

**Biblical Counsels on
Thorny Questions
For Youth & Truth Seekers**

TEACH THEM

(Book 1 of 2)

**Complete with Critical Thinking Questions
for Campus Ministry, Youth Study Group
Discussions and One-On-One Discipling**

Michael O. Ojewale

For a quick overview of
BACK TO BASICS MINISTRY
and **Teach Them** Book Distribution,
turn to the PROLOGUE, EPILOGUE,
and APPENDIX 2.

This copy of **Teach Them** is more than a book;
it is a “Printed Missionary.” It is a church-oriented tool
for “*the gift of God [which] is eternal life in
Christ Jesus our Lord*” (Rm. 6:23),
for one-on-one discipleship, mentoring,
and a resource for the local church youth ministry.

NOT FOR SALE

Teach Them is circulated in churches on the basis of
“Get 1 book for a minimum donation of \$10.00 or \$XX.00”,
where \$XX.00 is the amount suggested by the pastor.

Back to Basics Ministry is a local church-oriented organization. That’s why we offer “Teach Them” publication as (1) a ministry resource for evangelism, discipleship, and peer-to-peer mentoring in the local church. Consequently, the pastor decides the pricetag for his/her membership and (2) as an opportunity for partnership with the local church to support our outreach to the youths in higher institutions of learning—our future leaders.

**Biblical Counsels on
Thorny Questions
For Youth & Truth Seekers**

TEACH THEM

(Book 1 of 2)

A “Printed Missionary” for the Master’s Mandate

Formerly titled: *Uncle Mike Answers Your Questions*

**A Thematic Resource for
Small Groups,
“House Churches,”
Remote Study Groups,
Peer-to-Peer Mentoring, and
Missionary Teams and Field Evangelists**

Covering Basic Themes Such as, *Salvation, Faith, Effectual Prayer, Knowing God’s Will, Deliverance from Guilt and Condemnation to Having Peace with God and Self, Why Pain and Suffering, Defense for Jesus’s Resurrection, the Bible, Bonus Chapter: “It Happened, Because It Had to Happen”, and many more.”.*

Complete with Critical Thinking Questions for Campus Ministry, Youth Study Group Discussions and One-On-One Discipling

Michael O. Ojewale

Unless otherwise indicated, all scripture quotations are from
the NKJV, © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc.
TEACH THEM (Formerly “Uncle Mike Answers Your Questions”),
Books 1 and 2.

The original *Uncle Mike Answers Your Questions* (17 chapters) is available as a free audio book on our website. A bibliography section is lacking for two reasons: 1) although the work is scholarly and educational, I did not set out to make it an “academic” work, and 2) I will have to put the hundreds of books in my personal library in the bibliography section. I guess I can say that this work tells my story and growth at different chapters of my life.

Visit us online to listen to the audio book, *Uncle Mike Answers Your Questions* at www.BacktoBasicsMinistry.org

DISCLAIMER: This publication is MY AUTHENTIC VOICE, not the echo of someone else’s. The opinions and statements contained in this publication are mine—in their entirety. They do not represent those of the DOCCS, Department of Corrections and Community Supervision, my colleagues at work, or any other governmental agency, in any way, shape or form.

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For: Back to Basics Ministry, a Literature Ministry to, and in Partnership with, the Local Church; for Equipping the Youth of Today, the Leaders of Tomorrow, through Distribution of “Teach Them” Publication, Books 1 and 2 in Higher Education Institutions.

Introduction

These two divisions—“Dear Uncle Mike” (Book 1) and “Dear Chaplain” (Book 2)—also represent the two sides of my life and ministry for the past two decades. One side, the “Dear Uncle Mike series,” represents my years in the classroom as science teacher with preteens and teenagers who were controlled more by hormones than the cerebral. After school closed, with my interaction with these boisterous and sometimes rambunctious kids still buzzing in my head, was that stage of my constant struggle, study and meditation on how the church could effectively reach and impact these preteens and teenagers with the abundant life Jesus promises and to mobilize them to become soldiers for Christ.

The second side of my life, the “Dear Chaplain” series represents my ministry as a Protestant chaplain in a State Correctional facility. Although I am a chaplain to every inmate and staff—religious or nonreligious—when I function in any Protestant meeting, service, Bible study or prayer, I can be authentic, in my true color, and unapologetically present to anyone what my faith has to offer to make life worth living. In the “Dear Chaplain” series if it comes across to you that I restate or reiterate [I just did it again] the same point in several ways, you may be right and it’s deliberate. Blame the teacher in me for that. Splitting the manuscript into two books (Books 1 and 2) was a last-minute decision.

There were four of us chaplains in the facility belonging to four major religions, but we cater to all religious organizations that are recognized by the Dept. of Corrections. We have the best collegial team spirit and it’s been reported by some visiting auditors (whether true or false, it’s their opinion) that we were the most intellectual group of chaplains they’ve met. I was the last to come on board; the longest serving, the Imam, is a physician, MD, by first calling. While some facilities report in-fighting among chaplains and strained relationship with the DSP and/or Exec. Team, we could not have

Teach Them

asked for better peers of clergy or a better Deputy Superintendent of Programs (DSP) in charge of programs and religious organizations, or a better Superintendent.

In honor and loving memory of
Evangelist (Reverend) Bola Sanni
The Reverend (Dr.) Bisi Orebayo
Bishop Titus Olugbenga David
The Reverend Dele Ijagbulu
The Reverend Gbenga Ewejobi
The Reverend (Prof./Mrs.) Kenny Ayenibiowo
Pa (Deacon) Paul Omehen Uwaya
(Gideonite) Oladele Otaniyi and
(Mother-in-Israel) Mrs. Olawanle T. Ojewale

Before they exited the stage, they each wrote their chapters in the One Story of God—the Story of the Universe, and sang their assigned parts in the One Song of God—the Song of the Universe. They “served God’s purpose in [their] own generation,” (Acts 13:36; NIV). In the same way that the Apostle Paul wrote, “I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus” (Gal. 6:17), I can also say I bear in my body the fingerprints of these saints in glory.

“Blest be the tie that binds...”

“And I heard a voice from heaven saying, ‘Write this down: Blessed are those who die in the Lord from now on. Yes, says the Spirit, they are blessed indeed, for they will rest from their hard work; for their good deeds follow them!’” (Rev. 14:13; NLT)

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Author's Prologue

“Printed Missionary”—Read Aloud/Read Together

For more than a decade, as a New York State certified Biology/General science teacher, 7-12, I taught general science/biology in inner-city middle and high schools in New York City (NYC). The two most important lessons I learned in those days in the classrooms of NYC that I was convinced would be of help to me as a church leader/pastor were these:

1. The students (or kids) learn more from their peers than they do from teachers or adults in the room. This is why successful teachers utilize cooperative learning, group activities and peer-to-peer mentoring, and
2. The students (or kids) learn more from technology than from any other means of transmitting knowledge. Again, successful teachers cannot over employ technology, including animated power points and short movies in the classroom. There's hardly any topic under heaven in the sciences that you cannot find an online or YouTube resource to introduce or supplement your lesson.

Emboldened by this conviction I did two things in 2011 and 2012. First, I am not one to raise a problem without attempting to proffer a solution. So, to test run my idea, I published *For Youth And The Young At Heart—224pp*, workbook format. I visited many churches in the five boroughs of NYC promoting the book with the idea of peer-to-peer mentoring and use of technology in the churches as the way to go if we were serious about reaching today's youth. Many church leaders were ready to try anything, because they were already experiencing frustrations in their youth ministries. The success stories came from the few churches where the youth ministry was run and led

by young people themselves with the adults as midwives in the spiritual birthing process. In the secular sector, the businesses that have thrived for decades and generations are those that have institutionalized tradition of risk-taking by releasing the helm of affairs to young bloods with imaginative, not-yet-proven ideas to lead the organization. These young bloods, not yet cemented in rigidity or schooled in the worship of status quo, keep reinventing and transforming the operations into machinery that continually meets the needs of emerging new generations. It is my opinion that there are few things in the history of our faith more revolutionary and impactful than a Christian youth equipped and entrusted (yes, entrusted) with the spiritual care of other young people.

I stand on the shoulders of many notable Christian leaders. Two mentors are worthy of mention. The late Reverend/Evangelist Bola Sanni, the founding chairman of *Advertisers of Jesus Christ* (Ilesha-Nigeria) and the late Reverend (Dr.) Bisi Orebayo, the National Director of *Every Home for Christ* (Lagos-Nigeria). These two saw something in me, which I couldn't see or identify in myself. They opened my eyes to the power of the pen and the printed page—sounds old school in an Internet age. They not only nurtured and encouraged me; they also provided the platform for me to try out and hone my gifts. They tutored me to think always about reaching the yet unreached, discipling the young Christians, and to “think globally, act locally”.

- An “old school” saying that had captivated and motivated me for over 40 years is, “**Books are our best teachers.**” (I sincerely pray it's still true in the 21st century.) That's one big rationale behind “Teach Them” as a “printed missionary.” A printed missionary can go and survive in places human missionaries cannot; it will stay longer and keep true to the same message under any circumstance. What's more, it has the advantage of continuing to reinforce whatever human agencies have done, proclaimed, or taught for months and years after the events or human agencies have gone. We hope pastors and church leaders will welcome this printed missionary and use it with their

Author's Prologue

youth, small groups and send it to their homeland/foreign mission outposts and missionary groups that they support.

- Jokes apart, I believe the 80-20 Percent Rule (Pareto Principle) holds true. The 20 percent (of world population) that will shape or reshape the world (and the future of the Christian faith) are the 20 percent (of world population or Christendom) that value and read books in the age of Internet/YouTube or whatever new inventions the future unveils.
- The objective behind the design of this book was that it would be read aloud/read together with another person, maybe with a friend or study buddy. If you are in a book club, think of it as 10 mini books (or 20 mini-books if you have Book 2) bound together. (Some chapters have been printed as books). Although the chapters are long, the original concept was to write a letter to respond Biblically to issues faced by young Christians. If you think of the chapters as long letters, you will appreciate why I encourage reading it out loud to and with a partner. You can both wrestle together with the questions at the end of the chapter. Notice that I said, “wrestle together”, because some questions in life don’t really have an answer and maybe they don’t need any, or won’t get any answer on this side of life. It may take several sessions to thoroughly work through some chapters. We provide here Biblical counsels on thorny questions to help young people and truth seekers choose life and meaning in a chaotic and adrift world.

How do I know a student has really mastered a subject? I know she’s mastered it when she is able to teach and explain it to others in the simplest ways without fanciful terms. To me, that’s what truly enlivens the classroom when everyone is both learner and teacher. The more she teaches her peers the greater her confidence and the stronger her grasp of the subject. At best, ultimately, “Teach Them” is a tool for just that: for the neighbor eager to connect with another neighbor, peer-to-peer helping each other in spiritual matters; as learners and teachers simultaneously. If all you have is a copy, and

Teach Them

if it is impractical to read together with a friend/colleague, as soon as you finish a chapter give it to a friend or colleague to read and come together to answer the questions. You will find that peer-to-peer mentoring very enriching spiritually, emotionally, as well as deepening your friendship socially. Because it is a thematic resource, each chapter can stand by itself and you don't have to study the chapters in sequence. You may go to any topic or theme of interest, such as the chapter on salvation, faith, decision-making/guidance, apologetics—defense of the Bible, or defense of Jesus' resurrection, or theodicy—reconciling the problem of pain and suffering in a world created, maintained and sustained by a good and holy God, as many Christians believe.

May the Lord accept and bless this offering of “Teach Them”, which I offer as another strategy in our corporate act of obedience to God's “teach them” mandates in both the Old Testament (Exo. 24:12; Deut. 4:9, 10; 11:19) and New Testament (Matt. 28:20; 2 Tim. 2:2). Although the book was initially titled, *Uncle Mike Answers Your Questions*, my goal is really not to provide answers. My ultimate purpose is to raise questions, provoke questioning or stimulate the need to ask more and more of the right questions. As a science teacher, I teach middle school students that science is all about asking the right questions—how, when, why, what, where—and trying (or hypothesizing) to find answers or solutions. Good teaching at certain levels is not about supplying the answers but agitating the soul of the student to no longer be at rest but persistently ask questions, to vacillate, to take risks, to move beyond comfort zones, to continue struggling to find answers, to discard outdated answers so much so that the unquenchable thirst of finding answers is in itself the pilgrimage that eventually provides relief and satisfaction for the soul. If this turns out to be the way you eventually find this work, then, I would have done my job—my best job ever.

Michael O. Ojewale, 2021.

P.S.

Author's Prologue

1. **25-DAY-SELF-PACED READING/STUDY FOR THE VERY BUSY:** This book is loosely divided into 25-day reading/study portions, Day 1 to Day 25, (or 25-day supplemental devotional readings). To be thorough and effective, one day is devoted to working through the end-of-chapter exercises and the review questions of each chapter.
2. Please read chapter 10, the last chapter of Book 2. It might be the key that unlocks the book. When you unlock the author's mind you break the code to his work. It is my own self-understanding of those breathtaking, staggering theological postulates of *being chosen in Christ, predestined to adoption by the Father, and good words God ordained and prepared us for from the foundation of the world*, Ephesians 1:4-11 & 2:10. It is also the way I understand God's purpose for my life and how I have applied to myself Jesus' words before Pilate, "*For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world,*" (Jn. 18:37d) and Apostle Paul's remarks, "*It pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb and called me through His grace,*" (Gal. 1:15) and "*For it is God who works in [us] both to will and to do for His good pleasure,*" (Philp. 2:13). Do read the appendices as well. It explains why this is "a book of remembrance."
3. By the way, the bonus chapter, "It Happened Because It Had to Happen," is a **MUST READ**.
4. ***Teach Them is Not Available in Bookstores.*** The books are offered at: Take one book for a minimum donation of \$10.00 (or any amount suggested by the local church) and two books for a minimum donation of \$20.00 (or any amount suggested by the local church). Additional copies are available at participating local churches, or by mail from our website, www.backtobasicsministry.org. If you are requesting copies by mail, for shipping and handling, please include additional 20% or whatever is sufficient to cover postage above the minimum donation required per book for the number of copies.
5. ***Incorporate this Book into your Fellowship/Small Group or Start***

a Back to Basics Study Group. Consider bringing friends, family, and colleagues together to form a **Back to Basics Study Group**. In many areas, we all need to get back to the basics, don't we? You may start with a partner, or two friends, or three. You are that little flock Jesus had in mind when He said, "*Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom*" (Luke 12:32). Focus on a chapter that you may read and study privately before coming together for study and fellowship. This may be one hour, or two hours devoted to reading, studying, praying together, and answering the questions at the end of each chapter. Designed by a veteran educator, *Teach Them* is both teacher-friendly and student-friendly as well. Take your time; don't hurry. Some chapters may take longer than one study session. You never can tell who will be helped by it and what such group may develop and grow into. Don't wait anymore; take the initiative. "*Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth*" (2 Tim. 2:15).

6. ***This Could Be Our Second Wind.*** For mission-conscious, evangelism-minded Christian leaders of my age, who can no longer travel—as we did in our younger years, yet, cannot afford to sit, watch and do nothing. In this two-volume series, my colleagues and I can still go places as **Printed Missionaries** or **Printer Encouragers**. Here we are, send us; please send us.

Theme: Salvation/ Authentic Christian Experience or How to be Born Again

Dear Uncle Mike,

I go to church every Sunday. I see people go to the front of the church after the sermon to be prayed for or to join the church, but I have never done that. I think I am already a part of the church, but I feel there's more to it than I understand or have experienced. It bothers me that I don't have much to say about my Christian experience other than that I am baptized, and I have been coming to church with my parents for as far back as I can remember. I claim I am a Christian, but deep in my heart, I feel like I am not. No one is perfect. Can you explain the gospel to me? Can you break it down for me, please? I need to know how to move forward from where I am now presently in my faith and grow as a true Christian. If I wasn't writing you, I wouldn't be saying all these. That's how shy (or maybe ashamed) I am to own up to my true feelings about my spiritual life. By the way, do I really have to go forward to shake the preacher's hand? Please, don't tell me to do that. I feel I would be making a fool of myself.

Theodore

Dear Theodore,

I'm thrilled to know that the church has been a part of your life through the Christian influence of your parents. This kind of upbringing is a privilege many don't have. Let me say up-front that everyone's conversion story does not have to be dramatic and U-turn-like, life-changing experience, like Saul's Damascus road experience (Acts 9). It could be as quiet and without fanfare

and sensation as Timothy's who was raised by a godly mother and grandmother (2 Tim. 1:5). Saul of Tarsus, who later became known as the Apostle Paul, saw a light from heaven and heard the voice of Jesus audibly. Timothy had no such experience, but both conversions were genuine and authentic. Both men had a vital relationship with the risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. So don't feel intimidated or bothered if some of your friends or church members testify that they were drug addicts, alcoholics, thieves, liars, fornicators, or fraudsters before they were saved and you have no such "earth-shaking" story to tell. The same God who delivered them from those sinful habits is the same God who had kept you from traveling along that dangerous path in life. In the end, it is not about what kind of life or lifestyle you are leaving behind at conversion, but what kind of life and lifestyle you are now embracing and the glorious future that awaits you in that new journey.

Without a doubt, the seed of the gospel has been planted in you and watered over the years. Unfortunately, it is also possible to know the church language and have the right answers but not know the Lord, to have *head* knowledge and not have *heart* knowledge, to belong in the church but not be "in Christ." For example, one of the learned men in the laws of God in Jesus's audience once gave Jesus the right answer from scriptures though he himself was not right with God. Jesus lovingly told him, "*You are not far from the kingdom of God*" (Mk. 12:34). Wow! Not far but not in. That's pitiful. With all his knowledge and involvement in the temple, he was still a stranger and an outsider to the Kingdom of God. I'm glad you are not satisfied with merely going to church; you want to know the Lord for real and in a personal way. As a fellow pilgrim who's been on this journey, I count it an honor and a privilege to be of help to you in this regard. In fact, this is one of the ways we are to serve one another.

Sure, Theodore, I can break the gospel message down for you. You will have to bear with me if it ends up being a long letter. It is because I want to cover all the bases as much as possible. Information or knowledge of the truth is important, but it is only a starting point in Christianity, not the end. The goal is to use the information or the knowledge of the truth to lead to a

relationship, a personal relationship with a risen and living Savior. The goal is not learning about Christ; rather, it is to know Christ in a relational way. Without a personal relationship with Christ, Christianity is nothing more than a religion of dos and don'ts or a system of moral improvement—nothing different than joining the Boy Scouts.

Your story reminds me of Janet's experience. Janet is thirty-six years old now. When she was eight, there was a youth program in her church. School was on break, and many young people in the neighborhood attended that Saturday youth event. There were many outdoor fun activities, games, face painting, food, drinks, ice cream, old-fashioned preaching, and prayer. After the preaching, there was an invitation to "come forward and give your life to Christ." During the altar call, many young persons went forward. It was not a matter of responding out of conviction; it was more of "everybody is doing it." On the way to the front, some young people tapped on other young people to come forward and join the rest. Parents encouraged the shy kids to join their fellows at the altar. That was how Janet found her way to the altar, chewing gum, along with scores of other young persons of her age bracket. It was more of a group thing. The youth pastor asked all at the altar to repeat a prayer after him. All the young ones did, giggling and happy, with no clue whatsoever of what they were doing. A few Sundays later and before schools resumed, nine young people were baptized, including Janet. The church members were happy. That Sunday, the church sang, "O Happy Day . . . That Jesus Washed My Sins Away," like they never sang it before.

Since that time, Janet had called herself a real Christian. She later learned the phrase "born again", and she began to say she was born again at age eight when she responded to the altar in her church. However, deep down, Janet knew nothing about a spiritual transaction in her soul. At thirty-six, she decided she was "tired of pretending and faking it." In her own words, "I made up my mind, I am fooling nobody but myself by claiming I am saved or born again. I know I am not. I am just a church person. I knew nothing happened in my life when I went to the altar at eight. Other kids were doing it, and I followed them. I repeated the prayer after the pastor, and that was

all. I didn't know what it meant. I was baptized. Yet from that time until now, I know I've never had a genuine Christian experience. I sing in the choir and attend Sunday school. Over the years I have struggled if what I needed to revitalize my Christian life was rededication or to be born again. Since I cannot say that I was born again at eight, I want it now. I want to do it right." Janet is a bubbling new person in Christ today, with peace and assurance in her heart. Now she understood that she joined the church at eight but she did not join Christ then. I think Janet's story is similar to your situation. Happily, it can be fixed, like Janet's case.

Theodore, I think of myself these days as a storyteller. I like to use simple stories to illustrate or point to something more profound. Please indulge me as I use some stories to illustrate what the gospel entails or means. In fact, the gospel itself is a story. It is the story of God's love and how God communicates that love to us. The gospel is the story of God's act of salvation for the human race because, somehow, we have been estranged from God. The gospel story is told succinctly and in the best possible way in the most popular verse in the Bible, John 3:16, which says "*[Once upon a time] God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life*" (insert mine).

Before I go any further, let me first address the latter part of your letter: Do you really have to go forward to shake the hand of a minister? The answer is "yes and no."

The answer is no, you don't have to because responding to the altar call and shaking the preacher's hand means nothing more than a showing-off unless the decision to follow Christ has already been made in your heart. You see, a person can go to the altar as many times as he or she wants to, be counseled and fill the decision slip and still remain the same person, unchanged within. You give your heart to Christ first, and then all other things make sense. The decision has to come first from your heart. As they beckon to listeners to respond to the gospel invitation, some pastors actually phrase it this way: "Come . . . give your heart to Jesus and your hand to the pastor."

Again, the answer is yes. You have to make your faith or commitment to

Christ public in one way or the other, because there are no secret disciples. One particular method to publicly declare your stand for Christ and receive help and assurance is by responding to the altar call.

YOU AND I ARE BIRDS OF THE SAME FEATHERS



As to the question of whether you need to walk to the front of the church or not, actually, you and I share a lot in common. Going forward after hearing a sermon was the last thing I wanted to do. I was active in the church from my childhood, but I was far from being a saint to put it mildly. Looking from hindsight, I would say that I had a relationship with the church but not with Christ. I did, and I participated in anything every teenager of my age in or outside the Christian faith would do and probably a little more. Because I was performing well in both places—in the church and in the world—in my teens in high school, I became a Sunday school teacher and later the Sunday school superintendent.

Due to a rough school term that just ended—Christmas and New Year's break of 1971—and having narrowly escaped being expelled from school, I

sought for ways to prevent my getting into further troubles with school regulations in the new school calendar year. To pursue a low-key lifestyle, I joined the Student Christian Movement (SCM), in my high school in January 1972. Out of the blue, on my second meeting with the group, I was voted in as the new president of the Student Christian Movement (SCM). Prior presidents of the group had been ordained ministers, and that was even before I joined the group; so I was the first lay president for that matter and had not been mentored by prior presidents. That changed the paradigm for me. I could no longer be a “Christian” as I used to be. Somehow, I always knew that there had to be more to being a Christian than I had known. From then, all eyes were on me as the supposedly number one most Christian student in the school. I didn’t want to let them down.

Maybe I should tell you a little more. In the past in my school—Iloro Baptist Grammar School, Ilora-Oyo, Nigeria—it was the staff members who voted to elect students into offices as school prefects. I was told that in the staff room, I had been slated for what you would call the number two most important student office: the food prefect. However, because of some disciplinary problems I had with school regulations, I was made the hostel (or dormitory) prefect—like the 3rd in rank among prefects. It was the last school term of 1971, and it was a rough school term for me. At one time, when my fate was dangling in the air and it seemed I might be expelled from the school, the other school prefects visited all the teachers in their homes, except the school principal and his wife who was also a teacher, and appealed to them for leniency when my case would be brought up in the staff room. All promised to be supportive; only the vice principal was adamant. As I was told, the principal had expected a quick unanimous decision according to the standard practice on my infraction, but when the case was tabled, all the teachers rose up to defend me and prevailed on the principal for the school to offer me a second chance. The principal was baffled that they would do that but couldn’t be headstrong about it, because he needed the staff to rally behind him in other matters. Some other students with lesser infractions had been expelled. On top of that, I just returned to school from an “indefinite” suspension.

Somehow, I was spared. Needless to say, that my accomplices and I spent the rest of the school term on the field—weeding, uprooting trees, and filling up flowerbeds and roundabouts with topsoil—until the eve of the final exams.

I was the wrong person for the office of the hostel prefect, and after one term—which I virtually spent on the field, serving punishment—I was relieved of the position. So, in the new school calendar year, I resumed as a final-year student holding no office as a school prefect. The friends with whom I had served punishment the previous school term had transferred to other schools. That was when I joined the SCM. In God's timing and providence, I took up the mantle of the presidency of the Student Christian Movement (SCM). Looking back, I would say that while I was a misfit for the position of hostel prefect and had been passed over for food prefect because of behavior problems, I was the God-anointed person for the SCM. It was a turning point in the right direction for both the SCM and me. Those who say that God has a good sense of humor must be right. God picked the most unlikely for spiritual leadership to turn things around in the school and to make it plain to all that *"if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, old things have passed away, all things become new"* (2 Cor. 5:17).

As the new president of the SCM, I started reading the Bible for myself, especially the New Testament, and Christian materials to point me to the true way of salvation. I didn't want to mislead the members. Whatever I read from the Bible and Christian literature, I shared with the group. I started fasting too for the first time and spending time in the nearby bush to be alone in prayer. God was becoming real and personal to me. There were three meeting times in the week: one for prayer meeting, one for Bible study, and on Sunday evenings, we organized a worship service for the whole school. Because the prior presidents had been ordained Baptist ministers, I guess this was a piece of cake for them but not for me.

To deepen my knowledge, I attended a Christian youth camp in Easter 1972 organized by the Scripture Union (SU). The central theme of the three-day Bible study was how to be born again (Jn. 3). We had a long time of prayer after the theme sermon on Sunday night. Many young persons were

weeping as they prayed. I wanted to weep for my sins, but no genuine tear dropped, and I knew it would be wrong to fake a cry. Before the prayer session ended, I said a sincere prayer in my heart and asked Jesus to come into my life. I believe Christ did. We were then asked to respond to the altar call and be counseled on our decision. I hesitated, but something moved my legs, and I found myself in front. I couldn't believe I was standing there, at the altar, before the team of camp counselors.

When the counselor who interviewed me asked why I had responded to the altar or what decision I was making or intended to make, you would think that I would say that I had come forward to accept Christ, yet I didn't. I felt I was never a pagan, and I was ashamed to admit that after being a Sunday school teacher, Sunday school superintendent, and even the president of a Christian group in my school—after all that, that I was not yet a Christian! I couldn't swallow that; my pride got in the way. I told the counselor I had come forward to seek help regarding some questions that visiting Jehovah's Witnesses' members had bothered me with. However, as I mentioned, I had already prayed while in the pew for Christ to come into my life, tears or no tears.

You see, some people are not clear on what to do, how to pray, or what prayer to say, and they need help. That's what the altar call is supposed to do. It is the place where you can confide in a fellow pilgrim who has been on the journey earlier or longer than you. He or she can guide and help you to understand your decision and even lead you in a prayer you may repeat after him/her just to start you off on your Christian journey. In most settings, believe it or not, you don't have to walk to the altar alone. Many will be willing, even more than willing, to walk with you up to the altar to transact the spiritual business for your soul. All you have to do is tap someone sitting next to you and ask if he or she will be willing to accompany you. Most would count it a real privilege and a service for their Savior and fellow Christian.

During altar invitations, the late international evangelist, the Reverend (Dr.) Billy Graham, often made these statements: "Jesus died for you publicly. All the people that Jesus called or saved or healed in the New Testament record, Jesus did the calling, saving, or healing publicly." For practical rea-

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sons, going forward or responding to the invitation to the altar gives you a reference point for your spiritual pilgrimage. You have a reference point, a before and after, to recall when doubts set in. Matthew, one of the disciples of Jesus, would remember the day and time Jesus walked by his accounting desk and called him. Peter, James, and John recorded their fishing trip when Jesus walked by and tapped them on the shoulders to become His followers. Apostle Paul never forgot his experience and encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road. All these people had something they could refer to as before I met Jesus, how I met Jesus, and life after that life-changing encounter. Taking a step of faith forward after a sermon may become your first public and personal identification with Jesus. So, Theodore, go ahead and do it.

Now, my first story:

THE MOTHER HEN DIES TO SAVE HER CHICKS

Bush burning is one of the methods of hunting for small animals in some African villages. The local hunters will set fire to a small bush and gather around the edges of the bush. As small animals, big rats, reptiles, and rodents run to escape the fire, they run into the hunters' traps, the jaws and paws of the hunters' hunting dog, or the waiting arms of the hunters with clubs, cutlasses, and machetes in their hands to beat the animals to their death. After the fires die down, the hunters will go through the burned bush to hunt down and dig out some burrowing animals that have escaped into their burrows. Snakes and big rats are often captured in this way. With the bush burned down, escaping animals have no place to hide.

During one such expedition, as one of the local hunters is walking through the burned bush, he finds what looks like a burned big bird, with some feathers and feathery mass. The hunter kicks the suspected creature, and out comes some five or six chickens scurrying for their lives. The local hunters surmise that as the fire burns fiercely, the mother hen and the chickens must have been running back to the village for safety. However, when the mother hen realizes that, no matter how fast they run, she cannot make it to safety with her chicks, she gathers the chicks under her wings, wraps herself

Teach Them

around them, covers them up, buries her head in the sand, and waits for the fire. As the fire roars fiercely, it chars the mother hen, killing her, but the chicks are saved.



This is exactly what Jesus did for us a little over two millennia ago. Our sins estranged us and made us enemies to a holy God. Humanity was guilty and deserved punishment. Yet, God loves us and sought out a way to satisfy His righteousness, which cannot condone sin and His justice, which demands that sin be punished. The alternative was for someone who had no sin to pay the penalty for our sins. Jesus, the Son of God, stepped in and took our punishment. Consider the following scriptures:

“By this we know love, because He [Jesus] laid down His life for us.” (1 Jn. 3:16a)

“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.” (Jn. 3:16)

“But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Rom. 5:8).

“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Rom. 6:23)

It’s like you owe a bank a large sum you cannot pay. You are about to lose everything including your freedom. However, a philanthropist chooses to settle the bank on your behalf. You see, you didn’t pay from your pocket, but your debt has been cancelled. As far as the bank is concerned, you owe it not even a farthing. The bank cannot haunt you anymore. If anything, you now owe a debt of gratitude to your benefactor.

The mother hen offers her back and life to be burned to save her chicks from the fires of the burning bush. In like manner, so that we may escape the fires of hell, Jesus is gathering His “chickens” from every language and tribe and nation and color under His wings and gladly accepts God’s full wrath and punishment for their sins. Jesus died for us so we may live. Jesus paid it all. Jesus paid all our debt of sin.

Jesus says, *“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep. . . . Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This command I have received from My Father”* (Jn. 10:11, 17, 18). Like the mother hen in my story that died to preserve its young, or like David, the young shepherd of the Old Testament story, or any good shepherd who often risked his life to save his flock, Jesus, the Good Shepherd, laid down His life for us.

What do you need to do to receive this offer of God’s pardon and forgiveness and obtain God’s free gift of eternal life? You begin by talking to God and asking Him for this gift. Talking to God is what we call prayer. You may say a prayer like this:

Dear God, I realize that I am a sinner. I have sinned against You in my thoughts and actions. I thank You for sending Your Son, Jesus Christ, to die in my place. I acknowledge that Jesus died for my sins and provided a way for my pardon and forgiveness. I ask You to forgive me of all my sins, cleanse me, and empower me to live for You. I invite You into my life today. Come

into my heart and life and be my Savior. I receive Your gift of a new birth and adoption into Your family. Thank You for forgiving me and for saving me. In Jesus's name I ask. Amen.

My second story:

A LITTLE BOY AND HIS LOST BOAT

If the theme of my first story is *substitution*—that is, Jesus becoming our substitute, Jesus taking our place, taking up our sins, and dying in our place—the theme of my second story is *redemption*. That's actually a Bible word. It means to pay a ransom, to buy back what's originally yours but that had been stolen or lost. Jesus settled the bill to have us back in the Father's house.

A little boy lived in a riverside area. The sight of fishermen and their boats always fascinated him. He often sat by the beach and watched the activities on the water and the different types and shapes of local boats. With the help of his father, he made a toy boat of wood. He painted the hull red, his favorite color, and attached a white sail. He was very proud of his boat, because he made it. Though his father helped him cut and shave wood, the boat was his invention and creation.

One day, while sailing his toy boat on the lake, the wind suddenly strengthened and blew the toy boat out of sight toward the other side of the lake. The boy immediately ran around to the far side of the lake to look for his boat. He searched and searched but couldn't find it anywhere. The boat was lost. The boy was bitterly disappointed, because this wasn't any ordinary boat; this was his special boat that he had made with his own hands.

Sometime later, the boy was walking past a shop. He happened to look in the window, and there up for sale was his boat. He knew it was his, because he had made it himself and knew exactly what it looked like. He was overjoyed to see his little boat appear in the toyshop window. He ran inside and said, "That's my little boat in the window! I made it with my own hands. My father helped me cut and shave the wood. I painted it and

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attached the sail. My father and I made it, but the wind blew it off on the lake, and it was lost.” The shop owner said, “That little boat was brought in by fishermen who found it. I paid them for it. I’ll let you have it for what it cost me. You may have made it, but I bought it. Now it’s mine, but you can buy it back if it means that much to you.”



The boy had no money, but he went to work. He weeded and raked neighbors’ gardens and lawns for money. He cut wood. He sold papers. He did everything he could think of to do. Each day he counted his money, and each day he held his breath as he passed the toyshop to see if the little boat was still there.

At last, he had enough money. But had someone bought the little boat for a gift? How thankful he was to see it’s still in the window. When he came out of the shop, the boy looked admiringly at his boat. He clasped the little boat to his chest and cried, “Little boat! Little boat! You’re twice mine! I made you, and now I have bought you back again. I have redeemed you. I made you, and I bought you! Now you are mine twice over.”

That is a picture of what God has done for us. God made us, and therefore we belong to God. Because of our sin, we became lost and separated from God. In His love, God sent Jesus to buy us back, to redeem us. What was the price Jesus paid? Jesus paid with His own blood that He shed on the

cross. God made us, and He redeemed us. He redeemed us not with silver and gold but with “the precious blood of Christ.”

Consider these scriptures:

Knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot. (1 Pet. 1:18, 19)

Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”). (Gal. 3:13)

Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s (1 Cor. 6:19–20).

What does it mean to be redeemed? I’m glad you asked. To redeem is to buy back an item given, for example, to a pawnbroker, as security for a loan. The little boy bought back (or paid a ransom to have back) what was his own. Redemption is the state of being made free from slavery to sin, self, and the power of evil through the payment Jesus made with His life. Jesus laid down His life as ransom to set us free from slavery to sin and death. Now we are free to love and serve God.

Paul reminded the Corinthian Christians, “*For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s*” (1 Cor. 6:20). Again, he urged them, “*You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men*” (1 Cor. 7:23).

If you truly want to experience this redeeming work of Christ, you may say a prayer like this:

Lord Jesus, I realized that You went to the cross and died for my sin. I thank You for this sacrifice of Yourself as ransom for my freedom. I receive You

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now as my Lord and Savior. Come into my life and make me a child of God indeed. Amen.

If by now you've given your life to Jesus, let me be the first to say to you:

WELCOME TO THE FAMILY

DAY 2

Many people read a gospel material in a hurry or listen to a sermon half-heartedly, make comments, and sometimes commend the preacher, but they do nothing about what they've read or heard. I am therefore glad to meet a person like you who goes beyond merely giving mental assent or emotional response to a point of personal commitment.

The power of choice or decision-making is the greatest thing that distinguishes human beings from animals. As humans, we can think, and we can choose our actions and attitudes independent of what others do or what goes on around us. This is great! This power of choice that God places in us is also the greatest risk that God undertook in the creation of humankind, because it means that we have the power to choose God while we also have the power to reject God or be indifferent to God. Indifference to God, by the way, is the same as rejection! When we choose God, we live on a higher plane, a higher energy level, and gain a spiritual perspective of life. As a result, life becomes peaceful and purposeful, because we have an anchor—a divine Helper—especially in the midst of turmoil. However, when we reject God, we live on a lower plane, lower energy level, and life is reduced to the physical and natural dimensions only. The result is that life loses its meaning and purpose, because we are left to our own finite resources to cope with the vicissitudes of life.

Have you observed that most great things in life are started by simple decisions or by a chain of simple decisions? Have you ever considered that those who do not decide, rarely ever get started on anything? Once a firm decision is made, it has the effect of releasing lockedup and undreamt-of powers and possibilities. You can be sure that there is no ceiling to the possibilities that the decision to make Jesus the Lord of your life will bring to you (Phil. 1:6). You will never regret that you did choose Him, however rough

the road. The road can be pretty rough sometimes, but you will never travel that road alone. Never alone! Jesus will walk with you all the way, and your brothers and sisters in your new family will also walk with you every step of the way. *With* or *without* religious beliefs, life's journey is turbulent and stormy. The paths of life can be bumpy and the terrains laden with unforeseen turns and twists and unforeseeable dangers. With Christ in one's life, however, there is the "*Emmanuel, which means 'God is with us'*" (Matt. 1:23), a divine partner, a constant companion, "*a true Friend [who] sticks closer than one's nearest kin*" (Prov. 18:24).

As soon as Jesus comes into a person's life, a spiritual transaction takes place. Believe it or not, many things happen spiritually and simultaneously between that person and God. As you grow in the faith, you will learn more of these. Let me quickly share some of them with you. I will not pontificate or expatiate, because I want you to look up those scriptures I cite and read them for yourself. For easy reference, I have chosen all the verses from the New Testament.

When a person invites Christ into his or her life or is born again, (whatever church language or religious phraseology is used to describe this spiritual transaction matters little)

1. that individual's sins are forgiven (1 Jn. 1:9; 1 Cor. 15:3, 4);
2. he or she becomes a child of God indeed (Jn. 1:12, 13; 1 Jn. 3:1, 2);
3. the Holy Spirit of God comes into the person's life (Jn. 3:5, 6; 1 Cor. 6:19, 20);
4. he or she comes into a right relationship with God (2 Cor. 5:21; Rom. 8:1);
5. the individual now has unhindered access to God (Rom. 5:1, 2; Eph. 3:12);
6. he or she is no longer under the powers of darkness but under the power of Christ (Col. 1:13; Gal. 1:4);
7. God supplies power to live victoriously (Gal. 2:20; 1 Jn. 5:4, 5);
8. the person becomes a new creature (2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 2:10);

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9. the individual is now a witness for Jesus (Acts 1:8; Mk. 5:19; 16:15);
10. as a candidate of God's kingdom, he or she has a prepared place in heaven in the afterlife (Jn. 14:1-3; 1 Cor. 15:19);
11. he or she has been adopted into God's family (Rom. 8:15-17; Gal. 4:6, 7); and
12. the individual gains a new company of brothers and sisters redeemed by Jesus' blood and sanctified by God's Spirit (Mk. 10:28-30; Rom. 12:4-8).

I urge you to please get a copy of the Bible and prayerfully read the Bible passages I quoted at the end of each point. I used two passages for each to provide a testimony from two sources. All these verses are for you to *claim* and/or *affirm*. Claim, because some of the verses declare God's intention for you, and you need to appropriate these into your life. Affirm, because some of these verses enunciate the spiritual realities that have taken place in your life: who you *now* are in relation to Christ, what you *now* have in Christ, what you have *now* become, and the spiritual resources you *now* have for your spiritual journey.

THE DOOR THAT OPENS ONLY FROM THE INSIDE

I trust that you have made a genuine decision for Christ, but just in case you are vacillating or unsure, I'd like to say a few words of encouragement. If, somehow, you have not made a quality decision for Jesus Christ, this is the time to make it. Even though God is sovereign, God has chosen to respect and honor our decisions, and that is the only way we can be accountable to God for our actions and inactions. Imagine what the resurrected Lord said in Revelation 3:20:

Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear My voice and open the door, I will come in to you. (NRSV)



That door is the door of your heart and life. Why does Jesus stand at the door and knock? Couldn't He force the door open or force Himself inside? He could, but He wouldn't, because He is a gentleman, and because God respects the will of the owner of the house. God does not force us or force Himself on us; rather, God pleads with us and woos us by reason and love. We stand to gain when we surrender our lives to God. Every person has the key to his or her own heart and life, and that individual can open or close the heart to anything, any person, or even to God. Think of that! When anyone opens the door and invites Jesus in, Christ does come in. Because Christ longs to do that for every person, He stands at the door and knocks, pleading to be asked in. The door of the human heart is unique. First, you and you only hold the key to that door. Second, and most importantly, your heart is the only door that opens from the inside and you open it.

There are only two places Jesus can be in relation to anyone: in his or her heart or at the door of the heart, still knocking and waiting to be invited in. If Jesus is not in your heart right now, Jesus is at the door of your heart knocking. Why keep Christ outside any further? Just say, "Lord Jesus, come into my life. I open the door to you right now." You do not need to do this often or again and again. On the day and at the time you prayed to invite Jesus into your heart, as you opened your heart to Christ in prayer, He came into your life, if you did so in all sincerity and genuine repentance!

SOME HELPFUL HINTS FOR YOUR SPIRITUAL GROWTH

Spiritual growth is an ongoing event. I gave my life to Christ and began the journey of a disciple in Easter 1972 at age twenty. I am still growing in maturity as a disciple. Better still, I am still growing from one level of maturity to another level of maturity in my relationship with Christ. I like putting it that way because we never really arrive at a full-grown stature as Christians and we never really fully become all we could be in Christ on this side of eternity. There is always room for growth, always room for more and more of God in our lives.

“What constitutes growth?” I’m glad you asked. With both bachelor’s and master’s degrees in agriculture, I worked as a farm director for several years. I raised poultry, and arable crops. Growth in the physical realm parallels growth in the spiritual. Young plants and livestock are tender and need attention. They need protection, nurturing, and feeding, but they cannot be hedged or shielded all their life, they need a gradual exposure to the harsh realities of life for them to toughen, mature, and become independent. A sign of maturity and full development is reproduction. Without reproduction, each species of livestock or crops becomes extinct. These same principles apply to the spiritual growth of an individual believer or of the church of Jesus Christ. Like plants and animals become extinct unless they reproduce their kind, the church of Jesus Christ faces the same plight of becoming extinct unless the church evangelizes every new generation and reproduces new Christians.

To grow spiritually, remember the following:

1. Pray regularly every day. Have a definite time of personal prayers every day, especially in the morning. This is called quiet time. Create some time to be quiet and alone with God daily in prayer and in meditation on the word of God. Prayer is simply talking to God; it is as simple and natural as a child talks with a loving and caring Father. Don’t worry about language or learning some words to use in prayer. Prayer is a matter of the heart. Prayer is always sincere and genuine when the heart speaks. Take time to pause and

listen to God as you pray. Genuine prayer is not a monologue or a one-way communication; it is not “Listen, Lord, thy servant speaketh!” God speaks to us in prayer if we take time to listen.

Hint for prayers: Let me give you a hint for prayer, one that many have used over the years. It uses the word ACTS as an acronym for a four-point prayer. Each letter stands for a phase of prayer.

A stands for *adoration* or praise to God for who God is. Begin and generously season your prayers with praise. You may read a Psalm of praise and affirmation, such as Psalm 8, 16, 23, 24, 27, 30, 34, 37, etc.

C stands for *confession* of your sins. To confess is to agree with God that you have “come short” (Rom. 3:23), and who has not? Ask for forgiveness for negative things you’ve done, that is, the sins you’ve committed as well as for the good and positive things you’ve failed to do (the sins of omission). Don’t think of God as an inquisitor, or a prosecuting attorney or judge holding a magnifying glass to examine everything you’ve done wrong or failed to do. Satan is the accuser. God is a loving Father and longs to forgive.

I must caution you, however, not to be a “sin-conscious, never-pleasing-to-God” believer, but a “Christ-redeemed-conscious and Christ-made-righteous” type of Christian. How do I mean? Many sincere Christians revel in confessing their sins and unworthiness before God than confessing and professing their forgiven state and redeemed status and all that God has done for them through Christ. What would you say of a released prisoner who has the governor’s letter of pardon in his pocket but still goes about saying in the streets, “I’m guilty”? Does he understand what the governor’s pardon mean or stand for? That’s similar to what some Christians do. With God’s pardon signed in the Blood of Jesus, they still go about saying, “I’m guilty.” It’s either they do not believe the pardon covenant or do not believe who signed it. Belaboring the confession of our wretchedness before a holy and all-knowing God displays nothing more than a false sense of humility when you juxtapose that with the reality of “*Christ who died, and furthermore who is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us,*” (Rom. 8:34b).

To start with, God does not save or forgive us because we exhaustively

and honestly confess all our sins—a claim we cannot sincerely make; God forgives us, because Jesus paid the penalty for our sins by His own life, *“in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us,”* (Rom. 5:8b). Do you recall the stories of the mother fowl and the lost but bought back little boat? That mentality is the right approach and attitude in prayer. Come to God with the attitude and announcement, “God, here I am. I’m here to thank You and praise You, because I’m the one Jesus died for to pay for my sins. I’m the one He redeemed by His death. I’m the one whose sins You’ve washed away and cleansed by the Blood of Jesus. I’m the one You’ve adopted into Your family and sealed with the Holy Spirit so I can rightly say, ‘Abba Father’. I’m the one who’s been walking and stumbling, but Your strong hand has kept me steady. Even now, I’ve come not in my name or on my merit but in the name of Jesus and on His merit.” That’s the right confession. It honors God, because it shows you believe God’s word and the all-sufficiency of Christ.

Think of it this way: when Jesus taught His disciples a model prayer—which we often call The Lord’s Prayer—why did Jesus not make confession of our sins, “Forgive us our sins...,” the very first and paramount request after, “Our Father who art in heaven”? One reason is because the prayer Jesus taught us is centered in the family, in Father-child relationship. You are not an outsider cringing and peeping and praying to God. No, you are a child of God. You are already a member of the family sitting at the Father’s table. Jesus values our relationship with the Father. The prayer shows us that the force and power of His grace is overwhelmingly sufficient and acceptable to God that it smothered any effect of our sins. Be happy to proclaim, *“the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin,”* (1 Jn. 1:7c).

T stands for *thanksgiving*. Bring your prayers with thanksgiving to God. Say, “Thank you, God, for,” pause, and voice what comes to your mind. Say the phrase, “Thank you, God, for...” again and again and see how many things you can fill the blank with that you are grateful to God for. Think of the persons and things in your life that you may offer thanks to God for. You may also use a Psalm, such as, Psalm 103, 116, 136.

S stands for *supplication* or petition. Pray generously for yourself and

others. Nothing is too small or too big to bring to God in prayer. Enlarge your petition beyond personal needs to cover needs in your family, your city, your nation, and other nations as well. We have a friend in Jesus who is *able* and *willing* to bear and carry our sins, grief, sorrows, and also heal our land. Oh, what a privilege!

2. Read a portion of the Bible daily. This will enable you to develop roots and be grounded in your faith. The deeper the roots of a plant, the better the chances for the plant to weather the storms. Nothing succeeds without a plan. Have a plan or schedule for your Bible reading. If you are new to Bible reading, let me suggest a kind of two-month outline. You may begin with the gospel according to Saint John (twenty-one chapters). Follow this with the book of the Acts of the Apostles (twenty-eight chapters) and then the epistle of Paul to the Romans (sixteen chapters).

All these books I have suggested are in the New Testament. Make the effort and necessary adjustment (or sacrifice) to read at least one chapter every day. At the end of two months, you would have read a gospel (which is an eyewitness account of Jesus's life and ministry), the birth and historical account of the church of Jesus Christ (the movement that started after Jesus resurrected), and a letter to one of the local churches (a body of believers that incarnates the life of Christ).

What are the odds that 40 painters or architects who lived in different historical eras of human history, lived on three continents, never met each other and had no clue of the other's work? What are the odds that these 40 painters or architects would come up with a common theme and design? Not in your life! However, the Bible is such a work. The Holy Spirit commissioned the Bible to be written by different writers from different background, and profession, and the product is a common theme of God's salvation plan for humanity. You see, the Bible is a library of books written over many centuries, by people of different personalities and status, over many cultures, in many locations, in three languages but all conveying the same theme of God's redemptive plan for humanity.

Help for quiet time: Take note of these few points:

- Commit yourself to a regular time period of the day. Regularity is important.
- Be consistent. Endeavor to keep to the same time and same place, if possible. This routine will soon turn the quiet time into a good daily habit.
- Have a Bible with a large print, a copy of the Bible that you can read easily even when the room is not too brightly lit. If possible, use a Bible you are sentimental about, maybe because it is a gift from a loved one, or from your spiritual mentor, or from a ministry you are a part of or one that you generously support.
- Keep a notebook for a prayer diary and for recording devotional thoughts.
- Prepare ahead. Always keep your Bible and notebook in a place that is readily accessible. The preparation for a morning quiet time should begin the night before.

3. Fellowship regularly with other Christians in a local church that preaches and exalts Jesus Christ. Do this at least once weekly, on Sundays. Call to mind what I said about raising livestock or crops. The young need to be fed and protected. At whatever age you give your life to Christ, you are a “newborn infant” in Christ (1 Pet. 2:2; 1 Cor. 3:1) and you need to be protected and fed with the right diet so you may grow and develop normally. That is what the church is for. The church is a place for feeding, nurturing, protection, mentoring, discipleship, and fellowship. Our faith is both personal and communal. You need the support of a local church, the spiritual umbrella or shepherding of a pastor, and the community of fellow believers to nurture your gifts so you may serve Christ alongside others. I cannot over-emphasize this. Please seek out a church where you may grow your roots and find your bearings as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

4. Witness for Christ by your life and words. Tell others what Jesus is

to you and what He has done and is doing in you and for you. Christianity is the Word lived out in action and deeds. Let your life conform to your words. Walk the talk. Jesus gives us the highest motivation and greatest compliments when He said we are the *light* of the world and the *salt* of the earth (Matt. 5:13–16). Think of the world without these two resources. The light is bold and audacious in its witness and strength in dispelling darkness. Light is the universal symbol for enlightenment. Without light, the world gropes in darkness. Salt, on the other hand, is silent and subtle in its effectiveness as a seasoning and preservative. Salt is also medicinal; it brings healing and restoration to anything it encounters. That's who you are: the light and salt of your environment. You are to live your life in such ways that you are dispelling darkness, enlightening, seasoning, preserving, restoring, and healing.

