My heart was in agony

And

There was no more strength left in me

My life became nothing to me.

But You my Lord,

Came rushing to find me and weeping over me

You pulled me up

And

You hold me in Your arms and breathed life in me

*You opened my eyes so I can see
That You fought and took the blame instead of me
You broke my chains away from me
You healed my wounds one by one
And
Carried me home to You my Lord
So I can be one in You again
And
I can be Your bride*

God, Teach me How to Love

"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal." (Matthew 6:19-20)

The primary goal of every Christian family should be to serve God and follow His plan and instruction. The life of Jesus Christ is the perfect example of how to live a Christian life and how to serve God and others. As Christians we should follow His example; our teacher and our God. One of the lessons Jesus taught us demonstrated for us was His love towards all humanity. He loved us to the point that He gave His life for us so we can enjoy salvation, redemption, and eternal life.

"He who does not love does not know God, for God is love."
(1 John 4:8)

When we think of love, we feel happy and warm inside for love is the most natural thing people feel. God instilled it in us so we can experience His love for us and love for each other. There are two different kinds of love:

- Earthly love - It is based on feelings and the desire for either intimacy with another person or possession of an object. It can mean the love of pleasure, lust, money, food, learning, fame, success, or respect from others, among others. That is why this type of love is either a temporary or conditional pleasure, where the giving is motivated by the desire to receive in return.

- Christian love - God is the source and focus of this kind of love.
"Jesus said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Matthew 22:37-39)

Christian love is not:

- Defined by worldly standards (emotional love that lasts for a while then fades away)
- Conditional (expecting in return)
- A worldly love
 - Christian love is a virtue that results in commitment to the truth (we love because we were first loved).
 - Jesus Christ is our example of true Love:
- Jesus Christ loved His father and demonstrated humility and obedience that guided all His actions during His life on earth
- Jesus Christ loved all his enemies and never held a grudge against anyone, not even the ones who persecuted Him; rather he prayed for them on the cross
 - This level of love sets the standard for us; what we should be like and how should we react when we are oppressed, persecuted, or not loved by others
- Jesus Christ did not seek to control people, but He respected their freedom of choice, including the freedom to refuse Him as a Savior
- Jesus Christ cared for and listened to others without being judgmental; rather, He understood their circumstances and offered them a way to overcome their circumstances
- Jesus Christ took the form of a servant to teach us and show us how to serve one another in love and humility
- Jesus Christ rebuked the moneychangers and the merchants and asked them to take their business out of the temple because of His love for God

- Jesus Christ's suffering and death on the cross demonstrated His love for all mankind in order to free them from sin
- Jesus Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for it
 - Therefore, as Christian families, we ought to do the same and love one another in the family and outside the family as much as Christ loved us.

First Corinthians 13:1-2 teach us that love is the Foundation for All Virtues:

"Though I speak with the tongues of men and angels, but have not love, I have become as sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understanding all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing."

Because love is the heart and soul of Christianity, it must be at the center of every Christian virtue. Without love, we cannot have a relationship with God. Without love the Holy Spirit will be dimmed in our hearts and, consequently, we will not have and/or enjoy the fruits of the spirit. Therefore, when everything in our life is going well and nothing is troubling us, we should question ourselves: is everything okay with our spiritual life? Are we learning anything? Are we working to better ourselves? This does not mean that life in Christianity is stormy. On the contrary, Christian life is peaceful and full of joy; Christ's peace and joy. Consequently, when unhappiness or life's storms come knocking on our doors, we will be able to deal with it without losing our joy and peace and without being swallowed by it. As Christians growing in our relationship with God, our spiritual growth is achieved one step at the time until we have the Holy Spirit ignited in our hearts, He who will help us reach our goal of eternal life with God.

The Epistle to the Galatians lists the fruit of the spirit; which we will enjoy and experience once the Holy Spirit is ignited in our hearts. "*But the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.*" (Galatians 5:22-23)

- *Love*: When God's love flows through us, we will be able to love everyone and reach out to others
 - Love will make the other fruit of the spirit to flow in us
- *Joy*: It comes from realizing that God is in control of our lives, no matter how bad the situation seems
- *Peace*: Is the consequence of trusting God and His promises, being aware that we are in God's hands, and that God will give us what we can handle and what is right for each one of us
 - It is being sure that God will never forsake us and that He will help and protect us
- *Longsuffering*: It is the ability to endure our own circumstances and be patient with others in any situation, because we trust that God is watching over us at all times
- *Kindness*: When the love of God starts to flow in us and the Holy Spirit is ignited in our hearts, we will be able to be kind to others; regardless of the situation. Only then will we be able to affect other people's lives and change their attitudes
- *Goodness*: It is to be good in everything we do and to everyone we meet. It is the quality that allows others to see God in us and lead them to repentance
- *Faith*: It is a complete trust in God's love; to feel His divine presence in our life, to witness His power, and to experience His work in us
- *Gentleness*: It is the willingness to help others with kindness and be willing to forgive their wrong doing or gently bring it to their attention in order for them to change their way rather than accusing them of wrong doing

- *Self-control*: It is when we believe with all our heart that we are in the presence of God all the time. It is His presence that protects us from committing any wrong act. It is also the ability to control some desires of the flesh and submit our life to God's plan and wisdom

Aquila and Priscilla were an amazing husband and wife couple at the time of St. Paul. Their love for and devotion towards God and others was demonstrated in their teamwork, obedience, and learning and teaching the word of God.

"So Apollos began to speak boldly in the synagogue, when Aquila and Priscilla heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately." (Acts 18:26)

- They knew the word of God and practiced it in their lives
- They provided a home for St. Paul (Act 18:1-2)
- They helped Apollos and explained to him the word of God more accurately (Act 18:26)
- Their heart was open to serve God and those in need
- In Romans 16:3-4, St. Paul says, *"Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their own necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles."*

That is what love in the Christian family should be all about: ready, willing, and able to serve the Lord anywhere, in any way, at any time, and at any cost.

"Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy, love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." (1 Corinthians 13:4-7)

- *Pray*: with all your heart and invite God to your heart and tell him that your wish is to serve Him, that you hope to change just one life (even if it is your own), and that you long to be part of His body
- *Read the Holy Bible*: in order to have intimacy with God and know His will for your life
- *Attend church and a Holy Bible study*: to come closer and closer to God as you get to know Him better and to ignite the Holy Spirit in your heart to guide you throughout life
- Follow God's plan: with love, understanding, and patience
 - Husbands- not only should husbands provide for their families, but also they should love their wives and children and be the spiritual guide and leader in the family
 - Wives- Although many wives are breadwinners these days, that does not change the foundation for the Christian family, where the wife should submit to, help, and respect her husband
 - Children- obey your parents and grow in God's love and knowledge
- *Work as a team*: This is one of the blessings of married life. For as a team, couples can share joy, compassion, strength, friendship, and also help each other through difficult times
- *Learn to be one*: This will happen when we accept the Holy Spirit as our guide and work as a team
 - Accept the other person the way they are and embrace it
 - Overlook small irritations, blemishes, and foolish acts
 - Respond with love and understanding
 - Look for potential rather than problems
 - Do not let unloving feelings creep into your marriage
 - Put the good of your spouse before your own
 - Understand that it is not your job to change each other, but rather to accept one another and love each other

unconditionally. Rely on the Holy Spirit to guide you to a better life

- *Serve others as a couple:* The true Christian love motivates us to do God's will. And it is God's love and grace that work in us to give us the power and the ability to accomplish our tasks. We must not forget that our priority is to serve each other and our family first before we can commit to anything else outside the family, because we want to have God's blessing in that service
- *How can we serve:* Serving others does not need any special skill. It only needs love, motivation and a heart to serve. Below are some examples of types of service:
 - Drive senior citizens to church, shopping, or doctor's appointments
 - Visit the sick
 - Babysit groups of children at the church
 - Clean the church
 - Serve in Sunday school

"Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armor of God that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil." (Ephesians 6:10-11)

When God commands us to love Him and to love each other, His promise is that the Holy Spirit will produce that love within us if we open our heart to Him and ask him for His blessing. By receiving His love, we will also experience the fruit of His love in our services.



Teach me O Lord

Teach me O Lord... Let me learn Your ways

Lead me O Lord... Let me do Your will

Search me O Lord... Cleanse all my sins

Love me O Lord... Let me love You

Part III Summary

It is always a delight to know that God is loving, kind, and absolutely a wonderful father. Also, He is just and fair.

“He is the rock, His work is perfect; for all His ways are justice, a God of truth and without injustice; righteous and upright is He.”
(Deuteronomy 32:4)

In the chapters of this part we learned that our spiritual life grows and becomes fruitful when we commit ourselves to getting to know the LORD and understanding His ways and will for us. As we read the Holy Bible and pray for this understanding, we develop a relationship with our Lord. This relationship helps us to recognize what is acceptable to Lord, the weaknesses in our life, and to upstain from immoral behavior that prevent us from getting close to God.

Throughout the pages of the Holy Bible we learn about many people who were committed to their relationship with God, were driven by their love for Him, and allowed Him to work through them, such as Daniel. Daniel sought God’s love and approval in every aspect of his life regardless of the outcome. Therefore, God was with Daniel and granted him many blessings.

“I thank You and praise You, O God of my fathers; You have given me wisdom and might, and have now made known to me what we asked of You, for You have made known to us the king’s demand.” (Daniel 2: 23)

People are divided into, at least, three groups when it comes to their relationships with God. There are many who feel delighted to see God’s work in them or through them and around them. They enjoy knowing that God is able to transform their life in a way they never thought possible. Others long to have a spiritual life and a relationship with God, but because they lack commitment and self-

control they fall into temptation and/or become lazy and do not nurture the relationship. The third group is those who are completely unaware that they are losing their spiritual and eternal life by their carelessness and self-reliance.

Therefore remember, God took the first step towards us and planned our salvation. Now the choice is ours whether we walk towards Him. Also, know and believe that God will do whatever it takes if He can see a small desire in your heart. He will hold you in His hands, He will work with you, He will strengthen you, and He will help you to let go of your laziness and stubbornness. He will also open your eyes to see and understand His will for you. It is up to you to yield to His hand and allow Him to work in you and through you.

May the Lord grant us the wisdom, the knowledge, and the will to get closer to Him. May He open the eyes of our hearts to see the benefits awaiting us by being touched by His love for us, His salvation that He freely gave to us, and His power that is able to defeat Satan and to set us free.



PART FOUR

Attaining a Spiritual Life

Guard your Heart against Pride

"And the Lord said to Moses: 'How long will these people reject me? And how long will they not believe me, with all the signs which I have performed among them?'" (Numbers 14:11)

God's amazing work has been clear and demonstrated throughout the Holy Bible. He made clear to us the many signs of His existence and His care for all His children. Unfortunately, many people refuse to submit to God's plan for them and are guided by their own pride. As children of God, we should learn to humble ourselves in front of the Lord by learning and applying what we learn from the Holy Bible.

Reading the Old Testament (OT) is a difficult read for many of us. This is because either we do not think that it is important or we do not clearly understand God's intentions and purpose of all the events in the OT. Moreover, in many of the stories and events of the OT we mistakenly, feel that the message of the OT does not relate to our modern lives. However, these are just stumbling blocks that we should not allow them to keep us from reading the Holy Bible.

We need to remember that the New Testament (NT) is the fulfillment of the OT. Therefore, it is important to study both the Old and New Testaments. In order to have the full benefits from the reading of the OT/NT, we must pray to God to ignite His Holy Spirit in our hearts and minds and to grant us His Grace to be able to understand the His messages to us. Eventually, we will find that the more we read, the more we gain a better understanding of God's words. And ultimately, we will reach the point where it is a delight to read and reread God's words to us and to meditate on them.

In the OT we often read about people and individuals who are full of wickedness and who refused to respect and/or obey God's commandments. We also read about God's anger and wrath towards His people for their sins. However, in order that we do not lose trust and faith in God's love for His Children, we must keep in mind the following when reading the Holy Bible.

- God is great (Psalm 145:3)
- God is love (1 John 4:8)
- God is powerful (Hebrews 12:29)
- God is faithful (1 Corinthians 1:9)
- God is full of wisdom (1John 3:20)
- God is unchangeable (Malachi 3:6)
- God is righteous (Psalm 129:4)
- God is full of goodness (Romans 2:4)
- God is just (Isaiah 45:21)

The Book of Genesis introduces us to God and how He created the universe and everything in it by His own power, creativity, and wisdom. We also learn about His love for human beings. After He fashioned the world, He made human beings in His image and gave them a free will.

"Thus the heaven and earth, and all the host of them, were finished. And on the seventh day God ended His work which he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done." (Genesis 2:1-2)

God placed Adam and Eve in charge of the Garden of Eden and had a covenant with them to not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:15-17). However, they did not honor the covenant, and instead, sinned against God. Consequently, they fell into condemnation and were ordered out of the garden. Many of us are often puzzled by how only one bite of an

apple could result in turning Adam and Eve's lives, and, by extension, our lives, upside down this way. From once a peaceful, beautiful, and flawless life to one that is dangerous, uncertain, and corrupt. But there are many questions that we should ask ourselves.

- Did God tempt them?
- Why did God punish them so harshly?
- Why did God allow evil to come to the garden?
- If Adam and Eve had a great relationship with God, why did they not call on Him when they were being tempted?
- Why did not Adam and Eve have children in the Garden of Eden?
- How can we resist temptation?
- Is everything truly in God's hand?
- Is God struggling to keep our chaotic world in order?

Today, we still wonder and ask the same questions. Sometimes, it is so hard to understand why God allows us to be tested and to be held accountable for our actions, although He loves dearly.

"Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding."(Job 38:4-7)

Before God created the earth, He created the angles, with Lucifer being the most beautiful of all angels. However, Lucifer was never content with his position. His heart was full of pride and a desire to be better than God. He wanted to take over God's throne. It was his pride that led to his downfall from heaven to the lowest depths of the pit (Ezekiel 28:12-14; Isaiah 14:12-19).

"God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble." (1 Peter 5:5)

In order to understand all of this we need to know the meaning of pride. Pride is the head of all sin and it is very deceiving

because it comes in many forms. We can have pride when we think highly of ourselves. For example we might think that we are:

- very humble
- not like other people
- quick learners
- capable of assuming more responsibilities
- well versed in God's words

Pride can keep man from seeking God's love, grace, help, and wisdom and make man perish rather than to admit that he is a sinner. St. Augustine wrote about pride that, "it is the commencement of all sin."

"Then the Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to tend and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man saying 'Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat. For in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.'" (Genesis 2:16-17)

God gave Adam and Eve everything on a platter. He loved them so much that He made them in His own image and gave them a free will. However, when God put Adam and Eve in charge of the Garden of Eden, it was through a covenant. He told them that they could eat from every tree but of the tree of knowledge of good and evil they "shall not eat" or they "shall surely die". Adam and Eve started their fall by misusing God's gift to them; the free will. They used their free will to break the covenant and to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil to be like God; pride! Their pride also led them to put themselves in danger by not asking God for help and support at the time of their weakness and temptation. They did not realize that God freely offers us His:

- Divine help
- Grace
- Mercy

- Salvation

Their pride was also manifest when they did not repent or ask for forgiveness after they sinned. Rather, Adam blamed Eve and Eve blamed the serpent. They both refused to accept responsibility and, consequently, they cheated themselves from a second chance with God.

Through these stories, God teaches us lessons that we be wise to learn and understand. If we are self-centered, disobedient, rebellious, unjust, and unrighteous or if we question God's ability, wisdom, and motives, we will not be able to understand God's ways. For without God's love, grace, and protection we do not stand a chance of being righteous. Reading the Holy Bible with this knowledge allows us to understand the reason(s) of why God was grieving, angry, full of wrath, and was willing to destroy mankind.

How do we guard ourselves against pride?