5. Obey the voice of the Holy Spirit who is now in you. The Old Testament people had a concept of “God *for* us,” a God somewhere unreachable but who cared enough to enter into covenant relationship with humanity. A God housed in a temple whose presence was approachable only once a year by the high priest on behalf of the nation, after an elaborate sacrifice for himself and the nation. In the gospels, through the incarnation of Jesus, that changed to “God *with* us,” a God who has come to dwell with humanity but still limited geographically. After Jesus resurrected and the Holy Spirit of God came to indwell believers, the New Testament understanding of God-human relationship changed to “God *in* us.” God has come to take residence *in* the believer through God's Holy Spirit. Again and again, the Holy Spirit of God will speak to your heart, because you are God's child. What distinguishes one Christian from another may be their level of obedience to God. God speaks to us in many ways: through the Bible as we read privately, through circumstances, through the preached Word as we listen to a sermon, through prayer as we listen to God in prayer, etc. Whichever way God communicates His will to you, it behooves you to give instant and complete obedience. We don't always know for sure what God is saying, and we don't always get things right all the time, but it makes all the difference to your spiritual journey when the

bent of your heart is to obey God. *“To obey is better than sacrifice”* (1 Sam. 15:22, 23). When our obedience and integrity of heart are unquestionable, the grace and mercy of God will override any mistakes or errors of judgment we make as we attempt to do God’s will.

It will be very nice if you can get a copy of a daily devotional book, which you may pick up at any Christian bookstore. Such devotional books help the user to be consistent and systematic in daily Bible study and prayer. In this hi-tech era, the Bible is also available in digital format as audio Bible. There are also Bible apps on smart phones/tablets that provide daily devotional helps.

THE DIFFERENCE MAKER: “STEAL AWAY TO JESUS!”

So many people embarking on a religious quest often wonder why the world and its tempting allurements are so real and so close at hand, and God often seems so far and distant and like a mirage. My answer: we spend so much time in constant contact with the world engaging and imbibing its principles and so little time with God engaging and imbibing God’s principles. You become like the one you spend time with. It stands up to reason that if we are more in touch with the world—more in touch with the ways, spirits and practices of the world—than we are with God, the world then becomes more real than God. Time and again, we need to snatch ourselves from the hustle and bustle of our surroundings and practice what the old saints sang in spirituals: “steal away to Jesus!” It is at such time and space away from the world and alone with Jesus that we refuel, refocus, and get renewed in our spirits. As we spend more time with God and less time with worldly things, we begin to perceive things differently. We may see an answer to the prayer of an old hymn “to see Thee more clearly, love Thee more dearly, and to follow Thee more nearly day by day.”

The premium you place on your time alone with God in daily prayer and Bible meditation is important to your spiritual strength and growth. Be determined that from today onward, you will not fail to spend at least fifteen minutes daily, alone with God, in prayer and Bible meditation. Write that

decision in your diary or personal notebook today. In a couple of weeks from now, you will be mightily surprised what a great difference fifteen minutes alone with God has made in your life and spiritual growth.

Consider this: There are twenty-four hours in a day, forty-eight half hours, or ninety-six quarter hours. Should anyone be too busy that he or she cannot give one out of ninety-six quarter hours to be alone with God to nurture his or her own spiritual life? Just fifteen minutes, only a quarter of an hour daily! Is that too much? Think about that.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION AND MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS

DAY 3

1. In the opening paragraphs, Uncle Mike writes, “It is also possible to know the church language and have the right answers but not know the Lord, to have head knowledge and not have heart knowledge, to belong in the church but not be ‘in Christ’ ... Information or knowledge of the truth is important, but it is a starting point in Christianity, not the end,” implying that Christianity is deeper than being correctly informed about Christ, the Bible, or the church doctrines. Aren’t we supposed to teach or learn about Christ, and did Christ not send His disciples to teach the world in Matthew 28:19, 20? If Uncle Mike is right, why isn’t teaching and knowing about Christ and the Bible sufficient? Explain or discuss.
2. Jesus used many methods to heal or cure the blind in the New Testament. First, touch. Jesus touched the blind in Matthew 9:27–30 and 20:30–34. Second, spit and touch. Jesus led the blind man out of town, spat into his eyes, and also touched the eyes of the blind man in Mark 8:22–25. In fact, Jesus touched his eyes two times before he was able to see clearly. Third, the spoken word. In Mark 10:46–52, Jesus healed the blind Bartimaeus not by touching or spitting but by speaking the word of healing. Fourth, spittle, clay mud, and wash. In John 9:1–7, Jesus healed a man born blind by spitting on the floor, making a mud of His spittle, anointing the man’s eyes with the clay,

and sending him to go and wash in the pool of Siloam. We would say that it is unreasonable for the man that Jesus led out of town, spat on his eyes, and touched his eyes two times before receiving his sight to challenge Bartimaeus whom Jesus did not touch and tell Bartimaeus that he couldn't be properly healed of his blindness until Jesus spat on his eyes and touched his eyes twice, wouldn't we? If Jesus did not replicate His method on each occasion but healed the blind in several manners, why should we expect everyone to be saved in similar ways? What if Timothy had kept praying to see a light from heaven—like Paul—to confirm that he was saved? Would that make sense? Explain how this may help us understand why we are saved in different ways and manners as well.

3. Janet, in the story, was given a baptismal certificate when she was baptized at eight. At thirty-six, she gave her life to Jesus with full understanding of its implications and became a new person in Christ. After this, she'd been considering and asking how she could be baptized again, because she said she wanted to be baptized as a believer, which was not what she did at eight. She wants to testify publicly that she is now a new creature in Christ, and she believes that getting baptized is an opportunity for her to do that. Why would you, or why would you not, encourage her to go ahead in her decision to seek to be baptized again?
4. To the question "Do I really have to go forward to the altar?" Uncle Mike answered with a yes and no. Explain why he did that.
5. What is the purpose of the story "The Mother Hen Dies to Save Her Chicks"? What spiritual truth does it serve to illustrate?
6. Virtue exercise: (a) What virtue does the Mother Hen demonstrate by dying to save her chicks? (b) Is that virtue one of the attributes of triune God? If yes, how did God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit express it? If no, explain. (c) How does a Christian in our country today live out this virtue?
7. What is the purpose of the story "The Little Boy and His Lost Boat"?

Teach Them

What spiritual truth does it serve to illustrate?

8. Virtue exercise: (a) What virtue does the little boy demonstrate by working hard to buy back his own (lost) invention? (b) Explain why you think that virtue is, or is not, one of the attributes of God. (c) How does a Christian in our country today live out this virtue?
9. After reading this chapter, if a friend asked you how or what to do to become a Christian, what would you tell him or her?
10. What do you struggle with most about this topic or question?
11. On confession, the author writes: “Belaboring the confession of our wretchedness before a holy and all-knowing God displays nothing more than a false sense of humility when you juxtapose that with the reality of “Christ who died, and furthermore who is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us,” (Rom. 8:34b).” Is he discouraging us from confessing our known sins and failures to a holy and loving God in prayer? If he is, how then do we go about mending a strained relationship with our heavenly Father after we are convicted by the Holy Spirit that we’ve missed the mark in thought, word, deed and inaction? If he isn’t, what then is he saying? (Please read 1 John 1:7-2:2).
12. Persistent doubt, lack of assurance of salvation, or stunted spiritual growth or not growing in Christ might account for why some keep going to the altar and “give their lives to Christ” again and again. If that is your story, look again at the section on helpful hints for spiritual growth. What are you doing well, and what areas can you identify that you need to improve on or do better?
13. The author writes, “The premium you place on your devotional life will determine your spiritual progress.” Explain why you agree or disagree.
14. There are ninety-six-quarter hours in one twenty-four-hour day. Uncle Mike believes you are too busy for your own good if you cannot devote at least one-ninety-sixth of the day to be alone with God. Is he being old-fashioned or real? Comment.

Theme: Salvation/Authentic Christian Experience or How to be Born Again

15. Uncle Mike writes, “The door of the human heart is unique. First, you and you only hold the key to that door. Second, and most importantly, your heart is the only door that opens from the inside—and you open it.” Explain what he means by this with reference to Revelation 3:20.
16. Like “before and after” photographs in weight loss commercials, Uncle Mike shares the events and the kind of life he lived preceding his conversion and the period (the season of Easter 1972) during which he gave His life to Christ and became a “born again” Christian. Relate to the group your conversion experience or journey into faith in a three-point outline of (1) life before I gave my life to Christ, (2) how and when I gave my life to Christ, and (3) life after and my experience after I became a Christian.
17. Food for thought: If you have no “before and after” story to share with the group from the previous question, could it be that you are yet to give your life to Christ?

3-2-1 End-of-Chapter Reviews

1. Name three things (or three lessons) you have learned, or been reminded of, in this chapter.

Teach Them

2. Name two ways you can apply the lessons to your life to make it worth your while.

3. Highlight one motivational/inspirational quote—Bible verse, sentence, or phrase—that’s especially meaningful for you and copy this in your notebook/journal.

Pause 'n' Pray

If I turn 3-2-1 End of Chapter Review into prayer, an honest prayer from my heart to God may go like this: “Dear Father God . . .

”

(Write out or say your prayer using the first-person sentences.)

Teach Them

C. Although the letter makes sense, I still have the following questions on becoming a true Christian yet unanswered:

Theme: Faith/Overcoming Faith

Dear Uncle Mike,

What is faith? And how can I develop a strong faith in God?

Solomon

Dear Solomon,

Solomon, there are different levels and different dynamics of faith. To start with, we all exercise faith daily in more instances than we think of. From childhood, you exercised faith in your parents. That's why a trusting child would jump from the fifth or even seventh rung of the staircase, unannounced and without prior notification, into the arms of his daddy, believing instinctively that his daddy would catch him and prevent a fall. As we grow older, we exercise faith in many more everyday activities. For example, you enter a room and are offered a seat, you rarely shake up the seat and test it out before you sit in it. You sit in the chair believing that it is strong enough to hold you up and trusting the judgment of those who provided the seat. You hail down a taxi, and you put your life in the hands of a complete stranger to drive you around. You drink a spoonful of a medicine from a bottle in your medicine cabinet, you go to the bank to deposit or withdraw money—believe it or not, these are all expressions of faith. Yet I understand what you mean: you are thinking of faith in God.

Think of it this way: If a child would jump from the seventh rung of the stairway without prior notice, warning, or announcement into his father's arms, just instinctively believing the man was strong enough and well positioned enough to catch him. If you would sit in a chair and rest your whole weight on that piece of wooden furniture without doubting its ability to hold you up, shouldn't you, in like manner, be able to exercise a basic trust in the Almighty God and loving "Father... in heaven" that you believed enough

that you could rest your whole life on Him and He would hold you up? Sounds reasonable to me.

Your first question: What is faith? The Bible has a definition of faith in the New Testament that cannot be matched. It says, “*Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen*” (Heb. 11:1). Think about that. “Faith is . . . the evidence of things not seen.” Faith is the handle for something intangible. We cannot see God, yet we have faith in God. “*God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth*” (Jn. 4:24). How do we walk with an unseen God? “*We walk by faith, not by sight*” (2 Cor. 5:7). We please God by faith for “*without faith it is impossible to please Him [God], for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him*” (Heb. 11:6). What’s more, we overcome the world by faith: “*For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith*” (1 Jn. 5:4). Four times in the scriptures, we are told, “*The just shall live by faith*” (Hab. 2:4; Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11; Heb. 10:38).

The Amplified Bible has a pleasant rendering of Hebrews 11:1 by supplying the various nuances of some words. “Now faith is the assurance (the confirmation, the title deed) of the things [we] hope for, being the proof of things [we] do not see *and* the conviction of their reality [faith perceiving as real fact what is not revealed to the senses].” Faith is our confirmation letter, the title deed, and proof of ownership to all the promises of God. “*Faith perceiving as real fact what is not revealed to the senses.*”

Don’t let anyone tell you that you don’t have faith. Faith is a gift of God. We all have faith because “*God has dealt [distributed, apportioned, given out] to each one a measure of faith*” (Rom. 12:3f; insert mine). God has given you the measure of faith you need. As a beginning point, you need to acknowledge that you have the measure of faith you need to meet all the challenges that come your way. It is not the amount of faith but the object of faith that matters. We don’t have faith in faith itself but faith in a faithful God who keeps His promises.

One day, after Jesus taught about the necessity to forgive even the most

undeserving, the disciples realized they couldn't do that without some help. *"And the apostles said to the Lord, 'Increase our faith'"* (Lk. 17:5). You would think that in answer to that request, Jesus would lay His hand on the disciples and say, "Let your faith be multiplied." But no, Jesus did not do such a thing. *"So the Lord said, 'If you have faith as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be pulled up by the roots and be planted in the sea,' and it would obey you'"* (Lk. 17:6). The mustard seed is minuscule and infinitesimal. Jesus was telling them it was not the size of their faith but the object of the faith. Is the faith in God, the Mighty Almighty God? Therefore, it is a strong faith, even if it is as tiny as a mustard seed.

The object of faith is more important than the size of faith. City officials posted signs forbidden sledding on a frozen lake, because the ice at that time of year was too thin and deceptive. Yet a presumptuous and foolhardy young man said he had faith in the thickness of the ice and went sledding. That was presumption, not faith. Smack dab in the middle of the lake the ice broke and he had to be rescued in the nick of time. He had put his faith or trust in a wrong thing. The strength of his faith or bravado as the object of his faith was not substantive or good enough. When God is the object of your faith you can be sure God is substantive and good enough.

It also matters who is the God or god you place your faith in. For example, in the Old Testament in 1 Kings 18 we read of a contest on Mount Carmel between two sets of prophets representing two deities to determine whose deity was the Sovereign; either Jehovah God, represented by the lone prophet Elijah, or Baal, represented by 450 prophets. The deity that answered by fire from heaven to consume the offering on its altar would be declared the true God. The 450 prophets of Baal had so much faith in their god's ability to send fire that as they prayed. *"They cried aloud, and cut themselves, as was their custom, with knives and lances, until blood gushed out on them... But there was no voice; no one answered, no one paid attention,"* (1 Kgs. 18:28, 29b). No matter how strong and determined their faith was, Baal was not a true god. After their failure, it was Elijah's turn to pray to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob that the Israelites once faithfully served but now had deserted.

Elijah was so confident that he ordered that gallons of water be poured on the sacrifice until it was drenched. He then prayed a simple prayer. God responded to the voice of His prophet and sent fire. It resulted in a national revival, for which it was intended. The Baal prophets had faith and devotion but in a wrong deity.

Your second question: How do we develop a strong faith? Relationship and fellowship are crucial—relationship with God through the new birth and fellowship with God through meditating on God’s Word and daily prayer. This is personal communion with God—we speak to God in prayer, God speaks to us through His Word. This way, our level of faith and trust in God grows. Again, it is the object of the faith that makes it strong. Faith is as good as the object in which it is placed.

Relationship and fellowship with God’s children or the people of a community of faith, which we often call the local church are equally important. Faith does not grow in the absence of fellowship with people of like mind, for *“as iron sharpens iron, So a man sharpens the countenance of his friend”* (Prov. 27:17). Of the community of believers, or “members of the household of God,” Paul writes, *“For through Him [Christ] we both have access by one Spirit to the Father. Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God”* (Eph. 2:18, 19; see also Heb. 10:23-25). Someone has said that faith is personal but not private. As a member of God’s household, there’s a sense in which your faith grows in a community, in corporate assembly through the company you keep or the people you fellowship with.

The Word of God is the source of our faith, *“so then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God”* (Rom. 10:17). The more we read and meditate on the Word of God, the more we expose ourselves to the teaching of the Bible, the more we fellowship with other believers, the more we will know God and His dealing with those of prior generations, and the more our faith and confidence will grow in God. Just like its opposite, fear, faith is contagious. “Faith [and fear too!] comes by hearing.” Make it your habit to worship at least once a week where you can hear a good preaching of God’s

Word. That's how faith is fed, stirred, and fired up.

There's the story of a man walking along a narrow path who slipped over the edge of a cliff. As he fell, he grabbed a sapling growing from the side of the cliff; a fall into the deep chasm below him would be to his death. Realizing that he couldn't hang on for long, he called for help, "Help! Anybody there?" A deep voice came, "Yes, I am here!" "Who's that?" he yelled out of desperation, dangling from the cliff. "I am the Lord," came back the answer. Relieved, the man asked, "Lord, Help me!" "I'll catch you. Let go of the twig." "What?" the man spoke with a trembling voice. "I said let go of the branch you are hanging on to. You've got to trust me," repeated the deep voice. The man looked at the fifty-something-feet-deep gorge below him. It was only a matter of seconds before the twig he was hanging on to would be yanked out of its roots. After a long pause, panicking, the man cried out again, "Anybody else there?"

You see, faith is a matter of trust. Faith believes that God is indeed up there or down there, that "God is!" (Heb. 11:6), and that God is indeed strong enough to hold you. Faith means that you believe that God is indeed true to His word, and He's trustworthy and dependable so much that you are willing to risk all on God, that is, you are willing to let go of everything else you are holding on to for security. Take the leap toward God—and God alone!

How does faith grow? You see, like our muscles, faith grows by exercise. In the gym, you begin exercising with, let's say, a five-pound dumbbell. When you are comfortable exercising with the five-pound dumbbell and it stops challenging you, then you move to a ten-pound dumbbell because, by this time, your muscles have grown and gained enough strength for a bigger weight. Our faith also grows from exercise and experience. When you trust God in little things, it adds up. When you later confront bigger issues, you can look back on your life and be confident that the same God who had proved faithful in other ways is, in like manner, trustworthy in the big issue. Faith is simply taking God for His Word, knowing that *"God is not a man, that He should lie . . . Has He said, and will He not do? Or has He spoken, and*

will He not make it good?” (Num. 23:19) and that *“it is impossible for God to lie”* (Heb. 6:18b), for *“God . . . cannot lie”* (Tit. 1:2b).

The story is told of a house that caught fire one night. As the family ran outside, trying to escape the inferno, a young boy ran to the roof, thinking that was the best option. The father stood on the ground below with outstretched arms and called his son, “Johnny, jump! I’ll catch you.” The only way to save the boy was for him to jump off that roof. The father couldn’t run back to the burning house, and he couldn’t find his way to the roof. But because of the flame, smoke, and blackness, the boy could see nothing, not even a silhouette of his father. He could only hear the persistent trembling voice of his frightened father. As can be imagined, the boy was afraid to jump off the roof. His father, however, kept yelling and pleading, “Johnny, jump! I will catch you. You’ll be safe.” The boy protested, “Daddy, I can’t see you.” The father replied, “But I can see you, and that’s all that matters.” Without seeing his father, the boy jumped in the direction of the voice and was saved. That’s faith: taking a leap toward God’s voice even when all you can see is blackness.

In like manner, faith is putting one foot in front of another, going in the direction of God’s voice or God’s Word, without seeing the distance or knowing where your foot will land. When Moses and the Israelites stood before the Red Sea and the Egyptian army aimed at their destruction was furiously racing behind them (read Exodus 14), Moses cried to the Lord for deliverance. God told Moses, *“Tell the children of Israel to go forward”* (Exod. 14:15). Say what? It was an act of faith that made Moses lead the people to go forward in the direction of the not-yet-parted Red Sea, believing that God was able to make a highway through that body of water in the nick of time. Again, when experienced fishermen in Peter’s team labored all night and caught nothing (read Luke 5:1–11), Jesus told them in broad daylight to *“Launch out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch”* (verse 4). Peter protested, *“Master, we have toiled all night and caught nothing.”* It was an act of faith that made Peter to add, *“Nevertheless at Your word I will let down the net”* (verse 5), which they did, and *“caught a great number of fish”* (verse 6b). When the action did

not make sense to professional fishermen, Peter and his team went ahead on Jesus's word. That's faith: moving ahead on God's Word even when it doesn't make sense to us.

How do I apply God's Word in my particular situation? I'm glad you asked. The writer of Hebrews shows us an example how we can claim, appropriate, or paraphrase a promise of God and make it personal. In Hebrews 13:5, 6, we have a promise of God and an appropriate human response: "*Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He [God] Himself has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.'* So we may boldly say: *'The LORD is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?'*" What God says or promises is "I will never leave you nor forsake you." Based on God's promise, we boldly respond and affirm, "The LORD is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?" Got it?

Let's say that you need forgiveness. You claim 1 John 1:9, which reads, "*If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*" Based on that, you confess your sins and affirm, "I am forgiven and cleansed of all my sins according to God's Word." Whether you feel it or not really does not matter. What matters is the promise of God who cannot lie and your faith in His Word. Faith is taking God for His Word.

If, for example, you feel abandoned or distant from God, you can claim John 6:37: "*All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out.*" Your response to God based on that promise may be, "Lord, I come to You now in the name of Jesus. I thank You that I am accepted and completely welcomed into Your presence, because Your Son promised He would by no means cast out anyone who comes to Him. Thank You for receiving me."

Let's say you are fearful and scared. You open your Bible to Isaiah 41:10 and 13. You hear God saying to you, "*Fear not, for I am with you; Be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, Yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand. . . For I, the LORD your God, will hold your right hand, Saying to you, 'Fear not, I will help you.'*" Armed with such Word, you say, "Lord, I thank You that You are with me; I am not alone. You are

holding my hand. I will not fear. I will not fall, because You are holding me up. I receive Your strength, as You promised. I receive Your help. Surely, help is on the way, right now. I thank You that You even assure me that You are my God.”

One more example: Let’s say you are unsure of your relationship with God. Then you can read John 1:12: *“But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name.”* On the strength of that promise, you say to God, “Lord, I believe in Jesus as my Savior. I receive Your Son Jesus into my life right now. I believe I am born again into Your family. I praise You now that I am a child of God.”

You see, it’s that simple. You don’t have to see the heavens parted or have some goose bumps. Is God trustworthy? If the answer is a resounding yes, then what comes next is “Am I willing to bank my life on God’s Word?” God says it; we believe it. We find it in God’s Word; we claim it as ours and affirm it by saying yes or amen. Solomon, that’s faith in its purest and simplest form.

There’s no better way to end than with these words from Jesus:

So Jesus answered and said to them, “Have faith in God. For assuredly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be removed and be cast into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will be done, he will have whatever he says. Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them.” (Mk. 11:22–24)

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION AND MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS

DAY 5

1. How is faith in everyday life (for example, sitting in an empty chair in a room without first checking it out if it could hold your weight or hailing down a taxi driver without asking if he/she is properly licensed or verifying his/her alcohol level) different from or comparable to exercising faith in God to meet our daily and spiritual needs?
2. If God has given each one of us a measure of faith according to Romans 12:3f, why do some seem to have more faith than others, or

why do some Christians speak of God and God's deeds with more confidence than others do?

3. "Faith is like muscle, it grows with exercise and becomes atrophied with lack of use." Explain why you agree or disagree with this "use it or lose it" concept about faith.
4. If you were in the crowd that Moses led out of the Egyptian slavery (Exod. 14), and Moses charged that you should go forward into the billowing Red Sea as it pounded the coastlines, knowing the kind of person you are, would you have been one of the first to rush ahead on Moses' (and the Lord's) words, or would you have hesitated until you saw the sea parted before stepping into it? Explain why you would be in one group and not the other.
5. When His disciples prayed, "Lord, increase our faith" (Lk. 17:5), why did Jesus not do something miraculous to multiply their faith? What was Jesus trying to teach them by His answer?
6. The statement "*The just shall live by faith*" is repeated four times in the scriptures (Hab. 2:4; Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11; Heb. 11:38). What do you think it means? Who does the "just" refer to? And does "shall live" mean to be alive or what?
7. In the story of the boy who jumped off the roof of a burning building into the waiting arms of a father he could not see, the author concludes, "That's faith: taking a leap on God's voice even when all you can see is bleakness." (a) Have you done anything like that before—taking a leap on God's voice even when all you can see is bleakness? If yes, explain what you did. If no, why haven't you? (b) Name some daily instances or events in our day that present us with such challenges as "jumping off a burning roof" into safety without seeing anything but blackness.
8. Preaching is often justified with scriptures such as Romans 10:17, which states, "*Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God.*" The author then suggests that "fear" and "doubt" also come by hearing. Explain why you agree or disagree that both faith and fear gain

Teach Them

their entrance into our lives through the hearing gate. How do we then monitor our “hearing gate”? (Read Numbers 13:26-14:38, Joshua 2:8-13 and Judges 7:9-15 for instances of how paralyzing fear spread through a camp or community from baseless or exaggerated reports people heard. Their fear took God out of the picture. Defeat was the result in each case even when they would have been victorious, had they not given in to fear.)

9. In what ways are you like the story of the man who was dangling from a branch that couldn't hold him for long but also could not trust the voice that said, “Let go, I'll catch you”?
10. In Luke 1:38, Mary replied to the Angel Gabriel, “Behold the maid-servant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word.” In Acts 27:23–25, Paul told the discouraged and storm-tossed passengers who had lost hope, “For there stood by me this night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve, saying, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul; you must be brought before Caesar; and indeed God has granted you all those who sail with you.’ Therefore, take heart, men, *for I believe God that it will be just as it was told me*” (emphasis mine). In what ways are the actions of Mary and Paul and their speech a demonstration of faith in God's promise to them? How did they move ahead on God's Word even when it didn't make sense to them?
11. I was the traveling secretary for the SCM in 1979/1980 during my National Youth Service Corps in Nigeria. On one of our journeys back to the campus, the SCM van, which I drove, was running out of fuel, and there was no gas station around in that hour of the night. I had five or six other Christians, some “youth corpsers” and other students, in the van. One youth corper said he had read of a missionary who needed fuel and couldn't get fuel and he prayed over water to be turned into gasoline. He then poured the water into the fuel tank. According to his story, the missionary drove his car on water. He suggested that we do the same, that we pray over water and pour it into

the tank, believing it would turn into gasoline. After all, Jesus turned water into wine when they needed wine to keep the party going. He had the support of other Christians in the van, but I objected. I said I could go along if we prayed over the water and I smelled gasoline thereafter, meaning that it had turned into fuel. They said that wouldn't be walking by faith but walking by sight. They reminded me that faith says, "I believe it even if I can't see it; doubt says I will believe it only when I see it." I also reminded them that their suggestion was not faith but presumption. We eventually pushed the van the last two miles to the campus. In the light of what you've read in this chapter, was I faithless as they insinuated? Were they presumptuous as I suggested? Who of us was right? Explain. What would you have done if you were in my shoes, the official driver and custodian of the van?

12. After we pushed the van to the campus, my passengers narrated our ordeal to other Christians. They charged (or were they joking?) that by my refusal to go along with their suggestion, I had robbed them of the privilege of witnessing a miracle of water turning into fuel, because I had allowed "sense knowledge" to override "faith." (a) How would you answer their charge or accusation? (b) What is the difference between faith and presumption, between having faith in God and presuming on God? Give examples of faith and presumption.

3-2-1 End-of-Chapter Reviews

1. Name three things (or three lessons) you have learned, or been reminded of, in this chapter.

2. Name two ways you can apply the lessons to your life to make it worth your while.

3. Highlight one motivational/inspirational quote—Bible verse, sentence, or phrase—that's especially meaningful for you and copy this in your notebook/journal.

Pause 'n' Pray

If I turn 3-2-1 End of Chapter Review into prayer, an honest prayer from my heart to God may go like this: “Dear Father God . . .

”
(Write out or say your prayer using the first-person sentences.)

Pray for One Another (James 5:16)

If you are in a group, turn to a friend and ask Roger Palms’s questions: “How can I pray for you to be the obedient man or woman God wants you to be? What are the blocks that need to be eliminated, and what are the changes that need to be made?”

Reviewing Uncle Mike’s Letter

A. On a scale of 1 to 5 (1 stands for least satisfactory and 5 for completely satisfactory), circle a number that corresponds to the degree to which the Uncle Mike’s letter has helped to answer your questions on faith.

1 2 3 4 5

B. My bullet points or “NOTE TO SELF” from this letter are:

Theme: Assurance of Salvation

Dear Uncle Mike,

How do I know for sure that I am really a Christian or that when I die I shall be welcomed into heaven? I don't want to assume that everything is okay only to discover that I have gambled with my soul's salvation.

Jim

Dear Jim,

Your question is very penetrating. It goes to the heart of what being a Christian really means. Let me begin with the second part of your question. No, you don't have to assume or face eternity with doubt or lack of assurance, because the Bible says we can be sure of eternal life. If eternal life or salvation or heaven, were attainable based on our merit we would never know and would never be sure of when we had done enough to merit it. Yet, happily, it is a gift of God and a gift from God. John, a beloved Apostle of Jesus, writes, "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life" (1 Jn. 5:13a). Notice that the Apostle says "that you may know," not assume or guess or presume. Please allow me to quote this verse—1 John 5:13—in the Amplified Bible and The Message translations:

I write this to you who believe in (adhere to, trust in, and rely on) the name of the Son of God [in the peculiar services and blessings conferred by Him on men], so **that you may know [with settled and absolute knowledge] that you [already] have life, yes, eternal life** (AMP; bold letters for emphasis mine).

My purpose in writing is simply this: **that you who believe in God's Son will know beyond the shadow of a doubt that you have eternal life, the reality and not the illusion** (The Message; bold letters for emphasis mine).

In my growing-up years as a Christian, the leaders put it to us this way: assurance of salvation is based on fact → faith → feelings, in that order (*The Four Spiritual Laws* booklet by Dr. Bill Bright of Campus Crusade for Christ International). In other words, you start with the facts, the truth of God's Word—what God declares or promises. You then put your faith in the Word of God; you believe what God says in His word. Thereafter, feeling may or may not come. Starting with feeling is like putting the cart before the horse.

Good feelings actually do come, because there's no way a person can have his debts cancelled or be released from jail and not feel happy and find himself walking on cloud nine. In like manner, when you accept Christ into your life and believe God forgives you and sets you free from bondage to sin, and you heartily thank God for forgiving you, cleansing you and accepting you into His family, you are bound to "rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory" (1 Pet. 1:8f). Joy is a feeling. Feelings do come, because even God is an emotional being, and there's rejoicing in heaven when a person repents (Lk. 15:7, 10). Most of the fruit of the Holy Spirit, such as love, joy, and peace, are virtues that manifest as emotional feelings (Gal. 5:22, 23). Jesus promises His peace (Jn. 14:27) and fullness of joy (Jn. 15:11). Peace and joy affect our moods and outlook on life. Former atheist and intellectual who became an apologist for Christianity, C. S. Lewis wrote a book titled: "Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life", because joy, the kind of joy he never knew before, was his experience as a new believer in Christ. The danger or the problem comes when we depend on how we feel to confirm, attest to, or affirm our relationship with God.

My friend, the Reverend Murray Mayfield², says he does not feel saved in the morning until after his second cup of coffee. (At the time of writing the Rev. M. Mayfield was a pastor of two Baptist churches, a volunteer Protestant Bible Study leader in my facility and working towards certification to be a Protestant prison chaplain). That's when he begins to have the good feelings. As you know, the good, excited, happy feelings he gets after the second cup of

2. Reverend Murray Mayfield is currently a full-time protestant chaplain in a NY State Correctional Facility

coffee is nothing more than caffeine at work. The truth is that he is still saved even if he feels gloomy and groggy before drinking his morning coffee. Many things affect our feelings like the kind of food we eat, what we drink, the state of our health, the amount of sleep we had in the previous night, the condition of the atmosphere—the weather, the people around us at a particular time, the kind of background music, etc. That's why it's dangerous to gauge your salvation on how you feel. Your spiritual life will be a yo-yo experience, up now, down later, if it is based on how you feel.

I once had an inmate who related his struggles with feelings of doubt about his salvation. He desperately needed confirmation and he sought some signs from God. One day, as he looked out of his cell he saw a gaggle of geese, about 10, roaming and huddling together. He prayed and asked God for a sign that if he was indeed saved and forgiven 5 of those geese should separate from the pack, and, presto, 5 geese moved away from the pack and stayed by themselves. He was happy and excited, first, that God answered his prayer and gave him the sign he asked for, and second, that he had got a true omen that reassured him that he was saved and forgiven. Not many days after that he was again experiencing a bout of doubt. He was in the yard jogging when he noticed a gaggle of geese again huddling together. He said the same prayer that 5 geese would separate, but the geese just kept together. He changed the number to 4, and still nothing! He then prayed from 4 to 3 to 2 and lastly to 1, but the geese, as if defying an order, simply remained as one company for the rest of the evening. Was he saved based on his feelings or some outside signs the first time and was unsaved the second time? No! That's when he learned to depend on nothing but the Word of God. Signs and feelings are undependable for confirmation of our spiritual status.

I believe that assurance of salvation is based primarily on two factors: one, understanding the gospel message and, two, commitment to that message. Understanding is a mental assent; believing is commitment. Mental assent says, "It makes sense," but commitment says, "It makes so much sense that I now entrust my life to it." The commitment is a matter of the will. It is characterized by having the right beginning into this relationship. This com-

mitment or right beginning is tagged in many ways. Sometimes it is referred to as “being born again” or “new birth” (Jn. 3:3–8), “salvation” or “being saved” (Eph. 2:8, 9), and “life” or “eternal life” (1 Jn. 5:12, 13).

For example, Peter writes, **“Having been BORN AGAIN, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever”** (1 Pet. 1:23; emphasis mine). In Paul’s epistle, he wrote, **“For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto SALVATION”** (Rom. 10:10; emphasis mine).

Our salvation is based on what Jesus did for us on the cross. Jesus died for our sins. *“Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures”* (1 Cor. 15:3b). It was an act of love for a rebellious and sinful human race. *“But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that **while we were still sinners Christ died for us**”* (Rom. 5:8; emphasis mine). Jesus became our substitute and paid the penalty for our sins. Now all we need to do is to acknowledge that indeed we are sinners—meaning we have not always done the right things even according to our own conscience, and we have often done the wrong things even against our own conscience. Sin means that our actions and inactions, deeds, and neglects have sometimes brought great pains or harm or displeasures to others, to ourselves, and even to God. *“Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin”* (James 4:17).

We need to confess and repent of our sins and invite Jesus into our lives as Lord and Savior to help to moderate our thoughts and direct our steps. Religion enjoins us to do something to be saved, but Christianity is different because it is a done matter; it is based on what Jesus has done for our salvation. Christianity invites us to believe and receive. Eternal life is a free gift from God through the sacrifice of Jesus. Consider these verses: *“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”* (Eph. 2:8–9). *“For the wages of sin is death, but **the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord**”* (Rom. 6:23; emphasis mine).

In addition to eternal life being a free gift, it is also about relationship. We are brought into a relationship with God through God adopting us into

His family. Consider this: *“But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God”* (Jn. 1:12–13).

You may pray this prayer:

Lord Jesus, I acknowledge that I am a sinner. I thank You for going to the cross for me and paying my sin debt. I open the door of my heart to you now and invite You to forgive my sins and to come into my life and be my Lord and Savior. Give me the Holy Spirit to live in me and give me the assurance that I am indeed your child and that my name is written in the Book of Life. I pray this in Jesus’s name. Amen.

The story of Charles Blondin, an expert tightrope walker, paints a real-life picture of what faith actually is. There are several versions of his story, but they illustrate the same point. In June of 1859, he attempted to become the first person to cross a tightrope stretched over a quarter of a mile across the mighty Niagara Falls. As the story goes, he walked across 160 feet above falls several times, each time with a different daring feat: once in a sack, on stilts, on a bicycle, and, blindfolded, he pushed a wheelbarrow. The crowd had watched his daring feats. Upon reaching the other side, the crowd’s applause was louder than the roar of the falls! Blondin suddenly stopped and addressed his audience, “Do you believe I can carry a person across in this wheelbarrow?” The crowd enthusiastically shouted, “Yes, yes, yes. You are the greatest tightrope walker in the world. You can do anything!” “Okay,” said Blondin, “I need a volunteer.” The crowd became silent. No one volunteered. No one was willing or daring enough to risk his life. One version says that later in August of 1859, his manager, Harry Colcord, did ride on Blondin’s back across the falls. Another version says that he once got a volunteer to get into the wheelbarrow, and he pushed the man safely on the tightrope to the other side.

Having watched breathlessly the several acts of the famed tightrope walker, the crowd believed Blondin could actually carry a person on his back or in a wheelbarrow across the gorge on a tightrope. However, believing in his

ability was a mental assent. Jumping on his back or getting into the wheelbarrow was the commitment of faith, saying, in essence, “I trust you, Blondin. I believe in your expertise so much that I am willing to entrust my life into your able hands.” The crowd said they believed Blondin could carry a person on his back or push a man in the wheelbarrow across the abyss, but their actions proved they truly didn’t.

In like manner, it’s one thing for us to say we believe in God. It is another thing to take a stand for Christ. God wants you to entrust yourself completely to His Son. There is only one problem with this Blondin illustration, however. It may give the idea that trusting the Lord Jesus is something very dangerous and risky. Nothing could be further from the truth. Indeed, trusting Jesus for one’s eternal salvation is the safest thing a person can do! Human tightrope walkers sometimes fail, and some have even plunged to their death. The Lord Jesus Christ has never failed, and He will not start with you. Those who come to Him for salvation will never be disappointed! Have you done this, Jim? *“Therefore He [Jesus Christ] is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them”* (Heb. 7:25).

If you are still not sure of your salvation, this is the best time to make sure. Remember what I said at the beginning of this letter about a right beginning? It’s about being born again or receiving Jesus Christ into your life. It is about making a personal decision to follow Christ. Right now, Jesus is standing at the door of your heart, knocking, willing to come into your life to forgive you and save you. Will you let Him? Jesus is still saying to you, *“Behold, I stand at the door [the door of your heart and life] 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”* (Rev. 3:20).

Jim, will you pray to Jesus right now?

Lord Jesus, You don’t have to stand outside of my heart knocking and waiting to be invited in anymore. Right now, I open the door of my life and heart to You and invite You into my heart. Lord Jesus, come into my life and be my Lord and Savior. I thank You that You died on the cross to pay the

penalty for my sin. I receive You now. Forgive me of my sins and give me Your Holy Spirit to help me live a life that pleases You. I ask this in Your precious name. Amen.

FEELINGS EXERCISE (Group Activity)

How do you feel? Do you feel saved or unsaved right now? Why is that so?

Our feelings have often been grouped under four subheadings: glad, sad, mad, and scared. Supply five more words under each category in the table below. The first has been done for you. Use a dictionary or thesaurus to find the synonyms of these four words *glad*, *sad*, *mad*, and *scared*.

FEELING WORDS: HOW DO YOU FEEL TODAY?			
GLAD	SAD	MAD	SCARED
HAPPY	GLOOMY	ANGRY	FRIGHTENED

Answer these questions in your group or journal. Look at the table and decide:

- a. Which feeling words often describe you?
- b. Why is that so?
- c. How often do your feelings shift from one to the other during the day?
- d. If these different feeling words describe you at various times of the

day, then

- (i.) How often do you feel saved in the day?
- (ii.) How often do you feel unsaved during the day?
- e. Why is it unadvisable to base the assurance of your salvation on how you feel or on some external signs?
- f. Why has the Bible verse you read yesterday not changed position or its truth since last night? Even if your feelings about the verse have changed, why is it still saying what it said to you yesterday?
- g. What does your answer to question f tell you of a surer and more reliable source on which to base the assurance of your salvation?
- h. If you are able to draw, draw four pictures of someone who is glad, sad, mad, or scared, respectively.
- i. Nonverbal communication: We communicate more by our facial expressions and mood than by our words. Play this game in turns. Have someone make the face or display the mood of someone who is glad, sad, mad, or scared at different times.
- j. Next time you speak to your parent or friend, rather than tell a long story, simply use a feeling word, like “I’m too scared to go there” or “I am just too excited about this” or “I am miserable right now.” Can you see how these feeling words speak volumes? They might scare your mom!

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION AND MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS

DAY 7

1. The beginning of the Christian life has been described by many terms and phrases such as *born again*, *salvation*, *regeneration*, *repentance*, *accept Christ*, *receive Christ*, to name a few. Name and explain the term or phrase that’s used predominantly in your church or the Christian culture where you live.
2. Can a mortal man be certain of eternal life when he dies? Can he be absolutely sure his name is written in the Book of Life before he arrives at the Pearly Gate? Use relevant scriptures to support your

Theme: Assurance of Salvation

answer.

3. On what is your assurance or guarantee that you are a Christian or a child of God based? Do you have scriptures to refer to?
4. Read John 14:27, 15:11; Galatians 5:22, 23; 1 Peter 1:8; Psalm 51:7–12, esp. verses 8 and 12; Romans 1:17; 14:17, 15:13; and 2 Corinthians 5:7. From these scriptures, explain why we cannot rule out good feelings, such as joy, peace, and gladness, and yet cannot depend on those good feelings to determine our spiritual state.
5. How would you help an anonymous person who writes, “Why do I feel saved and born again some days but feel unsaved and not born again on other days? On those unsaved feeling days, I would confess my sins, repent again and again, and ask Jesus again into my life before I regain the feeling of being born again. However, my friends say that I don’t have to do this again and again. Why can’t I believe like they do?”
6. How does the Blondin story show/illustrate the difference between believing that gives mental assent and believing that follows through with commitment?
7. Read Romans 5:8, 6:23, and Ephesians 2:8–10 and write a paragraph that connects the three passages/verses in such a way that it explains the gospel to a friend who desires to become a Christian. What keywords or phrases jump out in those three passages that you would like to include in your paragraph, and why are they important?
8. “Sin means that our actions and inactions, deeds and neglects have sometime brought great pains or harm or displeasures to others, to ourselves and even to God.” Explain what the author meant by this definition or description of sin. Is this definition of sin broad enough? If yes, explain. If no, explain.
9. The author writes, “Religion enjoins us to do something to be saved, but Christianity is different, because it is a done matter; it is based on what Jesus has done for our salvation. Christianity invites us to

believe and receive. Eternal life is a free gift from God through the sacrifice of Jesus.” Examine this quote in the light of three major world religions: Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism. What does Islam, Judaism, or Buddhism ask their adherents to do to be saved? What do these religions, or their founders promise to guarantee the salvation of their followers?

10. Read Psalm 51:3, 4 for King David’s confession to God after committing adultery with Bathsheba and plotting the murder of Uriah, her husband, and then taking her to be his wife. Read also Genesis 39:6-10 for Joseph’s motivation for not yielding to the temptation to commit adultery with his master’s wife. Lastly, read Luke 15:17-24 for the prodigal son’s confession. In all the three cases the individuals recognized sin as offense in three areas: (1) personal—against self, (2) social—against others/society, and (3) spiritual—against God. Why is it important that we recognize that all our actions and inactions have repercussions in these three areas: our neighbors/society, our God and us?

3-2-1 End-of-Chapter Reviews

1. Name three things (or three lessons) you have learned, or been reminded of, in this chapter.

2. Name two ways you can apply the lessons to your life to make it worth your while.

3. Highlight one motivational/inspirational quote—Bible verse, sentence, or phrase—that’s especially meaningful for you and copy this in your notebook/journal.

Pause 'n' Pray

If I turn 3-2-1 End of Chapter Review into prayer, an honest prayer from my heart to God may go like this: “Dear Father God . . .

»

(Write out or say your prayer using the first-person sentences.)

Pray for One Another (James 5:16)

If you are in a group, turn to a friend and ask Roger Palms's questions: "How can I pray for you to be the obedient man or woman God wants you to be? What are the blocks that need to be eliminated, and what are the changes that need to be made?"

Reviewing Uncle Mike's Letter

A. On a scale of 1 to 5 (1 stands for least satisfactory and 5 for completely satisfactory), circle a number that corresponds to the degree to which the Uncle Mike's letter has helped to answer your questions on assurance of salvation.

1 2 3 4 5

B. My bullet points or "NOTE TO SELF" from this letter are:

Theme: Peace With God/ Peace With Self

Dear Uncle Mike,

How do I get rid of guilty feelings or have the assurance that my sins are forgiven? No matter how hard I try to put things behind me and have peace, I sometimes have this sad, gloomy, and guilty feeling for days, especially when things are not what they should be in my relationships with others or with God. It is not just that I feel sad. It is also that I walk around like an angry, mean person, which I am not.

Nicole

Dear Nicole,

Guilt is a big issue. It is a common emotion that's sometimes pervasive. It may show up in the form of an inside feeling that you somehow fall short, that you've done something wrong or have not done up to par. It may be a persistent ugly feeling that you miss the target, that you are not good enough. It could be a troubling self-doubt that you are disappointing to yourself, to God, to parents and to other significant persons in your life. Perhaps it's an eerie feeling that you don't measure up. Whatever the case it keeps you from being and feeling the best version of your true self. I will attempt to approach it from many angles without psychological jargons. Hopefully, I will touch on what you are struggling with.

First, let me start with a story in Genesis that illustrates the kind of civil war or unfocused anxiety that goes inside many people troubled with guilt feelings. Rebekah, the wife of Isaac, was barren. After 20 years of praying and hoping, she finally became pregnant. Pregnant women often talk of their baby kicking in their belly with a happy glow on their face, but not so with

Rebekah. Her case was different. Each kick was intentional and calculated to bring pain. She was pregnant with twin boys. These boys in her womb were engaged in rough play, fights, kicking each other and viciously tugging at Rebekah's belly. The pain was excruciating. She cried out for help, "*Why am I like this?* What's going on inside me?" She prayed,

"And the Lord said to her:
'Two nations are in your womb,
Two peoples shall be separated from your body;
One people shall be stronger than the other,
And the older shall serve the younger.'" (Gen. 25:23)

In plain language, there's sibling rivalry of the magnitude of a civil war going on inside Rebekah. Guilt is like that. It's happening inside you and it is one part of yourself striving with another. It's inner conflict. It's emotional turmoil. It's a battle raging on the inside. It's a soul un-reconciled, at war with itself, a person divided against herself. It is a person echoing the words of Rebekah, "*Why am I like this?*" (Gen. 25:22d). And, who hasn't muttered those words, "*Why am I like this?*"

GUILT IS THE RESULT OF A BROKEN PERSON LIVING IN A BROKEN WORLD. IT'S A PERSON AT ENMITY WITH HIMSELF, HIS NEIGHBOR AND WITH HIS CREATOR

We are all wounded and broken by life. Life acts on us in ways we do not expect. In response, we often react to life, like firefighters in combat-ready paraphernalia, to counter the attack. For reasons we cannot explain, the environment is sometimes negative or even hostile. Once-cherished relationships become toxic. We are misunderstood. Our plans fail. Friends disappoint us. A family member is sick. In spite of all our efforts, we didn't reach our goals. We doubt our own ability. Everything is high tension. We blame ourselves, or we get blamed. Either way, we experience guilt. Our emotions slump. Our faith plummets. We become moody. For these reasons, everybody goes through

this experience of mood swings once in a while. It is the way we are wired as *emotional* human beings. To stay long in that condition or live that way in such a manner that it defines who you are is the problem. It is hard to imagine what kind of hell this world would be if there's no such thing as guilt feeling. Guilt is often the voice of our conscience or the inner monitor that whispers to our souls. That's not to say that conscience is the best arbiter because conscience itself takes its cue from the culture or from our daily practices.

I'm sure you've heard it said, "When Mama is unhappy, no one around is happy," because Mama's unhappiness poisons everyone's happy mood. It goes for everybody, not just Mama. Our moods are infectious. It has been long established that tiredness and yawning are infectious. Others around us catch them, but recent research shows that even stress is contagious. It is in the air, and you catch it when you come across a stressed person. That's one reason I am happy that you are focusing on this problem, because you are not only helping yourself, you are also helping others around you. You don't want to be the joy killer in the room. Besides, you don't want to be the one who walks around like a time bomb, the mental health case, always angry and ready to explode anytime.

In one of Paul's letters to the Corinthians, he had rebuked the church for condoning sin. They were grieved by the content of the letter. Paul wrote a second letter to explain the difference between the sorrow of the world and godly sorrow or good guilt and bad guilt. The sorrow of the world over sin is remorse or regret for being caught, but the godly sorrow is repentance for the sin itself, for the act, whether or not one is caught. Regardless of his mournful tears and sadness, the man of the world will commit the sin again, for he isn't sorry for the act, just for being caught. However, even when not caught, under the conviction of the Holy Spirit, godly sorrow seeks repentance. Paul writes:

For even if I made you sorry with my letter, I do not regret it; though I did regret it. For I perceive that the same epistle made you sorry, though only for a while. Now I rejoice, not that you were made sorry, but that **your sorrow led to repentance. For you were made sorry in a godly manner,**

that you might suffer loss from us in nothing. For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death. (2 Cor. 7:8–10; emphasis mine)

Some people have a dull conscience while others have an overly sensitive conscience. Guilt feelings are deeper than the conscience, because they point to a broken relationship and that we stand condemned in the court of the heavens. Yet, guilt or guilty feelings do not have to lead to depression or a gloomy outlook or irrational behavior. It is designed to point us to the need for forgiveness and reconciliation with others, with God, and even with our selves. *“For if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all things. Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God”* (1 Jn. 3:20–21). The cross and the empty tomb of Jesus is God’s remedy for our guilt.

WE CAN PARTLY BLAME THIS PROBLEM ON ANGRY PREACHERS AND “BAD” PREACHING

Nicole, before I go fully into answering your question, I want you to imagine this scenario with me. Ready? Okay, you are a nice person, but you borrowed some money from a schoolmate that you haven’t paid back at the due time. This is not a credit card bill; this is money you owed to a person with a face. We are talking thousands of dollars, but the deal you were banking on for repayment fell through, and you lost heavily. The most awkward feeling in the world is to bump into that schoolmate in your local church on a Sunday morning. You owe him a lump sum, are late on repayment, don’t have the money to pay him, and he’s not a member of your local church! *What’s he doing here?* is the first question that pops up in your head. He doesn’t have to be a mean person, because he was kind enough to lend you the money. The problem is on your side; you haven’t made good on your promise to repay at the promised time. You can’t avoid his presence or change direction; you are face-to-face. You try some nice talk, and he’s not too concerned about civility. He starts in a low tone, in whispers, “Where’s my money? You’re three weeks late. I told you I was saving that money for my child’s school fees.” You start

some stories and excuses, but he's not buying them. You are embarrassed, and your eyes are scanning the church to see who is observing what's going on. Can you imagine that kind of awkwardness in feelings, Nicole?

I want to say that, partly, angry preachers and "bad" preaching are often responsible for perpetuating this kind of feelings in our relationship with God. As pastors, we are called to preach the good news of salvation; to this day, I still can't figure it out how you can talk about love, God's unconditional love, about a sinless Christ who died for sinners, and be angry at the same time. Yet when I listen to some preachers yelling and scowling, I have to ask myself: Why is he mad? You don't believe me? When next you watch a religious telecast, turn down the volume of your TV so that all you see are the nonverbal communications, the facial expressions, moving lips, and body language of the energetic and zealous preacher. In most cases, happily not all, you'll come to same conclusion: Why is he mad? Who is he mad at?

Many pastors have presented a God that you owe a heavy debt, which you haven't paid and can't pay. However, this is the truth—you owe God a debt, which you can't pay, and you can't even afford the currency for the payment. The currency for the payment is death, "*for the wages of sin is death*" (Rom. 6:23a). Naturally, you'd try to avoid God's presence even when your heart desires Him. It's like a kind of attraction-repulsion syndrome with God; you want God, but you are scared of truly encountering Him with your unpaid debt still hanging. If and when you do pray, you doubt your own prayers, because you don't believe you have the right to speak to such a God. If you bump into God (that sometimes happens in church), you'd cringe in fear. If you find yourself in the presence of a "holy" man whose "holiness" intimidates you than motivates you, you cower, because you feel lesser than. The result is that you have an awkward feeling of being a failure or heavily indebted when you think about God, the same awkward feeling of failure and disappointment that you feel when you stand in the presence of a lender you have defaulted on your promise of repayment again and again.

Nicole, it's bad preaching when pastors become self-appointed debt collection agents on God's behalf. It's bad preaching when all you hear from the

pulpit is a message of condemnation, how messed up you are, what a failure you are and how you come short before a holy God, and how you are going straight to hell. This is one leg of the truth. The balancing second leg is that however messed up you are, there's hope, and without this emphasis on hope and forgiveness, we fail the people and it is a disservice to the pulpit.

What if I told you, Nicole, from the onset, that you don't owe God anything *because of Jesus*? Will that help? What if I told you that you don't have to worry about the principal, late payment, or interest on your sin debt, because *Jesus has fully paid all your sin debt to God*? What if I told you that God has not sent your name to any collection agency to harass you or confiscate whatever you have in your house? What if I told you that God really loves you, volitionally and emotionally? What if I told you that God is not mad at you? What if I told you that God is not bent on punishing you or snatching away your job because of your sins? What if I told you that your bill has been stamped *paid in full*, in red blood, the blood of Jesus, God's Son? What if I quote the latter part of Romans 6:23, quoted in part earlier, which says, "*but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord*" (Rom. 6:23b)? What if I told you that in the New Covenant, God has not only *totally* forgiven you, but God has, as well, Himself provided a covering of righteousness for you in Christ so you no longer to have to feel condemned or unworthy of God's presence?

WE CAN ALSO BLAME THE PROBLEM ON THE SECULAR CULTURE

Forgiveness! To forgive and be forgiven! Who needs it? We all do. We all have done wrong things for which we feel guilty. Our personal stories may include how some people we trusted, especially caretakers in our childhood, have misused their power and abused us, abandoned us, maltreated us or taken advantage of us. We all have sinned and have been sinned against; we are therefore both culprits and victims. We both need to forgive and be forgiven. Things we long wished buried often come to surface. It is like our shadow, from which there is no running away.

Guilt! What haven't we done with our guilt and that "I don't like myself" attitude? Some try to blot it out with alcohol or suppress it with drugs, but none of these helps. Some go to confess to priests; some seek help in therapy sessions. Others have tried to make reparations for harm they caused or counterbalance their wrongdoings with extra good works. Some have apologized and sometimes wept openly for their sins, expressing regret and remorse. All these are commendable in themselves.

Psychologists, psychoanalysts, and therapists have been unusually creative in this respect of helping us get rid of "this thing . . . this bad feeling." While there is some help and relief from the services of these professionals, many of their clients seem to be still victimized. They wonder why they cannot get "it" off their minds, why they cannot be truly free of guilt and get on with life. The human soul seeks reality and will not settle for alternatives. We want to be pardoned, to be rid of guilt and bitterness.

Some psychologists say our problem is the environment—that we live in a twisted, distorted environment, which in turn imprints itself on us. Other psychologists say we are self-gratifying animals frustrated by the society, because the society imposes standards that suppress our inner drives. To them, there is no such thing as guilt. Guilt, they say, is an incorrect learned evaluation. Blame the society that programs or conditions us to feel guilty!

This skewed point of view has reformatted the concept of sin from its spiritual meaning and implications and toned it down, referring to sin as a complex, weakness, sickness, failure, attitude, personality trait, or mistake. How do you repent of alcoholism or drug addiction when the society labels (or re-labels) it as sickness or disability and not sin of drunkenness or self-abuse? Or who would repent of a habit of rage and anger tantrums when the society refers to it as a complex, weakness, or personality trait? True, there is a sense in which we are products of our sociological environment, but this is only half the truth. The only objective way to view sin is to see it as an act against God, against others, and against self.

You don't hear the word *sin* anymore from the pulpits of many evangelical churches in America. One pastor explained to me that people come to church

with deflated ego and low self-esteem, because they have been accused, beaten down, and told what a failure they are every day of the week; they shouldn't come to church and be treated the same way. The church should lift up their spirits and restore their sense of worth. To hammer on sin or call them sinners is to again do what the world does to them: beat them down in the name of religion. This sounds logical and compassionate but dangerous and damning spiritually. How do you present Jesus, as Savior from sin and the only hope of sinners, if you avoid mentioning the word *sin* or *sinners* from the pulpit? Jesus did not come to die for our inferiority and superiority complexes, which are the symptoms of sin. To rename *sin* as *mess* is peripheral. Sin is deeper than our mess; our mess is the symptom of our sin, our separation from God. Jesus came to deliver us from the root problem: sin, the result of our separation from God. Jesus died for our sins; Jesus died for sinners. Interestingly, the new prophets who are trying to bring back the concept of sin are not preachers but secular psychiatrists and newspaper columnists. (Please stay with me, Nicole. I told you in the opening paragraph, "I will attempt to approach it from many angles without psychological jargons." Remember? Thanks).

Dr. Karl Menninger, MD, a psychiatrist, wrote a number of very influential books, probably none more influential to the modern consciousness than a book he wrote entitled *Whatever Became of Sin?* In that book, Dr. Menninger says these words: "The very word 'sin,' which seems to have disappeared, was a proud word. It was once a strong word, an ominous and serious word. It described a central point in every civilized human being's life plan and lifestyle. But the word went away. It has almost disappeared—the word, along with the notion. Why? Doesn't anyone sin any more? Doesn't anyone believe in sin?" (p. 14).

The whole burden of his book is to document the disappearance of sin from American society. He basically argues that in place of the historic concept of sin, we now speak of crime and symptoms. This is his analysis:

Whenever you look at sin as either crime or symptoms, you are missing the essence of human right and wrong behavior. Whenever you take sin and turn it into crime, what you've done is taken God out of the picture because

sin is committed between a person and God. Crime is malfeasance [law: legally unjustified or contrary to law] between two human beings. So if you call it crime, you've really defined it downward. Or if you take sin and turn it into symptoms, you've gone even lower because there you're talking about things like outward indications, you're talking about heredity, you're talking about environment, you're talking about early life choices and factors that infringe upon the outside [insert mine].

As Dr. Menninger points out, when you discard the concept of "sin" and replace it with the concept of "symptoms," you've defined it as something that's completely exterior or outside of us. Who will repent of something exterior or external to him, which he cannot control? The demand for change is unfair, because he is a victim of the circumstance. Unfortunately, the pulpit has bought into this belief system.

WE EVENTUALLY FIND THE ANSWER IN THE CROSS OF CHRIST

DAY 9

What then is missing? Primarily, forgiveness is spiritual. The secular counseling program lacks a proper definition of sin as a deviation from God's standard of holiness. The truth is that repentance, remorse, and regret for sins, as good and necessary as they are, cannot guarantee peace or forgiveness without God. God's forgiveness does not imply that God winks at sin, because God's holiness prevents Him from glossing over our sins—sin must be punished. At the same time, God's mercy and love prevent Him from dealing with us according to our sins. This is a dilemma: holiness and justice demand that sins must be punished; love and mercy beg for forgiveness.

The cross of Christ was the place where this dilemma—the conflict between God's justice, which demanded that sins be punished, and His love that desired to forgive the sinner—was resolved. God forgives us only, because our sins in their entirety have been fully paid for by Christ's death and resurrection. God's justice was satisfied when "*Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures*" (1 Cor. 15:3b), and God's love was also demonstrated, because "*God commends His love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ*

died for us" (Rom. 5:8). God forgives us, because Jesus already paid the penalty for our sins.

If you thought deeply on this dilemma faced by a holy, righteous and loving God in relation to His sin-cursed humanity, and stretch it to a logical conclusion, you would come away believing that Christ died for a holy God as much as Christ died for sinful offspring of Adam. For true justice, a loving, merciful and gracious God needed Christ to die so a "God [who] is love," (1 Jn. 4:8b) could be reconciled to humanity. Simultaneously, we, sinful humanity, needed Christ, a sinless Perfect Substitute, to take our punishment so we could be reconciled to God. The cross has one horizontal beam or pole. The end of the pole that's stuck in the earth reads, "*Christ died for us*" (Rom. 5:8); the other end pointing to heaven reads, "*God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them,*" (2 Cor. 5:19). Simply, Christ died for God.

The blood of Jesus Christ His [God's] Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He [God] is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. . . . For I [says God] will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more. . . . In Him [Christ] we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace. (1 Jn. 1:7c-9; Heb. 8:12; Eph. 1:7)

Unlike human beings, when God forgives, He no longer acts on our past record; God no longer sees us through our past but as new persons with a clean slate. God sees us through what we can be in the future. Unlike human beings who can hardly forget a hurt or emotional pain, God chooses to forget, to no longer remember the things we've done wrong. We say "forgive and forget", but we all know that the forgetting is not easy, especially when there are many triggers: individuals, behaviors, things, scars, mannerisms, habits, and seasons that can reignite old memories of hurt and disappointment.

The psalmist says that God puts a space or separation between us and our sins as far as the East is from the West. Only God can separate a person from

his sins and give him a new identity. *“As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us”* (Ps. 103:12). That is, our sins are not tossed under the rug or behind the sofa but far, far away. The East and West don’t ever meet. If you are traveling East, the farther you go, the more eastern you get. You never arrive at the West. That’s the picture God paints for us about how God forgives our sins.

The prophet Micah says that when God forgives us, God casts our sins in a sea of forgetfulness. *“Who is a God like You, Pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of His heritage? He does not retain His anger forever, Because He delights in mercy. He will again have compassion on us, and will subdue our iniquities. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea”* (Mic. 7:18–19). To help our understanding of God’s pardon, the prophet Micah paints the picture of God casting “our sins into the depths of the sea.” The phrase conjures the picture of something hopelessly lost and gone out of sight in the middle of nowhere. In her book *Tramp for the Lord*, Holocaust survivor, Corrie ten Boon, said, “When we confess our sins, God casts them into the deepest ocean, gone forever ... Then God places a sign out there that says, ‘No Fishing Allowed!’”

God says through the prophet Jeremiah, *“For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more”* (Jer. 31:34g). It is not for amnesia or memory loss on God’s part but a choice, a decision of the will to remember no longer, to see us no longer through the lens of our past sins. In today’s computer language, we would rewrite the verse to say that God presses the delete button and follows it with a reset button to bring the computer back to its original factory default settings.

We are able to forgive ourselves, forgive others, and experience the peace and forgiveness of God because of what God has done for us in Christ. A person can truly forgive himself or herself and have peace within him/herself only after that individual has genuinely repented and experienced the forgiveness of God. Until then, all your efforts will be nothing more than trying to deaden your conscience to the matter. Such efforts prove futile in the end. The good news is that God’s forgiveness not only frees us from guilt and the

clutches of sin, it also empowers us to live for God's glory. This one thing we know, and the Scriptures make it plain: God is not stingy or frugal with forgiveness; rather, God is prodigal and reckless with forgiveness, if I may use those words.

Pray this prayer:

“God, be merciful to me a sinner!” (Lk. 18:13). According to Your word, “If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 Jn. 1:9). I confess my sins [be sure to mention some specific personal sins that come to your mind] and ask that You forgive and cleanse me, as You promised. In Jesus's name I pray. Amen.

The key really lies in this question: Have you accepted Christ as your Lord and Savior? Are you a new person in Christ? To confess and be forgiven is one thing; to have a relationship with God through Christ is another thing. That's when we are not just forgiven but also made righteous with God. That is, God imputes Christ's righteousness into our account.

IMPUTATION OR TRADING PLACES WITH JESUS RESOLVES THE PROBLEM

No illustration is perfect. However, for an illustration, let's say someone named Sam owes a large sum of money that he cannot pay to a lender named Brutus. A generous benefactor named Tim learns of Sam's predicament. Tim deposits an amount equal to Sam's debt into Brutus's (the lender's) account in Sam's name. As far as Brutus is concerned, the debt has been paid up and Sam's account is cleared. It didn't matter that the money did not come from Sam's purse. Sam is a free man. However, if Sam is unaware that a benefactor has indeed paid his debt, Sam will still be scared of Brutus for no reason other than ignorance of the fact that his debt has been paid. It is a sad truth that many are still running and hiding from God, because they do not know that someone, Christ, has paid the full penalty for their sins. Let's get back to Sam. While Sam's account is not in the red, it is still not in the positive. This is what forgiveness does. Forgiveness clears the debt, but the account is a zero.

Let's take it a little further. Let's say that Tim—the wealthy, generous

benefactor—links his fat account to Sam’s account. Sam can buy anything, charge his account to any amount, and still not go red. Because Sam’s account is now linked to an unfathomably loaded account, Tim’s wealth is now at Sam’s disposal; Sam’s ledger has been credited to an unimaginable level. This is what Christ purchased for us. We are not left with a zero balance; the income side of our account is incredibly funded. The righteousness of Christ is imputed to us. The prophet Isaiah foresaw this transference and imputation of our sins on Jesus in the OT when he said, *“All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all”* (Isa. 53:6). The Apostle Paul looked back to the cross where our sins were paid for when he wrote, **“For He [God] made Him [Jesus] who knew no sin to be sin for us, THAT WE MIGHT BECOME THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD IN HIM”** (2 Cor. 5:21; emphasis mine). The purpose is that we may be credited with Christ’s righteousness and declared righteous.

When writing to the Romans on this issue, Paul exults and jubilantly declares, **“There Is Therefore NOW No Condemnation To Those Who Are In Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death. . . . Who shall bring a charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even AT THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD, WHO ALSO MAKES INTERCESSION FOR US”** (Rom. 8:1–2, 33–34; emphasis added).

WHY KJV-ONLY BELIEVERS ARE SOMETIMES THE MODERN-DAY LEGALISTS

This is a little digression. I hate doing this, and I can’t remember ever doing it, because every version, translation, or paraphrase of the Bible has its merits. You just have to read the preface to appreciate the guiding principles and passion behind it and the audience for which it was intended. It is just that the KJV-only Christians are not only rigid but often condemn other trans-

lations, as if God dictated the KJV Bible word for word. No translation is perfect. Something is always lost or not fully expressed when we move from one language to another, one culture or era to another. In the light of availability of more earlier manuscripts, better understanding of the historical context, culture, and crowd of the original readers, even the KJV has words and expressions it can improve on. This brings me back to Romans 8:1.

It is generally believed that the latter part of Romans 8:1, quoted above—“who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit”—was not in the original text but was added by the translators of the KJV, which was also carried into the NKJV. Yeah! I guess those translators couldn't fathom why or how a condemned sinner could walk out a free man from the court of heaven for simply being “in Christ,” without doing anything on his part and without attaching any conditions to his freedom! They must have thought that we need to do some extra work in order to be found righteous. That little rider or caveat, “who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit,” is a takeaway from Christ's work and makes our standing without condemnation a conditional thing. It changes how we perceive Christ's work and how we understand our faith.

This also explains why the KJV-only Christians and denominations, if you've met them, are also preachers of works-based righteousness and are legalists with long list of dos and don'ts for holiness. By the way, I use NKJV as a pastor for “political correctness,” if you understand what I mean. Just to be less offensive to some. It is a kind of middle of the road—modern English, archaic translation. Like many Christians in my age group, I grew up on the Revised Standard Version (the approved version as religious textbook in secondary schools) and King James' Version—which I then considered was the pulpit version of the Bible. Due to this background, to this day, I still filter whatever I read in other translations through the RSV and KJV. It is a constant struggle because other translations don't sound like the Scriptures to me if they depart from the RSV and KJV. This infantile infatuation with KJV could be another reason why I stick with NKJV. English is my second language. (Please don't feel sorry for me for this because I consider

it an advantage, not a disadvantage. When I taught in public schools in Brooklyn, New York, I used to encourage new immigrant middle school students who had thick accent not to feel lesser than. I told them an accent, or English as a second language, meant they could speak and did speak other languages than their English-only speaker classmates, and it also meant that their worldview was broader and their life experiences more extensive than their strictly English speaker friends who probably knew little outside the zip code of their births, and who hadn't lived or interacted with other cultures and peoples of the world.) Because the scripture did not come to us in KJV as its original language, I choose to free myself from "thou", "thee", "getteth", and "begetteth." If I don't say to a friend, "Findeth thou not the pen that thou borroweth from me?" why do I have to read the Bible, a living book, in that Shakespearean language? Nevertheless, I have great respect for my colleagues who read, study and preach from KJV. I just don't need the extra struggle as a learner of the English language.

[Many inmates who write to chaplains and request for KJV Bible only—judging from the few lines of their letter of request—many could hardly string words together to make a correct sentence in the English language; not to mention their poor spelling. Yet, they want to read the Bible in KJV. Decidedly, we give inmates the Bible in any version, NKJV, NRSV, NIV, NIrV, NAB, NEB, LB, NLT, etc. but not KJV. We, however, give the KJV Bibles to Rastafarians, because KJV is the official Bible of the religion. If any Christian wanted to read only the KJV Bible, he should get it by himself. We also refuse Bible donations from "church" organizations that want to supply only the KJV. This practice did not originate with me. It was the practice before I became the Protestant chaplain in the facility and, after becoming acquainted with the situation, I didn't see any need to correct or challenge the practice. I have nothing but the highest regards for my predecessors in this regard.]

I apologize for the digression. Now back to Romans 8:1. Thankfully, virtually other later translations based on original and earlier manuscripts don't have this condition. It is not that they omit something (as KJV-only

Christians insist); it is that the KJV added something. However, all agree that that portion is rightly placed at the end of verse 4, as you will read in *all* translations. Again, I don't do this kind of thing, and this is probably the only time I've ever done it. Unfortunately, that addition to Romans 8:1 is a takeaway from Christ's work. Christ is enough! "*There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus.*" Period! End of verse! End of discussion. The phrase, "*In Christ*" is all that counts; all that matters!

Back to my illustration, Nicole, I want you to put yourself in Sam's shoes and rejoice. Guilt and condemnations are over for you. Jesus is even now praying for you.

The Rev. Dr. Gary V. Simpson, senior pastor of the Concord Baptist Church of Christ in Bedford-Stuyvesant, always extends an invitation of God's free offer of forgiveness before closing Sunday morning worship. Performing this priestly function before dismissing his congregation, he says authoritatively, "If anyone here is looking for the assurance of pardon and power, it has been granted unto you on the authority of God's word that declares, *If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*" (1 Jn. 1:9). Yes, "the assurance of pardon and power has been granted unto you on the authority of God's word."

I urge you to take this Brooklyn preacher's invitation as a personal one to you today. Confess your sins to God and ask for forgiveness on the basis of what Christ has done for you. Trust Him to change and empower you to live for God's glory. Amen.

DIGGING DEEPER: JUSTIFICATION (Word Study for Smart People Like You)

"Being **justified freely by His grace** through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. . . . Therefore **we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.** . . . But to him **who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly**, his faith is accounted for righteousness. . . . Therefore, **having been justified by faith, we have peace with God** through our Lord Jesus Christ. . . . But when the kindness and the love of God our

Savior toward man appeared, **not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us**, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 3:24, 28; 4:5; 5:1; Titus 3:4, 5; emphasis mine).

I really didn't want to bring in this word so I won't be sounding theological in any way, but on a second thought, it is not a big word, and you are really more than smart enough to handle it. When I was a classroom teacher, I often gave additional assignments to my best and fastest students for extra credit. I think of you as one of them, and I want you to take time to study this word *justification* for extra credit. Once you get an understanding of imputation and justification, it will free you from all guilt and condemnation. You will better understand the word *grace*.

Justification is actually a word from the law court; it means to treat or to reckon someone as something; in this case, reckoning or declaring as righteous in the sight of God. Some words close to it in our judicial system today will be *expunge* or *vacate*, which means to cancel or annul the record of an offense or charge as if it never occurred; to overrule, cancel, render null and void. In computer language, it means to press the reset button and return the machine back to its factory default setting as if it was never used; this process clears all memories (Read Psalm 103:12; Micah 7:19; Jeremiah 31:31–34; and Hebrew 8:12).

“Justification is the judicial act of God, in which He declares, on the basis of the righteousness of Christ, that all claims of the law are satisfied in respect to the sinner” (Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 513).

Justification and righteousness are inseparably united in scripture—almost the same words. The believing sinner is justified because Christ, having borne his sins on the cross, has become for us “wisdom from God—and righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (1 Cor. 1:30).

Justification:

1. Originates in grace (Rom. 3:24; Titus 3:4, 5). Either you attempt to work for your salvation, which makes you religious but not a Chris-

tian, or you accept it as a free gift. You can't have it both ways.

2. Is by faith, not works (Rom. 3:28–30; 4:5; 5:1; Gal. 2:16; 3:8, 24). If you work for anything, you earn it and you have a reason and right to boast about it. Unfortunately, this is not the case for salvation because it's not of works. "It is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast" (Eph. 2:8-9). But, "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23a). Death! That's the only thing we truly earn and deserve because we've worked to earn it by our sins.
3. May be defined as the judicial act of God (higher court) where He declares righteous one who believes on Jesus Christ. It is the Judge Himself (Rom. 8:1, 31–34) who declares the sinner, "Not guilty. Not condemned." The justified believer has been in court and has been cleared.

Justify means to declare righteous and does not have any basis in us (Eph. 2:8, 9). It is to regard the sinner as if he never sinned. Pardon deals with the past; justification deals with the past, present and future. The basis of justification is redemption. The price of redemption is so great it cost the righteous Jesus His life (1 Pet. 1:18, 19). The believer is clothed with the righteousness of Christ and now has a right standing with God. God says what Christ did for us was by far more than enough.

Imputation, which I mentioned above in my illustration of Sam, the borrower, and Tim, the wealthy benefactor is charging or reckoning something to a person's account. Three imputations are set forth in scripture:

1. The sin of Adam is imputed to his posterity (Rom. 5:12–14; 1 Cor. 15:21, 22).
2. The sin of humanity is imputed to Christ on the cross (2 Cor. 5:19, 21; Isa. 53:4–6; 1 Pet. 2:24).
3. The righteousness of God is imputed to those who believe (Gen. 15:6; Ps. 32:2; Rom. 3:22; 4:3, 8, 21–25; 2 Cor. 5:21; Philem. 17, 18; Phil. 3:9; 1 Cor. 1:30; Jude 24).

Imputation affects the standing, not the state. This is righteousness from God, apart from all human works, which is unto and upon all who believe (Rom. 3:22). It is the eternal standing of all who are saved. We then live into the righteousness that God has given us, and which we have received, by grace. Imputed righteousness is the basis of justification. God declares the one justified forever whom He sees “in Christ.” Our justification is abiding and unchanging, since it rests only on the merit of the eternal Son of God.

Three kinds of righteousness are also mentioned in the Bible (Rom. 10:1–13):

1. Self-righteousness, which the Bible says is like filthy rags (Isa. 64:6; Lk. 18:11)
2. Righteousness based on the Law, which the Bible says saves no one (Phil. 3:6; Gal. 2:21)
3. God’s (or imputed) righteousness, which is our only hope (Phil. 3:9; 2 Cor. 5:21)

Justification is more than forgiveness, since forgiveness is the cancellation of sin while justification is the imputing of righteousness. Forgiveness is negative (the removal of condemnation) while justification is positive (the bestowing of the merit and standing of Christ). The weight of your sins cannot outweigh, and therefore cannot nullify, what Christ has done for you.

Sad to say, but it is true that many well-intentioned evangelical preachers preach half the gospel all their life. The half they preach is the negative side: *Christ died for us*—Christ paid it all! This is true. The problem is that it focuses only on Christ taking away our sins, which brings our ledger to zero. The second half they fail to preach or emphasize is *Christ makes us righteous*. This is equally true. Jesus completely obeyed the Law and credits (imputes) us with His obedience and righteousness. This funds our account with *all* that’s Christ’s. Our ledger is not zero but fully credited with God’s righteousness.

You don’t become justified when you do better; then it will be by works. You are justified in your present state: a sinner who believes in God who

justifies the unrighteous or ungodly (Rom. 4:5). We have justification from God not as saints but as sinners. The greatest saints have no more merit for justification than the worst sinner. The pardon granted in justification applies to all sins, past, present, and future, and thus involves the removal of all guilt and every penalty. *“For by one offering He (Christ) has perfected forever those who are sanctified”* (Heb. 10:14).

The greatest proof of our justification is our union with Christ. We were “in Adam” when he sinned. We are “in Christ” when we put our trust in Him. We are now “in Christ” just as we were “in Adam.” We are now incorporated into Christ just as we had been incorporated into Adam. The one who is justified by faith is the one who is “in Christ”, and because he is “in Christ,” he has what Christ offers: righteousness, peace, joy, access to God, love, etc. All that Christ is and all He has becomes ours, and all we are and all we have become Christ’s by our union with Him.

Let’s imagine there’s this checklist for every Christian at the pearly gates. This is not the case; it is just for illustration’s sake. Okay, use your imagination. The three questions are:

1. Are his sins forgiven?
2. Is he righteous?
3. Has he fully obeyed the Law?

Many Christians will feel comfortable with the first, because they’ve learned about and also accepted God’s forgiveness. Some Christians will have knocked knees on the second because, in their understanding of salvation in Christ, they have not moved from forgiveness to justification. In justification, we are clothed with the righteousness of Christ. It will surprise you that only a few will feel no sense of condemnation by the third question: “Has he fully obeyed the Law?” Some Christians will pee in their pants at that question. Anyone who answers “yes” is a liar because none of us has *fully obeyed the Law*. That’s where Christ and His imputed righteousness and imputed obedience come into play. The answer is “yes” not because of us but because of Jesus.

Christ fully obeyed the laws and credits our accounts with His obedience. So when you stand at the pearly gates and, for the sake of illustration, those three hypothetical questions surface, you can smile because, based on the merits of Christ and His grace, you will get a check for those three questions. Yes, your sins are forgiven. Yes, you are the righteousness of God in Christ, and, yes, Christ's full obedience of the Law is your obedience. He has credited or imputed your account with *all* that He has and *all* that He is. You are Christ's, and Christ is yours.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION AND MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS

DAY 10

1. When you think of God, what picture comes to your mind? Who or what best represents God to you? Grandpa? Police officer? IRS? Mama? Grandma? Judge? Santa? Schoolteacher or principal? Pastor or priest? Pope? Who does? Why?
2. Give an example of "bad" preaching that gives a distorted picture of God.
3. "When Mama is unhappy, no one around is happy." If other people's moods tend to affect our own mood, as recent studies show, how can we shield ourselves from the negativity, foul mood, and anger that we tend to encounter daily in the lobby, at work, in school, or even in the church?
4. To illustrate forgiveness to us, God, in scriptures, through the inspired writers, often paints some graphic pictures for us. It is the only way we can appreciate God's largesse and grasp God's message on forgiveness. What is the picture of forgiveness God paints for us in the following passages?
 - a. Psalm 103:12 (clue: How far is the East from the West? That is, going West, how or when will you hit/reach the East?)
 - b. Micah 7:18, 19 (clue: How deep is "the depth of the sea," and how likely are you to find a missing object under the sea?)
 - c. Jeremiah 31:34 (clue: What did you wear on your second

or third birthday? You must have worn something, but you cannot remember. What is forgotten is gone from memory unless you find those second or third birthday pictures.)

- d. Isaiah 53:6 (clue: What happens to you when someone decides to take the blame for what you did wrong? Isn't that double jeopardy when the judge exact two punishments for one and the same crime?)
5. Why is it that some people find it hard to forgive themselves, or to forgive God or forgive other people who have hurt or disappointed them? Discuss.
 6. Explain how godly sorrow over sin is beneficial and different from worldly sorrow over sin. Explain the difference between regret, remorse, and repentance.
 7. A preacher says, "After you have sincerely confessed and repented of your sins and asked for forgiveness based on 1 John 1:7–2:2, you've been forgiven and cleansed of those sins. Any sense of guilt after that is not a conviction of the Holy Spirit [Jn. 16:7; Rom. 8:1] but the condemning voice of the devil, 'the accuser of our brethren' [Rev. 12:10]. You should resist it and not allow it to gain roots in your life." Explain why what the preacher says makes sense or not.
 8. Uncle Mike explains that being forgiven is half of what Jesus did for us and that the other half is the imputation of righteousness (or justification). Forgiveness is negative; it is the removal of sin that brings our account to zero. Imputation of righteousness (or justification) is positive; it is the crediting or linking of our account to Jesus's unlimited righteousness and complete obedience to the laws of God. Just as Jesus took the penalty for our sins, He also completely obeyed and fulfilled all the demands of the laws on our behalf, thus bringing us to a state as if we had kept all the laws and never broke one. Why is it important to understand the gospel in these two dimensions? Has this always been clear to you or is it a new understanding of the gospel? Discuss.

9. What if I sin again after being forgiven or after claiming God's forgiveness for a sin? Does that mean I am not genuinely saved? (See 1 John 2:1, 2).
10. What if I commit again the very same sin I just confessed to God and repented of? Should I still ask God for forgiveness? Isn't that like playing games with God—even if that's not what I was doing or wanted to do? Will I still be forgiven? (See Matthew 18:21, 22. Remember that God does not use double standards. If God asks us to forgive seventy times seven times, then God will not do less than that.)
11. Define or explain justification and forgiveness. How is justification different from forgiveness, and why is it more than forgiveness?
12. Mention the three imputations in the Bible. How is imputation the basis for our justification?
13. Mention the three forms of righteousness. Why is righteousness based on the Law insufficient for salvation? (Read Romans 10:1–13 for Apostle Paul's burden over Israel in their quest for righteousness.) Discuss the stage of personal holiness and devotion that a religious person must attain to become certain that he or she finally has done enough self-righteousness and self-denial to eventually merit salvation by self efforts.
14. Why has the concept of sin disappeared from the pulpits in most American congregations? (a) Is it a movement in the right direction? Yes or no? Explain your answer. (b) Knowing that Christ died for sinners and only sinners can be saved and restored to fellowship with God, how do we restore the concepts of sin and sinners back to the pulpit on Sunday mornings without further damaging the sense of worth or self-esteem of those who are already beaten down all week?
15. What if you had a dream in which you stood at the Pearly Gate? An angel in black robes says to you, "Sure, your name is written in the Lamb's Book. I suspect this may be a mistake because, according to my own record, you didn't fully obey all the laws of God. They may

call me a liar and the father of lies [Jn. 8:44], but you and I know that I am not lying on this. Would you say that you fully obeyed the Laws of God while on earth?” What would you say, as a Christian, to that accuser?

16. One favorite prayer you hear from Christians in Nigerian congregations is “We pray that none of us will miss heaven in Jesus’s name” or “We pray that we may all make it to heaven at last in Jesus’s name.” I don’t say such prayers, and believe it or not, I might not even say *amen* to the prayer. Why? To me, it is like praying, “Jesus, please don’t leave me or forsake me. Please, Jesus, be with me always.” That’s a religious prayer to me, not a Christian prayer, because Jesus already gave me His Word not to leave me or forsake me to the end of the world. (See Matthew 28:18–20; Hebrews 13:5, 6). I should rather be concerned that I don’t leave Him, not the other way around. If people pray such prayers out of reverential humility, I will have no problem with it, but you can—sorry, I can—always detect a tone of uncertainty in the prayer. I don’t pray that I may make it to heaven, not out of pride but because of my understanding of the word *justification*. If God says in His Word that I’ve been “*justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus*” (Rom. 5:1), what part of *justified freely* do I not understand? What is left out in that that I have to make up by my own efforts? Why do I have to doubt such eternal counsel in the Holy Book? The Judge of the Universe in the court of heaven declares me “justified.” What else do I ask for?

Let’s say the governor, out of the kindness of his heart, grants clemency; he signs a pardon letter for a condemned criminal, what next do you expect from the prison administrators? They unlock the gates and release the “criminal” into the streets as a free citizen. He’s free indeed just by the stroke of the governor’s pen! If the governor’s signature is good enough to free a condemned criminal, should God’s verdict, signed in the blood of Jesus, be any less credible? What do you think? It is in black and white that “*there is there-*

fore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1). For me, getting to heaven is settled for the simple reason that I am not going on my ticket; I am going on Jesus's ticket and by His grace, not by my works. For all my soul's eternal need, I choose to piggyback on Jesus. *"Therefore He [Jesus] is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them"* (Heb. 7:25; emphasis mine). Many of my Christian friends do pounce on me on this, and I won't be surprised if you do the same. Some quote the Apostle Paul, *"Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall,"* or *"But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified,"* (1 Cor. 10:12; 9:27). I always steer away from the fruitless debate on "Once saved; always saved," or "Whether or not a believer can lose his salvation," because it's usually argument for the sake of argument and no one ever rethinks or changes position thereafter.

Back in the '70s we sang this chorus: **"I hold not the Rock but the Rock holds me/3ce; I'm standing on the Rock that never fails."** Looking back over these many years I cannot say that it's been me holding on tenaciously to the Rock; rather, it's been the Rock that never fails that's been holding me firmly. If you honestly reflect on your Christian experience and journey, I am sure you will come to the same conclusion: It's been the Rock [Christ] who began the good work in you that's been holding you. All I ask from you is to be kind enough to reexamine the biblical phrases such as *saved by grace* and *justified freely by grace, the gift of God is eternal life, to them He gave eternal life,* and *He is able to save to the uttermost* and see if I make sense or not. Or, Jesus' Words, *"My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand. I and My Father are one,"* (Jn. 10:27-30; emphasis mine). Do those phrases or verses mean what they say or suggest? Just tell me I make some sense, a little sense, and I will be happy with that. How do I score on a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being no-sense, 3 some sense, and 5 being great sense? Discuss how and why you

rate me on this, whatever the number, in your group.

Extended Homework—for the curious and open-minded, Ephesians chapter 1

Please read Ephesians chapter 1 slowly, with deliberation. Can you see yourself in the chapter? Read it as if you were reading a note from the apostle Paul written to you, to explain the scope of your salvation? In it you will find a salvation plan that began in God's mind, and had you in God's mind as a beneficiary, from eternity past and continues its redemptive power into eternity-forever. God is the benefactor; we are the beneficiaries. As you read, what did you do to obtain those redemptive promises and elevated spiritual status? What was your part in the salvation plan? Were you consulted for your opinion? What part or portion is dependent on you, or on your doing something to make it work? We read the part of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. All I read about us is that we are the beneficiaries of God's grace. In case you miss anything, here is a partial list from verses Ephesians 1-14.

The work of God the Father—1:3-6

- 1. Blessed us in the heavenly realms** [or the spirit realms] with every spiritual blessing in Christ—v. 3. Things happen first in the spirit realm before they manifest in earth; for example: Dan. 10; Job 1 and 2; Josh. 6. We are blessed where it matters most.
- 2. The Father chose us in Christ before the creation of the world** to be holy and blameless in His sight—v. 4. We did not just show up because father and mother had sex; we were in God's mind in the spirit realm long before we were born. You are not just a product of the biology of reproduction—you were in God's mind, existed in the spirit world before being sent down here to fulfill an assignment. There's purpose and meaning in your life. Your birthday could be the day you were born, or 9 months before that—the time of conception when your life began in your mother's womb, and it could be ageless because you are a part of divinity, a part of the Eternal. You came from God, took up flesh to carry on your assignment on earth. We

were chosen. God is faithful (1 Cor. 1:9; 10:13). We can be sure that the faithful God who chose us before time and space existed will not un-choose us and abandon us as orphans in time and space—see John 15:16—where Jesus says, “You did not choose Me, but I chose you...” The apostle Paul said we can be “*confident of this very thing, that He [God, by His Spirit] who has begun a good work in [us] will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ,*” (Philip. 1:6; insert mine).

3. In love, **the Father predestined us**—v. 5a, for what purpose/reason? Even if you’ve derailed or stepped out of purpose, know that God loves you and God has the power and the means to turn things around or like the GPS device, to recalculate a different/new route to your destination.
4. The Father predestined us to be **adopted as His sons through Jesus Christ**—v. 5b; why or how?
5. This was **in accordance with God’s will and good pleasure**—v. 5c. Your life and God’s program is of utmost pleasure to God. It can only mean that we are loved and accepted unconditionally, even before we were born
6. It’s all by **His glorious grace in Christ**, which God has freely given us—v. 6. Grace is unmerited, undeserved, and unearned favor of God.

The work of God the Son—1:7-8

7. **We have redemption**—we’ve been bought back; a price has been paid for us—through the Blood of Christ—v. 7a
8. **Our sins have been forgiven** due to the riches of God’s grace—v. 7b. Unlike other religions of the world, we are not striving for acceptance; we’ve been accepted, freely and unconditionally. We are striving within our acceptance to do better, live better and live into what we have been freely given
9. This was not a sparing grace but one that **God lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding**—v. 8
10. **This was a mystery**—not disclosed to prophets and priests of

OT—but made known to us according to God’s good pleasure and purpose only in and through Christ—vv. 9, 10. Mystery because it was hidden, but not mysterious, that Jews and Gentiles will form one family of God

11. We were **chosen and predestinated according to God’s will** to be to the praise and glory of God—vv. 11, 12

The work of God the Holy Spirit—1:13-14

12. We were **not excluded but included** in Christ through the gospel of Truth for our salvation—v. 13a. Jesus, God’s salvation, the gospel, are not exclusive rights of Israel or any sect; the church is not an exclusive club
13. Having believed we **were marked (branded; claim of ownership) with a seal of the Holy Spirit**—v. 13b
14. This seal is like **a deposit, a down payment**, a commitment that more is to come—v. 14a
15. This also **guarantees us an inheritance**—v. 14b. We are heirs of God through Christ and join heirs with Christ
16. **We are God’s possession**—v. 14c

I submit to you that Satan, sin and self might try but they cannot invent any scheme or tool that would dismantle what the Triune God: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, devised and packaged long before anything began. The Godhead is not different today, in essence and principle, from what Godhead was in eternity past, or what the Godhead would be in eternity to come. It is our understanding of God and our concepts of God that change and/or are progressive. Furthermore, the immutable God is not doing anything different or behaving differently today from what God did or how God acted and behaved in eternity past, or different from how God would be or what God would do in eternity to come. The bottom line is that this volitional, loving and gracious God had chosen us, loved us, accepted us, adopted us, included us, and redeemed us from eternity past to eternity to come. Covenantal relationship between God and His creation do

change but not the essence of who God is. God's dealing with His creation in every era, dispensation, or age is consistent with who God is. "*For I am the Lord, I do not change; Therefore you are not consumed, O sons of Jacob,*" (Mal. 3:6). On the top of Mount Sinai, at the giving of the replacement slates of the Ten Commandment, the Lord declared His eternal essence to Moses,

And the Lord passed before him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation," (Exo. 34:6, 7).

If I may, I want to also suggest that it is an oxymoron to talk of eternal security, or of losing eternal life, because the life God gives us at salvation is His life, *zoe*, and it is eternal. How can anyone lose what is eternal, imperishable and undying?

In the Greek language, three different words—*bios*, *psuche*, and *zoe*—are translated as "life" in English. *Zoe*, in John 1:4: "In Him was life [*zoe*], and the life [*zoe*] was the light of men." Here the Greek word refers to the uncreated, eternal life of God, the divine life uniquely possessed by God. It is the same word used in the widely quoted John 3:16 and John 10:10. By replacing the English word life with the original word *zoe* in John 10:10, it reads: "I have come that they may have *zoe* and may have *zoe* abundantly." That is, *Zoe*, the uncreated, eternal life of God.

When I witnessed and shared my faith in 1972-1974, Romans 6:23 was often one of my staples to explain the gospel. I used the New Revised Standard Version then. It reads, "*For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*" I still remember my explanation of the second part: *the FREE GIFT of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord*. I would say something like, what we deserved as the wages of our sin is death, (6:23a), but, *in Christ Jesus our Lord*, God chose to withhold what we have earned and worked for. God decided to give us what we don't deserve or merit—eternal life—as a free gift. Can you imagine that? Eternal life is a

FREE GIFT of God, not something you earn or deserve after much work and spiritual striving. I would then say, just as the Sun and the air we breathe in are essential to life yet free, in like manner GOD IS GIVING US ETERNAL LIFE AS A FREE GIFT. As I concluded and pressed for decision I would ask: What do you do when someone offers you a free gift? You receive it and say, “thank you.” That was then. I now realized that, good as that was, it was a partial understanding. I wish I had added then that, as this gracious and merciful God has not withdrawn His gift of the Sun from the sky or removed the air from the atmosphere despite so much wickedness in the world, you can be sure that our Father-God will not take away His gift of eternal life from you because you stumble in your spiritual growth.

On the ground of all this, a plan God devised before you and I, and our great, great grandparents, were born; tell me, how logical is it for any believer who truly belongs to God through Christ to live in doubt or fear of losing a salvation he/she never designed, earned, merited or worked for, but was bestowed upon him because of God’s largesse and goodness? If God was omniscient to foresee the intrusion of sin into His created world, and God so loved and cared enough to initiate the redemptive acts. If God thus made provision for redemption, even before sin came into the world through a “*LAMB slain from the foundation of the world,*” (Rev. 13:8). If God was gracious then to Self-sacrifice His Son and do so much for His beloved creation, is God now less gracious to withdraw or cancel the blessings?

Paul again writes to the Romans, “*For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us,*” (Rom. 5:6-8). If Christ died for us while we were “ungodly” and “still sinners,” what would the same Christ do now that we struggle in our faith? Would Christ who had died for us then strangle or strangulate us, or would He nurture and shepherd us to wholeness? I submit that at such times Christ then becomes our advocate—1 John 2:1. To the Colossians, Paul penned his prayer thanksgiving to God,

Giving thanks to the Father **who has qualified us** to be **partakers of the inheritance of the saints** in the light. **He has delivered us** from the power of darkness and **conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love**, in whom **we have redemption through His blood**, the **forgiveness of sins** (Col. 1:12-14; emphasis mine).

3-2-1 End-of-Chapter Reviews

1. Name three things (or three lessons) you have learned, or been reminded of, in this chapter.

2. Name two ways you can apply the lessons to your life to make it worth your while.

3. Highlight one motivational/inspirational quote—Bible verse, sentence, or phrase—that’s especially meaningful for you and copy this in your notebook/journal.

Pause 'n' Pray

If I turn 3-2-1 End of Chapter Review into prayer, an honest prayer from my heart to God may go like this: “Dear Father God . . .

”

(Write out or say your prayer using the first-person sentences.)

Pray for One Another (James 5:16)

If you are in a group, turn to a friend and ask Roger Palms’ questions: “How can I pray for you to be the obedient man or woman God wants you to be? What are the blocks that need to be eliminated, and what are the changes that need to be made?”

Theme: Christian Doctrine of Trinity/Triune God

Dear Uncle Mike,

Do Christians worship three Gods? If no, who or what then is the Holy Spirit? Some Christians pray to Jesus. Is Jesus God?

Ben

Dear Ben,

Do Christians worship three Gods? That's a great question. How can God be three persons yet one God? Moses prefaced his message to Israel, saying, "*Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one!*" (Deut. 6:4). Jesus answered the religious debaters, "*The first of all the commandments is: 'Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one'*" (Mk. 12:29). We may define the doctrine of the Trinity (or Triune God Tri-unity) as follows: God eternally exists as three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and each person is fully God, and there is one God. We don't worship three Gods.

The word *trinity* is never found in the Bible, though the idea represented by the word is taught in many places. Although the doctrine of the Trinity is not explicitly found in the Old Testament, several passages suggest or even imply that God exists as more than one person. For example, in Genesis 1:26, God said, "*Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.*" What do the plural verb (*let us*) and the plural pronoun (*our*) mean? They suggest the presence of more than one personality in the Godhead.

No one can define the Trinity. We, who are finite, cannot comprehend God, who is infinite. Here are some ways we try to illustrate the concept of the Trinity, but the attempt is wholly inadequate:

- For example, I could say that a man has a body, a mind and a spirit

(1 Thess. 5:23; Heb. 4:12). Which one is the man?

- Or I could describe water, H₂O, as a liquid (at room temperature), a solid (at/below zero degrees Celsius, ice) or a vapor (at one hundred degrees Celsius, steam), depending on whether it was water, ice, or steam. Which one is H₂O? It's the same chemical composition but different forms at different temperatures.
- Or a man is a husband, a father, and a son; yet he is one man. To the wife, he is "honey"; to the son, "Dad"; and to his father, "Junior." Yet, he is one and the same person.

No illustration is adequate. At best, it can only suggest the possibility of three personalities in one entity or what God is like. Among the scriptural passages that suggest the triune God, we discern three kinds of texts: (1) those in which God speaks of Himself in the plural number, (2) those in which God and God and Lord and Lord are distinguished, and (3) those in which the three persons are expressly mentioned and distinguished.

1. First, from the first group, we will consider Genesis 1:26 and 3:22, as well as Isaiah 6:8. "Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness' and "Then the LORD God said, 'Behold, the man has become like one of Us, to know good and evil.'" The prophet Isaiah (6:8) said, "Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying: 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?' Then I said, 'Here am I! Send me.'"
2. Second, those texts where God and God, LORD (Jehovah), and Lord are distinguished: "The LORD hath said unto Me, Thou art My Son; this day have I begotten Thee" (Ps. 2:7). "The LORD said unto my Lord, Sit Thou at my right hand" (Ps. 110:1).
3. Third, those series of texts in the Old and New Testaments in which the three persons are expressly mentioned and distinguished. Example of such texts as:
 - a) Come near to Me, hear this: I have not spoken in secret from the beginning; From the time that it was, I was there. And now the Lord GOD and His Spirit Have sent Me (Isa. 48:16).

b) For there are three that bear witness in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one (1 Jn. 5:7).

c) There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all” (1 Cor. 12:4–6).

d) The Trinity was present at Jesus’s baptism. “When He [Jesus, the Son, second Person of Triune God] had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God [the Holy Spirit, the third Person of Trinity] descending like a dove and alighting upon Him. And suddenly a voice came from heaven [The Father speaking, the first Person of Triune God], saying, ‘This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased’” (Matt. 3:16–17).

Who Is the Holy Spirit?

- The Holy Spirit is God. He is not an “it.” He is not a divine influence. He is not a fleecy white cloud or mist. He is not a dove or “wind” or “cloven tongues of fire,” although He can manifest Himself in these forms. These are how He visibly manifests Himself but not who He is. He is not a ghost (ghoul, apparition, or phantom) or a concept.
- The Holy Spirit is the agent by which the Father draws us to Himself (Jn. 6:37, 39, 44, 65). We cannot find God by ourselves or on our own, only as the Holy Spirit draws or woos us to God (Gen. 6:3).
- The Holy Spirit is responsible for our new birth or regeneration (Jn. 1:12, 13; 3:1–8, esp. verses 5 and 6; 1 Cor. 12:3).
- The Holy Spirit inspired the writers of the Bible (2 Tim. 3:16, 17; 2 Pet. 1:20, 21), and the Holy Spirit is always present to illuminate the Word to any seeker or intentional reader of the Holy Writ (Ps. 119:18; 1 Jn. 2:20, 27). The Bible is the only book that the Author is present when it is read.