- Pray for God to help you and guard your heart
- Admit that you are short-sighted and cannot see the whole picture
- Know the kind of tricks that Satan can attack you with
- Trust in God's love and power
- Ask Him to show you His way
- Repent when sin gets in the way
- Learn how to use your talent for His glory
- Dedicate yourself to fulfill His purpose in you
- Submit to His plan for your life

"Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear." (Hebrews 12:28)

Finally, God is in control. He knows when our life will end and He knows our thoughts and sees our hearts. So do not let pride fill your heart. Instead, humble yourself in front of your creator, and He will grant you His blessings.



*Hear us O Lord
Your children are in fear my Lord
They don't know what to do
They've never experienced such things before
They yell and shout to You
They are waiting for a word from You
They know you're here with them
But
They don't know what You want them to do
Please calm the storm my Lord
And fill them with peace
So they may endure
All what will come in their way
Don't be afraid my child
For I am He
And I am never far away from you
Hold on to Me
Until you come home
And I will
Show you all My love for you
To the end I will be there with you*

Do Not Let the Past Rules Today

“Remember now your creator in the days of your youth; before the difficult days come, and the years draw near when you say, I have no pleasure in them.” (Ecclesiastes 12:1)

Most of us have some unresolved issues that happened at some point of our life, *“our past.”* Some of these past issues might be mistreatment by someone, a weakness we are struggling with, or inability to facing hidden temptation, among others. Almost all of us struggle internally with these issues and we either ignore their effect on our lives or pretend they do not affect us.. Until one day we are faced with the reality that we are unable to control our past and we no longer can hide from it. The more we insist on ignoring it or hiding it, the more we trapped and mentally and/or emotionally crippled by it. This internal struggle causes us to be angry, get revenge, or to lose hope.

When everything seems to be unclear and irresolvable, it is best to seek what is heavenly. God has given us many examples in the bible on how to deal with our internal struggles and these examples teach us how to deal with our own weakness.

“Then Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until the breaking of day. Now when he saw that he did not prevail against him, He touched the socket of his hip, and the socket of Jacob’s hip was out of joint as He wrestled with him.” And He said, ‘Let me go for the day breaks.’ But he said, ‘I will not let you go unless you bless me!’ So He said to him, ‘What is your name?’ he said, ‘Jacob.’ And He said, ‘your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed.’” (Genesis 32:24-28)

Our past can ruin or, at least, interfere with our present and future if we do not deal with it and allow it to rule our life. To avoid that, we must become aware of and acknowledge all the stumbling blocks to a good relationship with God and get rid of them instead of dwelling on the past and its issues.

Jacob was a man with many faults. For example, in one selfish act, he deceived his father Isaac, and cheated his brother Esau of the blessings by his father, which was his birthright as the elder son (Gen.27:27-28, 33-36). Jacob became very afraid of his brother and had to escape and leave his father's house. When he became greatly afraid for his life, he found God as His refuge and demanded His blessing.

“Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead.” (Philippians 3: 13)

Sometimes God will allow His children to go down and bottom out in order to pull them up and, hopefully, they choose to stay up. Some of us tend to collect unneeded items instead of regularly sorting through them and discarding the unwanted, such as magazines, books, papers, cloths...etc. Little by little we run of space. Again, instead of sorting and discarding, we box and hide the unwanted items and we forget about them. Until one day the hording becomes a stressful problem that needs to be dealt with. The same is true in our life. If we horde our past problems and do not deal with them, one day these problems may destroy our present and our future.

St. Paul is an excellent example of how to face, acknowledge, and deal with past issues and how not to let it

interfere with his present and future. St. Paul persecuted many Christians, but he did not allow his past to interfere with his future and his goal to walk with God. After he acknowledged his mistakes and wrong doing, he repented and sought to change the direction of his life and walk with God according to God's will and not his own. Therefore, his heart and mind were filled with the responsibility to evangelize everywhere he went and to tell his story in order to help others to overcome their weakness and past problems and come to God in order for them to be healed.

"Unto you I left up my eyes, O you who dwell in the heavens. Behold, as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their masters, as the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the Lord our God, until He has mercy on us." (Psalm 123: 1)

Let us not allow our hearts to be filled with anger or revenge against those people who have wronged us, but rather let us insist on doing what is right in the sight of God. Pray for those who have wronged intentionally or unintentionally and pray for yourself to have the grace to forgive, the wisdom to repent, and ability to get back on the right track, leaving all things to rest in God's hand. He will be the judge.

For we know Him who said, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay." and again, "the LORD will judge His people." (Hebrews 10:30)

In the story of Joseph, we clearly see God allowing Joseph to struggle for discrimination by his brother and injustice at work for many years. God used these circumstances to teach Joseph His ways, to strengthen him, to prepare him for the huge responsibility that was coming ahead, and to grant him His many blessings. The life of Joseph is a good example of a good servant of God, who did not dwell on or blame others for his struggles. Rather, he dedicated

his life to God whenever and wherever He led him and had had a thankful heart at all times.

“But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it this day, to save many people alive.” (Genesis 50:20)

Joseph did not seek revenge, even when he was able to. Instead of revenge and anger, he put the matter in God’s capable hands and let Him judge the people responsible for his suffering. Joseph also trusted that in God’s wisdom, there was a reason for all of what happened in his life.

“Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men.” (Romans 13: 17)

If you feel that your life is dark and you have no more light in you because of your past experience(s) and the old scar in your heart, let all the past issues rest in God’s hand and let the Holy Spirit do His work in you with mending, healing, and filling you with light. Give yourself a chance to start over with a new heart full of gratitude to God and mercy to everyone who wronged you, then you will be able to forgive and the past will no longer interfere with the present and/or the future.



Prayers

*It is not about the words I say
It is what I truly feel inside
It reminds me to be thankful
It allows God to see my tears
It brings me closer to God
It reminds me with all His great work in me
It protects me from doubts
It feeds my soul and mind
It reminds me of the Lord's presence
It awakens my faith
It lets me hear the voice of One I love
It makes me stay on the right track
It covers me in the day of my distress
Most of all
It makes my spirit grow and multiply
Thank you Lord for allowing me to pray to You*

Repentance Leads to a Joyful Life

“Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that the times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.” (Acts 3:19)

Repentance is an important part in Christian life. However, many of us are not aware of its importance and feel and/or think that it is humiliating to confess one's sins. Moreover, many of us do not see the connection between repentance and joy. We all sin, but if we ignore the sin and do not repent, this sin becomes a habit or an addiction and, eventually, we will become slaves to sin. When we are enslaved to sin and unable to free ourselves from its claws, we start to experience many negative feelings, such as weakness, frustration, guilt, and shame. Consequently, we will experience mourning, sorrow, and tears instead of joy.

“Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.” (James 5:16)

When we find ourselves enslaved to a sin that we cannot overcome or when we feel hopeless in any situation, we should remember that nothing is too hard for our Lord to fix. We just need to open our heart to Him and invite Him to take over. Then, He will guide us and help see the right path.

“... lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one....” (Matthew 6:13)

In the story of the Samaritan women in John 4:1-30, Jesus passed through Samaria and sat at Jacob's well at noontime while His disciples went to town to buy food. Was this a coincidence? Was He just passing by and happened to meet with this woman?

No, it was not a coincidence. Throughout our life many things happen at just the right time. We may attribute it to luck or coincidence, but when we are dealing with God and His plans to our life, these occurrences are never a coincidence. Rather, these so called luck or coincidences are the plan and the will of God in our life. In many ways, the story of the Samaritan woman affects each and every one of us. It teaches us so much about God's plan for each one of us and our choice to either accept or reject His plan for our life.

"A woman of Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink.' For His disciples had gone away into the city to buy food. Then the woman of Samaria said to Him, 'How is it that, you, being a Jew, ask a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?' For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans." (John 4:7-9)

Our Lord Jesus Christ came to the well at noon, for He knew that this soul was in need of salvation. No one comes to the well at the noon hour, but this sinful, Samaritan woman had chosen this hour to be alone at the well because she was an outcast and rejected by everyone in town. Jesus had compassion on her and did not treat her like everyone else. Instead, He spoke to her gently and that made her pour her heart out to Him. Moreover, Jesus Christ started the conversation with her because he knew that she would not start the conversation with Him. At the time of this story, the Jews considered the Samaritans Gentiles and had enmity with them. But Jesus did not consider her an enemy or an outcast. She was like all of us, a sinful person in need of love, acceptance, and salvation. Therefore, He asked her for a drink of water and gradually invited her to ask Him for the living water. She did not waste the opportunity. She asked for the living water and she received.