Teach Them

- We don't stay the same after our new birth; we are set apart, sanctified, and made holy by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:9–11; 2 Cor. 3:18; Gal. 5:22, 23).
- Everything about God is transmitted or conveyed to us and ministered to us by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 2:9–14).
- The Holy Spirit enables the believer to love with the love of Christ shed abroad in our hearts (Rom. 5:5). This “love of God,” which the Holy Spirit “pours out into our hearts,” is the only way we can forgive as God forgave us—unconditionally, love the unlovable and loveless, and be nonjudgmental toward them, as Christ loved and embraced us. On our own power, we cannot love our enemies as Christ commands us to do (Matt. 5:42–45; Lk. 6:27, 28), but *we can* with the “love of God . . . poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 5:5).
- The Holy Spirit is called God in Acts 5:3, 4, whom Ananias and Sapphira, his wife, sinned/lied against.
- The Holy Spirit is joined with the Father and the Son in the baptismal formula in Matthew 28:19 and the dismissal grace in 2 Corinthians 13:14.
- The Holy Spirit is a person possessing a will, intellect, and emotions. “But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills” (1 Cor. 12:11)—that is, the Holy Spirit decides and apportions which gift or gift mix best fits an individual Christian.
- Having emotions, the Holy Spirit can be “grieved” (Eph. 4:30), and the Holy Spirit does “make intercession for us with groanings that cannot be uttered” (Rom. 8:26).
- Being a person and having a personality, the Holy Spirit can be “resisted” (Acts 7:51).
- The Holy Spirit is God with all the attributes of deity such as eternal (Heb. 9:14), omnipotent (Lk. 1:35); omniscient (1 Cor. 2:10, 11), omnipresent (Ps. 139:7–13), Creator (Gen. 1:2), sovereign (1 Cor.

12:6, 11), regeneration/new creation (Jn. 3:3, 8; and sinned against (Matt. 12:31, 32).

- The Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity (or triune God)—co-equal with God the Father and God the Son.

The Nicene Creed was composed in part and adopted at the First Council of Nicaea (325). It was revised with additions by the First Council of Constantinople (381). The Nicene Creed summarizes the orthodox faith of the Christian Church and is used in the liturgy of most Christian churches. The portions of the creed that address the person and deity of the Holy Spirit as the early fathers of the faith understood and affirmed read thus:

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of Life,
Who proceeds from the Father and the Son.
Who with the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified.
Who has spoken through the Prophets.

The Holy Spirit is indispensable to the Christian. The Father gave His Son as ransom, the Son gave His life, and the Holy Spirit would make the work of redemption real to the believer. Jesus explains the ministry of the Holy Spirit to His disciples. The Holy Spirit is our helper, comforter, counselor, advocate, and standby. The following scriptures from the Amplified Bible remind us of the reasons why Jesus and the Father sent the Holy Spirit to be with us, and why we are helpless without the Holy Spirit:

And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Comforter (Counselor, Helper, Intercessor, Advocate, Strengthener, and Standby), that He may remain with you forever—But the Comforter (Counselor, Helper, Intercessor, Advocate, Strengthener, Standby), the Holy Spirit, Whom the Father will send in My name [in My place, to represent Me and act on My behalf], He will teach you all things. And He will cause you to recall (will remind you of, bring to your remembrance) everything I have told you. (Jn. 14:16, 26 AMP)

However, I am telling you nothing but the truth when I say it is profitable (good, expedient, advantageous) for you that I go away. Because if I

do not go away, the Comforter (Counselor, Helper, Advocate, Intercessor, Strengtheners, Standby) will not come to you [into close fellowship with you]; but if I go away, I will send Him to you [to be in close fellowship with you]. (Jn. 16:7 AMP)

To summarize, the Holy Spirit:

- is the source of our new life in Christ (Jn. 3:1–8).
- is our helper (Jn. 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7; Rom. 8:26).
- is our intercessor (Rom. 8:26).
- is our standby or partner or come-alongside (Jn. 14:18).
- convicts of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment (Jn. 16:7–11).
- is the Spirit of truth (Jn. 14:17; 15:26; 16:13).
- leads/guides us into all truth (Jn. 14:26; 16:13).
- speaks/testifies of Christ, not of self (Jn. 15:26; 16:13, 14).
- glorifies Christ (Jn. 15:26; 16:14).
- reminds us of all that Christ has taught us (Jn. 14:26).
- receives from Christ and gives us (Jn. 15:26; 16:13, 14).
- tells of things to come, of future events (Jn. 16:13; 1 Cor. 2:9–12).
- abides with us forever (Jn. 14:16).
- is with us and will be in us (Jn. 14:17)—that is, God coming to live on the inside of us. God cannot be any closer to you than that.

Is Jesus God?

To the other part of your question—“Some Christians pray to Jesus; is Jesus God?”—Jesus clearly taught us to pray to the Father but to pray in His name, that is, to approach God on His merit and authority. For example, Jesus says, **“And WHATEVER YOU ASK IN MY NAME, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ASK ANYTHING IN MY NAME, I will do it. . . . And in that day you will ask Me nothing. Most assuredly, I say to you, whatever you ASK THE FATHER IN MY NAME He will give you. Until now you have asked nothing IN MY NAME. ASK, AND YOU WILL RECEIVE, that your joy may be full”** (Jn. 14:13–14;

16:23–24; emphasis mine). In the model prayer that Jesus taught His disciples, which we traditionally call the Lord’s Prayer, the opening sentence is “*Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be Your name*” (Matt. 6:9d). In Jesus’s high priestly prayer for His disciples and those who would believe in Him through their witness, recorded in Saint John’s gospel 17, Jesus prayed to God the Father, saying, “*Father, the hour has come. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son also may glorify You*” (Jn. 17:1d).

Although Jesus taught us to pray to God, we find many praying to Jesus when He walked the earth. Peter prayed to Him, “*Lord, save me*” (Matt. 14:30). Two blind men prayed to Him, “*Son of David, have mercy on us*” (Matt. 9:27). A woman whose daughter was demon possessed prayed to Jesus, “*Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David! My daughter is severely demon-possessed*” (Matt. 15:22). Blind Bartimaeus prayed to Jesus, “*Son of David, have mercy on me*” (Mk. 10:48). A man whose son suffered seizures prayed to Jesus, “*Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and suffers severely*” (Matt. 17:15). Ten lepers cried and prayed to Jesus, “*Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!*” (Lk. 17:13).

In the early seventies, a student asked Ms. Kirk-Patrick, a missionary of the *Baptist Students Union* in Nigeria, that same question: why do some Christians pray to Jesus when Jesus Himself prayed to the Father and taught us to pray to the Father? I still remember what the missionary said. She said, “You are right. Jesus taught us to pray to God the Father in His name, but I don’t think that God the Father gets jealous when we pray to His Son, Jesus.” The lady faced the boy and, tongue in cheek, asked him, “What do you think? Do you think God the Father feels jealous or nervous for all the attention we give His Son, especially when we pray to Jesus?” Of course not. Jesus says, “*I and the Father are one*” and “*Anyone who has seen Me has seen the Father also.*”

Who is Jesus? What did Jesus say about Himself and God? Jesus did not mince words. Jesus declared who He was to different crowds: Pharisees, Jews, His Disciples, the Samaritans, Sanhedrin, Pilate, and even the demons recognized His identity, but Jesus would not let them testify of Him. First, to the Pharisees, Jesus says, “IF YOU HAD KNOWN ME, YOU WOULD HAVE

KNOWN MY FATHER ALSO.” The Pharisees wanted to discredit Jesus’s testimony. *“The Pharisees therefore said to Him, ‘You bear witness of Yourself; Your witness is not true’”* (Jn. 8:13). Jesus replied them, *“And yet if I do judge, My judgment is true; for I am not alone, but I am with the Father who sent Me.”* Jesus continued, *“I am One who bears witness of Myself, and the Father who sent Me bears witness of Me.”* They then said to Him, **“Where is Your Father?”** Jesus answered, **“You know neither Me nor My Father. If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also”** (Jn. 8:16, 18, 19; emphasis mine).

As the dialogue continued, it turned to Abraham, the father of the Jewish race (Jn. 8:48–59). Jesus then dropped the bombshell when He declared, *“Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM”* (Jn. 8:58). First, Jesus who was not yet 50 (Jn. 8:56, 57) claimed He predated Abraham. Jesus did not say, “I was,” but “I AM,” thus claiming equality with Jehovah, the “I AM WHO I AM” before whom Moses had stood on the mountainside (Exod. 3:13, 14). The Jews had heard enough of His “blasphemy” and took up stones to kill Him. We read in John 8:59, *“Then they took up stones to throw at Him; but Jesus hid Himself and went out of the temple, going through the midst of them, and so passed by”* (emphasis mine). The Man they wanted to stone to death just passed “through the midst of them,” and as if overcome by a strange presence, no one threw a stone at Him. As we know, this was because His time was not yet, and the Savior was not prophesied to die by stoning (the Jewish method of capital punishment) but by crucifixion (the Roman’s method of capital punishment).

Second, to the Jews, Jesus says, “I AND MY FATHER ARE ONE.” The Jews asked Jesus to declare His identity and no longer keep them in suspense. *“Then the Jews surrounded Him and said to Him, ‘How long do You keep us in doubt? If You are the Christ, tell us plainly’”* (Jn. 10:24). Jesus says, *“I and My Father are one”* (Jn. 10:30). To the Jews in Jesus’s audience, that was blasphemy, and He deserved to die. **“Then the Jews took up stones again to stone Him. Jesus answered them, ‘Many good works I have shown you from My Father. For which of those works do you stone Me?’** The

Jews answered Him, saying, ‘For a good work we do not stone You, but for blasphemy, and because You, being a Man, make Yourself God’” (Jn. 10:31–33; emphasis mine)

Third, to His disciples, Jesus says, “HE WHO HAS SEEN ME HAS SEEN THE FATHER.” When Jesus announced that He would be leaving this world, the disciples were confused. “**Philip said to Him, ‘Lord, show us the Father, and it is sufficient for us.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? *He who has seen Me has seen the Father*; so how can you say, “Show us the Father”? Do you not believe that *I am in the Father, and the Father in Me*? The words that I speak to you I do not speak on My own authority; but the Father who dwells in Me does the works. ‘Believe Me that *I am in the Father and the Father in Me*, or else believe Me for the sake of the works themselves”**” (Jn. 14:8–11; emphasis mine).

Fourth, to more receptive individuals, He revealed His divine nature through prophetic works to the oft-married woman of Samaria: (John 4:19–26) and the man blind from birth (John 9). Although Jesus often used coded language like “the Son of Man,” “Son of David,” “Son of God,” “the Good Shepherd,” or “I AM” His Jewish audience had no doubt that He was claiming Divinity. In less hostile environments, Jesus often spoke in plain language, disclosing His identity in those places and to those for whom such revelation would not further hinder His public ministry. Especially to Samaritan and Gentile audiences Jesus plainly declared He was Messiah. “*The woman said to Him [Jesus], ‘I know that Messiah is coming’ (who is called Christ). ‘When He comes, He will tell us all things.’ Jesus said to her, ‘I who speak to you am He’*” (Jn. 4:25, 26; emphasis mine). In a private discussion to the man who was born blind that Jesus had restored sight to, after the man had been cast out of the Temple, Jesus “*found him, He said to him, ‘Do you believe in the Son of God?’ He answered and said, ‘Who is He, Lord, that I may believe in Him?’ And Jesus said to him, ‘You have both seen Him and it is He who is talking with you.’ Then he said, ‘Lord, I believe!’ And he worshiped Him,*” (John 9:35b–38; emphasis mine).

Fifth, although Jesus would not answer His false accusers before the San-

hedrin, when the high priest put Him under oath, even at the cost of His life, Jesus declared who He was in Matthew 26:62-64 and Luke 22:66-71. *“And the high priest arose and said to Him, ‘Do You answer nothing? What is it these men testify against You?’ But Jesus kept silent. And the high priest answered and said to Him, ‘I put You under oath by the living God: Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God!’ Jesus said to him, ‘It is as you said. Nevertheless, I say to you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven... Then they all said, ‘Are You then the Son of God?’ So He said to them, ‘You rightly say that I am,’”* (Matt. 26:62, 63; Luke 22:70).

Sixth, answering the Roman governor, Pilate, in John 18:33-37. *“Jesus answered, ‘My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here.’ Pilate therefore said to Him, ‘Are You a king then?’ Jesus answered, ‘You say rightly that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice,’”* (Jn. 18:36, 37).

Lastly, though the Galileans and Judeans might not recognize Jesus, there was a crowd that did: the demons in the demon possessed. However, Jesus did not want the Demons who recognized Him to proclaim Him. They often yelled, *“What have we to do with You, Jesus, You Son of God? Have You come here to torment us before the time?”* (Mark 1:23-25; 5:6-8; Matt. 8:28, 29). The demons’ master, Satan himself, knew who Jesus was from the onset. After God, the Father, had called Jesus His “Beloved Son” (Matt. 3:17), then Satan, in three successive temptations, attempted to tempt Jesus to doubt His identity or misuse His privilege if He was indeed whom the Father called Him to be, “the Son of God,” (Matt. 4:3, 6).

The prophet Isaiah foretells that the Messiah will be called the Mighty God, Everlasting Father. **“For unto us a Child is born, Unto us a Son is given; And the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, MIGHTY GOD, EVERLASTING FATHER, Prince of Peace”** (Isa. 9:6; emphasis mine).

To Titus, the Apostle Paul wrote about **“looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of OUR GREAT GOD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST”** (Titus 2:13; emphasis mine).

To the church in Colossae, Paul wrote:

HE [JESUS] IS THE IMAGE OF THE INVISIBLE GOD, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. ALL THINGS WERE CREATED THROUGH HIM AND FOR HIM. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist. And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence. FOR IT PLEASED THE FATHER THAT IN HIM ALL THE FULLNESS SHOULD DWELL, and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross” (Col. 1:15–20; emphasis mine)

The early church had a hymn about the deity of Christ recorded in Philippians 2:5–11:

Let this mind be in you which was also in CHRIST JESUS, WHO, BEING IN THE FORM OF GOD, DID NOT CONSIDER IT ROBBERY TO BE EQUAL WITH GOD, BUT MADE HIMSELF OF NO REPUTATION, TAKING THE FORM OF A BONDSERVANT, AND COMING IN THE LIKENESS OF MEN. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that AT THE NAME OF JESUS EVERY KNEE SHOULD BOW, OF THOSE IN HEAVEN, AND OF THOSE ON EARTH, AND OF THOSE UNDER THE EARTH, AND THAT EVERY TONGUE SHOULD CONFESS THAT JESUS CHRIST IS LORD, to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:5–11; emphasis mine).

In conclusion, Ben, in spite of all I have written on the Trinity, I really do

not expect you to fully understand the Trinity (no one does), but I expect you to accept the doctrine as the way God has chosen to reveal Himself. No one can define or explain the Trinity. A quote, with source unknown although often credited to some seminary professors, states: “The man who denies the Trinity will lose his soul. The man who tries to understand the Trinity will lose his mind.” We, who are finite, cannot comprehend God, who is infinite. Millard Erickson, at the very end of the section on the Trinity in his widely used 1983 *Systematic Theology*, after twenty-one pages of biblical, historical, logical, and analogical argumentation, concludes: “We do not hold the doctrine of the Trinity, because it is self-evident or logically cogent. We hold it, because God has revealed that this is what He is like.” God eternally exists as three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and each person is fully God, and there is one God.

In my formative years as a Christian, the concept of one God in three persons was put to me this way:

1. In the Old Testament, it was *God with us* (Ps. 46:1; 56:9c); God above is for us all. “God is our Refuge and strength. . . . This I know, God is for me.”
2. When Jesus was born, God lived with us, and it was *God with us* (Emmanuel, Matt. 1:23). The Word that was with God in the beginning; the Word that was God; the Word by whom all things were created— “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood,” (John 1:1-3, 14; The Message—MSG).
3. With the ministry of the Holy Spirit, God lives inside us, and it became *God in us* (Jn. 14:21; Gal. 2:20; Col. 1:27b).

There is only one God, but He manifests Himself in three persons, whom we call the Trinity, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION AND MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS

DAY 12

1. How would you attempt to:
 - a. Define or explain Trinity to a Moslem? Bear in mind that Moslems strongly believe that God has no son because, to the Moslem, the idea of God having a son suggests the presence of a wife and conjugal relations. This is blasphemous to conceive of God as having a wife or having sex like humans.
 - b. Defend or justify from scriptures the doctrine of Trinity to a nonbeliever.
2. How important is the reference to the Nicene Creed in our defense of the doctrine of Holy Trinity?
3. Write a one-sentence prayer to God the Father, a one-sentence prayer to Jesus or God the Son, and a one-sentence prayer to God the Holy Spirit. Call the individual member of the Trinity by name and address your request specifically to the personality and function of that member of the Godhead. (Hint: For example, which member of the Godhead saves us? In whose name do we pray? Which member illuminates our mind and opens our eyes to God's truth? Who helps us in our prayers? Which member adopts us to His Family? To whom do we address our prayers? Who is our Source who died for us and who lives in us?)
4. Why do we say the Holy Spirit is God, possessing all the attributes of deity? Support your answer with scriptures.
5. Mention at least five things the Holy Spirit does in the life of a believer.
6. In the light of your answer to the previous question, explain why the ministry of the Holy Spirit is indispensable in the life of a Christian.
7. Explain why this sentence credited to a seminary professor "The man who denies the Trinity will lose his soul. The man who tries to understand the Trinity will lose his mind" is good enough or not good enough for you.

Teach Them

8. (a) Is Jesus God? (b) Did He claim to be God? (c) Did the early church and writers of the epistles believe Jesus to be God, the very expression of the Father? Explain, using appropriate scriptures.
9. In John 14:21, Jesus promises, *“He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him.”* Explain what it is like and how that happens in the life of a believer. See also John 14:23: *“Jesus answered and said to him, ‘If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him.’”* The Father and Son will make their home, or indwell, the believer.
10. How do you understand this statement “The Bible is the only book that the Author is present when it is read”? What encouragement do we have in this?
11. If the Holy Spirit teaches us all things including enlightening our understanding of the word of God, the Bible, as we read in 1 John 2:20, 27, especially 27a, “But the anointing which you have received from Him abides in you, and you do not need that anyone teach you; but the same anointing teaches you concerning all things,” does that mean we have no need for any human teacher or mentor? Explain your understanding of the verse in the light of other scriptures and practical Christian living.
12. How did Jesus disclose His identity in different contexts and crowds, such as the Pharisees, Jews, Sanhedrin (when put under oath) and a Gentile governor, Pilate?

3-2-1 End-of-Chapter Reviews

1. Name three things (or three lessons) you have learned, or been reminded of, in this chapter.

2. Name two ways you can apply the lessons to your life to make it worth your while.

3. Highlight one motivational/inspirational quote—Bible verse, sentence, or phrase—that's especially meaningful for you and copy this in your notebook/journal.

Pause 'n' Pray

If I turn 3-2-1 End of Chapter Review into prayer, an honest prayer from my heart to God may go like this: “Dear Father God . . .

»

(Write out or say your prayer using the first-person sentences.)

Pray for One Another (James 5:16)

If you are in a group, turn to a friend and ask Roger Palms’s questions: “How can I pray for you to be the obedient man or woman God wants you to be? What are the blocks that need to be eliminated, and what are the changes that need to be made?”

Reviewing Uncle Mike’s Letter

A. On a scale of 1 to 5 (1 stands for least satisfactory and 5 for completely satisfactory), circle a number that corresponds to the degree to which the Uncle Mike’s letter has helped to answer your questions on Trinity.

1 2 3 4 5

B. My bullet points or “NOTE TO SELF” from this letter are:

Theme: Knowing God's Will/ Experiencing Divine Guidance

Dear Uncle Mike,

How can I be sure that I am making the right decisions about my future plans?

Susan

Dear Susan,

That's a good question, and one that every young person should be concerned about. It is very reassuring when you consider that God indeed desires to lead and guide us. Think of this statement God made to His people in the Old Testament: *"I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will guide you with My eye"* (Ps. 32:8). Wow! God says He will instruct... teach... and guide. What more can we ask for?

A lady was hawking her wares between villages. She devised a method to find direction if she came to a fork road or to an intersection where two roads crossed each other. Her method was to throw a piece of stick up in the air, let it fall, and then go in the direction in which the stick fell. One day she came to an intersection where two roads intersected. She wasn't sure whether to go forward, turn left, or turn right. One thing she was sure of was that she wasn't going to turn back. She threw up the stick and let it fall a couple of times and then headed in the direction of an elderly woman's village. The elderly woman had stood in front of her house and watched the lady throw up the sticks a couple of times before proceeding.

When the lady reached the elderly woman's house, out of curiosity, the woman inquired, "I watched you at that intersection throwing up a stick

several times. What was that ritual about?” The lady explained her method of finding direction by going in the direction that the stick fell. The elderly lady then commented, “But did you have to throw up the stick that many times? You must have thrown it up like six times.” To which the lady replied, “I was waiting for the stick to land in the direction I wanted to go.” Sounds funny, but it is that kind of mentality and attitude that messes up finding God’s direction. Most times, we’ve made up our minds what we want or want to do and only want God to rubberstamp our decision.

How do I find God’s will? First, let me provide some Bible passages for your encouragement:

- Trust in the LORD with all your heart, And lean not on your own understanding; In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He shall direct your paths (Prov. 3:5, 6).
- The steps of a good man are ordered by the LORD, And He delights in his way (Ps. 37:23).
- O LORD, I know the way of man is not in himself; It is not in man who walks to direct his own steps (Jer. 10:23).
- Jesus says, “But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you.
- However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you. All things that the Father has are Mine. Therefore I said that He will take of Mine and declare it to you (Jn. 14:26; 16:13–15).

Consider the following suggestions:

1. Pray about it and trust God to guide you because you belong to God; you are God’s.
2. Read and study the Bible concerning the matter to discern God’s

will.

3. Talk to some mature Christians and ask their views, counsel, and prayers for you as you decide.
4. Claim specific promises from the Bible to fortify your heart and reinforce your prayers.
5. Consider all the pros and cons of all the alternative actions and inactions; put everything on the table. Examine the merits and demerits of each line of action.
6. As you continue in prayer and meditation in God's Word and conversation with mature Christians, consider the action steps that give you peace of mind. Paul writes, "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and *the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus*" (Phil. 4:6–7; emphasis mine). The prophet Isaiah also wrote in the OT, "You [God] will keep him in perfect peace, Whose mind is stayed on You, Because he trusts in You" (Isa. 26:3). That God-given peace of mind that passes all understanding often serves as the green light.
7. By all means, decide. Make a decision after careful considerations of the possible consequences of whichever action step you take. There is nothing like indecision, because indecision, in and of itself, is a decision. Indecision is a decision not to decide, and it carries its own consequences.
8. If you've faithfully done the above, then believe that God is guiding you or has guided you, leave all the consequences (or how things eventually fall into place) to God, and go on merrily singing the old hymn, "All the way my Savior leads me; what have I to ask beside."

HOPE FOR THE DESTINATION BUT ENJOY THE JOURNEY

Believe it or not, God does not always lead us by the shortest and fastest route to our destination. That's why it is important to enjoy the journey. Most of the time we think of the destination and wish to dash for it and grab it, but God is concerned about the process or the journey as well. The journey builds character in us. We become devoted to a cause or consumed by a passion. We understand cooperation, partnership, and interdependence. We value relationship and appreciate our co-travelers along life's pathway. In short, we become humans through our journey.

When God led Israel out of slavery from Egypt, God, in His wisdom and providence, did not lead them to the Promised Land by the shortest route:

Then it came to pass, when Pharaoh had let the people go, that GOD DID NOT LEAD THEM BY WAY OF THE LAND OF THE PHILISTINES, ALTHOUGH THAT WAS NEAR; for God said, "Lest perhaps the people change their minds when they see war, and return to Egypt." So GOD LED THE PEOPLE AROUND BY WAY OF THE WILDERNESS of the Red Sea. And the children of Israel went up in orderly ranks out of the land of Egypt (Exod. 13:17–18; emphasis mine).

God led them in a roundabout way for their own good. God knows what you can take, what you are ready or not ready for, and God will lead you accordingly.

Life is not as straightforward as two plus two equals four. We wonder why God's guidance sometimes appears to come through some "trial and error." God's leading is not always through some straightforward route. We need to keep moving forward in faith even when we cannot clearly see what's ahead of us. A car in motion is easier to steer than one that's parked or stationary. That's why it is important that you enjoy the journey. The fact that you are filled with the Holy Spirit, that you pray and study your Bible and seek counsel from some mature Christians, does not shield you from some missteps or even supposed mistakes.

In church, in our Sunday school classes we learned, almost formulaic,

that the righteous prosper and the wicked suffer but in real life we find it is not always so that the righteous prosper and the wicked suffer. Asaph, the author of Psalm 73, was greatly puzzled and troubled by what he knew of God—God making the godly prosperous and punishing the wicked. However, that contradicted what he witnessed; Asaph saw the prosperity of the wicked and the godly in want. Asaph was tempted to question the merit of living godly lives if the wicked, not the righteous lived in prosperity. He then went into the sanctuary and God showed him the big picture (v. 17); the wicked will perish but the godly will live with God eternally. All of us have a limited view of reality. Like Asaph, we need God to open our minds to understand and eyes to see the big picture.

Knowing God's will or living God's will is not always about hitting the bull's-eye at the first shot. It is everything about practicing your archery and choosing your target. It is about the prior exercises of building your muscle and practicing, picking up the bow and shooting your arrows, again and again and getting better and better with more practices. Hitting the bull's-eye comes as a crowning glory to the prior skill-building exercises. It is the same with knowing God's will. You seed in some things to get the fruit or harvest of your labor.

As you seek God's direction for your life, keep at the back of your mind that God promises to direct your steps. *"The steps of a good man are ordered by the LORD, and He delights in his way"* (Ps. 37:23). Faith teaches us also to believe God that our stops as well as our steps are being ordered by the Lord. Amid some words of hope, prophet Isaiah sandwiched the following promise on guidance. God said through His prophet, *"Your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, 'This is the way, walk in it,' Whenever you turn to the right hand Or whenever you turn to the left"* (Isa. 30:21). How reassuring to know that even when I step away from the "straight and narrow path" the Good Shepherd will whisper in my ears, *"This is the way, walk in it."* *"And if you leave God's paths and go astray, you will hear a voice behind you say, 'No, this is the way; walk here.'"* (LB).

Faith calls us to redefine failure, especially regarding guidance. For those

who trust God with their lives, what seems like a terrible failure or closed door today may prove to be providence at work in the by and by when we have the benefit of hindsight.

THE CRUX OF GUIDANCE: INTIMACY WITH GOD

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, And lean not on your own understanding; In all your ways acknowledge [Heb: *yada*] Him, And He shall direct your paths” (Prov 3:5, 6).

“Now Adam knew [Heb: *yada*] Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain” (Genesis 4:1a).

The Hebrew word *yada* is translated *know* in Genesis 4:1, describing sexual union or intimacy between Adam and his wife. The same Hebrew word *yada* is also translated *acknowledge* in Proverbs 3:6, implying that the result of acknowledging God in all our ways is that God will direct our paths. Going by the principles of first mention, the context of Genesis 4:1 provides us the clue into the meaning and dynamics of the Hebrew word *yada*. Adam knew (or *yada*) his wife, Eve, meaning Adam had sexual relations with his wife; and the result was a new life, a new creation. *Yada* describes the greatest possible intimacy between a man and a woman that results in a new birth. The result of Adam *yadaing* (if I may form the adjective) was that Eve conceived and bore Cain.

It is the same Hebrew word *yada* that is translated *acknowledge* in Proverbs 3:6, the consequence of which our paths will be guided by God. When we have a relationship of intimacy with God similar to that described by a sexual relationship with a spouse, we enter into a realm of walk with God that He is intimately a part of every fiber of our life. Just as Adam *yada*d (my verb) Eve and produced result, our *yada* (or intimacy with God, acknowledging God) will likewise bear fruit. “In all your ways acknowledge [Heb: *yada*] Him, And He shall direct your paths” (Prov. 3:5, 6).

For our steps to be guided by God, all we need to do is just *yada* God; be intimate with God, and He will direct our steps. Be intimate with God; stay close to Him. Have constant dialogue with God, as with a friend and

companion, all day long. Don't wait for special times and places for prayer or meditation. *Yada* God all day long, and He will direct your paths. God may lead us by closing some doors and opening another. Don't keep banging the doors that God—in His love, wisdom, and sovereign will—has closed.

I have this funny belief that I rarely do make decisions. As I look over my life, it is like God opens one door and closes another, and I just find myself walking into the open doors. I know I do decide; but it is often like Providence has, in His sovereignty, arranged and rearranged my circumstances that I find myself going through the available avenue, which, in the end, is the best option for me. In addition to guiding me by “the peace of God which passes understanding,” I have observed God bringing me across a book or resource, providentially moving out some people and bringing in others who will be favorable to my needs. From hindsight, I can say that for most times, it is Providence at work; it is simply being in the right place at the right time, which I cannot attribute to any smartness on my part other than the “grace and mercy” of God at work.

As you would have read in earlier chapters, I gave my life to Christ when I was twenty, and I was ushered into Christian leadership positions right away. In my growing-up years as a Christian, one of my favorite verses regarding God's leading is Isaiah 42:16: *“I will bring the blind by a way they did not know; I will lead them in paths they have not known. I will make darkness light before them, And crooked places straight. These things I will do for them, And not forsake them.”* I sincerely believed I was the blind person the Lord had to guide, and I would often place my life in His hands and pray, “I am the blind person, with open eyes but cannot find my way. Lord, please lead me, guide me. I am lost without You.” I also loved Psalm 32:8: *“I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will guide you with My eye.”* I just believed that I am a child of God and that God meant those words and that His eyes were upon me to guide me as He said. Every “No,” or slammed door, or closed door, or death or disappointment, though painful, when “going through” has, from hindsight, been Providence at work.

Today, with tears of joy welling up in my eyes, I sing Fanny Crosby's great

church hymn:

All the way my Savior leads me,
What have I to ask beside?
Can I doubt His tender mercy,
Who through life has been my guide? ...
For I know what e're befall me,
Jesus doeth all things well.

“O Lord, I know the way of man is not in himself; It is not in man who walks to direct his own steps” (Jer. 10:23).

“The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit” (Jn. 3:8).

AS YOU WAIT, BUILD FOUR WALLS OF REFUGE AROUND YOURSELF

Sometimes, as we seek God’s direction for our lives, things seem to be at a standstill; you pray and pray, wait and wait, but you seem to hear nothing—no “still small voice.” You see nothing—no thunder roll or “heavens parting.” In fact, heaven seems like brass. At such seasons, learn to stay within the fortress of four walls of divine refuge. Those walls are built with four unique sets of promises of God. Remember, they are spiritual walls, real but unseen bulwarks. These walls provide an enclosure, a place of refuge that shields you on all sides, leaving you open only to the heavens. Fortify and enclose yourself mentally within the four walls of God’s love, God’s faithfulness, God’s presence and God’s omniscience.

The first wall is the love of God. No matter what, God loves you and God cares for you. Possibly the most popular verse in the Bible gives us an assurance of God’s unconditional love.

For God so loved the world [that’s you, you singular] that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever [put your name here] believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life (Jn. 3:16; insert mine). We love Him [God] because HE [GOD] FIRST LOVED US (1 Jn. 4:19; emphasis mine).

No matter what, never forget that God loves you; you are the apple of God's eye. The problems you may have are no indication that God is against you. The one common thread that runs through the whole Bible is God's unflinching and unconditional love and mercy.

The second wall is God's faithfulness: God is faithful.

No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but GOD IS FAITHFUL, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it (1 Cor. 10:13; emphasis mine). He [God] who calls you is faithful, who also will do it (1 Thess. 5:24).

God will show up at the right time. God keeps His word; God answers prayers.

The third wall is the ever-abiding presence of God. God says He'll always be with you and will never leave you or forsake you.

I am with you always, even to the end of the age (Matt. 28:20c). **For He [God] Himself has said, "I WILL NEVER LEAVE YOU NOR FORSAKE YOU"** (Heb. 13:5c; emphasis mine).

Even when you can't see God, God sees you. When you can't find God, God's eyes are always on you. God will never leave you or forsake you, as He promised. During the Israelites' journey through the wilderness, when they sinned, God judged the sin, and they suffered the consequences. But for all their forty years of wandering, God did not remove "the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night," which was to them the visible evidence of God's presence and journeying with them.

The fourth wall is God's omniscience and ability to bring out good from a multiple of bad events. God has the ability to right all wrongs and make all things work out right in the end.

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose (Rom. 8:28). For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope. (Jer. 29:11)

God knows the end from the beginning, and God can achieve God's good

purposes for our lives from seemingly odd and awkward situations. Joseph, looking back over the years of his ill treatment, would say to the same siblings who had hated and maltreated him when he was a vulnerable youth, “*But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive*” (Gen. 50:20). The fact that God righted the wrongs and used Joseph’s brothers’ hatred to further God’s purposes did not exonerate them but showed God’s superintendence over all things (Gen. 45:7, 8; Ps. 105:17). Never lose faith that, with God, something good will come out in the end. With those four walls around yourself, the waiting is meaningful, the journey (or process) is purposeful, and the destination becomes the icing on the cake.

A LESSON FROM CHEMISTRY

The application of lessons we learn in chemistry can be very insightful in our spiritual understanding. For example, sodium (Na) is a combustible soft metal. Chlorine (Cl) is a poisonous gas. Only in God’s laboratory can these two combine to form a harmless and useful product, which is our common table salt, or NaCl, that we use to season our foods. Table salt is an entirely new substance with properties different from the elements it is made up of. In the real world, combustible dark metal + poisonous gas = grains of white salt makes no sense. Such things happen only in God’s lab.

Also, hydrogen gas (H₂) is highly flammable. Oxygen gas (O₂) supports burning and combustion. Only in God’s lab can a highly flammable gas and another that supports burning be combined to form a common everyday compound without which there’ll be no life, water, or H₂O. Water, the product of the two gases, is a liquid—a liquid that does not support burning/combustion. Water is an entirely new substance with properties different from the elements it is made up of. Again, in the real world, flammable gas + combustible gas = liquid makes no sense, but it makes sense in chemistry.

In like manner, in the laboratory of life, God can weave and string together for us—in ways that only God can—any series of combustible and painful experiences, disappointments, and tragedies we’ve had, when we turn

it all over to God, to bring out something good and useful in the end. Never lose sight of the possibility that in God's chemistry a combination of bad experiences can eventually produce a better person when we trust in God's Fatherly heart and gracious providence.

Romans 8:28 is still in the Book for all who love God. Read it here in two different translations.

“And we know [with great confidence] that God [who is deeply concerned about us] causes all things to work together [as a plan] for good for those who love God, to those who are called according to His plan and purpose,” (Romans 8:28; Amplified Bible—AMP).

“And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them,” (Rom. 8:28; New Living Translation [NLT]).

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION AND MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS

DAY 14

1. What's so funny and at the same time so much like us about the behavior and mind-set of the lady who throws sticks to find the directions to go? Looking back, can you recall some ridiculous ways, out of desperation, that you've employed to determine God's will in certain situations in your life? (“Ridiculous” because even when used you knew it couldn't be a clear-cut God's method).
2. Define or explain intimacy with a friend, a spouse, and God? Is intimacy always sensual or sexual? Explain.
3. Why is it that the closer or more intimate you are with a person, the more your communication moves from loud to whisper and eventually to no sound but touching and gazing into each other's face and understanding each other without using words? Relate this to intimacy with God.
4. Why is intimacy with God the key or the crux of guidance (as suggested by father-and-son David and Solomon, the writers of Psalm 37:23 and Proverbs 3:5–6)?

Teach Them

5. Why is it important to “enjoy the journey” in the course of seeking God’s will in any situation and not be too consumed by the destination that you miss out all the fun of the “process” and beautiful scenery of the trip?
6. Of the eight points listed for consideration (in the steps for finding God’s will), (1) which step is most difficult for you, and (2) which step is most difficult for many people you know?
7. The author compares knowing God’s will to an archer practicing his archery and hitting the target, the bull’s-eye, only after repeated failures or trial and error. Read Isaiah 30:21. Do you agree with him on this? Is failure or missing the mark part of our training and learning process? Do we have to fail many times before getting it right? That doesn’t sound encouraging to me. Doesn’t the Bible say we have the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 1:16; Phil. 2:5) and are led by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:14)? Discuss this concept.
8. Uncle Mike writes, “Faith calls us to redefine failure, especially regarding guidance. For those who trust God with their lives what seems like a terrible failure or closed door today may prove to be Providence at work in the by and by when we have the benefit of hindsight.” Do you have any experience to substantiate this? If you do, share with the group how your worst failure, heartbreak, or tragedy eventually turns out to be God undergirding your future and preventing you from a wrong turn.
9. Mention the four walls that Uncle Mike suggested are important when you are in the waiting period for what you believe God for. Which of the four walls do you need most, or need to be reminded of, at this period of your life?
10. What insight do we have from Genesis 4:1 and Proverbs 3:5–6 about God’s guidance, especially considering the Hebrew word *yada*?
11. What encouragement or insight do we gain from the chemistry and chemical composition of water (H₂O) and table salt (NaCl) to make us keep hope alive in God’s ability to make “all things [eventually]

work together for our good” (Rom. 8:28a) and make “everything beautiful in its time” (Eccl. 3:11a) in spite of all the setbacks we might have had?

12. Read John 10:11–31, especially 14 and 27 and Isaiah 1:3. How do we, as Jesus’s sheep, hear the voice of our Shepherd? How can we avoid falling into the same error as did Israel, which led to God’s indictment of Israel in Isaiah 1:3?
13. FOR EXTRA CREDIT: Read Genesis 15:6-16; 45:7, 8; and Psalm 105:8-38. In Genesis 15, earlier in their history and before the nation of Israel was born, and even before God changed Abram’s name to Abraham—the progenitor of the race, God made a covenant with Abram. In the vision, God gave Abram advance notice of what would happen to his descendants, some hundreds of years in the future, even though he was still childless at the time. God said to Abram: *“Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years. And also the nation whom they serve I will judge; afterward they shall come out with great possessions... But in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete,”* (vv. 13-16).

Centuries later, recapping their history, we read in the Psalms that God “sent a man before them—Joseph—who was sold as a slave,” (v. 17), and God “sent Moses His servant, And Aaron whom He had chosen” (v. 26). So, God sent these two who lived in different eras so God could fulfill His covenant with Abraham. With the benefit of hindsight, even Joseph told his brothers, “God sent me before you to preserve a posterity for you in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So now it was not you who sent me here, but God,” (Gen. 54:7, 8). God, who sees the end from the beginning, in His foreknowledge and advance planning had set the future in motion for the nation of Israel, even before it became a nation. From Genesis 15 when God entered into a covenant with Abram, we learned that Israel would sojourn in

Egypt for 400 years, that it would be maltreated and enslaved in Egypt, that God would sustain and deliver Israel and lead the nation to the land God had earlier promised Abraham (Gen. 12). Everything about the future of the not-yet-born nation was in the big picture. Joseph (who lived >300 years after Abram) and Moses (who lived >600 years after Abram) did not just happen to be, they were sent; they were planted at a particular time in history to fulfill a purpose, a predetermined assignment. The unjust sufferings of Joseph and Moses made sense to them only from hindsight, only as they considered the big picture. Long before the nation of Israel was born, while it existed only in God's mind, God had ordained Joseph to be the link to bring it to Egypt and God had also ordained Moses to be the one to bring it out of Egypt—hundreds of years in the future.

The word Universe comes from an old French word, which comes from a Latin word, which means all together, whole, entire, collective, general, literally turned or combined into one. The word is made up of two words, *uni*—one; *verse*—spoken phrase, or song. The word “universe” means One Song or one spoken phrase, as in “Let there be”. The entire universe sings in unison; it sings one song—God's Song. There is one story in the universe—it is the story of God. All creation sings different parts of the One song; all history is one story—the story of God—made up of our individual stories within the One Story of God. Abraham, Joseph and Moses played different parts and sang different parts in the one Story and one Song of the universe—the Story of God; the Song of God. Pain is not wasted in God's kingdom and no suffering is a waste if it fulfills a higher purpose in the Big Picture, which often is only known to God. (1) Explain/discuss how knowing that Joseph and Moses were part and parcel of the unfolding of God's plan to fulfill His promise to Abram, and that nothing, not even Israel's slavery in Egypt or the sufferings of Joseph and Moses were out of God's sovereign oversight can help us trust God. (2) How can this kind of knowledge and faith living be helpful in dealing with the struggles that we go through today?

More will come on God's sovereignty and how to pray especially when we live under oppressive political regimes or when the nations of the world

experience a pandemic, such as the corona virus pandemic. In Psalm 105:25 the Bible indicates that God, “turned [Pharaoh’s and Egyptians’ hearts] to hate His people, to conspire against His servants [Israelites].” This throws a new light on Exodus 1:8 which says, “A new king, who did not know about Joseph, came to power in Egypt.” This is the Old Testament’s perspective of God’s sovereign control over Israel’s destiny that’s so complete that it governs even the evils that nations commit against her. For example, God revealed His plans to a pagan king, Pharaoh, in a dream—Genesis 41, which led to the rise of Joseph and eventually the 70 children of Israel coming to Egypt to escape the famine in the land of Canaan (Gen. 46:26, 27). God also called Cyrus, a foreign emperor, “His anointed,” (Is. 45:1-13) and promised to go with him and make him prosperous, because Cyrus had been anointed to return the exilic Israel back to the land of Judah and to rebuild the temple of God in Jerusalem (2 Chron. 36:22, 23; Ezra 1:1-11). God also addressed Nebuchadnezzar as “My servant,” (Jer.25:9; 27:6; 43:10), because God had raised him for a purpose, as God’s rod of discipline over God’s people (2 Kgs. 24 and 25). We read, “The Lord carried Judah and Jerusalem into captivity by the hand of Nebuchadnezzar,” (1 Chron. 6:15). The Apostle Paul in Romans 13 writes that all governing authorities are ordained by God (v. 1) and calls them God’s servants [or God’s ministers] (vv. 4, 6). Yet, Prophet Hosea crying out against apostasy in Israel said, “They set up kings, but not by Me; They made princes, but I did not acknowledge them,” (8:4a). In other words, God disinherits and dissociates Himself from the idolatrous rulers. In Hosea 13:11, God says, “I gave you a king in My anger, And took him away in My wrath” implying God was the king-maker as well as the One who brought a regime to an end. Thankfully, believing in God’s sovereignty means we are happy that nothing happens to us, or happens in this world, that God is not aware of or that takes God by surprise. Happily, there’s no situation in our lives that God would say, “I didn’t see that coming.” It gives us peace to know or to be reminded that God is in control of all things, but (3) how do we pray for changes in government (esp. considering Rom. 13:1-7 and Hos. 8:4; 13:11), and (4) how do we find encouragement when rulers are harsh, turn the blind

side when Christians are being unjustly persecuted and murdered, or when a deadly disease indiscriminately ravage the land? (5) How is the church a voice for the oppressed when the governing authorities are unjust, and without the church transforming itself into a political tool or becoming divisive how do God's people live into the mandate of Micah 6:8—*“He has shown you, O man, what is good; And what does the Lord require of you But to do justly, To love mercy, And to walk humbly with your God?”* (6) How do we pray for the healing of our nation (2 Chron. 7:14; 1 Tim. 2:1-4)?

A Rabbi told me of a lady who was trying to choose between Christianity and Judaism. The Christian group she was studying with believes “Everything is in God's hand; it is in God's hand if it will be, or not be.” The Jewish group believes we are partners with God; that God expects us to take initiative, to think and to plan. She happens to subscribe to that idea. She chose Judaism over Christianity, because she believes God gives us a brain and mind to use. (7) From all you've studied thus far about God's will, how would you defend or refute this Christian group's position? (8) Would you say that the Christians she was meeting with held to half-truth or the whole truth? Explain your answer.

3-2-1 End-of-Chapter Reviews

1. Name three things (or three lessons) you have learned, or been reminded of, in this chapter.

Theme: Knowing God's Will/Experiencing Divine Guidance

2. Name two ways you can apply the lessons to your life to make it worth your while.

3. Highlight one motivational/inspirational quote—Bible verse, sentence, or phrase—that's especially meaningful for you and copy this in your notebook/journal.

Pause 'n' Pray

If I turn 3-2-1 End of Chapter Review into prayer, an honest prayer from my heart to God may go like this: "Dear Father God . . .

" (Write out or say your prayer using the first-person sentences.)

Theme: Effectual Prayer/ Praying God's Will

Dear Uncle Mike,

Does God answer every prayer? I doubt that because if God does, no team will ever lose a game and every player will win the lottery. How do I pray that my prayers may be answered?

Karen

Dear Karen,

I'm glad you are thinking seriously about prayer, the source of our spiritual life. When the disciples of Jesus ask Him to teach them how to pray, Jesus responds with what we now call the Lord's Prayer. The opening words are "Our Father" (Lk. 11:1–4). Jesus teaches us to address the Eternal, Almighty, and Creator-God as "our Father." That raises prayer to a new level—to a level beyond asking and receiving to one of filial relationship and fellowship with the Most High God. Wow! In today's language, Jesus is saying that "Papa" is the addressee; the name on the envelope of our prayer request and our prayer envelope is hand-delivered to Papa by Jesus Himself, since we pray to the Father in His name (Jn. 14:13, 14; 16:23).

Let me start with the concept of two teams both praying to the same God to enable them to win a match or contest. If they were praying to different gods, then we'd conclude that the god of the winning team must be more powerful than the god of the losing team. It would be more of a contest between gods. However, when two farmers in the same neighborhood are sincerely praying to the same God, one for rain on his crops and the other for dryness for his harvest, what does God do? This is not a problem for God and should not be for us if we have a proper understanding of prayer. Prayer

or faith is not the belief that God will do what we want. Prayer or faith is the belief that God will do what is right. That should be comforting if we believe in a merciful and compassionate God, a God that we address as our heavenly Father. If we trust in a Father God who cares for us as individuals, then such faith and relationship will sustain us even when we pray and fast and yet our team loses the game, or the rain falls and spoils our plans.

In *Prodigals and Those Who Love*, William Barclay writes, when we pray, remember:

1. The love of God that wants the best for us.
2. The wisdom of God that knows what is best for us.
3. The power of God that can accomplish it.

In one of the episodes of the TV series *A Different World*, Kadeem Hardison (screen name Dwayne) attempted to explain how prayer works to a spiritually dejected female character whose prayer had not been answered as she expected. In a comical way but with all seriousness, Kadeem explained that when you pray, sometimes you get what you want, sometimes you get what you need, and at other times *you get what you get*. Kadeem concluded that when you get what you get, God helps you to live with it. Sitcoms aside, it is true. When we pray, sometimes we get what we get; but when we do, God gives us the grace to live with what we get. Depending on the way and manner we respond to the situation, sometimes we don't just cope with the situation. We thrive and blossom through it. Prayer changes things, but more often, prayer changes us—the pray-ers.

I know the question you may ask is “If *we get what we get* when we pray, why pray then? If the chips will fall where they may—regardless, what is the benefit of prayer then?” That question portrays a narrow understanding of prayer. First, it portrays God as a vending machine that we approach with coins to get what we want. We should remember that God is not Santa and prayer is not simply about getting. Prayer is about a unique privilege for finite mortals to be in fellowship with the Infinite and Immortal God. Second, that

question besmirches the worthiness of God. God is worthy of our praise, no matter what is going on around us. David says,

I will bless the LORD **at all times**; His praise shall **continually** be in my mouth (Ps. 34:1; emphasis mine).

David did not say this, because everything was hunky-dory, smooth and nice, and hitch-free every time and all the time. No. David made the declaration as an act of faith in God's goodness and superintendence over all things. In another place, David also wrote,

Make a joyful shout to the LORD, all you lands! Serve the LORD with gladness; Come before His presence with singing. Know that the LORD, He is God; It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves; We are His people and the sheep of His pasture. **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 (Ps. 100:1–5; emphasis mine).

The central question of the book of Job in the Old Testament is the intrinsic worthiness of God: Is God worthy of our worship without the benefits and gifts He bestows upon us? Will God even be in our radar if we do not have all the trappings of a good life, which we associate with living a life that pleases God? In other words, does God have to bribe us with things for us to praise Him? Satan insinuated that Job, the wealthy OT patriarch, worshipped God because God abundantly blessed and prospered him. To disprove Satan's point, God allowed Satan to take away the material things that surrounded Job. In a quick diabolical succession within hours of each event, Job's children died, his farm and livestock were raided and stolen, fire burned some investments, and a powerful wind blew away and destroyed his houses. Within hours, Job's portfolio and family was reduced to zero. Yet, Job praised God still. Satan contended that if Job was sick with some debilitating and terrible disease, then he would come to his breaking point. Again, Satan was permitted to inflict Job with diseases. Job still held on to his faith in God. Job settled the question that God was worthy of worship with or without material things and in sickness or health. The primary reason for prayer is the

opportunity for earthlings to fellowship or be in dialogue with the Eternal. We should desire and seek God—the Giver—than the benefit of His gifts.

Now, the answer to your first question “Does God answer every prayer?” is yes. Growing up, I learned from preachers that God answers our prayers in one of three ways: yes, no, and wait (or not now). As I got older and more matured in faith, I discovered two things I could add to the wisdom of these preachers: they probably made the points, but I did not hear them then. One, every one of those answers—yes, no, or wait—is an answer of love and God’s omniscience. Two, God always does far better than we ask for, as the Apostle Paul wrote, “*Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us*” (Eph. 3:20).

When the Answer Is Yes!

First, there are numerous yes answers to prayers in the Bible. King Solomon, at the beginning of his reign, prayed for wisdom. God not only gave Solomon wisdom but God also added riches, honor, and wealth (1 Kings 3:5–15). When Hezekiah was terminally sick, he prayed for healing. God not only healed him, but God added fifteen more years to his life (2 Kings 20:1–6). Hannah prayed for a son; God answered her prayer and gave her Samuel (1 Sam. 1:9–28). Yet, God gave much more -- “three sons and two daughters” (1 Sam. 2:21). God gave each of them more than they asked for—“exceedingly abundantly above” what they asked for or thought possible.

When the Answer Is No!

There are also numerous no answers to prayer in the Bible, but they are answers of love. I will hesitate to use the phrase “*unanswered prayers*,” because the prayers were answered. The answer was no. The phrase, “unanswered prayer,” suggests a God who ignores you, snubs you, or refuses to acknowledge you and your prayers. I’ve seen T-shirts with the following messages: “Love Me, Hate Me, But Never Ignore Me” and “I’d Rather You Yell At Me Than Ignore Me.” Why would they choose being hated and yelled at over being ignored? Because it means they are not invisible to the other person;

it suggests a relationship, even if toxic. They prefer hearing a “NO” to silent treatment or cold shoulder. We do too. I'd rather walk away knowing God had said “No” to my prayers than wondering if God ever heard me, or even saw me on my knees, to start with.

For example, the Apostle Paul prayed and asked God to remove “a thorn in the flesh” (2 Cor. 12:7–10). God said no to Paul, and it was an answer out of love that Paul soon acknowledged. With the no, God gave Paul abundant grace to cope with the situation. *“And He [God] said to me [Paul], ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me”* (2 Cor. 12:9).

Abraham couldn't imagine the possibility of having a child at one hundred years by a wife who was ninety years old. He therefore prayed that Ishmael, a son he had by his maid, be permitted by God to be his heir. God said no to that request, because God had something better for Abraham. Here is a brief account:

Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart, “Shall a child be born to a man who is one hundred years old? And shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?” And Abraham said to God, “Oh, that Ishmael might live before You!” Then God said: “No, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his descendants after him.” (Gen. 17:17–19)

I believe that someday, whether in this life or on the other side of life, with the benefit of hindsight, we will be immensely thankful to God for all our sincere prayers to which God said no! (I have many of such that I am presently grateful for—with the benefit of hindsight.)

When the Answer Is Wait!

Like the preachers said, there are also plenty of wait or not-now answers in the Bible for various reasons the individuals might not understand in the moment of need. Elijah prayed seven times before the answer came (1

Kings 18:42–44). Daniel prayed and fasted for twenty-one days before the answer arrived (Dan. 10:1–14). At the beginning of his reign, David faced an advancing enemy army. As he prayed for guidance, God seemed to say, “Get ready, but wait for further instructions.”

Therefore David inquired of the LORD, and He said, “You shall not go up; circle around behind them, and come upon them in front of the mulberry trees. And it shall be, when you hear the sound of marching in the tops of the mulberry trees, then you shall advance quickly. For then the LORD will go out before you to strike the camp of the Philistines.” (2 Sam. 5:23–24)

The Bible enjoins us to wait, *“for you have need of endurance [or patience; KJV], so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise”* (Heb.10:36); *“And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart”* (Gal. 6:9); the Bible talks in many places about “the appointed time” (Gen. 18:14).

A fourteen-year-old son asks his father to let him drive the car. The father says, “Not now.” Ten years later, the same man will be a proud father as he sits in the car with his son in the driver’s seat. It’s a function of timing.

In *Too Busy Not to Pray*, IVP, p. 74, Bill Hybels, writes,

If the request is wrong, God says, “**No.**”

If the timing is wrong, God says, “**Slow.**”

If you are wrong, God says, “**Grow.**”

But if the request is right, the timing is right and you are right, God says,
“**Go!**”

My question is: Are you listening to what God is saying to your request today?

Key to Answered Prayers

Now, to the latter question, “How do I pray that my prayers may be answered?” Primarily, we begin with relationship or adoption into God’s family that makes you pray, “Our Father.” Understand that prayer essentially

is a privilege to fellowship with the Eternal God. Make the Giver (God) more important than the gift. Pray in faith and in the name of Jesus, meaning approach God in prayer, not on your rights or goodness but on the merits of Christ alone. Nothing I can say match these verses:

And whatever we ask we receive from Him [God], because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight. And this is His commandment: that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as He gave us commandment. 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 Jn. 3:22–24)

Yet you do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures. (James 4:2d, 3)

According to James, two reasons for unanswered prayers are (1) unoffered prayer (4:2d) and (2) improper dispositions to prayer or praying selfishly (4:3).

Prayer Hindrances and Prayer Excuses

From a more practical point of view, there are hindrances to prayer, some Satan-induced and others self-induced or environment-induced. The Bible mentions that sin, guilt, worldliness, resentment, and unbelief, to mention a few, are hindrances to prayer. They make us feel dry, discouraged, and unwilling to pray. When we muster the effort to pray but without getting rid of these hindrances, the prayers are just like empty phrases that don't rise any higher than the roof, as if the prayers bounce off the roof back to us.

Even without these prayer hindrances, we fail to pray as we ought to because we make or manufacture excuses—excuses such as procrastination. That's the best excuse the enemy of prayer has invented. The enemy never tells us not to pray. He knows that won't work. What he suggests is "pray later." "God is going nowhere, so why don't you wait and pray when it is more convenient and with less distraction?" "Wait until your mind is freer

and you can concentrate better, and then pray.” Good ideas, won’t you say so? However, the problem is that the later time never comes. We get so preoccupied throughout the day that we do not find a place or time to squeeze in God or prayer. Other excuses the enemy has used successfully include “I’m too busy,” “I’m too tired,” “I feel dry,” “I have no privacy,” “I feel empty,” “I can’t concentrate,” “Someone else is praying,” or “I don’t want to appear a fanatic.”

Prayer Tripod

Fortunately, we can overcome all these prayer hindrances and excuses by what I refer to as prayer tripod. Just as each one of the three legs of a tripod must be good for the tripod to stand and not fall, each one of the prayer tripod must be in place for a successful prayer life. These three things have been found helpful.

1. One, have *a set time* for prayer. To say I pray all the time without a set time for prayer is a recipe for lack of a prayer life.
2. Two, have *a designated place* for your prayers. This can be a chair, a rug, a corner of the room, an improvised kneeler in a corner, a room, a garden. It becomes your personal altar.
3. Three, have *a workable plan*. That is, a plan that includes a prayer list or a praise and prayer items. Nothing succeeds without a plan, including a prayer life. This is systematic and strategic praying.

Prayer Plan

A four-points prayer plan that many have used successfully is spelled with acronym A-C-T-S:

A stands for *adoration*. Begin by verbalizing your praise and worship to God.

C stands for *confession*. Be honest before God. Let God forgive and cleanse you.

T stands for *thanksgiving*. Verbalize your gratitude for diverse blessings.

S stands for *supplications*. Intercede for others. Pray and thank God for them.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION AND MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS

DAY 16

1. How do you address God in prayer? How does your pastor open or begin his/her prayer from the pulpit? What might that suggest about his/her concept of who God is? What divine name or names, title or titles do you generally use to refer to God in prayer? Why or how did you become accustomed to using those names/titles for God?
2. Jesus always prayed to God as Father (Matt. 26:39; Jn. 17:1) or "Abba, Father" (Mk. 14:36). The Holy Spirit in the believer prays and groans to "Abba, Father" (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6). The author writes that "Papa" is the addressee on our prayer envelope and that the envelope is hand-delivered by Jesus, in whose name we pray to the Father. How does that change or affect the dynamics of prayer if we address our concerns in prayer to "Papa," "Daddy" or "our Father in heaven" who is as well the Almighty God, Creator and Sustainer of the Universe, the Eternal, Sovereign King of kings?
3. "Prayer or faith is not the belief that God will do what we want. Prayer or faith is the belief that God will do what is right." Explain what Uncle Mike meant by this.
4. How do you understand or receive William Barclay's three points in

The Prodigal? Do you find it encouraging? How?

5. Have you said a prayer that was answered by “You get what you get” (Kadeem/Dwayne)? Explain. (If not, keep on living, and you’ll soon have a long list of such answers.) What does Kadeem suggest happens when “you get what you get”?
6. Why are we still encouraged to pray, or why do we need to still trust God when it is possible that the answer to our prayer may be, as Dwayne suggested, “you get what you get”? Discuss or explain your answer.
7. What message was Uncle Mike trying to pass across when he wrote, “We should remember that God is not Santa and prayer is not simply about getting. Prayer is about a unique privilege for finite mortals to be in fellowship with the Infinite and Immortal God”? Did he successfully buttress that point with Job’s story from the Old Testament? Yes or no, explain.
8. In addition to the examples mentioned in the book, can you cite Old Testament or New Testament personalities who honestly prayed and God answered with a (1) yes, (2) no, or (3) wait? What was the response of those Bible characters to the answer they got?
9. Was Bill Hybels in *Too Busy Not to Pray* right on target with his four-way answers to our prayers or was he some old-school Christian? Explain why you agree or disagree with him.
10. You’ve probably heard this from church people, “God’s delay is not God’s denial.” Explain that in the light of the quote from Bill Hybels’s *Too Busy Not to Pray*.
11. Mention or make a list of some (1) prayer hindrances and (2) prayer excuses and (3) suggest how we can overcome these prayer hindrances and excuses.
12. Uncle Mike suggests that the prayer tripod will help to overcome all prayer hindrances and excuses. Which leg of the tripod of prayer is absent or weak in your prayer life? How would you improve this to have a balanced tripod for your prayer life?

13. Why is it that the enemy of our souls never tries to discourage us from praying? All Satan does is to whisper, “Pray later,” or “You need some privacy, and you’ve got no privacy here. You don’t want to be hypocritical about your prayers,” or “Wait until your mind is freer, and you can concentrate better and then pray.” Why is the enemy always so successful with these tactics? Discuss.

3-2-1 End-of-Chapter Reviews

1. Name three things (or three lessons) you have learned, or been reminded of, in this chapter.

2. Name two ways you can apply the lessons to your life to make it worth your while.

3. Highlight one motivational/inspirational quote—Bible verse, sentence, or phrase—that’s especially meaningful for you and copy this in your notebook/journal.

Pause 'n' Pray

If I turn 3-2-1 End of Chapter Review into prayer, an honest prayer from my heart to God may go like this: “Dear Father God . . . _

(Write out or say your prayer using the first-person sentences.)

Pray for One Another (James 5:16)

If you are in a group, turn to a friend and ask Roger Palms’s questions: “How can I pray for you to be the obedient man or woman God wants you to be? What are the blocks that need to be eliminated, and what are the changes that need to be made?”

Reviewing Uncle Mike’s Letter

A. On a scale of 1 to 5 (1 stands for least satisfactory and 5 for completely satisfactory), circle a number that corresponds to the degree to which the Uncle Mike’s letter has helped to answer your questions on prayer.

1 2 3 4 5

Theme: Effectual Prayer/Praying God's Will

B. My bullet points or "NOTE TO SELF" from this letter are:

C. Although the letter makes sense, I still have the following questions on prayer yet unanswered:

Theme: Apologetics—A Defense of the Bible

Dear Uncle Mike,

Can we trust the Bible, I mean a book that old, to direct our life in this century?

Tyquan

Dear Tyquan,

Wow! Some people think we ought to check our brains at the door of the church. I'm glad you aren't such a person; you don't seem to accept anything at face value in the name of religion. When some preachers, professors, or philosophers say, "Question everything," and you begin to truly question everything, they start feeling uncomfortable, because they never intended for you to question some things but not God. I challenge you, and if I may, I empower you to question everything, even me! Question my academic credentials and professional certifications too. Question everything, but do so with respect and courtesy. It is my belief that whatever is genuinely sacred will survive the harshest scrutiny and criticism. The Bible is proof; it has survived the most inconsiderate forms of criticism.

God challenges us to use our minds, to **"love the LORD [our] God with all your heart, with all [our] soul, with all [our] MIND, and with all [our] strength. 'This is the first commandment'"** (Mk. 12:30; emphasis mine). In Isaiah 1:18a, God invites us, *"Come now, and let us **reason together**, 'says the Lord'"* (emphasis mine). Yes, God invites us to reason, to reason with Him, not to discard but to use our reasoning faculty. In other words, bring your brain to church and engage God at an intellectual level (and you'd be amazed how tiny your brain is!). I have asked and I still keep on asking such questions

about the veracity of the Bible, as you do. These days my quest borders on reexamining the claims of the Bible and being amazed or bedazzled again by the overwhelming proof.

Unfortunately, some people don't ask such questions from good motives. Most people accept what they read in newspapers, history textbooks, and on the Internet as accurate and authoritative. Such writings place no moral demands on us. Let a book—a unique book such as the Bible—make absolute moral and theological assertions, and people become uncomfortable. Let a book tell us how to live, let a book espouse heaven and hell, let a book challenge us about our sins and demand that we repent of them, let a book make absolute demands for our commitment to Jesus as *“the Way, the Truth and the Life”* (Jn. 14:6); then we'll do all we can to discredit that book. This is the reason some people claim the Bible is full of contradictions and question its reliability. Consciously or unconsciously, the reasoning is if the Bible can be discredited, or at least relegated to the realm of mythology, its demands will have been trivialized.

I find it amusing when people say that the Bible is irrelevant to us, because it was written a long time ago. For example, when you turn on your TV or read the daily newspapers, do you come across words or themes like poverty, infidelity, injustice, hate, war, murder, rape, incest, homicide, suicide, terrorism, looting, armed robbery, and senseless killings? I'm sure you do. Guess what, these are the same concepts that people who lived four thousand years ago dealt with on a daily basis. The Bible writers, right from the first book of the Bible, recorded for us how the people grappled with such issues. Details and particulars may change, but the concept is the same today or four thousand years ago. Believe it or not, the first couple—Adam and Eve—had to deal with sibling rivalry and homicide—one child murdered his kid brother out of envy. The unique thing about the Bible is that the writers, writing under divine inspiration, were able to peel back the layers and record for us the behind-the-scene events, or the origin of the spiritual problems that led to this pathetic situation in the human race. The Bible also points us to the way of peace and empowerment and urges us and shows us how to replace

these evils in the society with love, loyalty, devotion, peace, justice, respect, and spirituality.

The Bible Has Been in the Open Market More than Most Other Books

The Bible has been in the open market than most books and survived every attack against it. When people level accusations against the Bible, it is either out of ignorance or deliberate attempts to avoid its claims. It is never an educated or academic exercise. Consider that the great antique works that are in great libraries today—written by historians, statesmen, and philosophers who lived before Christ—often receive little or no critical judgment as people level against the New Testament. Using a scientific yardstick, the New Testament towers above all these. In fact, most of these works will not survive if subjected to the same scrutiny and treatment as the New Testament has been subjected to in the hands of infidels. I will give you four examples to compare to the New Testament.

1. **Herodotus's *The History*:** Herodotus was a Greek historian. It is believed that his work was published and known before 425 BC, the year he died. Earliest copies of his work dated to AD 900, providing a time gap of about 1,350 years. There were eight surviving copies.
2. **Thucydides:** Thucydides—an Athenian historian, political philosopher, and general, dubbed father of “scientific history” and school of political realism—wrote *History of the Peloponnesian War*. He died in 400 BC. Earliest copies of his work dated to AD 900, with a time gap of about 1,300 years and eight surviving copies.
3. **Plato:** Influenced by Socrates, Pythagoras, Heraclitus, Homer, and others, Plato is one of the world's best-known and most widely read and studied philosophers. Plato died in 348 BC. Earliest copies dated to AD 900, with a time gap of about 1,300 years and seven surviving copies.
4. **Pliny's *Natural History*:** An early encyclopedia written in Latin by

Pliny the Elder is one of the largest single works that survived the Roman empire. He died in AD 79. Earliest copies dated to AD 850, with a time gap of 750 years and seven surviving copies.

5. **New Testament:** Written by the Apostles Peter, John, Paul, and first-century believers like Mark and the meticulous researcher-historian and physician, Luke, between AD 50 and 100. Earliest copies dated to AD 114–250, with a time gap of 50–150 years and 5,366 surviving copies.

Which of these works stands the chance of the best accuracy? Of course, the New Testament! The closer the earliest copies found are to the original manuscript date when it was written/published, the more reliable that work is. The more surviving number of copies available, the more credible the work is. Compared to these other works of history—often cited and less criticized than the NT—the New Testament has the earliest manuscript copies dating 25–150 years, the shortest time gap between its composition and earliest manuscript copies available, just about one hundred years. There are thousands of copies, more than five thousand, of those original manuscripts, compared to less than ten in most of these world’s greatest works of history. The NT manuscripts are consistent and accurate to 99.5 percent. We can be sure we have an accurate copy of the first century New Testament.

THE THREE LEGS OF THE TRIPOD: (1) Prophecies Fulfilled, (2) Jesus Quoted the Bible, and (3) The Amazing Unity of the Books of the Bible

PROPHECIES FULFILLED—First Leg of the Tripod

When I think of the Bible, many things strengthen my faith in its veracity and authority. I’ll briefly mention three. First, I believe the Bible, because of the many prophecies—thousands of future events that the Bible predicted about nations and Christ—that have come to be fulfilled. The prophecies foretold events in detail that were beyond the scope of human speculation. How did

the writers or speakers do it? They attributed it to God! God declared that such evidence was a proof of His existence and superiority over men and all heathen gods (Isa. 41:21–24; 42:8–9; 46:8–11).

I'd like to tantalize and whet your appetite, if I may, with a table of forty prophecies about the Messiah that were fulfilled by and in Christ. Believe me, there's a lot more, and some have identified over 350 Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah that were fulfilled in and by Christ. Below this letter (at the end of the chapter), you will find the table of forty Old Testament scriptures—prophecies about Christ, the Messiah, and their corresponding fulfillment in the New Testament by Christ. Everything from the Messiah's lineage, birth, infancy, miracles, betrayal, crucifixion, death, and resurrection were prophesied. These are prophecies about Christ's first coming as a babe born in a manger and as a Lamb slain for our sins. Besides this, there's another huge amount of prophecies about Christ's second coming that are not included in this list. The second coming is when Jesus returns as the conquering King of kings and Lord of lords. The image then is that of a roaring Lion as opposed to the first image of a Suffering Servant and submissive Lamb led to the slaughter.

In his book *Science Speaks*, Peter Stoner applies the modern science of probability to just eight prophecies regarding Christ. He says, "The chance that any man might have . . . fulfilled all eight prophecies is one in 10 to the 17th. That would be 1 in 100,000,000,000,000,000" (put seventeen zeros in front of one, or one hundred quadrillion). That's beyond wow! To help laypersons appreciate this number, Stoner suggests this graphic illustration. He said if "we take 10 to the 17th silver dollars and lay them on the face of Texas. They will cover all of the State 2 feet deep. Now mark one of these silver dollars and stir the whole mass thoroughly. . . . Blindfold a man and tell him he can travel as far as he wishes, but he must pick up (that one marked silver dollar). What chance would he have of getting the right one?" Stoner concludes, "Just the same chance that the prophets would have had of writing those eight prophecies and having them all come true in any one man, . . . providing they wrote them in their own wisdom." (By the way, Texas is

268,820 square miles or 696,200 square kilometers, the second largest US state behind Alaska, 10 percent larger than France, and almost twice as large as Germany or Japan.)

Only the Eternal, Omniscient God, “declaring the end from the beginning,” could make such predictions come true to the letter. The eagle-eyed prophet Isaiah, speaking as God’s spokesman, records, “*I am the Lord, that is My name. . . . Behold, the former things have come to pass, and new things I declare; before they spring forth I tell you of them. . . . I am God, and there is none like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done*” (Isa. 42:8, 9; 46:9, 10).

JESUS QUOTES FROM ALL DIVISIONS OF THE BIBLE—Second Leg of the Tripod

Second, Jesus recognizes the Bible. Jesus quotes from all three of the main divisions of the Old Testament, showing that He accepts the entire Old Testament as scripture. Anyone who accepts the authority of Jesus will accept what He acknowledged as scripture. Jesus pointed people to the scriptures (Jn. 5:39), and He spoke of the faithfulness of scripture (Jn. 10:35). I could say more on this, but the next letter, the chapter on resurrection, says it all. This is my premise: If Jesus is Lord, if He is who He says He is, the Son of God, and if what He says He is, is validated by His resurrection, then whatever else Jesus affirms or confirms is the truth for me. For example, I may not be able to prove the scientific or logical possibilities of some of the recorded accounts of the Bible, but based on Jesus’s credibility, I believe the story of the universal flood in Noah’s day, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the story of Jonah who was swallowed by a big fish. I believe them simply because Jesus, God’s Son, mentioned them specifically in some of His teachings. If Jesus can be faulted or if His divinity and omniscience can be doubted or disputed in one area—say, the flood or Jonah’s episode—then He can be doubted in all other areas as well. I can hear the echo of Paul’s voice saying, “*Indeed, let God be true but every man a liar*” (Rom. 3:4).

Among other reasons why I believe in creationism is because Jesus, in

answering questions about divorce, not only quoted the Old Testament, but in the process, He also said something that affirmed creationism and marriage as a union between man and woman becoming one flesh, joined together by God. We read,

And He [Jesus] answered and said to them, “Have you not read that **He [God] who made them at the beginning ‘made them male and female,’** and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate.” (Matt. 19:4–6; emphasis mine)

Jesus said, “**HE [GOD] WHO MADE THEM AT THE BEGINNING ‘MADE THEM MALE AND FEMALE,’**” thus attesting to creationism. Again, for me, everything hangs on to Jesus, His God-Man, omniscience, His credibility, and His worthiness. If Jesus could get it wrong on how Adam and Eve and humanity came to be—that is, if Jesus said God made them in the beginning and God did not make them according to evolution—then He could be equally wrong elsewhere in His other pronouncements.

Why I, an Ordained Evangelical Pastor, Taught Evolution in AP Science Class

With my scientifically trained mind, why do I believe in creationism rather than evolutionism? For weeks I taught evolution in depth according to the textbooks in an AP biology class. Yes, I was an ordained evangelical Spirit-filled pastor. The lead science teacher in the school didn’t want to teach evolution because of her religious beliefs, but I did because it was in the curriculum and because I wouldn’t want the students to go blindly to college without studying the ideas, propositions, and reasoning of the past great intellectuals, just because their science teacher who happens to be a Christian in the public school system was scared of I-don’t-know-what.

My simple definition of science to middle school students is “the way by which we try to understand and make sense of the world.” Imagine you suddenly found yourself on a deserted island. You are bound to examine and

reexamine; question and postulate; guess and investigate; wonder and wander north, south, east and west, looking up and down. Waking up on this planet and looking around; we are bound to question: Why are we born? Why are we here? What are we here for? What do we need to survive? What happens when we die? We look into a telescope and see giant planets and stars. Naturally, many questions flood our minds. We look into the microscope and discover another form of life. We are further bombarded with more confusing questions. We are bound to ask why and how? Who put them there? Who created all these things? Why is there order and what's holding things together? Believe it or not, that's what science or the science of evolution is: it is the way by which scientists and philosophers try to understand and make sense of the world and the galaxies of stars and planets. Do they have to be right or absolute? No. Just make sense of it. Any plausible answer is better than none. Whatever makes most sense becomes the working template for that time and season; and it's subject to change when better information and instrument become available. That's why science is not set in concrete. True science is a moving post and scientists keep refining their ideas with the emergence of advance tools, more precise technology, and better methods. To me, scientific theories of evolution are logical ways great thinkers [scientists, philosophers, and curious observers of nature] have attempted, in their best possible efforts—rightly or wrongly—to explain and make sense of the physical world of unending universes of order and precision in which we find ourselves.

In their language, the true scientists and philosophers did not claim to be [and they did not have to be] 100 percent accurate—just honest suppositions, scientific guesses, and their attempts to extrapolate how the universe might have come to be. Many of them died while still refining, wrestling with, and having doubts about their own propositions and assertions. Nothing can be verified experimentally or replicated in a lab. In the end, believing in evolution requires as much faith, if not more faith, as religion does. Without such a working system of beliefs about how things came to be, science and the secular community will have a baseless platform.

The unfortunate part is that the secular community is heavily funding and promoting some evolutionary ideas as *the* truth in order to advance their own business and political agendas. That goes beyond the realm of science. That's politics. No evolutionary process or theory is repeatable in any lab, which immediately takes it beyond the realm of empirical science into the arena of philosophy. No widely acceptable logical explanation can account for a sudden jump from nothing to something, from a simple form of life to a more complex form because such has not happened in the past millennia. While mutation and adaptation may account for variation in a species, there's no explanation for the existence of myriads and myriads of species of living things. When scientific theories are presented as absolutes that have crossed the boundary of true scientific effort, then most theories of evolution are subjective and questionable.

If evolution is true, the fossil record should be full of "Transitional Forms." The reality is that the fossil record does not reveal "transitional forms" of organisms in the process of changing from one to another. "The extreme rarity of transitional forms in the fossil record persists as the trade secret of paleontology. The evolutionary trees that adorn our textbooks have data only at the tips of the nodes of their branches; the rest is inference, however reasonable, not the evidence of fossils. Yet Darwin was so wedded to gradualism that he wagered his entire theory on a denial of this literal record..." (The Panda's Thumb; p. 181).

The fossil record shows the appearance of a multitude of creatures with no evidence of evolution. Belief in evolution is based upon faith, not evidence—this is the worst kind of blind faith! It requires a greater faith to believe evolution with all its suppositions, assumptions, extrapolations, interpolations, postulations, and inferences than creationism: "In the beginning, God created...". Evolution is the centerpiece of atheism, that is why Karl Marx was such a big proponent of Darwin. The complexity of nature clearly shows that it was designed. Evolution fails to explain the origin of the cosmos. In a sense, evolutionary science is based upon faith. For example, evolution has not been seen and has not been tested but with faith people believe that

it happened.

Jesus—the God-Man With Unparalleled Credentials

Scientific proof does not apply to historical events, because they cannot be repeated. Events in the past are proven using legal and historical methods. The New Testament is historically reliable and the New Testament says Jesus claimed to be God. Jesus' claim was confirmed by fulfillment of all messianic prophecies; His sinless and miraculous life; His prediction of His death and accomplishment of His resurrection. Therefore, Jesus is God and whatever Jesus teaches is true. Jesus taught that the Bible is the Word of God; therefore the Bible is the Word of God.

Jesus manifested that He was God by the long list of His miracles, which no human being but only the Almighty Creator God could perform, including these 30 miracles:

1. Stilling the Storm
2. Feeding the 5000
3. Walking on the Water
4. Feeding the 4000
5. Temple Tax in the Fish's Mouth
6. Withering the Fig Tree
7. Draught of Fish
8. Turning Water into Wine
9. Cleansing of a Leper
10. Healing a Centurion's Servant
11. Healing Peter's Mother-in-law
12. Healing a Paralytic
13. Healing the Hemorrhaging Woman
14. Healing Two Blind Men
15. Healing a Man's Withered Hand
16. Healing the Gentile Woman's Daughter
17. Healing the Epileptic Boy

18. Healing a Blind Man
19. Healing a Deaf Mute
20. Healing a Blind Man at Bethsaida
21. Healing the Infirm, Bent Woman
22. Healing the Man with Dropsy
23. Cleansing the Ten Lepers
24. Restoring a Servant's Ear
25. Healing the Nobleman's Son (of fever)
26. Healing an Infirm Man at Bethesda
27. Healing the Man Born Blind
28. Raising the Ruler's Daughter
29. Raising of a Widow's Son at Nain
30. Raising of Lazarus.

AMAZING UNITY OF THE BIBLE IN SPITE OF DIFFERENT AUTHORS AND GAPS BETWEEN THEM—Third Leg of the Tripod

Third, the amazing unity of the Bible is addressed. Ask three university dons on the same campus, or three theologians from three denominations, to address a subject, and you'll get four opinions in each case but not in the Bible.

- The Bible contains sixty-six books, written over a 1,600-year span, over a period of forty generations, by approximately forty authors from every walk of life. For example, Moses was a political leader trained in the universities of Egypt, Peter, a fisherman; Amos, a herdsman, Joshua, a military general, Nehemiah, a cup bearer to a king, Daniel, a prime minister, Luke, a physician, Solomon, a king, Matthew, a tax collector, Paul, a tentmaker and rabbi.
- The Bible was written in different places: Moses wrote in the wilderness, Jeremiah in a dungeon, Daniel on a hillside and in a palace,

Paul inside prison walls, Luke while traveling, and John in exile on the isle of Patmos.

- The Bible was written at different times: David in times of war, Solomon in times of peace, Jeremiah when his nation was under siege and ruined, Ezekiel in exile, and Nehemiah when the author was homesick while serving a foreign monarch.
- The Bible was written on three continents (Asia, Africa, and Europe) in three languages: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. Yet, there is an amazing harmony and continuity.

Regardless of the diverse subject matters covered in its pages, the central theme and message of the Bible is God's love and redemption plan for humanity. The Bible is a unique book. The reason for the unity of the Bible is because there's only One Author inspiring the different writers. The same Holy Spirit moved all the writers. The Bible is the only book that the Author (the Holy Spirit) is with you when you read it.

Knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet. 1:20–21). All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Tim. 3:16, 17)

Answering the Charge of Circular Reasoning

In circular reasoning, the proposition is supported by the premise, which also is supported by the proposition. For example: "A is true because A is true," or "A is true because B is true; B is true because A is true," is, at best, humorous. In most cases, circular reasoning or "begging the question" usually lacks other information or supportive proof, which, I will argue, is not the case in this chapter. In the end, the Christian argument "The Bible validates itself," or "The Bible is its own proof" or "Jesus is who He says He is" may sound circular and amusing to a skeptic, but after a careful examination of the over-

whelming evidence to support the claim denying the veracity of the Bible (or the uniqueness of Christ), it's no longer a matter of intellectual or logical reasoning but a willful choice regardless of where the evidence leads. True scientific reasoning does not have a preconceived answer or conclusion before thoroughly investigating the evidence. Scientific reasoning that is credible is not subjective; it examines the evidence and asks, "Where does the evidence lead me, or what conclusion does the evidence invite me to make?" The true intellectual then puts his/her opinion and political persuasions aside and goes where the evidence leads. That's all I invite you to do especially in this chapter and the next.

Forty Old Testament Prophecies Jesus Christ Fulfilled (about His First Coming)

	Prophecies about Jesus	Old Testament Prophecy	New Testament Fulfillment
1	Messiah would be born of a woman.	Gen. 3:15	Matt. 1:20 Gal. 4:4
2	Messiah would be born in Bethlehem.	Micah 5:2	Matt. 2:1 Lk. 2:4–6
3	Messiah would be born of a virgin.	Isa. 7:14	Matt. 1:22–23 Lk. 1:26–31
4	Messiah would come from the line of Abraham.	Gen. 12:3 Gen. 22:18	Matt. 1:1 Rom. 9:5
5	Messiah would come from the tribe of Judah.	Gen. 49:10	Lk. 3:33 Heb. 7:14
6	Messiah's throne will be anointed and eternal.	Ps. 45:6–7 Dan. 2:44	Lk. 1:33 Heb. 1:8–12
7	Messiah would be heir to King David's throne.	2 Sam. 7:12–13 Isa. 9:7	Lk. 1:32–33 Rom. 1:3
8	Messiah would be called Immanuel.	Isa. 7:14	Matt. 1:23

Teach Them

9	Messiah would spend a season in Egypt.	Hosea 11:1	Matt. 2:14–15
10	A massacre of children would happen at Messiah's birthplace.	Jer. 31:15	Matt. 2:16–18
11	A messenger would prepare the way for Messiah.	Isa. 40:3–5	Lk. 3:3–6
12	Messiah would be rejected by his own people.	Ps. 69:8 Isa. 53:3	Jn. 1:11 Jn. 7:5
13	Messiah would be preceded by Elijah.	Mal. 4:5–6	Matt. 11:13–14
14	Messiah would be declared the Son of God.	Ps. 2:7	Matt. 3:16–17
15	Messiah would be called a Nazarene.	Isa. 11:1	Matt. 2:23
16	Messiah would speak in parables.	Ps. 78:2–4 Isa. 6:9–10	Matt. 13:10–15,34–35
17	Messiah would be sent to heal the brokenhearted.	Isa. 61:1–2	Lk. 4:18–19
18	Messiah would be a priest after the order of Melchizedek.	Ps. 110:4	Heb. 5:5–6
19	Messiah would be called king.	Ps. 2:6 Zech. 9:9	Matt. 27:37 Mk. 11:7–11
20	Messiah would be praised by little children.	Ps. 8:2	Matt. 21:16
21	Messiah would be betrayed.	Ps. 41:9 Zech. 11:12–13	Lk. 22:47–48 Matt. 26:14–16
22	Messiah's prize money would be used to buy a potter's field.	Zech. 11:12–13	Matt. 27:9–10
23	Messiah would be falsely accused.	Ps. 35:11	Mk. 14:57–58

Theme: Apologetics—A Defense of the Bible

24	Messiah would be silent before his accusers.	Isa. 53:7	Mk. 15:4–5
25	Messiah would be spat upon and struck.	Isa. 50:6	Matt. 26:67
26	Messiah would be hated without cause.	Ps. 35:19 Ps. 69:4	Jn. 15:24–25
27	Messiah would be crucified with criminals.	Isa. 53:12	Matt. 27:38 Mk. 15:27–28
28	Messiah would be given vinegar to drink.	Ps. 69:21	Matt. 27:34 Jn. 19:28–30
29	Messiah's hands and feet would be pierced.	Ps. 22:16 Zech. 12:10	Jn. 20:25–27
30	Messiah would be mocked and ridiculed.	Ps. 22:7–8	Lk. 23:35
31	Soldiers would gamble for Messiah's garments.	Ps. 22:18	Lk. 23:34 Matt. 27:35–36
32	Messiah's bones would not be broken.	Exod. 12:46 Ps. 34:20	Jn. 19:33–36
33	Messiah would be forsaken by God.	Ps. 22:1	Matt. 27:46
34	Messiah would pray for his enemies.	Ps. 109:4	Lk. 23:34
35	Soldiers would pierce Messiah's side.	Zech. 12:10	Jn. 19:34
36	Messiah would be buried with the rich.	Isa. 53:9	Matt. 27:57–60
37	Messiah would resurrect from the dead.	Ps. 16:10 Ps. 49:15	Matt. 28:2–7 Acts 2:22–32
38	Messiah would ascend to heaven.	Ps. 24:7–10	Mk. 16:19 Lk. 24:51

39	Messiah would be seated at God's right hand.	Ps. 68:18 Ps. 110:1	Mk. 16:19 Matt. 22:44
40	Messiah would be a sacrifice for sin.	Isa. 53:5–12	Rom. 5:6–8

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION AND MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS

DAY 18

1. In one of the opening paragraphs, Uncle Mike contends that most people disagree with the Bible or attempt to discredit it for ulterior motives—to find ways to avoid the Bible's absolute demands on morality, sin, heaven, hell, Jesus, etc. Explain why you agree or disagree.
2. The issues we wrestle with today, those things that dominate our newsrooms and fill our airwaves, such as robbery, adultery, rape, incest, murder, etc., were the same issues and problems people in earlier societies and Bible times several millennia ago dealt with. The names and nomenclatures may differ, but the maladies are the same. Why is that so?
3. Compared to the writings of Herodotus, Plato, and Thucydides, the New Testament towers above and stands on better grounds for credibility and reliability. Yet, people criticize and question the authenticity of these works less than they do the Bible. Why is that so?
4. The Bible is a book of prophecy (Rev. 1:3; 19:10; 22:7, 10, 18, 19; 2 Pet. 1:20, 21). Thousands of biblical prophecies have come true. Please refer to the table on prophecies fulfilled about Jesus's first coming. These fulfilled prophecies establish for us that the thousands yet to be fulfilled will be fulfilled also in their appointed time. Stoner's work, his probability test on eight prophecies, and his conclusions also help to strengthen our faith and confidence in God's Word. What emotion does it evoke for you that the Bible is true and

credible? Does it fill your heart with joy, peace, hope, dread, worry, or fear? Explain.

5. What/Who do you know of your great-great-grandparents ten generations or about four hundred years ago? Whether you know a little or much, what's your source, and why did you believe the source without questioning? If you know next to nothing, what's your proof that they existed?
6. Old science textbooks say that the similarity between chimp/human DNA is greater than 98 percent. More recent textbooks put the similarity at 95 percent, still close. No offense, but what if I showed you the picture of a chimpanzee and told you the close similarities in your DNA is proof that he was your great-great-uncle many generations ago from another mother and your family line happens to have evolved into how you look now for evolutionary reasons? Self-evaluate your response: was your explanation logical and rational, or religious and purely emotional, or both logical and religious? (By the way, before you curse me out, if you are heading to college, I suggest you get ready for such a shocking attack on your faith and human dignity from an atheist philosophy or science professor. That's the real world in which you find yourself when you get out of the cocoon of your home and church. "The Bible says" alone will not bail you out in a secular philosophy class. You need rational and scientific thinking to engage the secular world. Read 1 Peter 3:15.)
7. When it comes to "Question Everything," are there some no-go areas in your church or youth fellowship? If yes, what are they, and why are they regarded as off-limits? Are the justifications for self-preservation or because those things cannot stand the test of scrutiny when the focus is on them? Discuss.
8. The Bible is a collection of books—it is a library of its own. The authors come from different backgrounds, nationalities, geography, eras or ages in human history, different professions, etc., yet the Bible has an amazing unity. It is one storyline from Genesis to Revelation,

one message from cover to cover. Why is this so?

9. Uncle Mike writes, “Among other reasons why I believe in creationism is because Jesus, in answering questions about divorce, not only quotes the OT, but, in the process He also said something that affirmed creationism and marriage as a union between man and woman becoming one flesh, joined together by God. . . . Jesus said, “HE [GOD] WHO MADE THEM AT THE BEGINNING ‘MADE THEM MALE AND FEMALE,’” thus attesting to creationism. Again, for me, everything hangs on Jesus, His God-Man, omniscience, His credibility and His worthiness. If Jesus could get it wrong on how Adam and Eve and humanity came to be, that is, if Jesus said God made them in the beginning, and God did not make them according to evolution, then He could be equally wrong elsewhere in His other pronouncements.”

Some will argue that this is circular reasoning. In circular reasoning, the proposition is supported by the premise, which also is supported by the proposition. For example, we argue, “The Bible is the Word of God because the Bible says so.” This approach is not too different from defining a word by using the word itself in the definition, for example defining *singing* as when you open your mouth and sing. How helpful is that to an English learner? In most cases, circular reasoning or “begging the question” usually lacks other information or supportive proof, which, I will argue, is not the case in this chapter: there’s abundance of proof. (Doesn’t that assertion sound like another example of circular reasoning—I am my own proof: “I am right because I say so”?)

QUESTION 9a: In the light of the volume of information provided in this chapter, for example, the amount of biblical prophecies fulfilled in Christ’s first coming alone, the amazing unity of the Bible in spite of its divers authors, different eras and a range of topics it covers (and, in the next chapter, the overwhelming evidence attesting to Jesus’s resurrection), why is it 100 percent safe to bet your whole life

and soul's salvation on the premise that Jesus is who He says He is, or that the Bible is what it claims to be? Discuss.

QUESTION 9b: In case you aren't yet convinced to do this (the above), what are the alternatives that you are left with, and how safe (or safer) are they than putting or betting it all on Jesus? Discuss.

QUESTION 9c: That is, if you will not trust the Bible, which other book under heaven will you trust with your whole life or bet your whole life and eternity on? Name and discuss that book or those books.

QUESTION 9d: And if you will not accept or trust in Jesus, which other world leader or religious founder will you safely bet your whole life and soul's salvation on? Name and discuss that scientist, statesman, historian, or religious founder who deserves your wholehearted trust.

3-2-1 End-of-Chapter Reviews

1. Name three things (or three lessons) you have learned, or been reminded of, in this chapter.

2. Name two ways you can apply the lessons to your life to make it worth your while.

3. Highlight one motivational/inspirational quote—Bible verse, sentence, or phrase—that’s especially meaningful for you and copy this in your notebook/journal.

Pause 'n' Pray

If I turn 3-2-1 End of Chapter Review into prayer, an honest prayer from my heart to God may go like this: “Dear Father God . . .

”

(Write out or say your prayer using the first-person sentences.)

Pray for One Another (James 5:16)

If you are in a group, turn to a friend and ask Roger Palms’s questions: “How can I pray for you to be the obedient man or woman God wants you to be? What are the blocks that need to be eliminated, and what are the changes that need to be made?”

Reviewing Uncle Mike’s Letter

A. On a scale of 1 to 5 (1 stands for least satisfactory and 5 for completely satisfactory), circle a number that corresponds to the degree to which the Uncle Mike’s letter has helped to answer your questions on the veracity of the scriptures.

1 2 3 4 5

B. My bullet points or “NOTE TO SELF” from this letter are:

Theme: Apologetics—A Defense of Jesus' Resurrection

Dear Uncle Mike,

I sometimes wonder about the resurrection of Jesus. I struggle how someone that's dead, embalmed, and buried in a grave can rise again after three days is a fact of history and not a religious myth. I believe Christianity will still be an attractive religion without the resurrection part.

Cleo

Dear Cleo,

Cleo, it is okay to doubt and struggle with the contents of our faith in order to arrive at a faith that's factual, truthful, logical, and genuine. The authentic Christians are those who admit their doubts rather than hold on to a blind and unexamined faith. An examination of the evidence for the resurrection goes beyond just exploring the evidence Jesus rose from the dead but to the reliability of the Bible itself. As Christians, however, the physical resurrection of Jesus is crucial to our faith. As Paul categorically declares,

And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty . . . And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! . . . If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable. (1 Cor. 15:14, 17, 19)

Some skeptics deny the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ, saying that none of us was there and no one can really say what happened two thousand years ago. Well, none of us were around when the Pharaohs ruled Egypt or when Socrates or Plato walked the earth, and none of us were around when George Washington was president. Logic and science demand that we accept

all these as historical facts if there is enough historical documentation or artifacts attesting to their lives, if they are corroborated by enough eyewitnesses or attested by other writers and contemporary historical figures, and if there are absolutely no documented claims, especially during their times or immediately after, denying the facts about them. To deny this would be illogical and unscientific.

Of the myriads of logical explanations, here are some thoughts I'll like you to consider. I gleaned these points from the writings of Bob Dutko, Josh McDowell, Jack Zavada, and Terry Watkins:

1. The Disciples of Christ did not go off to a faraway place like Athens or Rome to preach that Christ was raised from the dead. Rather, they went right back to the city of Jerusalem, where, if what they were teaching was false, the falsity would be evident. On the day of Pentecost, the day that the Holy Spirit from the Father came on the disciples of Jesus, Peter came out of hiding, as it were, to preach a sermon. Peter challenged the hostile audience,

Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know—Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death; whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it. . . . This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses. (Acts 2:22–24, 32)

Days later, in the name of Jesus, the Apostles healed a well-known forty-year-old man crippled from birth who begged for a living in front of the Temple in Jerusalem. At this spectacular miracle, the large crowd of worshippers gazed in awe and wonderment. Peter, standing in front of the Temple, seized the momentum again to testify to Jesus's resurrection.

So when Peter saw it, he responded to the people: "Men of Israel, why do you marvel at this? Or why look so intently at us, as though by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk? The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified His Servant Jesus, whom you

delivered up and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he was determined to let Him go. But you denied the Holy One and the Just, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and killed the Prince of life, whom God raised from the dead, of which we are witnesses. And His name, through faith in His name, has made this man strong, whom you see and know. Yes, the faith which comes through Him has given him this perfect soundness in the presence of you all.” (Acts 3:12–16)

This growing popularity and influence of a man they had crucified and miracles of healings being done in the name of (resurrected) Jesus disturbed the rulers. Following this undeniable miracle, they arrested the Apostles and tried to stop the movement.

And when they [the Sanhedrin, the highest religious court and authority] had set them [the apostles of Jesus, Peter and John] in the midst, they asked, “By what power or by what name have you done this?” Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders of Israel: If we this day are judged for a good deed done to a helpless man, by what means he has been made well, let it be known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by Him this man stands here before you whole.” (Acts 4:7–10)

With the Apostles' nonstop preaching of Jesus's resurrection and especially constantly charging the Sanhedrin for plotting the crucifixion of an innocent person, why did no one, especially the religious establishment who pushed Pilate to crucify Jesus, bring up the corpse or produce the evidence to deny the accuracy of such accounts of resurrection by Jesus's disciples? It can be for no other reason than they knew Peter was declaring a truth—a truthful historical event.

2. Before Jesus was crucified, the disciples were, for the most part, cowards. Peter denied even knowing Jesus three times before the crucifixion. After watching Jesus shamelessly arrested, beaten, and crucified like a criminal among criminals, Jesus's followers went into hiding and stayed behind

closed doors for fear of their lives. What event changed them from cowards to being courageous? Why were the disciples willing to be tortured and killed for a known lie? The same religious establishment that crucified Jesus threatened the same fate to His followers to put an end to the movement.

And they called them and commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John answered and said to them, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard,” . . . And with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And great grace was upon them all. (Acts 4:18–20, 33)

If Jesus did not actually rise from the dead, how did the disciples go from frightened followers of Jesus before his death to bold evangelists willing to die preaching his resurrection?

3. People do certainly die for false beliefs all the time, but they *think they are dying for the truth. If the disciples faked the resurrection, they would know* Christianity is a lie. Historical records say they were tortured and killed for their faith. Countless people have died for Jesus, absolutely certain that the resurrection of Christ is a historical fact. Tradition says ten of the original Apostles died as martyrs for Christ, as did the Apostle Paul. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of early Christians died in the Roman arena and in prisons for their faith. The only logical explanation is that they must have seen the risen and resurrected Jesus alive after His gruesome and disgraceful death. At a critical moment, the lives of the Apostles were hanging by a tiny thread, but a respected member of the Sanhedrin, Gamaliel, cautioned other members against killing the Apostles.

And when they had brought them [the apostles], they set them before the council. And the high priest asked them, saying, “Did we not strictly command you not to teach in this name? And look, you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this Man’s blood on us!” But Peter and the other apostles answered and said: “We ought to obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging

on a tree. Him God has exalted to His right hand to be Prince and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are His witnesses to these things, and so also is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him.” When they heard this, they were furious and plotted to kill them. Then one in the council stood up, a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in respect by all the people, and commanded them to put the apostles outside for a little while. And he said to them: “Men of Israel, take heed to yourselves what you intend to do regarding these men. . . . And now I say to you, keep away from these men and let them alone; for if this plan or this work is of men, it will come to nothing; but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it—lest you even be found to fight against God.” And they agreed with him, and when they had called for the apostles and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name. And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ. (Acts 5:27–42)

If the Sanhedrin had proofs to refute the resurrection, then Gamaliel would not have to speak the way he did. (Incidentally, Gamaliel was Saul’s mentor. However, Saul was not yet converted to Christianity at this time.)

4. A large crowd of more than five hundred eyewitnesses saw the risen Jesus Christ at the same time. The Apostle Paul records this event in 1 Corinthians 15:6. He states that most of these men and women were still alive when he wrote this letter, about AD 55. Undoubtedly they told others about this miracle. Today, psychologists say it would be impossible for a large crowd of people to have had the same hallucination at once. Smaller groups also saw the risen Christ, such as the Apostles and Cleopas and his companion. They all saw the same thing, and in the case of the Apostles, they touched Jesus and watched him eat food. The hallucination theory is further debunked, because after the ascension of Jesus into heaven, sightings of him stopped. When Paul stood before King Agrippa, he insinuated that the king was well

informed and the events of resurrection that Paul alluded to were not done in secrets but public knowledge. *“I think myself happy, King Agrippa, because today I shall answer for myself before you concerning all the things of which I am accused by the Jews, especially because you are expert in all customs and questions which have to do with the Jews. Therefore I beg you to hear me patiently. . . . For the king, before whom I also speak freely, knows these things; for I am convinced that none of these things escapes his attention, since this thing was not done in a corner”* (Acts 26:2, 3, 26; emphasis mine). King Agrippa did not refute Paul that he was telling a lie because the king was aware of the truth of the resurrection and the aftermath.

5. Jesus told His disciples He would rise after three days. If He was still dead on day four, that means He wasn't who He claimed He was. He wasn't the Messiah and certainly wasn't God after all, so why would the disciples worship a dead guy who lied to them and was exposed as a fraud? Why would they make up the resurrection story if Jesus turned out to be a fraud? Lies or deceptions are typically done for some selfish motive. Preaching the resurrection of Jesus would not bring the disciples wealth, fame, status, or popularity. It would only cause them to be hated, scorned, persecuted, excommunicated, imprisoned, exiled, beheaded, tortured, and crucified, as history records; so again, what could possibly be their motive? Just to save face? That's certainly not logical. The only logical thing is that the resurrection was the *truth*. Peter later wrote to the early Christians,

For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty. (2 Pet. 1:16)

6. Why would thousands of people immediately convert, forming the New Testament church, if Jesus didn't actually rise from the dead? Thousands upon thousands, from all walks of life, were converting to be followers of Jesus. As many as three thousand on the day of Pentecost. If no one saw Jesus alive and the crowds had only the words of the disciples to go by, why would

thousands convert, knowing especially that the disciples were preaching to many who didn't want to believe Jesus was the Messiah; so what words could they speak to hostile crowds to convince them Jesus really did rise from the dead? Why did thousands convert if not that the crowds actually saw the risen Jesus or heard eyewitness reports from family members and friends who had more to lose and nothing to gain yet risked it all by claiming to have seen the risen Jesus?

Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them . . . praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved. . . . And believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women. . . . And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord. . . . And a great many people were added to the Lord. (Acts 2:41, 47; 5:14; 11:21, 24b)

7. How did Saul of Tarsus, the chief persecutor of Christians, convert to become the Apostle Paul, the chief follower of Jesus, if he didn't really have an encounter with a risen Jesus?