Jesus Christ never condemned her for living in sin, but instead He found a way to comfort her and praise her for telling the

truth about her living condition. Talking with the Lord and admitting the sin helped the Samaritan woman to see that He is not just any man passing by, but He is the Messiah. Suddenly she was filled with the living water in her spirit and she became full of zeal and eagerness to tell her story so others can have the same joy she had experienced. She left her jug of water (her earthly needs) in order to run and tell the whole town about the Messiah, inviting everyone to come and discover Him for himself or herself.

It was not impossible for a sinful woman to change her way and attitude and become one of Jesus Christ's followers. This is because when the Lord touches our heart, we feel something special that we have never experienced before. We long for this relationship and wish to submit our life to His will as if we are very thirsty and longing for a cold sip of water. Only then will we become the best we can be and have the true joy that comes from the heart.

"And behold, a woman in the city who was a sinner, when she knew that Jesus sat at the table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of fragrant oil, and stood at His feet behind Him weeping; and she began to wash His feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head; and she kissed His feet and anointed them with the fragrant oil." (Luke 7:37-38)

What a wonderful picture of a repentant soul; to give all she had to the One who is worthy of praise. This woman also, lived in sin all her life and was known for it by everyone in town. She was touched by the Lord's love and kindness. When she heard that Jesus Christ is at the Pharisee's house, although she was not invited, she went there because she wanted to see Him. Her intent was to come near to Him, showing Him what His presence in her life meant to her. She did not speak a word but her actions were enough to say it all, as it showed her ultimate love for her Savior.

Everyone watched her while she wept with sorrow and her tears of repentance flowed down His feet. Then she wiped His feet with her own hair as a sign of humility. Her kisses were filled with gratitude for His acceptance of her repentant heart. She anointed Him with the most expensive perfume that was paid for by the many sins that she had committed. And she poured it all out as a love offering to the one she desired to commit her life to for her many sins had been forgiven.

"I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see. As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent." (Revelation 3:18-19)

Sin will find a perfect home to come, grow, and multiply in if we allow it to invade our thoughts, hearts, and lives. So always be prepared to shut the door in the face of sin, and do not allow a few moments of pleasure to destroy your relationship with your Creator.

Remember that sin is like a thief stealing what belongs to God. By fasting and praying, you open the door for the Lord to cleanse your heart and give you light and grace to equip you to fight and stand firm against temptation. Most importantly, it allows you to remind yourself that there is nothing impossible for God, encouraging you to seek Him every chance you get.

Finally, may the Lord open our eyes to see the importance of repentance in our life with Him, to seek it with hope of forgiveness, and to gain a joyful life with Him.



*You are the one
You are the one my heart desires
I wish to gave You everything I have
My heart, my life, all my dreams, and my pain
To lead me to what is pleasing to You
To mold me in Your own image
And make me just like You
I wish You walk with me everywhere I go
And holding my hand all the way through
Only then
No matter where I go and what I face
I will not be worried or afraid
For
You are the only One who can
Lift me up and carry me through my day
You are the only One who can
Forgive my sin and iniquity*

The Attitude of Forgiveness

“And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you are sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ also forgave you.” (Ephesians 4:30-32)

Every now and then, we face unexpected situations that tend to complicate our lives. Most of these situations can be easily dealt with, such as not seeing “eye-to-eye” in a certain circumstance or a simple disappointment, etc. But because we are stubborn and filled with self-righteousness and pride, being right becomes more important than letting the problem slide in peace. Although we might think ourselves as godly and righteous people, not forgiving those who do us wrong makes the ungodly feelings grow and fester in our hearts. Eventually, the small problem becomes like a weed in the middle of a beautiful garden. If the gardener does not tend to it and take time to pluck it out and treat the soil beneath it, it will grow stronger, develop deeper roots, multiply, and will, eventually, ruin the rest of the garden.

Unfortunately, some people consider forgiveness to be a myth or a, at best, a wonderful idea. Others think it is an impossible thing to do and it is easier to be angry and get even with someone than to forgive. Forgiving to them means you are weak, or you have to give up all your rights, and/or you have to ignore the hurt you feel. On the other hand, some people may only forgive minor things, but not major things. Therefore, we must examine how God goes about forgiveness. God does not differentiate between small or big

sins. God will forgive all of our sins if we come to Him, acknowledge and confess our trespasses, and repent from these sins.

It is normal for human beings to experience different kinds of feelings, especially sadness and joyfulness. And it is very hard to ignore the pain and suffering one might go through in situations of abuse, violence, death of a loved one, among others. What we need is to acknowledge and respect our feelings and give pain the space and time needed for healing. We also should not allow ourselves to be swallowed up and choked by the thorns of pain and suffering because of our pride and resentment, but we can overcome these negative feelings of hurt, pain, and suffering through forgiveness.

In many instances we not only have grudges against each other, but also against God if:

- God does not grant us our wishes
- We lose a loved one
- We lose our job, business, or fortune
- We are facing a hardship

In these situations, many of us go through so many negative emotions; holding a grudge, resentment, bitterness, disappointment, etc. and, more importantly, sadness, pain, and suffering. We waste our time and energy in conflicts and frustration, and sadly, may end up with many health problems. Most of all, we allow small or relatively small problems to separate us from the Lord and others. However, if we practice forgiveness, we may overcome pain and replace it with peace and joy. In this case, pain might be an instrument to make us stronger mentally and spiritually.

Because of our pride and self-righteousness, one of the hardest things we can do at home, at work, and at church, is to be able to look at others and:

- Say "I am sorry, forgive me"
- See the best in others
- Give others the benefit of the doubt
- Swallow our pride
- Remember that the Lord forgave us first
- Humble ourselves
- Change our attitude
- Change our expectations
- Open ourselves to other opinions
- Seek God's love first

"And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses." (Mark 11:25-26)

In the parable of the unmerciful servant (Mathew 18:23), Jesus drew for us a clear picture of forgiveness. The parable describes a servant who owed his king ten thousand talents and he could not pay him back. The king was kind, compassionate, and forgave his servant his debt. That same ungrateful servant turned around and demanded that his fellow servant, who owed him a much smaller debt, to pay him in full. When the fellow servant asked for mercy and forgiveness because he could not pay his debt, the ungrateful servant put him in prison. When the king heard what happened, he called the ungrateful servant, scolded him, and put him in prison until he paid his debt in full.

Jesus taught that when we pray we should say, "... Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us..." How can we ask God to forgive our faults, iniquities, and all our wrong doings, and at the same time we hold grudges in our heart against our friend, neighbor, or family and do not forgive them?

Moreover, how can we ask the same friend, neighbor, or family member to forgive us if we do not forgive them first? And how would life at home, church, office, or the street would look like if we do not forgive each others? That is why Jesus gave us what is known as “*The Golden Rule*. ”

“So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.” (Matthew 7:12)

There are many reasons why it is best to forgive and let go of pain, sadness and frustration. For example, forgiveness will:

- End the cycle of hurt and resentment
- Help us rise above vengeance and rage
- Teach us to fight for the voice that is telling us the right from wrong
- Stop us from hurting ourselves and others
- Help the Holy Spirit to work in us
- Bring harmony to our spirit in the midst of painful feelings and grief

To overcome hurt and grudges we need to:

- Escape to a quiet place. There is always a way out when we put our heart to work to hear the soft spoken words God says to our inner spirit.
- Listen to a good word of advice from a wise friend, family member, or a clergy. This might help us hear the truth and open our eyes to new possibilities and perspective that can bring us to a peaceful and comfortable solution.
- Know that you need to have an active role and to take some actions to solve the problem. It is your forgiveness!
- Ask yourself the following questions: why do I keep avoiding the problem? What do I seek for myself? How can I look at the situation from a different perspective? How can I solve the problem?