As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison. . . . As he [Saul] journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" Then the Lord said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads." And Ananias went his way and entered the house; and laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." (Acts 8:3; 9:3–5, 17)

The conversion of Paul records the most drastically changed life in the Bible. As Saul of Tarsus, he was an aggressive persecutor of the early church. When the risen Christ appeared to Paul on the Damascus Road, Paul became Christianity's number one Christian and promoter. He endured five flog-

gings, three beatings, three shipwrecks, a stoning, poverty, and years of ridicule. Finally, the Roman emperor Nero had Paul beheaded because the Apostle refused to deny his faith in Jesus. What could make a person willingly accept—even welcome—such hardships? Logically, if Jesus didn't really rise from the dead, Saul would be too happy to expose Jesus as a fraud who couldn't conquer death after all. What on earth could have caused him to convert? Christians believe the conversion of Paul came about, because he encountered Jesus Christ who had risen from the dead.

8. How could the disciples even steal the body in the first place? The body was encased in a tomb with a twenty-four-hour watch by Roman guards trained to kill. The punishment for breaking a Roman grave seal or attempting to steal a body or overpowering a Roman soldier was death, so how did timid, cowardly disciples muster up the courage to try this? And for what motive? That's a big risk for absolutely no payoff.

Chuck Colson (1931–2012), former Nixon White House “hatchet man” charged in Watergate-related scandals, shocked the world when he became a Christian in 1973. Reading C. S. Lewis's book was instrumental to his conversion. The *Boston Globe* wrote in a commentary in 1973, “If Mr. Colson can repent of his sins, there just has to be hope for everybody.” He was transformed into a humble servant. He was incarcerated in 1974. He was the founder of the Prison Fellowship Ministry. Colson, the former special counsel to President Richard Nixon, was quoted as saying that one of the reasons he disbelieved the conspiracy theory on the resurrection of Jesus was its impossibility. He said if the few inner-circle men of the president of the greatest country in the world who had their reputation to protect and a lot to gain from the secrecy could not keep a secret for a couple of months, how would hundreds of followers of Jesus who had nothing to gain and might lose their lives in the process collude to a lie and not even one of them would leak out the secret for the sake of his skin, for conscience's sake, for money, for political gains, or for three minutes of fame? He said the world has never known a group of three to five bonded on a lie or conspiracy and not have one dissi-

dent or traitor, especially, when the heat is on.

And behold, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat on it. His countenance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow. And the guards shook for fear of him, and became like dead men. . . . Now while they were going, behold, some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all the things that had happened. When they had assembled with the elders and consulted together, they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers, saying, "Tell them, 'His disciples came at night and stole Him away while we slept.' And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will appease him and make you secure." So they took the money and did as they were instructed; and this saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day. (Matt. 28:2-4; 11-15)

9. The empty tomb may be the strongest proof Jesus Christ rose from the dead. Unbelievers have advanced two major theories: someone stole Jesus's body or the women and disciples went to the wrong tomb. The Jews and Romans had no motive to steal the body. Christ's Apostles were too cowardly and would have had to overcome the Roman guards. The women who found the tomb empty had earlier watched Jesus being laid away; they knew where the correct tomb was. Even if they had gone to the wrong tomb, the Sanhedrin could have produced the body from the right tomb to stop the resurrection stories. Jesus's burial cloths were left neatly folded inside, hardly the act of hurrying grave robbers. Angels said Jesus had risen from the dead.

"So they both ran together, and the other disciple [John] outran Peter and came to the tomb first. And he [John], stooping down and looking in, saw the linen cloths lying there; yet he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb; and he saw the linen cloths lying there, and the handkerchief that had been around His head, not lying with the linen cloths, but folded together in a place by itself. Then the other disciple [John], who came to the tomb first, went in also; and he saw and believed. For as yet they did not know the Scripture, that He must rise again from the

dead. Then the disciples went away again to their own homes” (Jn. 20:4–10).

10. The women eyewitnesses are further proof that the gospels are accurate historical records. If the accounts had been made up, no ancient author would have used women for witnesses to Christ’s resurrection. Women were second-class citizens in Bible times; their testimony was not even allowed in court. Yet, the Bible says the risen Christ first appeared to Mary Magdalene and other women. Even the Apostles did not believe Mary when she told them the tomb was empty. Jesus, who always had special respect for these women, honored them as the first eyewitnesses to his resurrection. The male gospel writers had no choice but to report this embarrassing act of God’s favor, because that was how it happened. The angel told the women who came to the tomb,

“He is not here; for He is risen, as He said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay. And go quickly and tell His disciples that He is risen from the dead, and indeed He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him. Behold, I have told you” (Matt. 28:6, 7).

The only logical explanation for the above is that they *all*—without exception—must have actually seen the risen Jesus. They must have witnessed His victory over death and the grave.

No one can remain a rational doubter after evaluating this overwhelming historical evidence. We must bow in humble submission and proclaim, “Jesus is who He says He is!” JESUS IS LORD!

This fact—that He rose from the grave and He’s alive—validates *all* the claims and sayings of Jesus, including when Jesus declares the singularity of His pathway to God. Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” (Jn. 14:6). This is either the truth, or all else about Jesus is falsehood.

Unlike the question “Does God exist?” very few people question whether Jesus Christ existed. It is generally accepted that Jesus was truly a man who walked on the earth in Israel two thousand years ago. The debate begins when the subject of Jesus’s full identity is discussed. Almost every major religion teaches that Jesus was a prophet or a good teacher or a godly man. The prob-

lem is that the Bible tells us that Jesus was infinitely more than a prophet, a good teacher, or a godly man. This brings us back to C. S. Lewis's "Trilemma: Lord, Liar or Lunatic". Lewis argues,

Christ either deceived mankind by conscious fraud, or He was Himself deluded and self-deceived, or He was Divine. There is no getting out of this trilemma. It is inexorable. . . . You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse." (C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*)

Apparently, it is not only the people of this generation who have challenged or questioned the preaching of resurrection. In his epistle to the Corinthian church, Paul wrote a long chapter, 1 Corinthians 15, to defend the preaching of the resurrection of Christ. This is what the Apostle Paul had to say in the opening verses of the chapter:

Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. *For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve. After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep. After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles. Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time. For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me. Therefore, whether it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed* (1 Cor. 15:1–11; emphasis mine).

As it was the kernel of the gospel message two millennia ago, the resurrection is still the heart of the gospel we preach today. Jesus is alive! And he is

coming back again, as he said.

THE UNIQUENESS OF CHRIST

In addition to hundreds of prophecies fulfilled by Christ, the validity and coherence of the Bible, and the overwhelming proof of Jesus's resurrection, when it comes to religions of the world, the only problem is the *uniqueness of Jesus*. For example:

1. Only Jesus had His birth, life, mission, death, resurrection, and thousands of details about His life prophesied by scores of prophets in different ages and have all those prophecies fulfilled in His life as evident in the table in the previous chapter.
2. Only Jesus, of all religious founders, claimed to be God; other religious founders at best regarded themselves as messengers of a faith.
3. Only Jesus performed miracles of healing diverse maladies, including raising the dead, to back up His claim to be God; no other religious leaders performed miracles to attest to supernatural ability.
4. Only Jesus claimed to die for the sins of others; all other founders died for their own sins and for themselves. Many religious founders built an army of people who fought and died for the founder in the process of establishing the new religion.
5. Only Jesus claimed to be the Savior and to have come to save us, because we cannot save ourselves, and only Jesus provided His salvation as a free gift; all other religions expect you to save yourself by attempting to follow their doctrines as much as possible.
6. Only Jesus provided certainty for the salvation of His followers; other religious leaders weren't themselves certain of their own salvation and didn't guarantee certainty to their followers.
7. Only Jesus claimed to be the way to God and that a relationship with Him, not religion, is the pathway; other religions gave rules and principles that might lead their followers to God.
8. Only Jesus says no one is morally good enough to get to heaven and no one can ever be morally good enough, no matter how they try,

to make it to God; so He offers forgiveness and eternal life solely by grace and as a gift even to the most ungodly, the social derelict, and the most undeserving person. Other religions lack the message of grace or salvation as a free gift of God and say, in essence, "If you want to get to heaven, you have to deserve it. You've got to earn your way there. There's no free lunch in spiritual matters. Be good and do good if you want to get to heaven. Always improve yourself morally. Try, try, and try harder and hope somehow your good works outweigh the bad in the end," thus leaving their followers with uncertainty and never knowing if and when their good outweighs the bad on God's scale. The good and the righteous get to paradise in the teachings of all religions, but Christ says the bad and wicked have as much chance, if not more, to get to paradise than the good and the righteous, because everyone must come by way of repentance and faith in Him. Incidentally, the bad and the wicked more readily accept their need for repentance than the good and righteous of this world.

9. Only in Jesus, by His incarnation, did God seem to say to us, like a loving spouse addressing his or her mate, "I love you. I want this relationship to work. What's mine is yours. What's yours is mine. I will put you first. I will treat your bills and your debts as mine, and I will take care of them for us. I will also adjust my programs and myself to fit into your personality so we can understand each other better, and I will share everything I have with you, including my life." To prove that, God, in Christ, shared our humanity and became one of us, because that's what love does to a mate. He died in our stead to pay our sin-debt, because that's what a true lover does. He adopts us into His family as His children so God can share everything with us. He sends the Holy Spirit into our lives so we can truly be one with Him and God can truly share Himself with us. In other religions of the world, if God is not a distant God, He is not as approachable or available as He is in Christ.

10. Only Jesus had an empty tomb, because He rose from the dead; you can visit the graves of other religious leaders and founders.
11. Only Jesus accepted the worship of His followers, and this was even before He died on the cross. Angels and other religious leaders didn't consider themselves divine enough to accept worship from men and women.
12. Only Jesus stood before crowds of His detractors and vicious critics and demanded from them that they point out any sin or crime He had committed. He was the only sinless Man who ever lived, the only One who lived a perfect life. More than three times, Pilate declared He found no fault in Jesus before he signed His death penalty under pressure from the religious leaders. No other religious leader ever claimed to be sinless, and none other ever dared to invite his followers or detractors to cross-examine their lives for any sins. History proved they had the feet of clay and sought God's forgiveness and acceptance for themselves.
13. Only in Jesus, through His suffering and death, do we see a vulnerable and suffering God who can sympathize with us when we suffer pain or loss, because He's been in our shoes. God is invincible and too mighty to suffer or understand grief in most other religions.
14. Only Jesus claimed to be the Mediator between humanity and God; other religious leaders confessed that they needed help themselves to get to God.
15. Only Jesus claimed He would come back again; other religious leaders consider their death their demise. Some Bible scholars say that the prophecies of Jesus's second coming as a conquering King to set up His kingdom are so overwhelming they outnumber the prophecies of His first coming as a baby born in a manger by a ratio of 8:1.
16. Only Jesus provided assurance for His followers when they faced death, assuring them that they would live again, because He lives and He is "the resurrection and the life"; other religious leaders had nothing comforting to give their followers in the face of death other

than to expect judgment and to hope for the best that they eventually pass the test, in the afterlife.

17. Only Jesus did not write or dictate a book; He didn't leave us with a collection of His sayings. He was the Book and Model for His followers, but no library in the whole world can contain all the volumes that have been written about Him. The Bible is still the acclaimed number one best seller worldwide and the most read of all religious holy writs.
18. Only Jesus, and the influence of His life, has transformed the cultures of the world and brought more education and enlightenment than any other religious leaders.
19. Only Jesus—because He is alive today—claims to personally manifest Himself to His followers, live in their hearts by His Holy Spirit, be a living presence around them daily, thus making Himself real in their lives and experiences; the adherents of other religious faiths don't have the promise of the presence or even the ghost of their dead leaders, only the books and teachings they leave behind. (On the uniqueness of Jesus, I can go on and on, but I will stop here.)

DR. ANTHONY FLEW: The World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind

The phrase “Go where the evidence leads” is actually from Dr. Anthony Flew, (1923–2010). Dr. Flew belonged to the analytic and evidentialist schools of thought. Dr. Flew was a philosopher and the most influential atheist of the twentieth century. He wrote over forty books on atheism. Many present-day atheists and their books are indebted to Dr. Flew's groundbreaking works. Dr. Flew taught in universities of Oxford, Aberdeen, Keele, and Reading, and at York University in Toronto. He was known as a strong advocate of atheism, a strong critic of the afterlife and free will as a defense for the presence of evil, and was one of the signers of the Humanist Manifesto in 2003.

Dr. Flew changed his mind in 2004 and declared a belief in God. His comments showed his intellectual integrity. Dr. Flew, the most philosphi-

cal atheist, stated that in keeping his lifelong commitment to go where the evidence leads, he now believed in the existence of a creator God based on recent overwhelming evidence and scientific evidence and philosophical arguments, especially the complexity of DNA and the innumerable information it contains. Scientists and philosophers generally agree that wherever there's information, there must be intelligence behind it. If, for example, in the middle of nowhere you found pieces of pebbles arranged to form this phrase, "Hi, Ben," that's a piece of information and there had to be an intelligence behind it. Most scientists now believe there had to be intelligence behind DNA with the amount of organized information it contains.

Dr. Flew wrote a book published in 2007 titled *There Is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind*, outlining his reasons for changing his position. As may be expected, his rejection of atheism was a nightmare for skeptics, and his book caused a stir and negative reviews. Many claimed that because of his old age he wasn't as mentally altogether and that he had been used by his coauthor. Dr. Flew wrote a personal rebuttal to all the critics in a published letter, claiming he was 100 percent behind the book that bears his name. Anyway, all I want to leave you with is his phrase "Go where the evidence leads." So I encourage you to investigate, research, ask questions, and then "go where the evidence leads."

Interestingly, all the atheists and agnostics who have eventually converted to Christianity did so because of the overwhelming evidence. There are many of them who are now strong defenders of the faith they once doubted or disbelieved. They might not have used Flew's phrase "Go where the evidence leads," but that was what they did. They could no longer defend the indefensible in the light of massive supportive information that they had unearthed during their research to find evidence to discredit the faith. In the end, as honest intellectuals, they had to bow to the facts of Christ and proclaim Him Lord of all. With advances in science, especially in quantum physics, molecular biology, and DNA, most scientists now admit that they don't know enough to deny anything, even the existence of spirits.

Finally, don't believe anything because I said it. I urge you to have enough

self-respect, dignity, and self-discipline to investigate before you say “I believe” or “I don’t believe.” You’d be surprised how many people who have never really read the Bible loudly criticize the Bible and say it contains errors and inconsistencies. What do you call that? How do you find faults with a book that you have never investigated seriously? Don’t be in that crowd. Accord yourself the kind of intellectual honesty displayed by Dr. Flew to “go where the evidence leads” in spite of any preconceived ideas. You earn everybody’s respect when you do that even when they don’t agree with your conclusions.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION AND MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS

DAY 20

1. In the opening sentences, Uncle Mike writes, “It is okay to doubt and struggle with the contents of our faith in order to arrive at a faith that’s factual, truthful, logical and genuine. The authentic Christians are those who admit their doubts rather than hold on to a blind and unexamined faith.” Why did he say that? Aren’t we supposed to live by faith? Isn’t doubt unhealthy and wrong? Discuss.
2. Cleo admits in his letter, “I believe Christianity will still be an attractive religion without the resurrection part.” Do you agree or disagree? Explain.
3. Will Christianity still be a saving faith that affirms victory over death and Satan and life after death without Jesus’s resurrection? Explain your answer. (Hint: (a) How and through whom did death become a part of human experience? Read Genesis 2:15–17; 1 Corinthians 15:26; John 10:10; 11:25, 26; 14:1–3, 6. (b) How and by whom was death conquered? Read John 14:19; 11:25, 26; Hebrews 2:14–18; 1 Corinthians 15:26.)
4. Why is it a moral issue or lack of creditable scholarship to accept the historicity of Plato, Socrates, and George Washington and doubt or deny the historicity of Jesus when there are more evidence and proof of the life and influence of Jesus than that of any other person who ever lived? Explain.

5. Why couldn't the scribes, Pharisees, Pilate, and other religious leaders who colluded to crucify Jesus present the body or corpse of Jesus to disprove the disciples' claims of His resurrection? Wouldn't that have silenced the Apostles?
6. Why is it unlikely and terribly unreasonable and unimaginable that Peter and the other Apostles stole away Jesus's body to concoct a conspiracy theory of His resurrection and then died for their own lies?

Food for thought: Based on Charles Colson's testimony, if there was a conspiracy theory hatched by eleven disciples, quite a number of women, and other believers in Jesus, has there been a precedent in history or since Christ's resurrection where such a large number of people agreed to lie and die for it and no one leaked the conspiracy, no one deflected, and no one became a dissident? (Today, in a group of three members, one is bound to be a traitor for love of money, for political reasons, or for sheer love of his own skin.)

7. Why did Saul, a former persecutor of the Christian church, make a U-turn to become the Apostle Paul who vigorously preached Christ and eventually died for His sake? Paul lived and died for the same faith he had earlier tried to quell. Why is that against reason except for . . . (complete the statement).
8. Why is the hallucination theory unsustainable?
9. How is the "women factor" countercultural and an impact proof to establish Jesus's resurrection?
10. Why is C. S. Lewis's "Trilemma: Lord, Liar or Lunatic" in *Mere Christianity* a bony issue for scholars? See Lewis's quote in the text.
11. Name five areas where Christ is unique and incomparable to other religious founders. What does His uniqueness speak of His claims?

3-2-1 End-of-Chapter Reviews

1. Name three things (or three lessons) you have learned, or been reminded of, in this chapter.

2. Name two ways you can apply the lessons to your life to make it worth your while.

3. Highlight one motivational/inspirational quote—Bible verse, sentence, or phrase—that's especially meaningful for you and copy this in your notebook/journal.

Pause 'n' Pray

If I turn 3-2-1 End of Chapter Review into prayer, an honest prayer from my heart to God may go like this: “Dear Father God . . .

”

(Write out or say your prayer using the first-person sentences.)

Pray for One Another (James 5:16)

If you are in a group, turn to a friend and ask Roger Palms’s questions: “How can I pray for you to be the obedient man or woman God wants you to be? What are the blocks that need to be eliminated, and what are the changes that need to be made?”

Reviewing Uncle Mike’s Letter

A. On a scale of 1 to 5 (1 stands for least satisfactory and 5 for completely satisfactory), circle a number that corresponds to the degree to which the Uncle Mike’s letter has helped to answer your questions on the resurrection of Christ.

1

2

3

4

5

B. My bullet points or “NOTE TO SELF” from this letter are:

C. Although the letter makes sense, I still have the following questions on the resurrection of Christ yet unanswered:

Theme: Theodicy—

*Wrestling with the Problem of
Coexistence of Evil, Pain, Suffering, and
a Perfectly Loving Almighty God*

**Dear Uncle Mike,
Why do babies die?**³
Murray

Dear Murray,

Murray, your question is simple but loaded. Happily, it does not appear like you are blaming God, like some do. An adult might ask why is there evil in the world or why do bad things happen to good people? Why cancer? Why did a single mother raising three young kids by herself have to die in an accident caused by a drunk driver? Where was God when the accident happened, because she was a religious woman who prayed daily? Why such devastating earthquakes in poor neighborhoods that killed innocent children? Why were

3. *Why Do Babies Die?* was my first major writing, apart from writing out my sermons, that I penned in about one and a half years after my first wife, Olawanle, lost her battle with endometrial cancer on March 17, 2014. While it was addressed to a young boy seeking answers I might have embarked on the journey in quest of answers to my own questions. This chapter is a piece from my rising up from my bottom, my valley, and finding the courage to run once again my fingers on the keyboard of a word processor. It is not a chapter I set out to write; it is a chapter that got hold of me and drew me to my laptop. It is my prayer that others who have been in my shoes and are honestly asking questions and seeking answers, not out of rebellion with a clenched fist but with an open mind, may find some answers on these pages. It was published in 2016 under the title: *Why Do Babies Die?* and distributed to the public, but not to inmates because of its personal nature.

places designated for the worship of God not miraculously saved in the earthquakes? Some debilitating health problems are genetic but may jump some generations only to suddenly appear in a generation and some families. Why that generation or family? It may jump some individuals and afflict others. Why are some spared while other individuals in the same family lines are not?

Why did the Apostle James die in the hands of King Herod but the Apostle Peter, of the same Jerusalem church, was miraculously delivered from Herod (Acts 12)? How would the family of the Apostle James feel when the family members of the Apostle Peter stood up in church for testimony and thanksgiving to God for sending an angel to rescue their father from Herod's guillotine? Nancy stands to praise God and thank her pastor and church members for their prayers as she testifies in the African Baptist Church that she is now 100 percent cancer free after battling with the deadly disease. Yet, in the same congregation is Dorothy's family who's lost their loved one, Dorothy, to cancer after countless rounds of chemotherapy, radiation, surgeries, and unceasing prayers from faithful believers. While Dorothy's family is rejoicing with their fellow church member, they are still dealing with inner struggles why *cancer free* has not become part of their family faith vocabulary. For these reasons, though you asked why babies die, I will expand the scope of my answer to similar questions people have asked down history about the presence of unexplainable evils and disasters in the world.

Some adults dare to ask more complicated questions such as if God is good, why is there evil in the world He created? If God is powerful and good, as we say He is, why can't He put an end to senseless suffering and evil, or do these evil happenings give God reasons to smile? Why? Why? Why? We can go on and on, but you get the point. These are the kind of questions that have driven some people to atheism. These are the questions I have wrestled with and issues that have agitated my mind for as long as I can remember. In fact, my first book, published in 1986, was titled *Overcoming Life's Crises*. The first two books I published in the United States in 2001 go by the titles *God and Suffering* and *Blessed Are Your Tears*. As a pastor, I was always trying to make sense of senseless sufferings and tragedies.

Murray, all I can say, from the onset, is that when it comes to the issue of why do babies die? or why is there evil in the world? while we may have some explanations, we don't have the answer that makes sense in every particular case. Besides, we have no guarantee that any answer or explanation we give will be meaningful to those who are grappling with those questions. I'll try not to be too technical or use theological language. Not that it matters, but I also don't know your age. For practical purposes, I will put your age between thirteen and nineteen. I'll just raise some points for your consideration and end with a story I used in my book *God and Suffering*.

1. The Long Arm or the Rippling Effects of the Consequences of the First Sin in the Human Race, Often Call “The Fall” Of Humanity

First, babies die, evil exists, bad things happen to those who don't deserve it, good people have cancer, and so on. All these things happen as the long arm or the rippling effects of the consequences of the first sin in the human race often call “the fall” of humanity. When Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden, they and their descendants and the earth on which they lived came under judgment and consequences of their disobedience. God forgave them; but as in physics, so in life, every action has an equal and opposite reaction, or consequence. From the Garden of Eden and onward, things were no longer the same for humans and their world—at least not as God had originally intended before the fall.

After creation, God had looked over His handiwork and declared, “It was very good” (Gen. 1:31). That was then. After Adam and Eve sinned, that opened the floodgate for evil and tragedy. Believe it or not, the next story we read in Adam's family was sibling rivalry and murder: Cain killed his sibling brother, Abel (Gen. 4). It got worse in a matter of few years so much so that Bible would say—are you ready for this?—“And the Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart” (Gen. 6:6). The same God who had looked at His creation and proudly declared “It was very good” wouldn't say that anymore. Sin had marred and destroyed every-

thing.

God made us, human beings, as volitional moral beings. We have the power and right to make choices. We can choose God, and we can decide to reject God. That's the risk God was willing to take when He made us with volition and power to decide. The biblical account that God made us "in [His] own image and likeness" (Gen. 1:26, 27) is the greatest compliment on the human race. As humans, we can choose to do good, and we can choose to do evil. God did not make us robots. God did not pull any string or remote control when Adam sinned. If God had pulled Adam's strings, then God would not be morally obligated to pronounce him guilty of the sin, which God Himself had engineered, had God made him like a robot. God made us out of love and wanted us to love Him back freely, for love that is decreed or forced is not true love. Adam and Eve, and the rest of us down human history, have not always made the right decisions. So, Murray, let me reiterate my first point: babies die, floods and earthquake destroy lives, as the long arm, the rippling effects, or consequences of a world that's out of sync with its Creator. Creation is out of alignment with its Creator and the culprit is the fall.

Paul wrote in Romans 8 that the cosmos and humanity are groaning because of the consequences of the fall through Adam's sin.

Because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that *the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now*. Not only that, but we also who have the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body. (Rom. 8:21–23; emphasis mine)

It is a broken world, filled with broken people—people who sin and people who have been sinned against. Therefore, we are both victims and culprits alike. Believe me, in such a world, hurt and pain are unavoidable.

In his epistles to the Romans and Corinthians, Paul compared Adam to Jesus. Sometimes it helps my understanding when I see things graphically. To help you see the difference pictorially, I will put Romans 5:12, 17–19 and 1 Corinthians 15:21, 22 in two columns to show what we lost in Adam and

what we gained in Christ and what the sin of Adam brought on humanity.

IN ADAM	IN CHRIST
Romans 5:12, 17–19	
12 Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned—	
17 For if by the one man's offense death reigned through the one,	much more those who receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ.)
18 Therefore, as through one man's offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation,	even so through one Man's righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life.
19 For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners,	so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous.
1 Corinthians 15:21, 22	
21 For since by man came death,	by Man also came the resurrection of the dead.
22 For as in Adam all die,	even so in Christ all shall be made alive.

From the first column, we read that sin, death, condemnation, and judgment entered the world through Adam. Through Adam, sin was passed on to us, and we became sinners. So also death was passed to us, and we all died in Adam. In Adam we also received judgment and condemnation. Therefore, because of the fall, we were lost and estranged from God. (Would you blame preachers who say that when they get to heaven the first thing they will do is kick Adam in his groin for eating the forbidden fruit?) In the second

column, we read that in Christ we receive the abundance of grace, the gift of righteousness, we reign in life—meaning freedom and dominion. We receive justification in life, we are made righteous, we are made alive, and we have hope of resurrection. In Christ we—Christians—are restored back into fellowship and favor with God (Gen. 1:26–31).

Why did God create us with a free will? I'm glad you asked. I agree with the reasoning that the world wouldn't be messed up today had God made Adam and Eve with the ability to always say "Yes, Lord" and nothing more. You see, God created us with a free will, because that's who God is. God is a volitional, emotional, relational, decision-making Being, and God created us "in His image and likeness." So we, like God, are volitional, emotional, relational, decision-making beings. At one point in the undated past, God, a decision-making and relational Being, decided to create human beings as an object of His love to relate with. God wanted us to be co-creators, like God, and to rule and manage the earth for Him; read Psalm 8:1–6 below. God then called a conference within the Godhead and dialogued with the God-self. This is how God opened the session in the divine council, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth" (Gen. 1:26). To do otherwise—to create us with no capacity to relate, choose, and decide—would have made us automatons.

As an automaton, you go to work when you are programmed to do so; you do the work you are programmed to do, and you go to sleep when you are programmed to. Such a world would be a world of no individuality or personal growth. To make matters worse, you must share your food with your enemy and "worship" your Creator 24/7 every day, not because you want to but because you are an automaton and you've been programmed to do so. Guess what, you will never be able to quit, argue, complain or say no because you've been programmed one way—"to do what I program you to do"—with no mind of your own. The only way out of this bondage is to break down. When you break down, the genius mind that created you will

fix you and put you back to your assigned life duty for all eternity, because you cannot die or run out of battery life. The payoff in this scenario—if you think it is a payoff—is that it will be a perfect world, every part working like a precision watch with its rhythmic *tic-tac, tic-tac*, a world of no disobedience, no punishment, and, hence, no evil consequences whatsoever. As far as I am concerned, if you called for a vote, having tasted freedom, I wouldn't like it that way, would you?

Psalm 8:1, 3-6 (emphasis mine)

¹O Lord, our Lord,
How excellent is Your name in all the earth,
Who have set Your glory above the heavens!
²Out of the mouth of babes and nursing infants
You have ordained strength,
Because of Your enemies,
That You may silence the enemy and the avenger.
³**When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers,
The moon and the stars, which You have ordained,**
⁴**What is man that You are mindful of him,
And the son of man that You visit him?**
⁵**For You have made him a little lower than the angels,
And You have crowned him with glory and honor.**
⁶**You have made him to have dominion over the works of Your
hands;
You have put all things under his feet,**

The word translated *angels* (in verse 5 above) in the Hebrew is *Elohim*, meaning God or gods. The Septuagint, Syriac, Targum, and Jewish tradition translate it as *angels*, more out of modesty and reverence for God. Most current translations either render the verse as “a little lower than God” (as in RSV, NASB, AMP, and NLT) or add a footnote that explains the word translated “angel” in the original Hebrew is *Elohim*, meaning God. The psalmist,

like the writer of Genesis, is reminding us that we come from God. It is the knowledge and understanding of our Source that gives human life meaning and worth.

No one I know today puts this concept better than the late Dr. Wayne W. Dyer. In his publicly televised seminars titled “There’s a Spiritual Solution to Every Problem” and “Inspiration: Your Ultimate Calling,” aired on Public Television Station (PBS) in New York, Dr. Dyer said,

Who I am is not a human being here having a spiritual experience; it is the reverse. Who I am is a spiritual being having a human experience. There’s an infinite part of me. There’s a part of me that was never born and a part of me that never dies. I am a part of the Infinity. . . . Who we really are is where we came from. And where we came from is Eternal, Infinite, Abundant, Kind, and Unlimited. Our essence is where we came from; we are a piece of the Divine. The problem is that we develop an EGO that says we are different from our Source. EGO is Edging God Out. Ego is the problem. We came from Divinity and we Edged God Out. We bought into the idea of who I am is “what I have” or “what I do.” If you no longer have or you no longer can do then you aren’t; you’ve lost the essence of your identity. Inspiration is moving back into the point in such a way that you no longer accept yourself as anything but divine.

2. Not Necessarily for Their Personal Sins but for the Corporate Sin of the World

Second, babies die and bad things happen to “good” and “innocent” people not necessarily for their personal sins. At least in two places where Jesus confronted the presence of evil in the world, He countered the false theological reasoning of His day. In John 9, the disciples of Jesus saw a man who was born blind. That was an aberration. Their reasoning was that either the man—in his unborn state—or his parents had sinned for him to be born blind. In other words, to them, the blindness was a well-deserved punishment. The disciples asked Jesus, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” (Jn. 9:2). Jesus answered them, “Neither this man nor his par-

ents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him” (Jn. 9:3).

In another instance, they reported to Jesus some Galileans who had been killed by Pilate (Lk. 13:1–5).

There were present at that season some who told Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And Jesus answered and said to them, “Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish.” (Lk. 13:1–5)

Jesus disabused their minds that these Galileans met their fate not for any particular sins or for being worse sinners than others. Those things happened not necessarily for the sins of the individuals concerned, the victims, but as a consequence of the sin of humanity. Jesus gave a second illustration of those on whom the tower of Siloam fell as not the consequences of their sin but something that is the deserving of everyone—unless we repent. Jesus said all humanity deserved such things, and He challenged all to repent.

Today, we would ask why over three thousand men and women who reported for work to earn a living and feed their families have to die on September 11, 2001, when the Twin Towers burned down and collapsed. Terrorists brought down the Twin Towers in New York City when they crashed passenger planes into those towers. Why did a normal or even routine interstate air travel end in peril? What sin did they commit to warrant such sentence? What sins did the city, New York City, commit for God to mete out such punishment? Some evangelical preachers were quick to name certain sins, like abortion and the city for promoting homosexuality, indicating that the disaster was the judgment of God. However, a more appropriate response is to see such evils and tragedies not necessarily the consequences of the victim’s particular sin or city’s crime but of the human race. We are not God, and we should not play God in those situations. If He were here today in New York City, Jesus would again say that all humanity deserved such

tragedies, because we live in a fallen and broken world. He would challenge us all to repent.

You say it is not fair, and I agree with you. Try to think of humanity—all of humanity—as people sailing on a ship. Imagine the entire human race from every race under heaven in one gigantic ocean liner. Each one's survival is dependent on the action of the others in the boat. If the ship sinks, all humanity sinks, innocent babies and toddlers as well. If there's fire on one deck or part of the ship, the rest of us are equally unsafe. If there's partying and merriment going on in one part of the ship, it positively affects the mood and atmosphere of the whole ship, passengers and crewmembers alike. If there's a fistfight in one corner, we had all better seek peace between the parties, or things could rapidly escalate beyond control. If we all pull together and we all keep safety regulations while aboard the ship, we'll all land safely. If some keep safety rules and others don't, we are all heading for disaster—regardless of who acts with sanity and who doesn't. If all of us abandon safety regulation and act irresponsibly and insane, guess what, we are doomed! It's not God "doing it to us"; we are the ones "doing it to ourselves." The whole world in that ship is like one big family of Adam's race with one fate and one destiny. Got it? Yet, this does not mean that God has abandoned us to our fate. No, He has not. In fact, that's why God sent Jesus, His Son, to rescue us from self-destruction. Jesus is our rescue boat sent from heaven to rescue the passengers in humanity's sinking boat.

In essence, my giant-boat analogy for humanity is not far from reality. Astronauts report that in the outer space, there are trillions—yes, trillions—of planets belonging to different solar systems. Our solar system is part of the Milky Way galaxy. Astronomers tell us that when viewed from space in the galaxies of solar systems and planets, Earth is nothing more than a tiny fragile planet floating in space. From that vantage position, most astronauts appreciate our human connectedness and the need for us to be better stewards of the earth. Many of them have one message for us on Earth. Their message for us is to take care of the earth and to take care of one another, because we are all in it together. Any abuse of the earth, such as pollution, or

of humanity, such as war, in one-half of the hemisphere sooner than later will impact and affect the other half. Together we rise or fall. Someone who was interviewed on PBS radio said she began to take interest in global warming and became an activist for the environment when she understood that “the Earth is not what we inherited from our parents but what we borrowed from our children.” She determined to do all in her powers to leave for posterity a restored, less depleted and less polluted Earth, and one in a better condition than she met it.

We know tragedies are not necessarily the consequence of personal sin, because Jesus reminds us that God “makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matt. 5:45). If God were meting out evils on sinners and withholding sun or rain on them, who would be spared? On whose farm will it rain, and whose will experience drought? Whose crops will receive sunshine, and whose will be in darkness? David, the psalmist, wonders aloud,

If You, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with You, That You may be feared. (Ps. 130:3, 4)

Or, as in the NLT, “Lord, if you kept a record of our sins, who, O Lord, could ever survive? But you offer forgiveness, that we might learn to fear you.”

Some sufferings come in the form of persecution simply because a believer chooses to do the right things in a crooked world. This infuriates other people because her stand for righteousness makes them feel uneasy as it magnifies their weakness and evil intents. Persecution takes many forms, including loss of employment leading to loss of income, loss of property, injustice or denial of rights, imprisonment, beatings, menacing, abduction, harassment, maiming, and even loss of life. To the church at Smyrna, one of the two blameless churches in Revelation 2 and 3, the risen Lord sent this message:

And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write, “These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life: “I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. *Do not fear*

any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death'" (Rev. 2:8–11; emphasis mine).

The keywords in the message from the resurrected Christ to this faithful church that was at that time experiencing persecution include tribulation, poverty, suffering, Satan, devil, and imprisonment. Jesus could see the hardship that was coming, and He warned the church but did not prevent the test or suffering or imprisonment. The Apostle Paul writes to his protégé Timothy, “Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution” (2 Tim. 3:12). Luke penned that Paul’s missionary team made their return trip visiting cities and encouraging the brethren, “*strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, ‘We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God’*” (Acts 14:22; emphasis mine).

3. The Words of One Ancient and Two Modern Philosophical Thinkers: King Solomon, Bishop T. D. Jakes, and Philip Yancey

Third, in the words of one ancient and two modern philosophical thinkers—King Solomon, Bishop T. D. Jakes, and Philip Yancey—pain and suffering come with the territory of being humans in a broken, sinful world. On the theme of suffering, Bishop T. D. Jakes preached a sermon series titled “It’s Just Life: Rain Falls on the Just and the Unjust.” Watching his telecast got me laughing hysterically like a jackal, because all my work and study on the problem of pain and suffering was summarized in that pithy title: “It’s Just life!” Life happens to all, to the Christian and non-Christian alike. Life happens when we least expect. When we think we have everything under our belt, life happens. It’s just life. It’s not that anyone is singled out to suffer or go through hardship for any particular reason; it happens to all. It’s not the devil

out to get you. It's just life! Rain falls on the just and the unjust! You might think your neighbor is the problem, but he or she is *really* not the problem. The context and details may be different from yours, but your neighbor is equally uneasy because he or she is also going through (or has recently gone through) something.

We have physical bodies; we live in a physical world and are subject to the physical laws. If there's drought or famine, it's just part of the physical world in which we live. There are no guarantees that you wouldn't feel the drought because you are born-again, Holy-Ghost-filled, tongue-talking, and heaven-bound Pentecostal. If there's a repressive government making draconian laws over the nation, there's no guarantee that you wouldn't feel the brunt one way or another because you happen to be a Christian. How you respond to those situations speaks volumes about your faith. Your response or reaction shows who you truly are: Pentecostal or *Penta-crazy* meaning: five times crazy.

On the problem of suffering, Philip Yancey, one of the most thoughtful Christian writers of our generation, has a book titled *Disappointment with God*. He argues that suffering happens to all, the religious and irreligious alike. You have no choice in the matter. If you live in this world, you will experience suffering and pain caused by loss, tragedy, death, sickness, accident, divorce, broken promises, and so on. You will be disappointed in life. The choice you have is whether to be disappointed *with* God (the title of his book) or to be disappointed *without* God—to confront suffering *with* faith or to confront suffering *without* faith. The choice is not avoiding pain and suffering. The choice is between either to have God *with* you as you go through your loss and bereavement or to be on your own resources *without* God as you go through. Your response or reaction to tragedy is either to curse God with clenched teeth and menacing index finger pointed to the skies in defiance because a loved one died of cancer or with face lifted to the skies, tears streaming down your face, and both hands raised in surrender to say to God, "I wish I understood why this happened, but I don't. I still trust Your Fatherly heart, nonetheless." Incidentally, it is either or no middle ground, because those are the only two options we are left with.

There are physical laws that govern the physical universe. If we break any of these laws, we suffer the consequence. For example, deny the law of gravity and jump off a ten-story building. They'll need a shovel to gather your remains because, a prayer warrior that you are, you've broken a physical law, the law of gravity, and you'll suffer its consequence. In like manner, if you disobey the laws of health—eat poorly, eat junk food or fatty food, and don't exercise—guess what, with all your speaking in tongues, Bible study, and prayer, you may end up in an early grave. Why? You broke the laws, and you must pay the price. You sinned against your body, and you pay the tolls. It is a fair and impartial universe.

The preacher, King Solomon, in Ecclesiastes 9, addresses this theme in a somber, sobering, reflective mood when he penned the following in Ecclesiastes 9:1–4, 11, 12:

“For I considered all this in my heart, so that I could declare it all: that the righteous and the wise and their works are in the hand of God. People know neither love nor hatred by anything they see before them. ²**All things come alike to all:**

One event happens to the righteous and the wicked;

To the good, the clean, and the unclean;

To him who sacrifices and him who does not sacrifice.

As is the good, so is the sinner;

He who takes an oath as he who fears an oath.

³**This is an evil in all that is done under the sun: that one thing happens to all.** Truly the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil; madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead. ⁴But for him who is joined to all the living there is hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion.

¹¹**I returned and saw under the sun that—**

The race is not to the swift,

Nor the battle to the strong,

Nor bread to the wise,

Nor riches to men of understanding,

**Nor favor to men of skill;
But time and chance happen to them all.**

¹²For man also does not know his time:
Like fish taken in a cruel net,
Like birds caught in a snare,
So the sons of men are snared in an evil time,
When it falls suddenly upon them. (Emphasis mine)

Almost like Bishop T. D. Jakes or Philip Yancey, King Solomon says,
All things come alike to all: One event happens to the righteous and the wicked; To the good, the clean, and the unclean; To him who sacrifices and him who does not sacrifice. As is the good, so is the sinner; He who takes an oath as he who fears an oath. This is an evil in all that is done under the sun: that one thing happens to all (verses 2 and 3a).

He continues in verse 11:

The race is not to the swift, Nor the battle to the strong, Nor bread to the wise, Nor riches to men of understanding, Nor favor to men of skill; But time and chance happen to them all.

Solomon opens by saying, *“All things come alike to all: One event happens to the righteous and the wicked; To the good, the clean, and the unclean . . . one thing happens to all.”* He concludes with *“Time and chance happen to them all.”* If he had been as witty and succinct as the Bishop Jakes, he could have simply said, “It’s just life!”

Murray, suffering comes with living in the kind of world we live today. Look around, pick any newspaper, or watch the ten or eleven o’clock news. It’s nothing but a recap of tragedies around the world: an account of someone’s rage, hatred, intolerance, or prejudice toward another. What makes the news are accounts of our inhumanity against fellow beings. What should surprise us is not that there’s suffering but that the level and magnitude of suffering has not escalated beyond what it is. Why did I say that? Because, shortly after creation, even *“the Lord saw that **the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was***

only evil continually” (Gen. 6:5; emphasis mine). It didn’t get any better. Centuries later, the prophet Jeremiah, after pondering on the condition of the human heart, came to this conclusion, “*The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?*” (Jer. 17:9). We have a heart problem. We need a spiritual heart transplant to fix it.

God does not check His daily planner and then decide who to afflict with cancer and which neighborhood to flatten with an earthquake. No, such things happen in a broken and fallen world. Faith comes in by our response to tragedy and suffering. Do we see the big picture, or do we take God out of the picture? Do we turn suffering into ministry by reaching out to help and thus becoming the hands and voice of God to the sufferer? Suffering does not leave us as it met us: it changes us in one way or another. The question is do we get bitter or better through and after experiencing suffering? We can grow and expand through it, or we shrink, but we are never the same. A Yoruba philosophical saying translates thus: You say you are wise, but you have not experienced suffering. Who taught you? The implication is that suffering is our best teacher in life.

It is in our response or reaction to tragedy that we show who we are, whose we are, and what’s in us. A friend of mine posed a riddle to university undergraduates. He asked, “When I cut an orange into two and squeeze it, what comes out of it?” The undergraduates were thinking of the biological composition of orange and other scientific and complicated answers. They missed the simple fact. The correct answer, which my friend was looking for, is what’s in it! When you squeeze an orange, what comes out is what’s in it. He made his point. When life squeezes us, what comes out is what’s in us. Suffering reveals what’s in you, who you really are.

4. Tragedy Should Cause Us to Search and Examine Our Ways Because Some Evils and Sufferings Are Due to Our Sins or Carelessness

Fourth, tragedy should cause us to search and examine our ways, because some evils and sufferings are due to our sins or carelessness. In the end, we are

our own devils. Some or most of our misfortunes are self-made, self-inflicted wounds, man-made problems, or due to irresponsible behaviors of others. For example, an unlicensed person at the steering wheel or a drunk person at the steering wheel or a car with some mechanical malfunctions are just accidents waiting to happen, which may lead to loss of innocent lives. We know the baby boy born from the product of the adulterous relationship between King David and another married woman, Bathsheba, died as a consequence of God's judgment on the sin (2 Sam. 11 and 12). That is one case I can give a simple answer why the baby died. However, I need to point out also that the baby did not go to hell. I say this, because David later said of the deceased boy,

And he [David] said, "While the child was alive, I fasted and wept; for I said, 'Who can tell whether the Lord will be gracious to me, that the child may live?' But now he is dead; why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me." (2 Sam. 12:22, 23; emphasis mine)

David said, "I shall go to him," and we know that David did not go to hell. We also know that much of the sufferings, wandering and deaths that happened to the Israelites under the leadership of Moses as they journeyed through the wilderness were due to their disobedience, time and again as we read especially the books of Exodus and Numbers. So without sugarcoating, some disasters are self-caused or self-inflicted. The Israelites sufferings were self-made.

Why do babies die? Maybe we should first ask: why do babies cry? We can easily answer this. Babies cry because of discomfort, hunger and thirst, wet diapers, extreme heat or extreme cold, or filthy living condition that is choking life out of them. They cry, because they cannot speak yet or articulate their problem in a spoken language. They don't yet have the language skill to ask their parents for specific help, so they yell when they need attention. The mother then tries to figure out the baby's real need. What if the crying baby is neglected? It happens, but only bad parents do that. What if the concerned mother fails to properly decipher, decode, or diagnose the need? We know

this can happen to any well-intentioned mother. Aha! Do you see where I am going? Sometimes babies die due to lack of proper care or ill health. They die, because the parent missed the signals and coded messages or the primary care physician missed the proper diagnosis of their unvoiced maladies.

I was told of a young couple in Nigeria—both parents had university education—who lost two sets of twins in less than five years after they got married. Fifty years earlier or if this had happened in the village, they would have said, “A witch was responsible.” Those who knew the family said though this couple loved their children, they were terribly ignorant parents when it came to antenatal care and were also uninformed but zealous Christians who presumed on prayer and God. In a sense, those losses, heartbreaks, and bereavements could be said to be self-made or due to irresponsible acts. That notwithstanding, no parent should carry the burden or guilt of another person or child’s death, except it came by a deliberate act of murder. Down human history, many people, children included, have survived the most horrific ill treatments, famine, severe wounds on the warfront, or fatal accidents and lived to tell the story, because their time was not yet. Only God has the power to give or take life. Infant mortality is high in many poor neighborhoods, not because the parents do not care sufficiently enough, but because the care available is limited by poverty, ignorance, and lack of health care apparatus.

Most of the life-saving routine surgeries in the hospital system today were not successful in the early stages. Before the surgical skills and methods were perfected, several or many patients lost their lives on the operating tables while the surgeons were fine-tuning their procedures. That’s one reason why patients or their caregivers sign a consent form before any experimental procedures. The lessons learned from those early failures or casualties helped the physicians to perfect the skill and save more lives today. No surgeon would go home feeling guilty for a death that came in the process of doing and trying his/her best to save a life. If a child dies, no matter what bystanders or family members may say cause the death, a loving parent shouldn’t be made to carry such guilt and condemnation. It is the enemy of our souls, “the accuser” (Rev. 12:10), not God, who brings charges and torments with regretful, nagging

afterthoughts such as “What if?” and “Had I known.” As long as it is not a deliberate act of homicide or murder, if a life is lost in an auto accident or freak accident, no one should be saddled with perpetual guilt.

At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told the parable of two builders (Matt. 7:24–27). One built his house on a deep rocky foundation, the other on a shallow sandy foundation. The two houses were subjected to the same harsh conditions of nature, storms, flood, tornado, and torrential winds. The house on the sand was flattened, but the house on the rock was able to withstand the hazards and survive. What’s the point? God did not destroy one and save the other house. The foundation you make for your life determines whether your house—your life—survives the storms of life.

Most evils are the result of man’s inhumanity against his fellow man. For example, Cain killed Abel out of jealousy. As I mentioned earlier, in Genesis 6:5, we read: “Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” Right from the beginning of time, people were doing wicked things, and their hearts were full of evil thoughts all the time. They were getting drunk and committing rape and incest and murders.

The case of a drunk driver is another example of man-made problems due to irresponsible acts of others. Why is it that it is the single mom, the victim, who had to die in the accident and not the drunk driver? That’s beyond explanation. Even with a sober driver, mechanical failure or fatigue could result in an automobile accident. Politicians have the power to make good or bad laws. They can enact laws and policies that may make life easy for citizens who have given them their vote and trust. Politicians can make selfish and politically motivated laws that will enrich them but make the lives of the populace a living hell. Crimes happen, because people disregard the rights of others and show a lack of respect for their own humanity. Mental illness is on the increase in America. Every other day we read of senseless mass shooting and killing in schools, churches, movie theaters, crowded malls, neighborhood playgrounds filled with children, army recruiting centers—just about any place. It’s a sick world, (See John 15:18, 19; 16:33; 17:14–16; 18:36;

Romans 12:2; James 4:4; and 1 John 2:15–17 for the ungodly nature of the system of the world.)

5. We Reap What We Sow, and Much More, in Our Own Life or in the Lives of Our Children or Children’s Children

Fifth, we reap what we sow—and much more. Paul writes in Galatians 6:7, 8: “Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life.” It is true that most disasters in nature are directly traceable to abuses in some parts of the world. We’ve been debating climate changes and depletion of ozone layers for decades not because of lack of scientific facts but of political exigencies. Those industries guilty of the greatest abuse from emissions from their products “pay” politicians to deny the facts. So the rest of the world keeps on suffering as a result of self-made problems.

Oil and chemical spillages have destroyed communities and destabilized the ecosystem; air and water pollution, excessive bush burnings, leakages of radioactive materials and nuclear reactors, emissions and exposure to carcinogenic substances, and biochemical warfare—all these human activities are changing human life and landscape adversely. Who is responsible? We are! Our irresponsible behavior will make us bequeath a world that’s skewed, depleted, and sick to future generations. Some health problems are directly linked to bad nutrition, smoking, and other bad habits. When nature catches up and sickness or suffering results, what right do we have to blame God? Most babies born to smokers or mothers who abuse drugs are underweight, and some die as a result. Do we blame God for the babies’ death?

King David spent much of his reign fighting battles, expanding the kingdom, defeating and subduing neighboring nations, and capturing new territories so much so that when he died, his successor, King Solomon, didn’t have to fight any battles. King Solomon inherited a peaceful kingdom because his father had paid the price and laid the foundation for peace. Solomon’s

reign was so peaceful he could concentrate on building projects including the Temple and his massive palace without distractions from wars or enemy neighbors. Solomon reaped what his father, David, had labored to provide.

Although King David bequeathed a robust kingdom to Solomon, King Solomon disappointed God and his people by unhealthy intermarriages. Read 1 Kings 11 and 12. Unlike David, King Solomon left behind a kingdom under the impending judgment of God. King Solomon had sown the bad seeds one of his sons, his successor, King Rehoboam reaped. The kingdom was divided, and he lost ten of twelve tribes, leaving David's dynasty with two tribes. Naturally, King Rehoboam wanted to marshal an army and go to war, but God sent a prophet to him with this message:

Speak to Rehoboam the son of Solomon, king of Judah, to all the house of Judah and Benjamin, and to the rest of the people, saying, "Thus says the Lord: 'You shall not go up nor fight against your brethren the children of Israel. Let every man return to his house, *for this thing is from Me.*'" Therefore they obeyed the word of the Lord, and turned back, according to the word of the Lord (1 Kings 12:23, 24; emphasis mine).

Sin has consequences. What King Solomon planted by his disobedience, his son reaped, and so also his father's dynasty was diminished.

I hesitate to mention this, but it is true that sometimes the long hand of justice is the result of some problems. The descendants in a later generation may harvest whatever good or bad seeds their parents had planted in previous generations. For example, in Hebrews 7, the writer argues that Levi, who was a great grandson of Abraham, had paid tithes in Abraham. Though unborn, Levi was in Abraham's loins when Abraham did the good deed. Abraham paid the tithe, but it was credited to Levi, four generations later. In 2 Samuel 21, there was a famine in the land that would not go away. When King David sought God, it was known that Israel had broken a vow, a holy promise made to the Gibeonites.

Now there was a famine in the days of David for three years, year after year; and David inquired of the Lord. And the Lord answered, "It is because of Saul and his bloodthirsty house, because he killed the Gibeonites." So the

king called the Gibeonites and spoke to them. Now the Gibeonites were not of the children of Israel, but of the remnant of the Amorites; the children of Israel had sworn protection to them, but Saul had sought to kill them in his zeal for the children of Israel and Judah. (2 Sam. 21:1, 2)

Israel, during Joshua's time (Joshua 9), made a solemn vow to the Gibeonites; but King Saul, in his misguided zeal, broke the vow. However, the judgment did not come during Saul's reign; it came in David's, who was not responsible for the breach. Those who paid for Saul's sin were his descendants, his grandchildren. They paid the penalty and died for the sin of their grandfather, King Saul, whom they probably did not know. It is the long hand of justice or nemesis, as we say today.

6. Not Necessarily because of Generational Curses

DAY 22

Sixth, people suffer losses or tragedies, have cancer in the prime of their life, and babies die in their infancy not necessarily because of generational curses in their family line. It could be but not generally so for anyone who is "in Christ." We are not divine enough to make such claims about anyone going through hardships or a chain of unexplainable accidents. There's a time to cast or bind Satan and his forces using the authority Christ gave us (Lk. 10:17–20; Matt. 18:18–20; Mk. 16:17) and to help those who had delved into the occult before receiving Christ to renounce anything of the enemy in their lives so they can be totally detached from Satan having a foothold in their lives and using a remote control. This is different however, from labeling anyone adopted into God's family through Christ as being accursed. If coming to Christ does not obliterate such "old things" of the past generation, I wonder why anyone should carry a Bible and preach that Christ saves and delivers from the powers of sin, hell and Satan (Jn. 8:36; 1 Jn. 3:8c).

Without doubt, patterns of behaviors are passed down to one's descendants or from one generation to another. Some maladies, behaviors, and mannerisms are passed down genetically. Others are not intentionally taught but are "caught" or imbibed by the children possibly also because such behav-

iors have been modeled for them and they have internalized them as normal. The behaviors have become established as family practice or tradition. Twice, when he feared for his life, Abraham lied about his relationship to his wife, Sarah. He called her “my sister,” telling a half truth (Gen. 12:11–13; 20:2). Decades later, we found Isaac, Abraham’s son, who wasn’t born when Abraham lied about his wife, also following the same pattern of his father and lying about his wife, Rebecca (Gen. 26:7). Abraham didn’t teach Isaac to lie, but Isaac heard the story of his father’s “survival tactics,” and he used the same tactic when he found himself in a similar situation. So, it became their family story.

We can trace in the Bible how patterns of behavior are passed down or perpetuated in the families, especially with the kings of Israel. It was “like father like son”; whatever act of disobedience or idolatry the father or the previous king did, the successor took it one step further. Again and again, we read entries like this:

And he [Abijam, son of King Rehoboam] *walked in all the sins of his father*, which he had done before him; his heart was not loyal to the Lord his God, as was the heart of his father David. . . . And he [Zachariah, son of Jeroboam] did evil in the sight of the Lord, *as his fathers had done; he did not depart* from the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who had made Israel sin. . . . And he [Menahem the son of Gadi] did evil in the sight of the Lord; *he did not depart all his days from the sins of Jeroboam* the son of Nebat, who had made Israel sin. (1 Kings 15:3; 2 Kings 15:9, 18; insert and emphasis mine)

In the king’s palace, the bad behavior or, more appropriately, the sin of idolatry had been modeled for the children (the princes); and regardless of what the Torah or any prophet said, the successor perpetuated the evils of their fathers as soon as they ascended the throne. Today, teenage pregnancy, drug addiction, alcoholism, gambling, crimes, and incarceration have become “a family or generational affair” for the same reason. On the positive side, having a college education at the minimum is a given in some families because, as far back as it can be traced, the great-great-grandparents attended a college. In all these cases, for good or evil, a pattern had been established in

the family line.

I submit to you, therefore, that recurrent teenage pregnancies in one family or teens going to college in another family have nothing to do with being cursed or blessed in the family line. The problem is that most people haven't matured enough to be self-determinant and to aspire to live above their surroundings, especially if they are negative or poverty stricken. If Mama is an unwed single parent surviving on welfare, in all likelihood, the daughter is going to be an unwed mother on welfare. If Mama had a GED, that's the highest the daughter would aim for unless some external force or motivating factors came into place. Thankfully, some do beat the odds and don't become statistics.

We stretch this principle of passed down or inherited behavior patterns when it comes to curses. We forget that when we make such a blanket claim, it renders Christ's work meaningless, and His blood becomes nothing more than "Kool-Aid," to quote a radical preacher. This position is popular among some Pentecostals, especially those in the "deliverance" ministry. They teach that children suffer generational curses of the sins of their fathers and forefathers. This has a strong support in the Old Testament, where God said He would visit the iniquity of the fathers on their children's children to the third and fourth generation. For example,

And the Lord passed before him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty, *visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation*" (Exod. 34:6, 7; emphasis mine. See also Exodus 20:4–6; Numbers 14:17–19; Deut. 5:8–10).

Or, Our fathers sinned and are no more, but we bear their iniquities. (Lam. 5:7)

After expounding such scriptures, the "deliverance minister" then gives invitation for those who seek deliverance from generational curses. I have preached from such scriptures in the past and still do it with caution and bal-

ance. As a university chaplain, I once preached a sermon on this theme titled “Ponder and Pray.” Meaning: reflect and consider your life; if you notice an undesirable pattern, then pray against it, pray it away and seek God’s mercy. “Ponder and Pray” was so well received it was printed as our Sermon of the Month. The circulation, in today’s language, went viral. So from experience, I know this is a tantalizing topic, one that is embraced in most, if not all, Nigerian congregations. I want to believe that when I handle such topics, I don’t posture myself as offering anything extra other than what Jesus had done. I want to believe that I simply lift up Jesus as all sufficient for every need and hangover. I just emphasize the fullness of what Jesus accomplished, without fanfare. I teach people who Christ is and who they are in Christ—what Christ purchased for them and the authority Christ gave them to thrive and blossom victoriously. I don’t project myself greater than them because I am not. The Spirit does His work in and through me, but I am not greater than them in any way.

A pastor’s or leader’s assignment and function in the Body of Christ may make him or her more visible, prominent and elevated but that does not make him or her any more a super-spiritual person than other believers. Every part or member of the Body of Christ is equally valuable and important to the health of the Body and its effective functioning. The best leaders and pastors lead by nourishing and serving others, even as Christ *“the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many”* (Mk. 10:45). Baptist preachers say the ground is flat at the foot of the cross because, everyone is equally destitute and needs grace and mercy at the cross. Pastors as well as their members are sinners who cannot help or save themselves. Pastors and members need the Savior’s forgiveness and Holy Spirit infilling. When King David was running away from Absalom who had led a rebellion to seize King David’s throne, the soldiers who were loyal to David decided to shield David from any possible attack. We read in 2 Samuel 18:3, *“But the people answered [David], ‘You shall not go out! For if we flee away, they [the rebel soldiers led by Absalom] will not care about us; nor if half of us die, will they care about us. But you are worth ten thousand of us now.’”* (Insert, mine).

It was David's royal office in a theocratic government that elevated him, and what other soldiers would defend with their lives. If King David was killed or captured on the warfront, Absalom's rebellion would have succeeded. By saying, *you are worth ten thousand of us*; they did not imply that King David's soul was worth more than other souls. However, David's exceptional leadership skills, statesmanship and responsibilities in civil and spiritual matters of the nation were unparalleled and were crucial. David's leadership team and other national leaders were not ready to lose him and his valuable service. God save us from pastors and church leaders who have made themselves gods to their followers!

Absolutely, yes, when it comes to falling under the anointing, I know firsthand many lives that have been changed and transformed after the minister laid hands on them or anointed them with oil and prayed for them. I know some ministers, who, without doubt, have been blessed with such ministry. It is important for me to make this clear from the onset because of what I am going to say later. I have noticed one problem that often manifests in two ways. The one problem is when falling under the anointing becomes the goal and the yardstick by which they measure the success of the prayer for the seeker. The same minister who has seen supernatural results through laying on of her hands and seekers falling under the anointing, under a self-imposed pressure for repeat performances, now begins to work harder on the seekers to see those signs and manifestations. The second way the problem manifests is in the ministry of those up-and-coming ministers under the leadership of the team leader or senior minister. Without having the anointing of their leader, those ones often work tirelessly to see seekers fall under the anointing as with their team leader, when they also pray and lay hands, probably as a way to validate their calling into the same ministry as their spiritual mentor.

No offense, but I didn't pray for, and never coveted, the anointing that would make anyone fall under my ministry. Rather, I prayed for one that would make them stand. I don't need anybody falling down or being slain in the Spirit to attest to me (or to the public) that my ministry has been blessed or Spirit-filled. Sometimes I find myself ministering in a local church

where the culture has been established to “fall under the anointing” when the minister lays his hands on you. Most church people are respectful of their leaders and do “cooperate” with them. I don’t exploit that. First, I don’t allow anyone to stand behind them with the readiness to catch them as they fall. That’s preemptive. That provision alone—somebody standing ready to catch them—has established an expectation and given them the permission to fall, which will happen because many are cooperative. If anyone attempted to fall when I lay my hands and pray, I grab them before they fall. I don’t let them fall, because that’s not my ministry; my ministry is to make them stand. Again, no offense intended.

Most—not all but most—in the deliverance ministry, when they lay hand on your head, they actually push you on the head so you may “fall under the anointing.” However, if you keep maintaining your balance and refuse to fall no matter how hard they push you, then they resort to manipulation and cajoling. They tell you, “Don’t resist. Don’t resist the anointing. Go under the anointing.” That’s putting the blame on you for resisting the “anointing” and putting the pressure on you to “cooperate,” go with the flow. Because someone is already behind you to catch you, many then fall. First, some “fall under the anointing,” because they don’t want to resist the word of the “prophet,” and secondly, they don’t want to “embarrass” the man of God and make him or her look incapable to deliver as promised. Some later confess, “I didn’t feel anything, but I fell because ‘he’ wanted me to.” That’s putting up a show in the church!

Some individuals who respond to the altar are stubborn but sincere. They do not fall, even though they really want to be slain in the Spirit *if the Spirit would only do it*. However, they didn’t feel any overpowering influence, and they refused to succumb to any pushing, gimmicks, or manipulations. Those ones often go home confused and asking themselves why they did not fall when other people were actually falling under the anointing. I tell them that I honor their integrity and I assure them there’s nothing wrong with them.

When these “high and mighty” preachers report their ministry elsewhere and tell the new audience “Thousands were slain in the Spirit, left, right, and

center,” they won’t tell the whole truth how it happened. Sometimes they hype it: they say they just waved their hand or blew air into a section of the crowd and people were falling here and there. By such lengthy introductory remarks, they are subtly but consciously preparing the new audience not to be left out but to fall for the same gimmick: when I wave my hand or blow in your direction, that’s your signal to “fall under the anointing”. Since they lack the integrity and scientific objectivity to survey the aftermath of the experiences of those who fell down under the anointing, by way of questionnaires with no names or personal details necessary, to find out how many really got the spiritual help they sought after being slain in the Spirit, here is my unscientific statistic: 99 percent get up with the same problem they had before they fell “under the anointing.” I would hate to do a real statistical survey. If things don’t change, God willing, I might conduct a statistical survey when I am in my nineties.

Can you take a joke? A friend of mine, a bishop of a network of some Pentecostal churches, tells me many fall backward away from the “man of God”, because the man of God has body odor and mouth odor! The man of God is sweaty and stinks. He needs some twenty-four-hour cologne and mouthwash, too. It gave me a good laugh. Please don’t repeat this joke elsewhere. It is an inner-circle, in-house joke! Only a Pentecostal bishop can say it and get away with it.

Jokes apart, I have heard more disturbing stories lately, and I don’t want to believe such stories. Unfortunately, the stories are being reported from credible sources and are becoming hard to deny, but I still refuse to believe them. I hear that increasing number of preachers are actually using cultic and magical powers to pull a crowd and make the crowd “fall under anointing” by mere hand gestures. These false ministers make deals with the devil to obtain supernatural powers. By using Satanic supernatural powers these preachers (more appropriately, theatrical performers) have the ability to gain insight into a person’s private world and personal information, and they use these, under the guise of prophesying or giving a word of knowledge to dazzle and mesmerize further their listeners into believing that they have extraordinary

divine powers. They hypnotize their followers, seduce the women, have sex with the married and unmarried virgins, raise large collections by extortion, and do many such dastardly and bastardly deeds. They don't preach the gospel of repentance and salvation; their emphasis is demonstration of power and spectacular show. I have seen video clippings that are worrisome. The preachers and their supernatural talks and dramas in the videos draw attention to no Father in Heaven and glorify no Jesus Christ of Nazareth but the showman himself. The more I wish these reports are untrue the more I remember the words of Jesus in Mark 13:22 and Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 11:13-15. Jesus warned His disciples, "*For false christs and false prophets will rise and show signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect,*" (Mk. 13:22). False christs and false prophets are already here and they are performing "signs and wonders." See also Matthew 7:21-23; 24:24. Paul writes about some false apostles of his days:

For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works, (2 Cor. 11:13-15).

Have you ever listened to the long list of possible symptoms of a disease being discussed on the radio or television? How do you feel as you hear the list? This is not peculiar to me alone; I have heard it from many. Suddenly, you feel like you have some of those symptoms, or you may even begin to feel in your body, right there and then, one or more of those symptoms just enumerated. A sudden fear grips you that you possibly might have the disease. In most cases, this is the kind of atmosphere of fear and doubt that many deliverance ministers create. When they list the likely symptoms of being under a generational curse, only the mature can see past that facade. Their list is inclusive of every human problem under the heavens. The gullible and Christians desperate for help believe they are under a curse. Many of these "ministers" have done as much harm as good or more harm than good by their witch-hunting tactics and the way they successfully turn family mem-

bers (even married couples) against one another.

To be honest with you, after over four decades in this business, with no personal agenda but to find and hold on to the truth, and having been blessed to dine with some of the “high and mighty” in the Christian ministry, I can *yell* it from the top of the highest mountain in the world: MANY WHO BRAG THEMSELVES AS DELIVERANCE MINISTERS THEMSELVES NEED DELIVERANCE, BUT PRIDE AND SPIRITUAL ARROGANCE WILL NOT LET THEM ADMIT IT. MANY HAVE RUN INTO PROBLEMS FOR LACK OF CHARACTER TO BACK THEIR CLAIMS. MANY THRIVE ON MANIPULATIONS AND THE GULLIBILITY OF THEIR AUDIENCE. IN THE END, THEIR INNOCENT VICTIMS (I WISH I DIDN’T USE THAT WORD) BECOME PERPETUALLY ENSLAVED TO THEM OR ATTACHED TO THEIR APRON, BECAUSE THEY ALWAYS NEED THEM TO DELIVER THEM, AGAIN AND AGAIN WHEN THEY ORGANIZE THEIR NEXT MEETINGS. (Please forgive me for yelling so loudly.)

Again, as I mentioned earlier, I don’t intend to imply that there aren’t sincere and genuine deliverance ministers. A health problem, addiction, or even behavioral problem that you’ve battled for years may be over in an instant when a Spirit-filled believer (and he or she does not have to be ordained or have a church title), lays hands on you, and prays for your deliverance in Jesus’s name. Those ones point you to Christ; they teach you and empower you to use Christ’s name and authority and the Word of God to live a free life. I think I should repeat that. Sincere Christian leaders and pastors “teach you and empower you to use Christ’s name and authority and the Word of God to live a free life.” You don’t have to be slain in the Spirit for the miracle to happen. They brag about nothing in the name of testimony. They are quick to wean you off any dependence on them and keep your focus on Christ. It is the difference between giving you a fish anytime you need one and teaching you how to catch fish and be dependent on no one to feed yourself. I like ministers who do the latter.

We should remember that the first game Adam and Eve played in the

garden after they sinned was blame shifting. No one accepted blame for his or her action. Adam blamed Eve, and indirectly God, because God gave him Eve. Eve in turn blamed the serpent, saying, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate” (Gen. 3). As long as we encourage the game of blame shifting, people will not take responsibility for their actions. True healing or deliverance is impossible in that kind of atmosphere where an individual will not take ownership for his life’s direction or no direction. If I may, I’d like to blame my great-great-grandfather for every problem I have today, because he was a warrior and he must have shed human blood during the tribal wars in Yorubaland in the 1800s. That takes the responsibility off me, doesn’t it? Nothing is my fault; I’m just a victim. The downside is that this often “enslaves” the poor, confused Christian to the “deliverer,” who is not Christ but the (forgive my French) so-called deliverance minister.

My own argument is that we have to decide under which covenant we operate. If we hold on to this concept, it nullifies the new covenant of grace and the opportunity of newness or new beginnings in the New Covenant, such as:

- “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.” (2 Cor. 5:17). Do we still have the boldness to say that old things pass away if God’s people remain cursed?

- “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God” (Jn. 1:12, 13). We must decide if these verses of a birth from above—“who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God”—mean what they say or not.

In addition, what do we make of promises such as these?

- “Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be *free indeed*” (Jn. 8:36; emphasis mine). Does Christ still set free indeed? Free indeed from what?

- “Giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light. *He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins*” (Col. 1:12–14; emphasis mine). At new birth, are we indeed delivered from one kingdom and transferred into another, or are we still in bondage to the old kingdom? Is the blood of Jesus not different from the blood of bulls of the OT sacrifices (Heb. 10)?
- “That at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus *you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ*” (Eph. 2:12, 13; emphasis mine). We are left with two options: either that the blood of Jesus is efficacious and powerful or that it is nothing more than Kool-Aid.

The writer of Hebrews contends that the new covenant came into being, because God Himself found fault with the old. Why do we pack in what God found defective?

For *if that first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second*. Because finding fault with them, He says: “Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when *I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah*” (Heb. 8:7, 8; emphasis mine. Read Hebrews 8 and Jeremiah 31:29–34).

If nothing has changed from Old Testament to New Testament, then there’s no need for a new covenant. Let’s go back to sacrificing bulls and goats.

The best intercessors of Old Testament saints had a good understanding of sin and its consequences. They acknowledged that their people were suffering, not just for the sins of their fathers but for theirs as well, and they made that the focus of their confession. Their humility is exemplary. Consider the personal pronouns *we* and *our* in their confession of sins they did not personally commit. They looked into their hearts and acknowledged that had they

been alive in the days of their fathers, they wouldn't have done differently. They realized that the fate of individual citizenship was closely tied to the fate of the nation, and the sin of the leaders was representative of the sin of the nation. They confessed their propensity to do the same as their fathers and forefathers. Classical examples include Ezra (9:6, 7), Nehemiah (1:6, 7; 9:2), David (Ps. 106:6), Jeremiah (3:25; 14:20) and Daniel (9:4–12). I quote Ezra, David and Jeremiah below:

- And I said: “O my God, I am too ashamed and humiliated to lift up my face to You, my God; *for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads*, and our guilt has grown up to the heavens. *Since the days of our fathers to this day we have been very guilty*, and for our iniquities we, our kings, and our priests have been delivered into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plunder, and to humiliation, as it is this day” (Ezra 9:6, 7; emphasis mine).
- “*We have sinned with our fathers*, we have committed iniquity, we have done wickedly” (Ps. 106:6; emphasis mine).
- “We lie down in our shame, and our reproach covers us. For we have sinned against the Lord our God, *we and our fathers, from our youth even to this day*, And have not obeyed the voice of the Lord our God. . . . We acknowledge, O Lord, *our wickedness and the iniquity of our fathers, for we have sinned against You*” (Jer. 3:25; 14:20; emphasis mine).

The exilic people of the Old Testament complained of the unfairness of their suffering, which they blamed on the sins of their father. God spoke through Ezekiel, “Behold, all souls are Mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is Mine; the soul who sins shall die” (Ezek. 18:4). God then promised a new covenant (Read Jeremiah 31:29–34). By that, God “changed the game” or “changed the name of the game” as a Brooklynite would say today. How do you read these scriptures?

- “*Yet you say, ‘Why should the son not bear the guilt of the father?’* Because

the son has done what is lawful and right, and has kept all My statutes and observed them, he shall surely live. The soul who sins shall die. *The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son.* The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself” (Ezek. 18:19, 20; emphasis mine). The people complained, and God issued a new stipulation. The prophet Ezekiel made it clear: each person is now responsible for his actions and consequences, and no one should blame their fathers anymore.

- “*In those days they shall say no more: ‘The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.’* But every one shall die for his own iniquity; every man who eats the sour grapes, his teeth shall be set on edge” (Jer. 31:29, 30; emphasis mine). The prophet Jeremiah concurred with the prophet Ezekiel: each person is now responsible for his actions and consequences, and no one should blame their fathers anymore.

It is not that God changes His mind on sin or that sin no longer carries consequences. Sin, even the sins of any nation today, have repercussions and adverse consequences that may last decades long after the perpetrators and leaders are dead and gone. It is that grace ameliorates the full force of sin and its consequences. If we preach this generational curse, we better preach *all* the Old Testament concepts and innumerable curses, without exception. Therefore, we had better delete the words *grace* and *new covenant* from our vocabulary.

Murray, I am not sure this is one of the things you are looking for in your question, but I can assure you that you will run into this kind of thing sooner than later. I just want you to bring your *head* and your *heart* to church. Anybody who tells you to “believe only” and discourages reasoning through your beliefs either has something to hide or he himself cannot logically articulate what and why he believes. If you are in a church where you are hushed and cannot *question everything*, begin to look for the exit sign.

7. Not Necessarily an Occasion for Deliverance because Every Problem Is Not Demonic in Nature and Every Solution Does Not Require Deliverance

Seventh, every problem is not demonic attack or an occasion to go for deliverance. Babies die, and bad things happen to “good” and “innocent” people not necessarily due to spiritual attacks or the operation of some black witches. I am an African and a naturalized US citizen. What the Westerners label and treat as mental illness Africans label as demonic attacks or manifestations. Westerners use medication, therapy, or confinement to a mental health institution; Africans visit churches, mosques, or herbalists seeking spiritual help for the problem.

As in many ancient cultures, our belief system and philosophical thinking in the African cultures include dualism—either or—God or Satan, friend or foe, family or fiend, good or evil. When it comes to the etiology, origin or source of a disease, or the reason for the loss of a job or a child, this dichotomy comes into play as well. The principle of good and evil, God and Satan is also applied in our diagnosis and treatment of problems. So whatever is not of God is Satanic. This is the reason why some neophytes in the ministry (or, more appropriately, many indigenous denominations) often wrongly label every human problem as demonic. Even malaria fever that comes from a mosquito bite or a sprained ankle through a fall is considered as demonic attack or the works of witches. A ninety-year-old African great-grandmother dies, because her enemies finally gain the upper hand. So to many spiritual leaders in Africa, the solution to every problem is deliverance, deliverance, and deliverance. You will be amazed how church people often discern and/or invent demons, and then bind and cast out these imaginary devils that exist only in their philosophical and theological thinking.

We have to remember that we live in a physical body; and our body, like a machine, experiences its own wear and tear due to stress, age, lack of sufficient rest or sleep, pollutants and pollutions, and other environmental and relational or relationship factors. First, we know there are physical and biochemical ailments, bacterial or viral infections, that respond to medication

or antibiotics like magic. While prayers can bring relief through divine intervention, it's a waste of time holding the devil responsible for that. Second, some degenerative problems come with age. If medication or a pair of glasses will correct vision, it is ignorance going for deliverance. If dietary calcium supplements can help with loss of bone density due to age, why not go for it? Deuteronomy 33:25b, "As your days are so shall your strength be," may be applicable to other strengths than physical when it comes to an elderly person struggling with waning physical strength.

Third, there are health problems related to poor nutrition and health problems arising from vitamin and mineral deficiencies in the body that can be quickly reversed with improved nutrition. Prayer alone, as James says in 2:14–17, is faith without works. Four, there are health problems arising from lack of mobility or exercise. It is use it or lose it. Our muscles and certain organs of the body lose their tone, vitality and vigor when not in use. The individual will benefit more from a challenge to set goals for regular exercise than binding and loosing any demons of obesity, diabetes or erectile dysfunction (the human male organ is a muscle) in an all-night prayer meeting. What we don't use becomes atrophied. Five, there are psychosomatic (body and soul interaction) or emotional problems, relationship problems, habituation problems arising from long-practiced wrong behaviors and negative thinking patterns that can be helped by listening, counseling, biblical teaching, or therapy. Prescribing seven days of fasting and anointing with oil may placate but will not get to the root of those problems.

Six, some human problems—social, emotional, and spiritual—are hormonal and are related to the life cycle or stage of human development. For example, an adolescent is in a flux—too old to be a child and too young to be an adult. Although he has the body of an adult, his wisdom is yet to catch up with his frame; he thinks he's old enough to make decisions, but he's too scared to face life. He entertains doubts if he's been sufficiently equipped to handle adult responsibilities. Each stage and station in life has its own crisis of identity and purpose, and that's why we often talk of midlife crisis or old age and marital problems associated with empty-nest syndrome or retirement.

The adolescent is perturbed with “What am I to do or become?” The forty/fifty-year-old is worried about “What have I done or become?” while the retiree is asking, “Have I played my music? What’s my legacy? Do I have an exit strategy?” Therefore, a confused, angry, and troubled adolescent, or depressive and grumpy fifty-year-old, or reclusive and pensive retiree may be battling with internal “demons” or crisis associated with their age and stage of life than any real devils from the pit of hell harassing them.

Seven, there are addictive problems that need a multipronged attack, including the reengineering of the individual’s environment. Deliverance alone without other factors in place will lead to a worse condition, as Jesus teaches in Matthew 12:43–45. Eight, some allergic problems like asthma or diabetics are related to poor living conditions, pollutions, or adverse reactions to a food item. These ailments may be in the genes, but it is usually the environment and individual’s habits that often set off the sickness. A diabetic patient puts it this way: my genes loaded the gun, but my habit pulled the trigger. More responsible eating habits and avoidance of triggers will serve better than prayer of deliverance—unless you are praying for deliverance from this world into another world! Nine, some problems are due to negligence and carelessness, like taking a helpful medication haphazardly and not regularly as prescribed and then suffering a relapse. Confession and repentance and a return to following through responsibly will serve better than prayers. Can you see where I am going with these, Murray? Prayer has its place, but it is not a substitute for an individual’s responsibility and common-sense practices.

Ten, we also know there are sinful habits and practices that need to be confessed and repented of. Paul says, “*Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like*” (Gal. 5:19–21). The works of the flesh call for repentance and turning to God and seeking the fruit of the Spirit. The apostle Paul didn’t write, “Now the works of the DEVIL are evident, which are: adultery, fornication.” He wrote, “Now the works of the

FLESH are evident, which are: adultery, fornication.”

It is a terrible waste of time and resources to hold a night vigil in an attempt to cast out the demon of “adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath” and so on. I know Satan reinforces these maladies, but the mind-set and approach of “Satan made me do it” is nothing but passing the buck and encouraging a victim mentality. The only help is to demand the individual to take ownership of his or her fleshly, sinful activities and repent of them before God. The error comes when we lump all these maladies as demonic and restrict help only to the spiritual.

Eleven, none of us will be here in our physical body forever. My pastor in Brooklyn, the Reverend Dr. Gary Simpson, tells of a hospital visit to an elderly woman in the early days of his ministry. He was about to pray for recovery and restoration of health when the woman gently placed her hand on his hand to caution and stop him. Gary got the message. He then prayed for a peaceful release and home going for the deaconess, who, in her spirit, had seen the light at the end of the tunnel and was ready to go home. She was home with her Lord in the next few days, which is to say that praying for a ninety-year old and claiming the scripture “*You shall not die but live and declare the works of the Lord*” (Ps. 118:17) is another example of our unwillingness to face reality.

Twelve and last but not the least, there are demonic oppression, obsession, or even possession. When we rightly discern demonic oppression or satanic activities in a person, it immediately draws the line between God and Satan—the dichotomy that Africans are well aware of. As we take our stand as representatives of Christ and use the authority of Christ to cast out the devils, we have seen people set free from the powers of the enemy as we use the authority and name of Christ.

We are spirit beings, God is a Spirit Being, Satan and his demons are spirit beings, the battle we fight is not in the physical arena but in the spirit realm, and the weapons of our warfare are spiritually potent. The name of Jesus on our lips, the Word of God spoken from our mouth, or pleading the

blood of Jesus to confront the enemy—all these are not physical but spiritual, and they are “mighty in God for the pulling down of strongholds” (2 Cor. 10:3–6) to defeat the enemy.

Don’t get me wrong: prayer is everything to me. Prayer is the first thing and the ongoing thing in my heart. It is. Prayer leads to divine healing; prayer moves people to act and do things they would otherwise not do. Prayer can change the outcome of everything, because God is able to do exceedingly, abundantly above all we ask or think (Eph. 3:20). While I am asking questions and listening, I am praying. I am dependent on the Holy Spirit for discernment, what to ask for, what to look for, how to read body language, how to listen, and how best to be empathetic. I just don’t throw out prayer as the panacea to every problem, and I don’t succumb to any suggestion to “just pray for me.” Unfortunately, we have indirectly encouraged a “fix me quick” attitude and expectation with our promised “arrowhead, hot” prayers.

Becoming a Christian or growing in Christ is all about progressive change; it is changing from one level to another. Some people however, don’t really want to change. They subtly resist the demand for change or transformation that the Holy Spirit places on them. They are happy with the sympathy they get from being on everybody’s prayer list. They don’t want to accept responsibility for anything. They play the game of victim mentality. One devil or the other is always bothering them. They are professional counselees. They just want to shop around. By shopping around for prayers, they convince themselves that they are doing something about the problem. They want a quick fix to a bad habit they’ve indulged in for years. Only when we’ve ruled out the possibility of the source of the problem being behavioral, environmental, physical or disease related, emotional or grieving a loss, nutritional deficiency, stress related, habituation problem, and sinful practices should we consider it demonic. I know Satanic attacks can disguise or manifest in many ways, but that does not necessarily make every problem demonic.

8. When Babies Die, a Spouse Departs, or a Young Person Dies, or People Die in a Horrific Manner,

If We Could See the Big Picture, Their Death or Horrible Manner of Death Might *Not* Be About the Deceased but about Those Who Survive Them. How Will They React or Handle the Tragedy?

Eighth, and this point is heavy. An adult will appreciate it better, I hope. When babies die, a spouse departs, or a young person dies, or people die in a horrific manner—by gunshot, senseless, phony (or freak) accident, homicide or violent crime, and so on—in the large scale, if we could see the big picture, their death or horrible manner of death might *not* be about the deceased but about those who survive them. How will they react to their loss, and how will they handle it? Will they pass the test? Heavy? I'll try to break it down.

One thing I have not said thus far, and which you will not read from me, is to say, "It is God's will". No, it is not God's will for babies to die, and it is not God's will for anybody to be gunned down by some cowardly thieves and hoodlums. From everything you've read thus far, those things are the acts of sinful humanity. Such things happen, but they are not God's will. God could stop them, but He did not. God allowed those things—all the possible consequences of creating Adam and Eve with free will—in His world, because God is bigger than evil and its effects. For example, when you tow your car to a professional mechanic, does he look worried? No! He's not daunted by the breakdown, because he knows he can take apart every piece of the engine and put it back again together. He's an expert. (Unlike God, the mechanic may actually be happy for the breakdown of your car, because being paid for repairing the engine is the means by which he feeds his family.) My point is that God is not panicky because of Satan or evil, or because human beings have unlimited capacity to do good or evil. God is bigger; God is sovereign over all.

The only way God could have stopped or prevented evil in His world was to take away our freewill so we can no longer go against God's laws. Once human beings don't have the power or freedom to choose good or evil, we become robots. Problem solved. In that scenario, you can't even say a curse

word or steal your brother's candy. Not because you don't want to or because you love God—no, it's because you've been programmed not to be able to say a curse word or steal candies. You've been programmed to "do what I say." If that's the case, then, you are no longer a human being; you are a machine in God's gigantic empire. It would have been a perfect empire with everybody doing what God wants and no crimes or babies dying. Yet, it would be a loveless empire as well because you cannot say you love someone or something when you don't have the capacity to hate or to choose not to love that someone or something. That kind of universe would not be different from Hitler's empire! God does not want to force, condition, or program our obedience; He wants us to obey Him and do what's right out of love and reason. As you know, however, we don't always function out of love and reason.

The presence of evil cannot thwart God's plan and purpose, and our faith in God should transcend those things. God, being God, can achieve greater purposes in spite of or even because of those tragedies. Rightly or wrongly applied, we often find solace in Romans 8:28. Let me also remind you that God was not taken by surprise that evil reared up its ugly head in a perfect world He had created. God knew this would happen, and in God's omniscience and sovereignty, God had made a plan of redemption even before time or the world began (Titus 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:9; Eph. 1:4; Rev. 17:8e). God had made plans to send His Son, Jesus, even before the foundation of the world (1 Pet. 1:20; Rev. 13:8b). Nothing was an afterthought or emergency rescue plan to an omniscient God.

I want to take it one step further; it's heavy, though. Yet, I have to tell you that, in the big picture, the baby or spouse that died at an early age had completed their assignment. The rest is up to us who survive them and wrestle with the loss. How can we make our faith speak or testify under such conditions? Some have done well in turning their "mess into their message or mission, their tests into testimony" as preachers like to put it. For example, MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving) is an organization that came into being after a mother lost a child through an auto accident caused by a drunk driver. Candace Lynne "Candy" Lightner (born May 30, 1946) is the Amer-

ican organizer and founding president of Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD). On May 3, 1980, a hit-and-run drunk driver killed Lightner's thirteen-year-old daughter, Cari, at Sunset and New York Avenues in Fair Oaks, California. The sentence given to the repeat offender of driving while intoxicated (DWI) outraged Lightner who then organized Mothers Against Drunk Drivers. The name was later changed to Mothers Against Drunk Driving. The object of her organization was to raise public awareness of the serious nature of drunk driving and to promote tough legislation against the crime. In a sense, she found a way to make her daughter's death redemptive or salvific, at least for other mothers.

Chaplain Kate Braestrup, widowed with four young children, found her calling in life after the tragic death of her husband, a Maine State Police trooper, when a fully loaded box truck collided with his Maine State Police cruiser on the driver's side. You can read her story in her book *Here if You Need Me*. To honor her departed sweetheart, Kate picked up what she was not interested in, but her husband had planned on doing before his death, and her life and ministry blossomed in the process. Her husband, Drew, had planned on becoming a part-time chaplain while Kate wanted to continue as a writer. He died before he had time to fill out and submit the application to the seminary. After his death, Kate filled out the application lying on the table and applied for a place. She said when they asked her why she was in the seminary, all through her seminary training, her answer was "to fulfill Drew's dreams." There are many others, in their corners of the world, who have found their calling or mission in life after a tragedy. They found ways to transform the tragedy into a source of blessing for many. That does not justify the tragedy, but it makes it redemptive in one way or another, and it honors the life and memory of those whose loss we grieve and mourn.

In spite of the "good" that came in the aftermath of her husband's death, Chaplain Kate did not conclude with "the end justifies the means" notion—that God allowed her husband, Drew, to die in that accident so that Kate could be called into the ministry, as some immature would love to put it and some actually did put it to her. It was not God's will or God's plan for Drew

to die in the ghastly accident so that Kate might find her life's calling. In the same way that it is not God's will for anyone to rob a bank, kill the bank's security guard so he can use the millions to build thousands of churches and finance evangelical programs through which thousands of souls might be led to Christ. For a holy and righteous God who hates sin and does no evil, the end does not justify the means; the means and process have to be in tune with the moral nature and character of God. That notwithstanding, God does bring good out of our mess, tragedies, or evil doings. To Kate, death comes to all in one way or another, and Drew died on his own timetable, sad and premature as it may be to us. Kate chose her own path to make sense of her loss and honor her departed friend and lover. It was how she processed her loss and responded to it that led her to higher grounds. If she had responded with hatred and bitterness toward God, other people, herself, and life in general, the outcome would have been different. A different mind-set and response could have led her to oblivion or even insanity.

Strange as it may seem, the unnamed first child born to David and Bathsheba—the product of their adulterous relationship (2 Samuel 12:15–23)—completed his life's assignment before he died. The child was sick and lived only for seven days.

In his generation, Enoch died or was translated prematurely, at an early age (read Genesis 5, especially verses 21–24) compared to the lifespan of his contemporaries. However, nobody reads his story today and feels sorry for him.

John the Baptist was a first cousin of Jesus and His forerunner. King Herod beheaded John the Baptist while John was in prison (Matt. 14:10). Although the manner of death was graphic and brutal, we read later in Acts 13:24, 25 that “*after John [the same John the Baptist who was beheaded] had first preached, before His [Jesus'] coming, the baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. And as John was finishing his course, he said, 'Who do you think I am? I am not He. But behold, there comes One after me, the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to loose'*” (insert and emphasis mine). Did you note the historian's comment, “As John was finishing his course”? You mean John the Baptist

actually did finish his course, his assignment in life, before he died?

Jesus died at a young age of thirty-three. He died a horrific death by crucifixion. Did Jesus finish His assignment? Yes, He did. Jesus kept talking about His time or His hour was not to come yet, was near, and then, “My time” is up. Progressively, at various times and stages of His life, Jesus said,

My time has not yet come. . . . for My time has not yet fully come. . . . The hour has come that the Son of Man should be glorified. . . . Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? “Father, save me from this hour”? But for this purpose I came to this hour. . . . Father, the hour has come. Glorify Your Son that Your Son also may glorify You. . . . I have glorified You on earth. *I have finished the work which You have given Me to do. . . . But now I come to You*” (Jn. 7:6b, 8c; 12:23, 27; 17:1, 4, 13a; emphasis mine).

When everything was completed, though still on the cross, Jesus cried, “It is finished” (Jn. 19:30). He did not shout “I am finished”, because He was not. His outburst was not a cry of defeat but one of triumph. It was an everyday word used to describe a job well done—faultlessly completed. It is finished; the work is completely done and over; nothing can be added or taken away!

King Jeroboam I in the OT was one of those on whom God entrusted much but who disappointed God woefully by going into idolatry. He and his descendants would suffer for his sin, but God found a child of Jeroboam who had a good heart. This child died prematurely but was the only prince to receive a kingly funeral and burial. Why? Let the prophet Ahijah, who anointed Jeroboam king, tell you (1 Kings 14:12, 13). The prophet Ahijah told Jeroboam’s wife, the child’s mother, who had come under disguises to ask the prophet about the prognosis of the child’s sickness:

Arise therefore, go to your own house. When your feet enter the city, the child shall die. And all Israel shall mourn for him and bury him, for he is the only one of Jeroboam who shall come to the grave, because in him there is found something good toward the Lord God of Israel in the house of Jeroboam.

The young prince died so he might not see or suffer in the evil that was

coming on his family “because in him there is found something good toward the Lord God of Israel in the house of Jeroboam.”

This brings me to a passage in Isaiah 57–1, 2, which I will give you in two versions (NKJV and NLT) without any comment or commentary:

The righteous perishes, And no man takes it to heart; *Merciful men are taken away, While no one considers That the righteous is taken away from evil. He shall enter into peace;* They shall rest in their beds, Each one walking in his uprightness (NKJV, emphasis mine).

Good people pass away; the godly often die before their time. But no one seems to care or wonder why. No one seems to understand that God is protecting them from the evil to come. For those who follow godly paths will rest in peace when they die (NLT, emphasis mine).

Our times are in His hands (Ps. 31:15). God controls human existence as God’s Word affirms: “*See now that I myself am he! There is no god besides me. I put to death and I bring to life, I have wounded and I will heal, and no one can deliver out of my hand*” (Deut. 32:39; NIV; emphasis mine); “***The Lord brings death and makes alive; he brings down to the grave and raises up***” (1 Sam. 2:6 NIV; emphasis mine). These two passages are from songs: one composed by Moses and the other by Hannah, the mother of Samuel. There are high and low notes in the two songs, like the music of life. We like the high notes, but we cannot run away from the low notes.

There are many facets to the description of God that we have in these songs by Moses and Hannah. I know they are troubling for some Christians. They could be symbolic, figurative, or poetic language, because they are songs. For this reason, some may choose not to interpret them literally. There are two ways to read these passages; one is negatively and the other is positively. One way is the path of “God is NO WHERE,” and the other is “God is NOW HERE”—same letters but different meanings. One view is morbid the other is awe-inspiring. If we read with a positive outlook, the last phrase “no one can deliver out of my hand” (Deut. 32:39e) is no longer frightening but comforting. It is comforting because it reminds us of John 10:29 where Jesus says, “No one is able to snatch them out of My Father’s

hand,” and Romans 8:39 where we are assured that nothing “shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord”—same God, same hand. Whatever these scriptures mean to you or however you struggle with them, the comfort for those who belong in God’s family is in knowing that the Sovereign One who “puts to death” or “wounds” is also the One who “brings to life” and “heals.” Believe it or not, sometimes God saves and delivers through death. If He does not take the disease away from us, He may choose to take us away from the disease so we can be home with Him and rest. Either way, it is the same Sovereign God and loving Heavenly Daddy at work.

Murray, what do I want you to make out of all these? Simply this: But for God’s grace, it could be worse, that is, more babies could be dying. As I said before, we are our own devils. Hence, the New Testament persistently calls on us to repent and turn to God. Evils happen, because people do evil. People do evil, because the environment has been poorly and sinfully engineered. Who are those behind the morally depraved, poverty stricken, unsanitary engineering of the environment?—people. I used to think that people commit crime due to poverty. No, people commit crime due to greed. Rich or poor, the reason behind crime is greed. Back to your question: why do babies die? Thinking scientifically, we may find the clue in the external environment: the food, the air, the care, in the parents or grandparents. In our bio-socio-political frame of mind, we may find the clue in the internal environment, the genes, the biological and chemical factors. However, none of these may help. Ultimately, we find the answer, the comfort, or the consolation within our souls only as we open ourselves to the Holy Spirit—the Comforter from heaven (Jn. 14:26, 27; 2 Cor. 1:4, 5).

**9. Ninth and Last—A Look at Suffering from DAY 23
God’s Viewpoint: (1) God is a Compassionate and
Co-Suffering God, (2) Vulnerable Jesus/Vulnerable
God, (3) Jesus’ Parable of the Co-Existence of
Good and Evil in this World Until Judgment Day,
and (4) God Has a “Tomorrow” for His People**

Compassionate and Co-Suffering God

How does God view suffering? What’s God’s perspective when our sufferings are self-inflicted or the consequences of our sins? In the bygone generations of yesteryears, when parents finished smacking their errant kids, they turned to them and, as if that would soften the pain, say to the weeping child, “You know this hurts me more than it hurts you”. No child believed that even when he nodded positively in agreement to the parent’s words as he continued to sob. However, it could be true. The loving parents do hurt or feel the pain of spanking their kids; they hurt emotionally if not physically. It breaks the parents’ heart that his child has not learned his lessons and his action deserves such consequences, so the child can grow up with proper attitudes and skills and mature. Love disciplines for the child’s own good, in the end, though it might be painful in the immediate.

The Old Testament Israelites were a rebellious and disobedient people. The blessings of obedience and the curses or consequences of disobedience were laid out in black and white in the covenant that Jehovah God made with Israel. During the time of the judges, before they became a nation with their own kings, we read, “In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 17:6; 21:25). The people committed more evils with the resultant cycle of “sin and consequences” than can be imagined during that period of anarchy. When they cried to God for relief, God would raise up judges or leaders to help them militarily and spiritually. Why? Here is the record:

And when the Lord raised up judges for them, the Lord was with the

judge and delivered them out of the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; *for the Lord was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who oppressed them and harassed them* (Judges 2:18; emphasis mine).

Even though their problem was self-inflicted, yet “the Lord was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who oppressed them and harassed them”, and because of the compassions of God.

So they put away the foreign gods from among them and served the Lord. *And His [Jehovah-God’s] soul could no longer endure the misery of Israel.* (Judges 10:16; emphasis mine)

God did not rejoice over their sufferings, and God did not take pleasure in punishing them. Like the parents of bygone years said they felt after spanking their kids, “[God’s] soul could no longer endure the misery of Israel,” and God would be moved to act in spite of the people.

This was not a one-time or one-period event in Israel’s history. The rebellion and return to idolatry continued throughout their history. It was the reason the nation was exiled. The prophet Isaiah beautifully captured the spiritual climate in the opening sections of his prophetic writings:

²Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth! For the Lord has spoken: “I have nourished and brought up children, And they have rebelled against Me; ³The ox knows its owner And the donkey its master’s crib; But Israel does not know, My people do not consider.” ⁴Alas, sinful nation, A people laden with iniquity, A brood of evildoers, Children who are corrupters! They have forsaken the Lord, They have provoked to anger The Holy One of Israel, They have turned away backward. ⁵Why should you be stricken again? You will revolt more and more. The whole head is sick, And the whole heart faints. ⁶From the sole of the foot even to the head, There is no soundness in it, But wounds and bruises and putrefying sores; They have not been closed or bound up, Or soothed with ointment (Isa. 1:2–6).

Yet against this horrible backdrop, we read from the same prophet Isaiah, *In all their [Israel’s] affliction He [Jehovah-God] was afflicted*, and the Angel

of His Presence saved them; *In His love and in His pity He redeemed them*; and He bore them and carried them all the days of old (Isa. 63:9; emphasis mine).

Why was God afflicted with them? God wasn't happy that they rebelled and sinned. Sin could not be condoned. They had to be punished or disciplined. It was painful for God to witness such. "In all their affliction He [God] was afflicted. . . . In His love and in His pity He redeemed them." God was with them; God became a co-sufferer. God was their Compassionate Redeemer. If God will not deliver me out of my misery but chooses to stay with me in my misery and suffer with me, I can live with that. I am not alone.

It is from this backdrop of Old Testament writings that I can say, from my understanding of the Bible, that for many inmates, getting incarcerated is an act of God's love; it is another offer of grace. It is a discipline or spanking that's necessary to forestall a greater calamity and redirect them to the life God intended for them. When God whispered to them on the streets, they did not listen. When God yelled to them in the neighborhood, they blocked their ears and complained that God was "messing up their game". Whether or not they realized it, when they got hit in the hard way and got three or four years in the slammer, it was the only way God could get their attention. For many, it is way, way past second chance or third chance or the umpteenth chance; it is in the realm of "yet another chance." God has been so merciful that He keeps giving another chance after another chance. What they do with that "yet another chance" is their choice.

I remind them they still have a choice. They can remain adamant, turn away from God, whine and complain, focus on learning new tricks to survive prison rather than avoid coming back. Conversely, they can turn to God and look up into His face for God's way out. I tell them if they would look up into His face, they wouldn't see the grimaced face of an angry and mean God saying, "You got what you deserve." Rather, they would see the face of a loving Father, with tears of compassion, saying, "I wish we didn't have to do it this way, but you weren't listening to Me. I love you too much to see you in the path of self-destruction and not do anything, even taking a drastic action, if that's the only way to get your attention." Of course, many inmates will get

hit many times and still not turn away from crime and turn to God. It is their choice. A loving Father can do no more than lament and grieve.

As God's mouthpiece to the people, speaking of the reason for their affliction, the prophet Isaiah said, "*Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction*" (Isa. 48:10). Israel was ridden of its idolatrous practices on the other side of "the furnace of affliction." They could say with David, the psalmist, "*Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep Your word*" (Ps. 119:67).

The writer of Hebrews also gives us a good perspective on the Father's discipline in chapter 12. He reminds us it's all out of love: "For whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives" (v. 6).

⁵And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons: "My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, Nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; ⁶For whom the Lord loves He chastens, And scourges every son whom He receives."

⁷If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? ⁸But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons. ⁹Furthermore, we have had human fathers who corrected us, and we paid them respect. Shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live? ¹⁰For they indeed for a few days chastened us as seemed best to them, but He for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness. ¹¹Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it (Heb. 12:5–11).

Vulnerable Jesus, Vulnerable God

One reason why I keep falling in love with Jesus is His vulnerability. He wasn't made of steel; He was flesh and blood like me. The Jesus that is preached from the pulpit is a one-sided Jesus. We show more of His God-ness or deity than

His humanity from the pulpit. When we do that, we create a gap between God and us, and that's the very chasm that Jesus came to bridge. When the only thing we exalt from the pulpit is the Jesus who calms the sea by a word and winks and demons tremble, the Jesus who not only heals the sick but also raises the dead back to life. That Jesus often intimidates me. No matter how much I try, I cannot be like Him. Little wonder many in the pews have given up making the efforts to be like Jesus because they are convinced, "It will never happen."