- Reflect and pray about the problem
- Ask God to invite you back to His flock
- Ask God to help and guide you by presenting your case in front of Him with sorrow and repentance
- Remember that in order to forgive you will need:
 - To be brave
 - Determination
 - Positive thinking
 - A loving heart

"Then Peter came to Him and said 'Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.'" (Mathew 18:21-22)

God in His mercy towards us forgives us continually and He expects His children to follow His example. Do not waste your time and energy hating, fighting, and isolating yourself for love cannot live or grow in hard soil. Instead, focus on your main goal and invite the Lord to work in you and He will pull you up every time you are in need. He will give you many blessing from the Holy Spirit to strengthen you and to heal your wounds.



What we learned about forgiveness

*Without love in your heart
you cannot appreciate each moment
it is easy to invite grudges
but your heart will be filled with hate*

*Blessing only comes from God
will make you blossom through the storm
rejoice through pain and suffering
praise the Lord in the midst of darkness*

*In this life there is always something to be learned
something to improve on
something you can expect to happen
so... be prepared and be faithful to the end*

Growing our Relationship with God

“For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding. That you may have a walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.”

(Colossians 1: 9-10)

Growing and enhancing our relationship with God requires, time, energy, effort, and commitment to make successful and pleasing to God. These ingredients are required for any other earthly successful relationship between spouses, family, friends, and colleagues. Although many of us wish that our relationship with God grow, many of us do not or will not put in the effort needed for this relationship. Instead, many of us complain about the difficulty in having and maintaining a relationship with God. In doing so, we really do miss. The blessings (e.g. unconditional fatherly love, joy, peace ...etc) that come from a commitment to grow one's relationship with God far exceed any difficulty in growing and maintaining this relationship. These blessings make life bearable and peaceful in the midst of tribulations. *“Now he who plants and he who waters are one. And each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor.”* (1 Corinthians 3:8)

God desires to have a very close relationship with us. He wants to be a father to us; not any father, but a father who died for His sons and daughters. But in order for this relationship to happen, God allows to pass through different tests according to each one's ability. This testing sometimes feels like going to a doctor's office, which, sometimes, can be uncomfortable. In most cases, the doctor

will order some diagnostic tests, such as blood work, X-ray, MRI ... etc. But in order to know the status of our health and whether we need treatment, we must endure the visit and the tests. Then the doctor might suggest that we need to have medicine or to have surgery or we need to avoid certain types of food to cure our systems. God is the doctor of our heart and soul. He knows our hearts, but He allows us to be tested so we can examine ourselves and know where we stand in our relationship with Him.

“Then Jesus entered and passed through Jericho. Now behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus who was a chief tax collector, and he was rich. And sought to see who Jesus was, but could not because of the crowd, for he was of short stature. So he ran ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see Him, for He was going to pass that way.” (Luke 19: 1-4).

The story of Zacchaeus is one of the stories that illustrate for us the different stages of spiritual life. Many of us would like to know about God and maybe see Him, but from a distance! They look from afar, they read, study the scripture, listen to many sermons and they may also talk about God, but they never experienced a true relationship with Him.

“And when Jesus came to the place, He looked up and saw him, and said to him, Zacchaeus, make haste and come down, for today I must stay at your house. So he made haste and came down, and received Him joyfully.” (Luke 19: 5-6)

When our Lord Jesus Christ saw that Zacchaeus had the curiosity to know Him, He came and invited him to come down and meet Him face to face. This is the time when God asks us to go to the deep, to be committed to follow Him, and act as children of God. Many will refuse to come down and many will run away, but here we see that Zacchaeus did the right thing and received our Lord

and Savior in his home, obeyed the Lord (he came down and welcomed Christ in his home), and grew to the next level of his spiritual life.

“But when they saw it, they all murmured, saying, He has gone to be a guest with a man who is a sinner.” (Luke 19: 8)

There are few very important points that we want to consider:

- We all are human beings and, hence, we all are sinners. There is no such thing as a perfect person. Therefore, the argument/accusation of the Pharisees are invalid
- Walking with God is not going to shield us from tribulations and criticism. Zacchaeus immediately ran into worldly problems when he accepted Christ
- After choosing the narrow road to follow Christ, some will try to persuade us or make it very hard for us to continue on that road

“Then Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord look, Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor, and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore fourfold.” (Luke 19: 8)

When the eyes of Zacchaeus’s heart were opened, he felt a great desire to be with our Lord Jesus Christ and that moved him to another level of his spiritual life. Zacchaeus chose to repent and do what is right in the sight of God, becoming obedient to Him in everything.

“When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things.” (1 Corinthians 13: 11)

Although Zacchaeus was a tax collector and became very rich by dishonesty and adding undue financial burden on the people, he followed a pattern that led to growth in his spiritual life and to his salvation.

- He heard about Jesus Christ and he did not ignore the news (level 1); instead
- He wanted to see Him, so he went ahead of the crowd to wait for Jesus (level 2)
- He did not allow obstacles to prevent him from seeing Jesus (level 3), so he climbed the sycamore tree
- He waited for Jesus and was attentive to what Jesus will say or do (level 4)
- He obeyed and came down from the tree when Jesus called him (level 5)
- When Jesus told him He wants to come to his house, he agreed and welcomed Him (level 6)
- When he had Jesus in his house and sat next to Him, his eyes were opened and he saw and acknowledged his sins and wrong doing (level 7)
- He vowed to correct the wrongs in his life to the best of his ability (level 8)

Knowing God brings so much joy in our hearts and leads us to great faith in Him, and faith will lead us into intimacy with Him. Therefore, never miss the opportunity to be part of God's family.

We cannot fathom or understand the depth of God's love towards us; His children. Imagine a mother who is expecting a child. Usually, she is joyful that her baby will be born soon. Throughout pregnancy she makes lists for all the preparations needed to welcome her newborn; books, toys, bottles, clothes, towels, etc. She is usually full of enthusiasm, anticipation and love. She will dream about all the things that she will do with her baby and all the beautiful moments that she will spend with him or her. Now imagine what the child will feel when the loving arms of his/her mother is seen for the first time, arms that will care for him/her and fulfill all his/her needs and desires. The baby will certainly respond with love, trust, and a thankful heart. He/she will

also be longing for the mother's arms, voice, and care. The baby will be attentive to her, will run to her every anytime she is needed. Then he/she will show thankfulness and obedience.

That is how God feels about each and every one of us. Each one is very precious and special to Him. God wants to pour His love and care on each one of us and help us to mature to the person that we ought to be so that in the end, we can have life and a special relationship with Him. In response to His great love and care, as babies, we must respond by love, trust, obedience and thankfulness.

Jesus said to him, *“you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it, “you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”* (Matthew 22:37-39).

Growing with God is exactly the same. We start by understanding what He went through because of His love for us, and by believing that He loves us, He died for us, and that He wants to be part of our lives in order to lead us into salvation. We get to know Him better and have a simple conversation with Him. The more we love Him and trust Him, the more we depend on Him, obey Him, and want to be pleasing to Him.



My Father

*My Father's love never fails to comfort me
He is always there for me
He is always there to give me abundant love
To comfort me when I am lost in confusion
To hold my hand when I am drowning in sorrow
My Father's love never fails to comfort me
He is always there for me
To touch my heart when it is full of agony
To wipe my tears when I no longer can
To grant me a smile in the middle of my worry
My Father's love never fails to comfort me
He is always there for me
To whisper in my ear when I am in need for a kind word
To open my eyes when I no longer can see
To turn my triumphs into to a blessing for me
My Father's love never fails to comfort me
He is always there for me*

Sin and Spiritual Blindness

"Now as Jesus passed by, He saw a man who was blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, saying, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' Jesus answered, 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him.'" (John 9:1-3)

Our Lord Jesus Christ, clearly, stated that there was no correlation between physical infirmity (blindness in this case) and the sins of this man and/or the sins of his parents. Therefore, birth defects and physical infirmities are not due to spiritual weakness or sin; because we are all born in sin.

However, some physical suffering can happen due to our life style: Such as excessive drinking that can damage the liver and may lead to accidents; addiction to street drugs or pain killers that can alter brain functions, may cause HIV or hepatitis, and may also lead to accidents; and sexual promiscuity that can lead to venereal diseases and/or HIV aids.

Moreover, God may allow physical infirmities and suffering to:

- Purify our sins: God in His love for His children sometimes allows physical suffering in order to open our eyes so we can see and recognize the narrow road that leads us back to Him. Like gold that requires high heat to make it pure
- Bring us; His children even closer to Him. The more we get closer to our Lord Jesus Christ through praying, fasting, repentance, reading His word, and partaking of the Holy communion, the more we go through the test of faith and

endurance, which sometimes require physical suffering to bring us or our loved ones closer to the Lord

On the other hand, there is spiritual infirmities and blindness, which are caused by our sins. This can happen to anyone who refuses to accept God in his/her heart, those who are selfish or full of pride, and those who have no love and kindness toward others. The Pharisees are the perfect example of the spiritually infirmed. They were spiritually blind and did not see Christ's amazing work. They were spiritually deaf and did not hear His teaching and how the law has been fulfilled in Him. They were spiritually mute and could not speak the truth. Instead, they condemned and tried to find faults in God's work and in those who followed Christ. They harden their hearts and filled it with hate and envy and, consequently, their choices prevented them from experiencing God's amazing work and love around them.

"Do not withhold Your tender mercies from me, O Lord; Let your loving kindness and your truth continually preserve me."
(Psalm 40:11)

The world around us is full of troubles and sin, but it also has Christ and His children who reflect His love and goodness in their life. However, sometimes we go through moments of doubt and moments of faith and life seems to be like a roller coaster that is hard to control. Now, imagine you are driving on a major highway in a large city. What you see is tall buildings, too many large or small cars, signs, people ...etc. Now imagine that you are on an airplane flying above the same city. The same things that appeared so big become very tiny objects that have no significance. This is what happens when we are away from God; everything seems big and complicated. But when God is right there with us, every trial, sacrifice, and suffering seems to be insignificant. When we are in the airplane we are separated from the city and its noise. When God

is in our life He carries us on His hands and goes between us and the city. So what is so big and complicated in the city becomes small and insignificant when God takes control and carries us in His hands.

“He will feed His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom, and gently lead those who are with young.” (Isaiah 40:11)

In every trial we go through, our Lord teaches us a lesson. One of the most important lessons we all have to learn is that sin is everywhere in this world and there is no way to avoid it. We all have imperfections, but we will always have two choices:

- Keep our eyes open and fixed on the Lord and this will make us:
 - Struggle to make things right
 - Develop fear and love of God's word
 - Do not cover up our wrong doings
 - Do not use empty excuses for our lack of commitment to our relationship with God
 - Demand accountability
 - Strive to do better and get closer to God
 - Acknowledge, rebuke and correct any sinful act on our part
 - Confess our sins and repent frequently
 - Hold on to our faith and be patient in the time of trial or tribulation
- Turn away from the Lord:
 - Blame God
 - Have doubts about God's goodness, judgment, and love
 - Damage and ignore our relationship with God
 - Distrust everyone
 - Continue in our wickedness
 - Lose our innocence towards sin
 - Question everything pure and godly
 - Our conscience becomes insensitive

- Give up trying to be faithful
- Become self-centered
- Then death will be the consequence of our separation from God

It is up to us to choose which road we will take. When we decide that spiritual consequences are no longer a consideration, we are running the risk of damaging our relationship with God and allowing sin to take control of our life.

"Why do the wicked live and become old, yes, become mighty in power? Their descendants are established with them in their sight, and their offspring before their eyes. Their houses are safe from fear, neither is the rod of God upon them. Their bull breeds without failure; their cow calves without miscarriage. They send forth their little ones like a flock, and their children dance. They sing to the tambourine and harp, and rejoice to the sound of the flute. They spend their days in wealth, and in a moment go down to the grave. Yet they say to God, 'Depart from us, for we do not desire the knowledge of Your way.'" (Job 21:7-14)

Does that sound like a question you wonder about?

There are different things that we need to consider:

- God may give the wicked some grace and mercy in the hope that they see God's blessings and repent
- God gives some earthly grace to everyone, including those who choose earthly comfort instead of a relationship with Him. But in addition to earthly grace, He gives His children a life with Him
- Satan will try to use this to attract us to leave our godly life and follow his plan

In the Holy Bible we see many examples of that. Jesus Christ has been tempted by the devil (Matthew 4:1-11), and He tells

us "*For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his own soul.*" (Matthew 16:26) Without suffering and darkness, we will never appreciate the light. If we approach our lives with this attitude, it will make appreciate and accept our lives the way it is. If we succeed in taking this crucial step and change the way we see and think about things and circumstances, then everything will work together for our good, whether the outcome is good or bad, health or sickness.

Let us not be blind to the truth. Instead, let us be eager to learn more about our Heavenly Father and change our attitude to be able to see the blessings in our life. When our spiritual eyes are opened, our physical eyes will be opened too. Then we will be able to see the bigger picture. That we are on earth for a short time, serving God is the priority in our life, and suffering is a small price to pay for our salvation and purification to make us worthy to spend eternity with the Lord.



*I Am All Yours
When God opened my eyes
To see all His goodness in me
There was nothing left to see
For ...
He is the one ...
Who created every part in my being
He is the one...
Who breathed the first breath in me
He is the one...
Who gave me my sight to see
My voice to speak
My ears to hear
He is the one...
Who taught my body the way it should be
He is the one...
Who inserted the seed of love in my heart
He is the one...
Who bestowed His gifts one by one on me
What an amazing thing to see
That I have no hand in me
And
To know that all I have is His*

Part III Summary

The purpose of part four was to discuss ways and methods that can help us attain a spiritual life and/or improve our relationship with the Lord.

- We discussed how to guard our heart against pride by submitting our life to the will of God with humility and obedience. Moreover, we need to study the scripture and pray to God to ignite His Holy Spirit in our hearts, so we can see and acknowledge God's helping hands, grace, mercy, and salvation in our lives. Abraham, Joseph, David, and Daniel never allowed their wealth, fame or wisdom to separate them from God.
- We talked about not letting the wounds and pain of the past to influence or affect our life today by allowing God to mend and heal our old scar and give us a new heart that although it might not forget the wound, but will be able to forgive it and move on to live a peaceful and joyful life. Jacob's and St. Paul's past had many faults and transgressions, but they never allowed it to affect their future life and relationship with God.
- Repentance was another way to attain or improve our spiritual life for it will ignite the Holy Spirit to work in us, will fill us with many virtues, and will guide our steps in our walk with God. When the Samaritan women met face-to-face with our Lord Jesus Christ, she never looked back. But filled with a river of living water, she ran and told everyone to come and see the Lord.
- Forgiveness is one of the works of the Holy Spirit in us. Once we submit our heart to God, He will help us not to be filled with bitterness, anger, or grudges, but rather we will be able to forgive and pray for those who wrong us. The unmerciful servant could not forgive his fellow servant although he was

forgiven by the master. Therefore he was judged by the merciful master and was put in jail.

- God can grant us to grow in the spirit and walk with Him when we show the desire to have a close relationship with Him and others. Such close relationship will need tending; therefore, once we stop complaining and being lazy in our spiritual life, we will experience the joy and blessings of having a close relationship with God. Jacob sought this close relationship with God. God responded by blessing Jacob.
- Finally, avoiding a life style that can separate us from God by avoiding sinful acts and instead acquiring the life of purity. We might get hurt a little in this process for purification, like purification of gold in high heat. However, at the end we will qualify to be called children of God.

May the lord enlighten us and make us able to walk with Him. May His peace fill our hearts now and forever.



PART FIVE

What will God Say?

I Am God and there is No Other

“Look to Me, and be saved, all you ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other, I have sworn by Myself; the word has gone out of My mouth in righteousness, and shall not return, that to Me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall take an oath.” (Isaiah 45: 22-23)

Our God is an amazing God, He created us and brought us to life but He never demanded that we have to follow Him. Instead He gave us freewill to choose our own destiny and to decide how we want to live.

Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ lived on earth with a holy heart and without any sin or blemish. Many people loved Him and followed Him, whereas many others hated Him, were jealous of Him, and wanted to destroy Him. Jesus Christ was never prideful or self-righteous and He never hated those who wanted to crucify Him. On the contrary, despite of everything, He loved and served everyone unconditionally.

When we look at Christ and His character we wonder whether if we can follow His steps or if it is even possible for us to be Christ-like. We find that transformation to that level of purity will be far beyond our abilities and seemingly impossible.

Most of us have the desire to make many changes in our life and to be Christ-like. We talk to each other about these changes and we dream about achieving them. Year after year, we make many New Year's resolutions or many promises here or there. But, in most cases, these changes either remain as just a desire to change or

just a dream, because we do not have the motivation, the willpower, and the determination to go through that difficult road and to win the battle and become Christ-like. Our commitments to God, ourselves, and to others are very weak because of the busy lives we lead, laziness, and the many excuses of why we cannot change.

To achieve the changes we desire and dream about to be Christ-like, we must reprogram our minds to make positive choices and to leave our old habits behind. This reprogramming starts by praying and submitting ourselves and our will to Him. Consequently, changes will start happening, slowly, but surely. Then, the more we improve, the more we want to improve some more and our lives will become a series of continuous achievements. But changes always take time because our old habits, although we wish to change them, are familiar to us and, sometimes, we consider them to be our “*comfort zone*.” That make us scared to let them go and to start over. But the Bible teaches us:

“As obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the lusts, as in your ignorance; but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct. Because it is written, ‘Be holy, for I am Holy.’” (1 Peter 1:14-16)

Amazingly, the first word an infant learns is “No” before he/she even knows its meaning. Somehow we are attracted to this word no matter how old we are and how educated and successful we might be. The word “No” gives us the feeling and sense that we are in control, and that is very satisfying to many of us. Wanting to be in control is one of our main human problems. We leave God out of our lives and assume His role; that causes many unhappy and undesired consequences.

Because of our self-consciousness or our big egos, we tend to hide ourselves behind many masks for we do not want others to

see our imperfection. We also hide what we feel and pretend we are happy and satisfied and, consequently, this make believe life leads to many bad habits, addictions, and depression. Instead of dealing with our problems, we hide them deeper or we develop resistance to the change; the cure. Consider for example a person who has an infection and needs a special antibiotic to cure it. If he is not compliant in taking his medication, the infection will spread, his body will become weaker and weaker, and he will develop resistance to this antibiotic. On the other hand, if he takes his antibiotic as prescribed, the infection will be cured. It might take time depending on the scope and severity of the infection, but will be cured. Same in our Christian life, if we do not follow the instructions of how to change, we will end up losing hope, losing trust, and having a weakened resolve to try again.

In order to overcome the obstacles and fear that come with the change, we need to acknowledge that God is the only one in control, that He is the one who has the perfect plans for our lives, and that we are in need of His direction. If we do not acknowledge these facts, we will live in fear of letting anyone get closer to us and finding out our true nature or will become frustrated because almost nothing seems to go as we planned.

The serpent promised Adam and Eve that they would be equal to God if they eat from the forbidden tree. Adam and Eve wanted to be equal to God and they saw the opportunity to achieve that if they follow the serpent's plan. Instead of living in peace and harmony with God in the Garden of Eden when they were following God's plan, they became afraid and felt naked and ashamed when they followed the serpent's plan to be equal to God. When they heard God's voice, they hid themselves, and consequently, became separated from God and were exiled from the Garden of Eden.

“So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave her husband with her, and he ate.” (Genesis 3:6)

When we humble ourselves we can see the hand of God every day in our lives and we can see His marvelous plan for each one of us. Through continuous prayers for the ability to submit to the will of God in our lives and for wisdom, and through perseverance and determination to change, we can overcome many problems and step by step we get closer and closer to God. Moreover, we will be true to ourselves and others and will have no need to hide behind any mask.

The story of the prodigal son is one of the best examples of ego and self-reliance. This man grew in a home filled with love, rules, kindness, riches, etc., but because of his ego and immaturity, he thought he was able to decide what was good for him without checking with his father who loved him dearly. He needed to be in control to satisfy his ego, but ended up lacking and miserable. Luckily, he was saved in the end by his loving father when he acknowledged his mistakes and humbled himself and returned to his father's house. But how many people do not take this step and come back to their fathers? This is a great lesson for us to learn without attempting to try it because we might end up wishing to eat the pods the pigs' eat, as the prodigal son, if we stay away from our Father in heaven.

“Then He said: ‘A certain man had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the portion of goods that falls to me.’ So he divided to them his livelihood. And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, journeyed

to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with prodigal living.” (Luke 15: 11-13)

Transformation does not come easily. It is a life-long process of admitting need, free choices, determinations, planning, and diligent prayers. Learning to praise and honor the Lord for any changes we might achieve will teach us to see His hand in everything around us and to encourage us to press on to the next level of understanding and maturity.

“Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” (1 Corinthians 10: 31)



Words for the thought

*When will I say I am Yours
When will my heart belong to You
When will I rejoice when I think I am coming back to You
So
God whispered and said ...
My love for you will lead you to My way
My Holy Spirit will cleanse you all day
My Holy Bible will teach you all about Me
My Body and my Blood will make you one with Me
Then ...
The road of knowledge and wisdom will be granted
The your heart will be transformed
Your mind will have one goal, which is to do My will
Then ...
Gradually you will be able to free yourself from any
distractions
Gradually you will discover the mystery that is hidden
Gradually the inner eyes will start seeing
And now ...
You can call yourself a child of God*



PART Six

My experience with God

I have been pondering what should I write and share in this chapter. My thoughts took me far away and opened a door for me to think about how my life then and now.

“For You have formed my inward parts; You have covered me in my mother’s womb. I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; marvelous are Your works, And that my soul knows very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was in secret, And skillfully wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. Your eyes my substance, being yet unformed and in Your book they all were written, the days fashioned for me. When as yet there were none of them.” (Psalm 139: 13-16)

What can I say to express my love for Lord when I look back and read these verses? I firmly believed in those words ever since I was a young girl and I still believe in them today. Life has not been easy for me. I struggle daily to make life appear normal to those who do not know me closely. Due to lack of resources, many responsibilities and immaturity, my mother tried to miscarry. To achieve that, the doctor gave her too many large doses of hormonal therapy. It is a miracle that I am alive and without birth defects. However, these high doses of hormones made me suffer from many health problems throughout the years. But I am grateful!

Lord: when you held me so tight in my mother’s womb and did not let go of me, You saved my body and soul from destruction. For I am your precious daughter and You did not let go of me!

The Lord became an integral part of my life at very young age. Although I was not a churchgoer when I was a young girl, yet I remember talking to the Lord about everything, trying to do the

right things, and feeling sad when others do not respect His words. Amazingly, even at a very young age, I felt that what happened to me did not affect my relationship with others. On the contrary, it gave me strength, made me more sensitive to people's problems and troubles, and made me give people the benefit of doubt. After all, we are all humans, we are full of faults, and we are learning something every day, mostly through trials and errors. I believe, pray, hope, and wish that these trials will change our life and we become a better people, friends, sisters, brothers, moms, or dads.

Since my very young age, I never had a year that was without trials. I suffered from one health problems after the other almost on a yearly basis. My mom would become frustrated with all my health problems and would ask me "why are you losing weight, why are you not eating, or why are you forgetful?" I had no answer to any of her questions and I remember looking up and asking God what is wrong with me Lord? But I received no answer. I did feel sad and frustrated sometimes, but I did not let any of these things to affect me. My mom took me to this doctor and that, but treatment did not improve my conditions.

Fear is also a big part of my life. I was lost when I was very young and my parents found me at the police station. Since then, I developed fear of everything: the dark, insects, stray cats and dogs, and the thought that I might get sick or be lost again. To overcome my forgetfulness, I adopted the technique of writing everything a few times or making diagrams in order to remember. This helped me go through school and exams.

But not everything in my past was hardships. We lived in an apartment building in Cairo, Egypt. Both sets of my grandparents, and my uncles and aunts lived in the same building. It was fun to live with my loving parents and brothers and be surrounded by close

family members. We also owned an apartment in Alexandria, Egypt on the Mediterranean Sea, where we spent our summer vacations on the beach with friends and family. As you can see, growing up was a mixed bag of good and bad due to my frequent sicknesses and my forgetfulness. However, I was determined to learn new things, help others, make use of every talent I have, no matter how small or trivial, and not to let anything hinder me.

Getting married and moving to Canada was the turning point in my life. I discovered that I can learn anything I want at any time I wish. Slowly, I started to attend church and hear more about God. But I was too busy with my new, young family, having young children at home, and my new determination to learn something new every year. I was too busy to think of or pay attention to my spiritual life. When we moved to the United States my children were getting older and we started to go to church regularly. I was asked to teach Sunday school, and I accepted thinking that I can make the children happy and I can do many art projects with them, but never really considered their spiritual lives or mine. But, the more I read about the Lord as I was preparing my Sunday School lessons, the more I felt that I was lacking the knowledge, the spiritual depth and, therefore, unworthy to teach Sunday school. I decided to quit teaching Sunday school and concentrated on teaching my children and myself how to acquire the Christian virtues we were learning about in class and how to grow spiritually in the knowledge of the Lord. So I would be able to tell my son not to fight with his peers, but rather to stay away from troubles, and give people the benefit of doubt, allow room for forgiveness, and to pray for them.

I went back to school and became a teacher. Between my personal life and my work as a Montessori teacher, I started to learn more about God and recognized that He takes good care of each and

every one, because each one is very special to Him. The more I paid attention, prayed, read the Holy Bible, and meditated every night on my day, the more I saw that the hands of God were around me and covering me. This motivated me to get to know Him better and to try harder to please Him and live according to His will.

Tribulations did not stay away from my life because I grew closer to God. However, as I was getting to know the Lord, my perception changed regarding tribulations. I started to learn that a new virtue or a new blessing maybe learned or gained through tribulations, if I thankfully accepted His will in my life. This led me to thank God for both the hard and easy times in my life. And eventually, I welcomed Him in my life and asked Him to teach me how to recognize and accept His will for my life without murmuring. In doing that I was set free and was no longer a hostage to tribulations, instead, I overcame and prevailed over them, regardless how hard they were.

"O God, my heart is steadfast; I will sing and give praise, even with my glory. Awake, lute and harp! I will awaken the dawn. I will praise You, O Lord, among the peoples. And I will sing praises to You among the nations. For Your mercy is great above the heavens, and Your truth reaches to the clouds." (Psalm 108:1-4)

Our mighty God is waiting for each one of us to look up to Him, spend time with Him, and have a conversation with Him. Let us not wait any longer or be swept away by the waves of the world. Instead, let us wake up from our sleep and count our days, which are few, and commit to change our lives. God loves our intimate moments with Him. During these moments, He gives us the insight about what is hidden deep inside our hearts. Therefore, it is very important that we spend quality time with Him and ask Him to enlighten our hearts and soul and make us able to open our hearts

completely to Him even though He already knows what is inside of us.

When God is an important part of our daily life, we will better understanding the Holy Bible when we read it, we will be better able to face our problems, and we will have the wisdom to know what is appropriate and acceptable according to the will of God. Therefore instead of murmuring and/or complaining that God never listens or has no time for us, let us take the initiative and make time for Him and insist in prayers on getting answers. Then you will ultimately discover that God was right there beside you all along and we were the ones busy with many things. When we commit our hearts, minds, eyes, ears, and mouth to God He will bless our senses. He will fill our hearts with love towards Him and other. He will give us better understanding of the word of God and of our situation. We will be able to see Him and recognize His voice. And finally, we will be able to thank Him and sing His praises. The more we grow in our spiritual walk with God, the more sensitive our senses will be attuned to Him.

There are many ways that we can improve our way of life such as:

1. Accepting our mistakes

"And when Jesus came to the place, He looked up and saw him, and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, make haste and come down, for today I must stay at your house.' So he made haste and came down, and received Him joyfully." (Luke 19:5-6)

Zacchaeus made up his mind that he must see our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ face to face no matter what he had to do in order to achieve this goal. He did not care what others would say about him. That is why our Lord called on him to become one of His followers. Zacchaeus saw a clear vision of God's mercy and love and responded with mercy to everyone who had falsely accused

him. And we, as sinners, must do exactly the same. We must admit, confess, repent, and reject our sins in order to invite God into our hearts so He can come, restore and renew us again.

2. Create new habits

"Then He went into the temple and began to drive out those who bought and sold in it." (Luke 19:45)

The way we conduct our lives is a sequence of habits. These habits will determine the way our life will be. Our body is the temple of God and when we commit ourselves to inviting God back into our lives, we must gradually clear our thoughts, behavior, and actions from the bad habits we have accumulated throughout the years and replace them with good habits. The way we acquire good habits is by filling our thoughts with good things such as reading the Holy Bible on a regular basis, praying, attending church, helping others, and avoiding things that invite bad thoughts. We must acknowledge and be patient with our limited abilities and with ourselves.

3. Learn to experience every moment and be thankful

"Enter into His gates with thanksgiving, and into His courts with praise. Be thankful to Him, and bless His name. For the Lord is good; His mercy is everlasting, and His truth endures to all generations." (Psalm 100:4-5)

Be thankful and rejoice for the simple things in life, such as a sunny morning, a friendly smile, a child's hug, etc. Thankfulness comes from being determined to see the world with a new vision. This vision will allow us to see the hands of God in everything around us, enable us to laugh at our mistakes and to consider them lessons that can help us improve ourselves, and to see that difficult times as growing periods, a way to gain blessings, or just a temporary setback.

4. Wake up every morning with a new purpose

"And all things, whatever you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive." (Mathew 21:22)

When the Holy Spirit is ignited in our hearts, our attitude about life will change because we have a purpose to get up every morning and do the will of God. This purpose is to serve the Lord in any way we can at home, work, and church. We will never run out of finding new goals in our life. The positive attitude we show wherever we are will attract many people to the One who gives us that attitude and in return will fill our days with many blessings.

5. Accept everyone the way they are instead of being judgmental

"Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the same measure you use, it will be measured back to you." (Mathew 7:1-2)

We live in a society that thrives on gossip and judging others by appearance. Our Lord and savior Jesus Christ warned us not to do this. Instead of standing and casting judgments, we should be able to pray for others, give excuses to one another, and help one another.

6. Learn to forgive instead of holding a grudge

"For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." (Mathew 6:14-15)

The next step of growing in our spiritual walk is to learn that no one is perfect. We all are sinners and make mistakes. Therefore as Christians, we all look up to our Lord Jesus Christ who commanded us to forgive and forget in order to gain blessings and to remove any grudges or anger in our hearts.

I pray we all learn how to live, enjoy, and experience every moment in our lives as if it is our last. When we learn to smile at the world, it will smile back at us. When we learn to see the full half of the cup, we will never see vacuum or emptiness. When we learn new facts about God every day and apply it to our lives, to forgive and forget, to care about others and help them to be the best of our abilities, and to live with a purpose, we will gain enormous joy in our lives that will be a blessing from the Lord to us. Finally, I encourage every reader to commit to a new and improved relationship with Lord.



Beautiful woman

Beautiful woman

What is your secret?

I see glowing in your eyes

I see sparkle in your face

I see a smile filling your heart

What is your secret?

I see treasures accumulate over the year

I see many gifts God bestowed on you

I see inner beauty very clearly

What is your secret?

I see joy in your walk

I see glow in your spirit

I see enthusiasm filling your day

When did all this happen?

When did all of this start?

Tell me, I need to know

Is it true that you love Him?

Is it true you walk with Him?

Is true that He is the one that made this all happen?

Beautiful woman

Now it is very clear to me



Unexpected life of Abundance is a book that will help us exploring the life of men of faith and our own spirituality and how God work in each and everyone to help us through our journey to Him .
May the Lord open our eyes to see His hand in everything and to discover our relationship with God and His plan for us.