Not that I need to hear less of the miracle worker Jesus, the Son of God—no, again and again, I need to hear more about that Jesus who is able to save to the uttermost, that Jesus who defeated death, that Jesus is able to turn water into wine and walk on water. It is just that I also, equally, need to hear of the Jesus who, after hearing of the beheading and death of His cousin, John the Baptist, withdrew into a quiet place to grieve and process the loss. I need to hear of the Jesus who crossed racial and social barriers and broke man-made religious traditions, thereby incurring the wrath of the establishment. I need to hear the Jesus who did and experienced the everyday things that come with living on planet earth, such things that I do and experience today. I need to hear of Jesus who both pulls me up to where He is so I can become a son of God as He is and who also at the same time comes to my level and walks the streets with me so I can experience Him as a human friend who eats with me and cries with me. I need a Savior who is higher than me, taller than me, deeper than me, bigger than me, but who at the same time can step into my shoes and understand where I am coming from—a broken man living in a broken world.

Happily, the Jesus I read in my Bible was both mighty and weak at the same time, because He was fully God and fully Man. He was the God-Man. The Jesus who suffered hunger and thirst, was betrayed, was misunderstood, was sad, cried with loud voice, wept openly, withdrew to a quiet place when the heat was on, felt forsaken, groaned on His knees alone in the dark, "Father, let this cup pass over me, but not My will, Your will be done," who, hanging on the cross, yelled into the darkness in the middle of the day when the Sun refused to

shine, “My God, My God, why?” That Jesus motivates and invites me. When I read those things about Him, I can almost say, “That’s me. That’s just like me. I cry too, and I withdraw when the pressure is on, and I ask why too many times.” That vulnerable Jesus gives me hope. When I remember that He was God whose account I read in passages such as in Matthew 26:37, 38; Mark 14:33, 34; and Luke 22:28, I can say that kind of God has been in my shoes.

And He [Jesus] took Peter, James, and John with Him, and *He [Jesus] began to be troubled and deeply distressed. Then He said to them, “My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death. Stay here and watch”* (Mk. 14:33, 34; emphasis mine). In the same night, Jesus turned to His disciples and, with appreciation for their support, said, “But you are those who have continued with Me *in My trials*” (Lk. 22:28; emphasis mine). A God going through trials?

As we journey to Easter in the church calendar, pastors often pay attention to the humanity and sufferings of the Christ, and that’s all. It is not just that we preach a Jesus made of steel from the pulpit; even some preachers pose as being made of steel, too. They think vulnerability is weakness, not strength. They are not as vulnerable as their Master Jesus who admitted to His disciples that He was “troubled and deeply distressed . . . sorrowful, even to death” (Mk. 14:33, 34). That kind of vulnerability is the last thing to expect from many men and women of faith today, especially those who mount the pulpit. Yet, that’s the Jesus I can truly say understands me for “He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted” (Heb. 2:18).

Jesus says, “I and My Father are one” (Jn. 10:30). Paul, the Apostle, writes, “He [Jesus] is the image of the invisible God . . . in Him all things consist. . . . In Him all the fullness should dwell” (Col. 1:15, 17, 19). Therefore, whatever we see in Jesus, we see in God, and whatever we see in God, we see in Jesus. When Jesus heals, that’s God healing; when Jesus feeds the multitude, that’s God feeding the multitude; and when Jesus weeps, that’s God weeping. In at least three places, Luke’s pen revealed the heart of Jesus over Israel’s (or Jerusalem’s) stubbornness. Those places, to me, reveal not only Jesus’ feelings but also God’s broken heart over unrepentant sinners. Jesus was heartbroken as He looked at the city and lamented,

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were not willing! (Lk. 13:34).

That was God lamenting. That was God's heart exposed.

In another instance, we read, "*Now as He drew near, He saw the city **and wept over it**, saying, 'If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things that make for your peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes'*" (Lk. 19:41, 42; emphasis mine). That was God weeping and lamenting. The word *wept* in Greek means more than shedding tears. It suggests a lamentation, a wailing, the sob and the cry of a soul in agony.

As Jesus was being led to the cross, many women were weeping and wailing for Him. Jesus turned to them and said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for Me, but weep for yourselves and for your children" (Lk. 23:28). Knowing that in only about forty years the Romans would destroy Jerusalem and the Temple, Jesus told them not to weep for Him but rather to weep for themselves. An angry, mean God wouldn't say that. When God offers grace and His grace is shunned, God grieves and laments. The vulnerable and compassionate God even weeps at such instances. Without love as the essence of His nature, an Almighty God would be worse than a despotic tyrant. With love as His DNA, the mighty Almighty becomes a compassionate God. *Compassion* comes from two Latin words meaning *to suffer with* or *to suffer together*. What a God! A Co-Suffering God! What a Friend I have in Jesus! This God inspires me.

Jesus' Parable of the Co-Existence of Good and Evil in This World Until Judgment Day

What did Jesus say about the presence of evil in this world created by a good and loving God? While it may appear as if Jesus did not directly confront the presence of evil in the world head-on, He did in some of His parables; especially the parable of the Wheat and Weeds told in Matthew 13:24-30 and explained in Matthew 13:36-43. The Parable of the Wheat & Weeds teaches us that God does have a plan for this world, and He is working to accomplish

it. However, it is unfolding over time and that means there's some waiting to do, something we find difficult. Jesus is teaching us patience – the patience of a God who chooses to delay His judgment.

In order to understand or correctly interpret a Bible passage we should always pay attention to the **crowd** the text was originally addressed to, the **context** of the situation and the **culture** of the first hearer or readers of the message of God. If we fail to do this, we will inadvertently superimpose a 21st century culture and ways of perceiving on a different culture and era. At the beginning of Matthew chapter 13, Jesus was addressing the parables to a crowd of beach goers. I quote from the Message Bible:

“At about the same time Jesus left the house and sat on the beach. In no time at all a crowd gathered along the shoreline, forcing Him to get into a boat. Using the boat as a pulpit, He addressed His congregation, telling stories...” (verses 1-3a; MSG).

To the Crowd of Beach Goers: The Parable of Wheat and Weeds

²⁴Jesus told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. ²⁵But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. ²⁶When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.

²⁷“The owner’s servants came to him and said, ‘Sir, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?’

²⁸“‘An enemy did this,’ he replied.

“The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’

²⁹“‘No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. ³⁰**Let both grow together until the harvest.** At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn” (Matt. 13:24-30; NIV; emphasis mine).

When we get to verse 36, the crowd changed. Now, Jesus was not speaking to everybody, every Dick and Harry on the beach. He was explaining to

His disciples who had asked for clarification. Here, Jesus was no longer by the beach or by the lake or by the Sea (however your Bible version puts it). Jesus was now in the house, with a little crowd of possibly not more than the 12 disciples. We can safely assume that the rest of chapter 13, from verse 36 was addressed to an intimate crowd of His disciples. So, the explanation of the parable of Wheat and Weeds, was not for public ears or public consumption, but to His disciples.

“Jesus dismissed the congregation and went into the house. His disciples came in and said, ‘Explain to us that story of the thistles in the field.’” (v. 36; The Message Bible)

To the Core of His Disciples: The Explanation of the Parable

³⁶Then he left the crowd and went into the house. His disciples came to him and said, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field.”

³⁷ He answered, **“The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. ³⁸The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the people of the kingdom. The weeds are the people of the evil one, ³⁹and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels.**

⁴⁰ “As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. ⁴¹The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. ⁴²They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears, let them hear (Matt. 13:36-43; NIV; emphasis mine).

When Jesus opened the curtain of history and talked about the final harvest at the end of time, the separation of the just and unjust, the co-existence of good and evil, the judgment to come, the righteous in heaven with God, and the unrighteous burning in hell fire, all this was to an inner circle of His 12 disciples.

Jesus explains the parable: the field is the world; Jesus/God is the One who sowed the good seed; the good seeds are the children of the Kingdom of God; the enemy who sowed the weed is the devil (Satan); the weeds are those under the bondage and deception of Satan and doing Satan's work; the harvest is the end of time; the harvesters are the angels of God. The wheat and weed share the same environment and are too intricately identical that it would be hard to separate one from the other.

In the light of our consideration of what Jesus taught on the problem of evil in the world through the filter of this parable, I'd like to distill it in question and answer format; see if you like it.

Q: God is good and God created a good world/field and planted good seed of the Kingdom. Why is there evil in the world?

A: An enemy has done this. "While everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away."

Q: Was God blindsided? I mean couldn't God in His omniscience have foreseen it and put a 24/7 guard of angels to watch and prevent the enemy from invading His field to plant bad seeds and pollute His world?

A: You might as well have asked: Knowing the kind of person Adolf Hitler would grow up to be, couldn't a good God have aborted him while in the womb or made sure he died of a childhood disease? God does not need a 24/7 guard, because God could have put the enemy on a short leash. That would be using brute force, and that's not how God operates His Kingdom. God's Kingdom works through love, reason, justice, freedom and God extends those also—love, reason, justice, and freedom—to God's enemy as well, hard as it may seem. Remember; God sends the rain on the just and unjust, His sun shines on the good and evil.

Q: Wow! We can do something then; just say the word. We can uproot the weed and clean up the mess, do we have Your word?

A: Let them grow together. It's too ingrained; it's like an inoperable cancer for which chemo will also do more harm to healthy cells. Evil has an end; it's just not now. "Let both grow together until the harvest." Good wins in the end. For now, evil, the weed, is so intertwined that you'll do more harm and

destroy the good wheat along with the weed. The bad seed of the enemy is growing in all areas: homes, families, schools, businesses, politics, military, churches, healthcare, etc. The mingling of good and evil in the visible kingdom will continue until the end of time. At that time of harvest, to guarantee no human errors, the keen eyes of angels will do the ultimate separation of the two.

Q: Do you realize that the sole purpose of weeds is to smother the good seed, to deprive the wheat of nutrients, block out sunlight, to pollute and spoil or even prevent any harvest?

A: You just answered your own question of why good people suffer, why bad things happen to the innocent and why there's persecution and injustice. It's kingdom versus kingdom, evil versus good. As the weeds attack, smother and oppose the good seeds on the farm, so also it plays out in real world that "the people of the evil one" attack, resist, suppress and oppress "the people of the kingdom." That's the mission of the enemy: to frustrate, deprive, pollute, stifle, corrupt, and if possible, terminate the good seed.

Q: So, what's the way out? What's God doing now? What can anyone do now to curb the spread of this dangerous weed without destroying the wheat?

A: Redemption is going on. You also were once in the enemy's camp before God "rescued [you] from the dominion of darkness and brought [you] into the kingdom of the Son he loves" (Col. 1:13; see also Eph. 2:1-8; 2 Cor. 4:3, 4). You were once the weed, the pollutant, in the enemy's camp and doing the enemy's service, but God's mercy reached and redeemed you. God is depleting the kingdom of Satan and bringing men and women to Christ's freedom. That's what you should be engaged in. It's a gradual process. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt. 28:18-20). Your assignment is not to be a weed-killer but to be intentional in your prayer and strategic in your efforts that by the divine miracle of conversion the weeds—"the people of the evil one" might be

transformed into good seeds—“the people of the kingdom.” “[Paul] planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase. Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor” (1 Cor. 3:6-8).

Q: You’ve got to do something fast, because, God, it doesn’t look like You’re winning. Please look around; can’t You see how everything is messed up?

A: “But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:8, 9). The kingdom of God “is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his garden. It grew and became a tree, and the birds perched in its branches” (Lk. 13:19).

Q: Is that supposed to make me happy? I don’t seem to like Your style.

A: “‘For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways,’ says the Lord. ‘For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways, And My thoughts than your thoughts...’ Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men... For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, ‘He catches the wise in their own craftiness’ ... 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!” (Isa. 55:8, 9; 1 Cor. 1:25; 3:19; Rom. 11:33).

“Love is patient, love is kind. [Love] does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. [Love] does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. [Love] always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails... love comes from God... because God is love” (1 Cor. 13:4-8a; 1 Jn. 4:7, 8).

There's a Tomorrow for God's People

Never forget that. There's a tomorrow for the people of faith. As people of God, we must keep our eyes and anchor our faith on God's tomorrow as Jeremiah 29:11 affirms. I am not talking about the tomorrow that comes twenty-four hours from now. I mean the tomorrow that makes it clear to us that today has to be what it is—the tomorrow that brings a stamp of approval on today's pain. I am talking of God's tomorrow that, just thinking about it, makes us look beyond the present discomfort and lifts our faces heavenward even as we walk through the debris of today. The events of today make sense only in God's tomorrow.

Jeremiah 29:11 is part of a letter that God, through Jeremiah, sent to an exilic people. The message was not sent to a people having a good time; it wasn't addressed to an obedient nation worshiping God in the Temple in their homeland in Jerusalem. Jeremiah 29:11 was a word meant for discouraged, captives of war, and homesick people. They were in exile, full of questions. Nostalgic about how things used to be. They were unsure how long the exile would last and what to do during the time away from homeland. They had no Temple, no priesthood, no sacrifices and offerings as before. They were not sure if they would ever return to Jerusalem, their homeland. Should they blend in into the new culture? Should they rebel against everything in the new environment? Should they cooperate with their captors and work for their government? "What future awaits us in this place? Where's the road forward? What do we do? Is it over for us, for our nation, and for our Temple? Where is God in this?" These were their unspoken questions in their confusion. God moved Jeremiah to pen this Word to them,

For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, *to give you a future and a hope* (Jer. 29:11; emphasis mine).

Today may be a tragedy or your own exile, but it is not an accident in God's vision. When we enter God's tomorrow and look back on today, then we are able to appreciate that, indeed, today was designed the way it was for us to be able to arrive at God's tomorrow. We will be able to thank God for

and appreciate the struggles of today in the light of tomorrow. I mean the tomorrow that speaks comfort into our heart, brings hope into our spirit, and puts a smile on our face even as we flashback and remember the uncontrollable sobs of today. What's God's tomorrow? That's when faith becomes sight. That's when promises are fulfilled and become realities. That's when all tears are wiped away and when there will be no more weeping or death or heart-break. God's tomorrow is when the wicked cease to be and the tormentors are decapitated. That's when "We shall overcome" becomes "We have overcome." For me, that's when I meet Olawanle again, not as my spouse but as my eternal sister and confidante. In God's tomorrow, we no longer "see in a mirror, dimly," and we no longer "know in part," but we will see "face-to-face." We "shall know just as [we] also [are] known" (1 Cor. 13:12).

Faith can sing today, because God is in charge of tomorrow. Today is God's seed in preparation for tomorrow. If today were not what it is, tomorrow wouldn't be what God ordained it to be. The pains and depravations of today are the seeds in the soils of tomorrow, and the tears of today are the waters that nourish the seeds to germinate, grow, and bring a harvest for tomorrow. It was when Joseph, the Jewish slave turned into prime minister of Egypt, got into his tomorrow and looked back at the ill treatment, injustices, conspiracies, near-death experiences, slavery, imprisonment, and all that he suffered from his brothers that he knew that it had to be that way. That was when he could say to his brothers, *"But as for you [Reuben, Simeon, Judah, Issachar, Dan, and the rest of you], you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good"* (Gen. 50:20; insert mine).

When Job, in the Old Testament, got into his tomorrow, we read in Job 42:10, *"And the Lord restored Job's losses when he prayed for his friends. Indeed the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before"* (emphasis mine). When, from this vantage point, Job looked back, then he knew that his yesteryears had to be what they were. He said of God from his experience, *"I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You. Therefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes"* (Job 42:5, 6). The Apostle Paul puts it this way, *"But as it is written: 'Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, Nor have*

entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him” (1 Cor. 2:9). In few words, Paul was saying tomorrow, for God’s people, is so much better than today. It is beyond anyone’s imagination and wildest dreams.

In God’s tomorrow, when we have a flashback on today, with the benefit of hindsight, we will be able to say with David, the psalmist, “Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep Your word” (Ps. 119:67). Re-echo with David, “It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes” (Ps. 119:71). The Apostle Paul writes in Ephesians 5:20, “*Giving thanks always FOR ALL THINGS to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ*” (emphasis mine). I can understand, giving thanks in everything (1 Thess. 5:18), but give thanks *for* all things? How do I give thanks that my spouse died of cancer? The answer is in God’s tomorrow, with the benefit of hindsight. The refrain of a church hymn puts it this way, “By and by, when the morning comes [that’s the tomorrow I talk about], when the saints of God are gathered home, we’ll tell the story how we’ve overcome, for we’ll understand it better by and by.” Yes, in God’s tomorrow, “we will understand it better by and by.”

Megachurch pastor Joel Osteen of Lakewood Church, Houston, Texas, in a Night of Hope meeting in Yankee Stadium in New York, shared the story of his flowerbeds and flower gardens in his house. For the flowers, he bought a fertilizer that has manure as its main ingredient. The downside is that manure stinks badly. After applying the fertilizer, everywhere stinks and smells horribly. When the children come home, they cover their noses in discomfort and ask, “What happened? There’s a foul smell everywhere. Something stinks so badly.” It’s the fertilizer. The whole family grudgingly bares the discomfort for few days, and then the smell is over. In a few weeks, the flowers bloom, their scent changes the atmosphere, their floral presence beautifies everything, and the whole environment is transformed. Everybody is happy and proud to invite neighbors to the garden. The mood around the house seems to change as the flowers brighten the surroundings. Joel concludes that the stinky, foul odor of the manure was the seed in the soil that produced the beautiful future

of the flowers. In like manner, the stinky, colorless and foul-odor-producing events in our lives could actually be the manure, in God's providence, that will make us bloom, transform our lives, and show forth the best that is buried or lying dormant in us.

In God's tomorrow, with the benefit of hindsight, we will sing joyfully the lyrics of Andrea Crouch's "Through It all," especially the third verse. Here is the third verse and the chorus:

I thank God for the mountains, And I thank Him for the valleys,
I thank Him for the storms He brought me through.
For if I'd never had a problem, I wouldn't know God could solve them,
I'd never know what faith in God could do.

Chorus:

And I say, Through it all, through it all,
I've learned to trust in Jesus, I've learned to trust in God.
Through it all, through it all, I've learned to depend upon His Word.

Murray, let me conclude by encouraging you to be happy that you have the capacity to be agitated and to ask such questions: "Why do babies die?" I like people who think deeply, and I appreciate those who honestly wrestle with doubt. It is those who question their faith and experience bouts of doubt who eventually recover a faith that's passed all scrutiny and tests and can withstand any storm. Let me also say be happy that you have the capacity to feel such pain. Don't waste that pain or anger. Go out and do something—anything to help in any way. Visit someone who is grieving the loss of a baby and offer to help with washing, cleaning, or running errands. If you are the one who is hurting, because you've lost a sibling—a little angel in your family is no more—I hope you find something in all these ramblings that has ministered some comfort to you. Believe me, I didn't intend the letter to be this long.

By the way, did you notice that I have mentioned the OT patriarch Job and his classic book on human suffering and all that Job suffered in this

discussion only in passing—just in the last few paragraphs? It is deliberate. That's why I am giving it to you as your assignment to read the book of Job in the Bible. Job's children died, too. In one single day, seven sons and three daughters of Job were buried under the rubble of a building when it collapsed and fell on them (Job 1:18, 19). It was a freak accident. I guarantee you that nobody can answer that question, "Why do babies die?" better than the patriarch Job. Why did Job's children die? Please read his book to find out not only why or when his children die but also how Job's story ended. I give you a hint:

Indeed we count them blessed who endure. You have heard of the perseverance of Job and seen the end intended by the Lord—that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful (Jam. 5:11).

10. Here Is My Story. It Comes from the Chinese Tradition

A poor Chinese farmer had one horse and one son. One day his horse broke out of the stall and escaped to the hills. The neighbors came around in the evening to commiserate with him. They said, "Your only horse is gone. This is bad luck." The old Chinese man said, "How do you know it is bad luck? Don't judge things by their appearance. There may be more to it than you know or see." Sure enough, at sundown the following day, the horse found its way back to the stall during its mealtime, leading twelve stallions with him from the jungle. On seeing thirteen horses in the stall, the farmer's son acted quickly and locked the gate on them. As usual, the neighbors came around in the evening when they witnessed the good turnaround. They said, "Oh, fate has smiled on you. This morning you had no horse, but now you have thirteen stallions. What good luck is yours!" The wise Chinese farmer answered, "How do you know it is good luck? Don't be hasty to pass judgment. There may be more to it than you know."

Few days later, as the farmer's son was trying to break in one of the wild stallions, he was thrown off and broke his leg. Again, the neighbors came in the night to chat. They said, "Just when we thought everything was going on well for you, your son broke his leg. Is it a curse or just plain bad luck?" The

sage answered them in his usual way, “How do you know it is bad luck or a curse? Don’t act as if you were divine. You are not omniscient. You don’t know all the ramifications, and there may be more to it than you know.”

Some days later, a Chinese warlord came through the farmer’s village and conscripted every able-bodied young man at home or on the farm. None of those young men carried off to war ever returned to the village. It was the last time their parents and brides-to-be saw them. However, the farmer’s young man was spared, because he had a broken leg. From then on, the neighbors came around every evening and gathered around the man’s fireplace, each sipping his cup of tea in deep thoughts and no one passing any judgment on what’s happened or happening in another person’s life or farm.

We are not omniscient. We don’t know the end from the beginning. We don’t know all that “have been,” “will be,” “might have been,” and “might be but won’t be.” We have no clue to all the “but” factors in life. Like “The farmer’s only son would also have been conscripted by the warlord along with other young men, *but* a broken leg made him unfit for the warfront.” “He was predicted to win the two hundred meter race, *but* he broke his ankles during the heat.” “He wasn’t going to win any medals, *but* the runner who beat him was disqualified.” “He was the favored candidate to win the election, *but* a bad press and false rumors weakened his credibility, and he lost the race before the truth came out.” You get the point.

No one can tell what good luck is and what bad luck is. Therefore, be sympathetic and exercise restraint. Don’t be a faultfinder. Don’t be too hasty in condemning others, passing judgment, or blaming them especially when they are experiencing suffering or going through a tragedy. You really don’t know what’s going on behind the curtain, what may come out of the hardship, or how the tragedy may eventually turn out or play itself out. “Who claims to know knows not” (ancient saying).

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION AND MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS

DAY 24

1. How come that the same God who had said of His creation, “It is very good” (Gen. 1:31) would in a short period of time say of the same world, “I regret” (Gen. 6:6). What happened in the intervening period? Discuss.
2. Explicitly, without doubt, it would have been a perfect but mechanical world had God created us with no power of choice, volition, or free will. Would you like it that way? Explain your answer.
3. Some TV televangelists say the first thing they would do in heaven is kick Adam in the groin for eating the forbidden fruit and throwing the human race into a mess. I believe it comes from self-righteousness and not knowing or not being true to their hearts, because they would have done exactly the same thing Adam did. It is my humble submission that had they been in Adam’s shoes, they wouldn’t have done any better or differently. Do you take sides with them or with me? Explain.
4. Uncle Mike disagrees with some evangelical preachers who insinuated that the tragedy of September 11, 2001, or 9/11 happened to New York City as a direct punishment from God for the crimes of the city, especially the sins of abortion and homosexuality? Did Uncle Mike substantiate his point sufficiently to convince you? Yes or no? Explain.
5. Genesis 1:26, 27/Genesis 2:7, read in part, “Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness . . .’ So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him. . . . 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.” Commenting on our humanity and spirituality, Dr. Dyer says, “Who I am is not a human being here having a spiritual experience; it is the reverse. Who I am is a spiritual being having a human experience. There’s an infinite part of me. There’s a part of

me that was never born and a part of me that never dies. I am a part of the Infinity. . . . Who we really are is where we came from. Where we came from is Eternal, Infinite, Abundant, Kind, and Unlimited. Our essence is where we came from; we are a piece of the Divine.” Explain (i) why you agree or disagree with Uncle Mike when he says that possibly the best commentary on Genesis account of our creation is this statement made by Dr. Dwayne Dyer and (ii) why it is helpful, and not arrogant, to understand “our essence . . . as a piece of the Divine,” as Dr. Dyer puts it.

6. How do you understand the fourth point, the fact that we reap more than we sow—even in or through generations yet unborn? Explain.
7. How do we handle any negative consequences, or the long hand of justice, of a past generation? Read Exodus 34:5–7 or Psalm 103:1–14.
8. If in reality believers and unbelievers alike experience suffering, pain, tragedy, divorce, bereavement, cancer, etc., and “it’s just life” as Bishop T. D. Jakes puts it, or it’s just a choice between being “disappointed with God” or without God as Philip Yancey puts it, or “the race is not to the swift, Nor the battle to the strong. . . . But time and chance happen to them all” as King Solomon put it, what happens to those wonderful promises of protection, favor, and healing we have in the Bible for people of faith, such as Exodus 15:26; 1 Chronicles 16:22; Psalm 34:19; Psalm 91; Psalm 103:1–5; Psalm 105:15; Psalm 121; Psalm 147:3; and 3 John 2? Have these promises become obsolete? Don’t we have some benefits or advantages as children of God who believe the Bible? Explain.
9. Why is it a good habit to search our lives and our hearts or examine our ways when unexplainable tragedies befall us? (Read Psalm 66:18; 139:1, 2, 23, 24.)
10. Why does Uncle Mike say his fifth point is “heavy” and can only be appreciated by an adult? He asks rhetorically, “What if the tragedies and losses that come our way are not about the deceased or lost jobs

or lost property but are more about our reaction or response to the loss? What if the bereavement or losses are about how we pass the test of faith, like in Job's case? (Evidently, neither God nor Satan needed or made use of any of the things Job lost; the "bet" or dialogue in the heavenly realms was about passing the test.) How do you understand the author on this point? What point is he making or attempting to make?

11. Why did Uncle Mike not subscribe to the idea of "anything that happens to us is from God," or fatalism – "what will be will be—we are just like pawns on the cosmic chessboard," and yet Uncle Mike affirms that God is sovereign? How can God be sovereign and not be responsible for some events under His watch in His Kingdom? Isn't that one of the inconsistencies skeptics charge us for? They say God—the Smart Guy—takes credit for the good things but He's not responsible for the bad ones? Is this one of the smart things we say in defense of God? Do religious people have to "make God look good" when in essence He might not be? The buck stops on someone's desk, doesn't it? On whose desk? Share your reaction and comments. From what you've read in this chapter, how do you reconcile the presence of evil in a world created and governed by a loving God? Is God completely off the hook?
12. What is the purpose of the story from the Chinese tradition? What spiritual truth does it serve to illustrate? Do you know another story that teaches similar truth? If you do, please share the story with the group.
13. What kind of a picture of God do we see when we look at suffering from God's angle? Does this make God a compassionate but powerless God as Rabbi Harold S. Kushner does in his best-selling book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*? Is this the choice we are left with—to reconcile the presence of evil in the world to our belief in a good and compassionate God? Explain.
14. Virtues exercise: (1) What virtue did the sage in the story possess?

- How did the virtue manifest in his life? (2) What virtues did the villagers lack at the beginning of the story? How did they show its lack in their reactions? (3) What virtues did the villagers imbibe and display in the end? (4) What virtues helped Chaplain Kate turn her tragedy into triumph? How did the virtue manifest in her life?
15. Don't forget my homework assignment to read the book of Job in the Old Testament.
 16. The author writes, "Today may be a tragedy or your own exile, but it is not an accident in God's vision. When we enter God's tomorrow and look back on today, then we are able to appreciate that indeed, today was designed the way it was for us to be able to arrive at God's tomorrow." How does that resonate with you or with your story right now?
 17. I have known Christians who believe—and even share the story in church—that certain problems they have are the results of God's discipline for one kind of offense or disobedience on their part. I happen not to share that view. I know God disciplines His errant child, but I just find it hard to link or correlate a particular problem to a specific disobedience. Help me out, please. How do I find a balance?
 18. When I said every problem is not demonic in nature (point number 7), did I make myself clear or was my view an American way of looking at reality? Was I too much in my head that I might have lessened or even demystified satanic attacks and the supernatural angle to human problems? Explain your answer.
 19. Under the seventh point, which is that every problem is not demonic in nature, Uncle Mike raises twelve points. Which of the twelve is hard for you to swallow? Which is an eye-opener, or which provides a breath of fresh air on what you are dealing with?
 20. I know that I touched some hot buttons with the piece on generational curse, which is a favorite theme of those in deliverance ministry. The Apostle Paul says of some "whose mouths must be

stopped” (Titus 1:11a; read verses 10–12).

- a. What’s your frank reaction to that portion? (It’s my insider’s account.)
- b. Did I go to the other extreme? Was I unnecessarily too critical? Discuss.
- c. Share your honest story with the group if you have ever gone forward for deliverance or for generational curses to be broken off you.

3-2-1 End-of-Chapter Reviews

1. Name three things (or three lessons) you have learned, or been reminded of, in this chapter.

2. Name two ways you can apply the lessons to your life to make it worth your while.

3. Highlight one motivational/inspirational quote—Bible verse, sentence, or phrase—that’s especially meaningful for you and copy this in your notebook/journal.

Pause 'n' Pray

If I turn 3-2-1 End of Chapter Review into prayer, an honest prayer from my heart to God may go like this: “Dear Father God . . .

»

(Write out or say your prayer using the first-person sentences.)

Pray for One Another (James 5:16)

If you are in a group, turn to a friend and ask Roger Palms’s questions: “How can I pray for you to be the obedient man or woman God wants you to be? What are the blocks that need to be eliminated, and what are the changes that need to be made?”

Reviewing Uncle Mike’s Letter

A. On a scale of 1 to 5 (1 stands for least satisfactory and 5 for completely satisfactory), circle a number that corresponds to the degree to which the Uncle Mike’s letter has helped to answer your questions on why babies die.

1 2 3 4 5

Theme: Theodicy—

B. My bullet points or “NOTE TO SELF” from this letter are:

C. Although the letter makes sense, I still have the following questions on why babies die yet unanswered:

“It Happened, Because It Had to Happen.”

Revisiting Theodicy from the Pulpit in Prison

Fast forward to 2021, post pandemic, so we thought, nationwide. In February, we returned to a modified congregational worship in the prison. My post-pandemic sermon series was “Preaching Through the First Chapters of the Bible,” just because it was something I’d always wanted to do. I had started with Psalm 1. The following Sunday was chapter 1 of Proverbs, then chapter 1 of Ecclesiastes, and so on. As I was preparing to preach on Jeremiah chapter 1 and Lamentations chapter 1, I felt I would need to revisit theodicy, or why evil and bad things happen in a world governed by a loving Intelligence. If you read through OT books of Jeremiah and Lamentations—or listened to the audio versions of the books, which was what I did—within a short period of time, I wouldn’t be surprised if you felt some heaviness in your spirit. I felt that way. I was glad that I wasn’t in Jeremiah’s shoes. I had written “Why Do Babies Die?” in response to the death of my late wife.

I am a pastor and sometimes double as the therapist to my prison congregation. After preaching on the first chapter of Lamentation, I couldn’t leave my flock hanging. I have come a long way in sermon preparation and preaching. Whenever I preach on a Biblical text today, I let four things guide me: (1) the text in its historical context, what it meant and how it spoke to the first audience, how it speaks to the present culture, and the 21st century application of its timeless message, (2) the direction the Holy Spirit is leading me as I brood over the text, which is why I am less of a “commentary preacher”

than I was 20-30 years ago, though I still read one or two commentaries on the text, (3) the condition of my flock, seeking what would be a “thus says the Lord” from the text to them, and (4) the elephant in the room; although there usually isn’t any in the room all the time, when there is one, it’s best to prayerfully and empathetically talk about it openly than ignore something that’s on everybody’s mind. The book of Lamentation is heavy, and I wanted to do justice to it, especially, as it followed my message on Jeremiah chapter 1. The book is not all doom and gloom and I focused on hope and its salvific and redemptive tone. Yet, I had to follow it up with a miniseries based essentially on the two passages in John chapter 9 and Luke chapter 13. The theme for my messages, which I shared with the inmates in a therapeutic fashion, in May 2021, was: “It Happened Because It Had to Happen.”

Part 1

How Do You Grieve the losses you’ve experienced in life?

Repeat after me, **“It Happened, Because It Had to Happen; It’s Time to Move On.”** It is not necessary to deny that it happened, or find justifications, or reasons for its occurrence. Simply: It happened because it had to happen. Cancers happen. Diabetes happens. Divorce happens. Earthquakes, tornadoes, hurricanes, flooding, and tsunamis happen. Rape happens. Blatant injustice happens. Senseless killings happen. This is not about logic or reason; that’s out of the way. The next chapter is salvaging what’s left and moving on in a different and more positive direction.

Nothing should be strange or unheard of anymore when we acknowledge that we live in a sick world inhabited by knuckleheads, governed by knuckleheads who have sold their souls to the devil in exchange for wealth and fame. When I consider the problems in countries around the world, the political upheavals, troubled war zones that have no foreseeable ending in sight, civil wars against enemies that’s hard to define, genocides, famine, abject poverty, the apathy, conspiracy theories and blatant lies of the government and leaders of many nations towards the devastation of Covid-19 that’s happening in

“It Happened, Because It Had to Happen.”

broad daylight in their country, displaced families and communities living in shelters and refugee camps for many years, narcissistic tyrants, and despotic dictators who slaughter or look the other way at the slaughtering of their countrymen, and I feel like pulling out my hair, I am able to regain a measure of sanity when I remember that it's a world filled with knuckleheads who do what knuckleheads do. The surprise—which is indicative of God's mercy—is that things are not worse than they are presently. I then ask myself if we are living in the *“perilous times”* of the *“last days”* of which the apostle Paul said things would degenerate *“from worse to worse”* (2 Tim. 3:1, 13), or *“from bad to worse”* (NIV). Paul had prophetically declared, *“But EVIL MEN and IMPOSTORS will GROW WORSE AND WORSE, DECEIVING AND BEING DECEIVED”* (2 Tim. 3:13; uppercase mine). If these are not the last days, God help me, I don't want to live in the last days, and I can only pray for the generation that will go through anything worse than presently. Things happened because they had to happen. Why? Because they are the kind of things that happen in a misaligned world filled with knuckleheads; they are the kind of horrid things that knuckleheads do. They are the kind of nasty stories that your knucklehead cousin peddles. I just want to broach it today; I will develop the concept further in one or two Sundays.

Readings: Lamentations 1 (vv. 1 to 12) and Matthew 14:1-16 (vv. 10-16).

Introduction

The book of Lamentation, as the name suggests, is a lament by prophet Jeremiah, appropriately dubbed, the weeping prophet. It is a lament over the destruction, devastation of Jerusalem and the Temple and deportation of the Judean people into exile. This was what Jeremiah spent his entire life, first, warning against, and then, advocating no resistance but submission to the invading army because the judgment was eventually coming to pass. Captivity was inevitable. Jeremiah saw it as redemptive and advocated submission to the invading army rather than fight against it. For this posture, his own people

regarded him as a traitor, as a defector working for the Babylonians because he was discouraging an armed struggle. To Jeremiah, resistance would be a losing battle and might prevent the Babylonians from showing mercy. This was God's tough love in display, disciplinary, yet, it was a necessary action; it was a redeeming, loving, plan of God (see Jeremiah 29:11).

Many of you consider your incarceration as your own exile, time away from home, and your own Babylonian captivity. I want to examine this chapter in that light. Like the Judean people, you have lost so many things, including your youth, dignity, and relationships. You've been detached from the familiar, from friends and family. You miss the neighborhood of your childhood or business. How do you grieve and lament all these? As you look in the mirror and see the shell of your old life, how do you grieve and readjust your mind to your new reality? How do you grieve and hope at the same time, or lament with unbridled optimism and possibilities? Without proper grieving the wounds will never heal. Happily, the ring tone in lamentation, and in this book, is HOPE. We grieve, we lament, because we hope for restoration. We hope because God is merciful and faithful; we hope because God's essence is unconditional LOVE. We hope because God is a Father who desires the best for His children, pities and forgives His children. We lament in hope because the hand that spans us, no matter how harsh it feels, that hand is also the same loving hand that was pierced and nailed to the cross for our sake. It is the same hands that are outstretched wide open today, beckoning us, "*Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest,*" (Matt. 11:28).

“It Happened, Because It Had to Happen.”

[I] Strangely, Human Creative Juices are often Released during Intense Sufferings and Pressure

Lamentation is classical Hebrew poetry, acrostic poetry. The chapters 1, 2 and 4 have 22 verses, each beginning with a corresponding 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Even chapter 3 with 66 verses is divisible into three units of 22 verses each. The first word of each verse begins with a different letter in order through the Hebrew alphabet. Chapter 3 does the same thing in blocks of three verses, for a total of 66. Although chapter 5 has 22 verses, no acrostic is present. To this day, Jews use Lamentations in their religious calendar to mourn the destruction of Jerusalem.

I wondered how a brokenhearted man such as Jeremiah could have the presence of mind to compose such heavy dirge, and elegy amid the ruins and his perplexity. Then I remember that suffering, agony, and pain can make you a life philosopher or poet. Many achievers, scientists, inventors, and authors whose work and life have impacted the world did not have a problem or trouble-free life. They achieved and contributed to the world, not because of good health, fortunes, inheritance, support, and resources, but in spite of all their handicaps and limitations. They transcended their condition in a way that could make them earn the title of “saints among us.”

Think of all our rappers, the renowned singers, and especially black rappers. Their work is classical poetry, home to the ghettos and high-rise projects but their works are art in its most pristine forms. Yet, I do not think that any of these men and women was born with silver spoon in their mouths. Instead they grew up with abuse, fear, and desperate skills for survival. Poverty and deprivation turned them into poets. So, I am not surprised that Jeremiah penned these laments in pure Hebrew poetry. Surprisingly, human beings grow and blossom in hard times than we do at trouble-free seasons. We develop character and exhibit virtues during suffering than in prosperity. My prayer is that you may use this period of your captivity to grow, mature, expand your thinking, and reconnect to your true self.

[II] Famous Black Rappers You Might Know Who Turned Their Lemons into Lemonades

I googled black rappers, and I picked the few whose names (or code names) I could pronounce. I probably know one or two names; you might know more.

1. Lil Wayne
2. Tupac Shakur
3. Kanye West
4. Drake
5. Snoop Dogg
6. Travis Scott
7. DaBaby
8. Jay Z
9. Lil Uzi Vert
10. 50 Cents
11. Nipsey Hussle
12. Ice Cube

Going by the sound of their names, nicknames, trade, professional or brand names, you can tell that they didn't come from the gated and exclusive zip codes. Suffering gave voice to their skill. They tapped into their pain and turned their lemon into lemonade—and marketed it for gains.

[III] Book Titles in the Hebrew Bible/Torah

Most books in the Old Testament, if not named after the author, usually take their Hebrew names from the first word or phrase in the book. The titles in our English Bibles come from derivations in the Greek Septuagint (which is Greek translation of the OT) or the Latin Vulgate. The title of the book of Genesis in Hebrew Bible/Torah is the first three words, “In the Beginning.” And it makes sense. It sets the tone for what you are about to read, that this is a book of beginnings. Exodus, whose theme is the exiting of Israel from

Egypt, has as its Hebrew title, “Now these are the names of.” “The names,” that is, people, which implies that the book is about the history/stories of some people, of being born and dying, of migration, slavery, and conquest. To quote from Exodus in the Hebrews’ bible, I will say, “Let’s turn to the book of ‘Now, the names of,’” because that’s the title in the Hebrew bible.

Leviticus, where God instructed them about worship and holiness and sacrifices, goes by the first phrase, “Now He [the Lord] called,” in the Hebrew text. God called and instructed Moses. The book of Numbers, which is the book of wandering, has the Hebrew title, “In the desert.” Deuteronomy which is like a repetition or recounting of the law and the nation’s history, a long valedictory speech by Moses, has the Hebrew title, “These are the words of,” of course, words of Moses. Guess what the Hebrew title of Lamentation is? It’s the first word of the book: HOW? That’s a word for shock and despair. How? Jeremiah asked in the opening, “*HOW lonely sits the city that was full of people! HOW like a widow is she, who was great among the nations! The princess among the provinces has become a slave!*” (Lam. 1:1; emphasis mine). I noticed there were no question marks, just exclamation marks! It’s because they were rhetorical questions. See also 2:1 and 4:1. Today, we are looking at chapter 1 in the book of HOW! It’s a primordial cry: How!

Life is full of “how” questions. Some of you have many chapters of your life’s book beginning with the word: “how.” Probably, you are asking:

- HOW did this happen?
- HOW did I get here?
- HOW blind, and dumb was I? What was I thinking?
- HOW could I stoop so low?
- HOW did this happen to me in broad daylight?
- HOW did that happen on my watch?
- HOW on earth did things turn out this way for me?
- HOW could this be that I did not see that coming?
- HOW could I have done that? I must be insane!
- HOW on earth can anyone make sense out of this?

- HOW at all could this have happened? It makes no sense!
- HOW did Mama's favorite, the altar boy end up a convicted felon?
- HOW? Tell me, somebody tell me how? It doesn't add up!

That's the theme of the book of Lamentations. It is the book of despair and shock at what had happened.

[IV] What is Lament or Lamentation?

Lament is a passionate expression of grief or sorrow. Lament is (1) to mourn aloud, wail, (2) to express great sorrow or regret for something. Lament is a tool that God's people use to navigate pain and suffering. Lament is vital prayer for the people of God because it enables them to petition God to help deliver from distress, suffering, and pain. Lament prayer is designed to persuade God to act on the sufferer's behalf. The Lament Proper is a description of the occurrences for which the people are requesting assistance or rescue.

The best use of lamentation is to let your mistakes, failures and even bad decisions teach you valuable lessons that will be beneficial in the future. In the book of Lamentations, there was so much more the Lord wanted to give the people and do in their lives, and they almost forfeited it because of careless and foolish choices. **In lamentation, we learn that God is our only hope. He is sovereign. He is the Master of the universe and the Author of life. When we seek God and ask Him for His touch and help, we will find assurance in Him.** Lamentation is a missing piece in the church vocabulary and liturgy today. We talk of confession, sometimes of repentance, but rarely of lament or lamentation. Yet, the church, the nation, and individuals need to lament over many things. I believe lamentation is a part of the grieving process.

Lamentation is not the only OT book that contains individual or communal laments. Many of the Psalms are lament poems, and every prophetic book except Haggai includes one or more examples of lament genre. However, this is the only book that is solely of laments. It is a lament over Jerusalem

and Judah. One way to read it is to substitute Jerusalem or Judah in the pronouns—she or her—in the chapters. **Orthodox Jews customarily read the book aloud in its entirety on the traditional date of the destruction of Solomon’s Temple, as well as the destruction of Herod’s Temple. Many Jews read it each week at the Western Wall, known as the Wailing Wall in the old city of Jerusalem. The book is read during the last three days of the Holy Week in traditional Roman Catholic liturgy.**

There are lament psalms. The book of Psalms comprises approximately 42 psalms of lament, about 30 of which are individual psalms of lament and the rest are communal. Community lament psalms, characterized by “we” include, Psalm 12, 44, 58, 60, 74, 79, 80, 83, 85, 90, 94, 123, 126, 129. Individual lament psalms, characterized by “I” include Psalm 3, 4, 5, 7, 9-10, 13, 14, 17, 22, 25, 26, 28, 31, and 39. Psalm 51 is a confession of rebellion against God with a plea for Him to restore David and the promise of a faithful life in the future. Most lament psalms have the following typical features: (1) invocation, (2) complaint, (3) request, (4) expression of confidence, and (5) vow or praise. The Penitential Psalms or Psalm of Confession are the Psalms 6, 31, 37, 50, 101, 129, and 142.

The language of emotion and the spirit of contrition in lament or lamentation are usually richer and deeper than confession. We need to move from confessing to lamenting. For example: Joel 1:13—“*Gird yourselves and LAMENT, you priests; WAIL, you who minister before the altar; Come, lie all night in sackcloth, You who minister to my God...*” “*LAMENT like a virgin girded with sackcloth For the husband of her youth*”, (Joel 1:8; emphasis mine). This was a call for national lament and repentance for God to visit the land again with forgiveness, prosperity, restoration, and revival.

In lament, there is a movement from sadness to hope. To the Jews, the last but one verse of the book, v. 5:21 is most important. It’s a prayer; it reads, “**Turn us back to You, O Lord, and we will be restored; Renew our days as of old.**” That’s HOPE. Most Christians remember and quote Lamentations 3:21-26, esp. vv. 22-24—probably most quoted portions of the book. It points to God’s reassuring presence and DAILY MERCIES even amid the

destructions and ruins. Acknowledging it could be worse but for mercy. In the midst of the indescribable destruction, rubble, debris, and wreckage wherever he turned his eyes, the weeping prophet, Jeremiah, penned,

Through the Lord's mercies we are not consumed, Because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness. "The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "Therefore I hope in Him!" vv. 22-24. [You probably remember the KJV—"It is of the LORD's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness" vv. 22 and 23.]

A great church hymn, "Great is Thy faithfulness" is based on verse 23. God's mercies are new every morning.

Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father
There is no shadow of turning with Thee
Thou changest not, Thy compassions, they fail not
As Thou hast been Thou forever wilt be

Chorus:

Great is Thy faithfulness, great is Thy faithfulness
Morning by morning new mercies I see
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me

Summer and winter, and springtime and harvest
Sun, moon and stars in their courses above
Join with all nature in manifold witness
To Thy great faithfulness, mercy and love

Great is Thy faithfulness, great is Thy faithfulness
Morning by morning new mercies I see
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me

“It Happened, Because It Had to Happen.”

Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth
Thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide
Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow
Blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside!

Great is Thy faithfulness, great is Thy faithfulness
Morning by morning new mercies I see
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me

You need to be in Concord Baptist Church, Brooklyn, NY and hear the old men and women; the deacons and deaconesses sing this hymn. They sing with gusto, emotion and tears, the result of flashback and reflections on God’s goodness and faithfulness to them over the years in their life’s journey.

[V] How Did Jesus Express Grief over the Death of His cousin, John the Baptist?

Even Jesus experienced the loss, untimely death or gruesome death of a loved one and partner in ministry.

Jesus and John the Baptist were first cousins. John baptized Jesus, to initiate His ministry. John was Jesus’ forerunner. He was conceived 6 months earlier than Jesus. John always spoke glowingly about Jesus and never about himself—John 1:19-34. Some of John’s disciples crossed over to become Jesus’ followers with the blessings of John—John 1:35-40. Jesus gave the highest commendations to John as well, Matthew 11:1-19. Jesus told the people about John, *“Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist... And if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come,”* (11:11, 14). John was the Elijah that prophet Malachi said was coming at the close of his book, in Malachi 4:5, and *“the voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord’”* (Isa. 40:3; Jn. 1:23).

- After He heard of the death of John, Jesus went away to a solitary

place, to grieve and mourn. He probably spent the time reflecting over the life of John and their relationship. He undoubtedly cried and groaned. Grieving people and depressed persons love to isolate themselves. A brief period is okay but extensive isolation aggravates the depression.

- Although Jesus wanted some privacy to grieve and mourn, the crowd sought Him out. *“When Jesus heard it [the beheading of John], He departed from there by boat to a deserted place by Himself. But when the multitudes heard it [of Jesus’ location], they followed Him on foot from the cities. And when Jesus went out He saw a great multitude; and He was moved with compassion for them, and healed their sick,”* (Matt. 14:13, 14; insert mine). Though broken and wounded Himself by the news of what had happened to His cousin and friend, Jesus did not shrink, did not shut down, did not withdraw, or retreated permanently. Rather, He returned to His assignment; He opened wide His heart and hands to those in need.
- Jesus re-invested in life. He got back to ministry and connecting to people and His purpose in life. The best way to honor a deceased family/friend is not to drop out of life but to reengage life. We read, *“When Jesus ... saw a great multitude; He was moved with compassion for them and healed their sick.”*
- *“When it was evening, His disciples came to Him, saying, ‘This is a deserted place, and the hour is already late. Send the multitudes away, that they may go into the villages and buy themselves food.’ But Jesus said to them, ‘They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat.’”* (Matt. 14:15, 16). Jesus’ disciples complained about their lack and inadequacy. They said, *“We have here only five loaves and two fish.”* Jesus said, *“Bring them here to Me”* (vv. 17, 18). Jesus blessed the bread and fish; they multiplied and were used to feed more than 5000 hungry men, women, and children.
- Jesus reached out to others in His deepest time of need. He looked, He saw a hungry crowd, and He had compassion on them and fed

“It Happened, Because It Had to Happen.”

them. You nurture your soul best by ministering to others, even from your own pain.

[VI] Lamenting and Grieving Your Losses

There's nobody here who has not experienced some losses in life. Presently, you are going through loss of freedom. You can't go anywhere you want to, eat, or do anything, like your counterpart on the streets. You can't surf the web or connect with friends on Facebook. You've lost such privileges. You can't even carry US\$ bills in your pockets. KFC, Pizza hut, McDonalds, White Castle, or other favorite diners are gone from your vocabulary while incarcerated. For some years now, some of you haven't seen a car on the streets, or school children running to or returning from school, or shopping mall. Truth be told, many of you who have been incarcerated for longer periods have seen mobile phones and many other latest technological inventions only in pictures, and you can only imagine how they feel to touch, and how they work because the world and your neighborhood have changed a million times, in a million ways since you were locked up.

Losses come in many ways: loss of loved ones, loss of a sibling, loss of a child, loss of a spouse, loss of a job, loss of freedom, loss of a relationship, loss of status or position, loss of health, loss of a body part, loss of zeal or zest for living, etc. Not to mention that many of you have experienced deaths in the family since incarceration.

While I do not intend to psychoanalyze any of you, I can confidently say that many of you end up in jail because you have not properly grieved the losses you've experienced in your life. You might have been mistreated, abused, and misused by parents or some irresponsible adults in your life who had power over you. Since childhood, you have been acting and reacting from the pain and abuses of the past that are still having a hold on your life. You were broken and wounded, by what happened to you in childhood, who left or abandoned you, who mistreated you, who humiliated you and took away your dignity and sense of worth. The people who have been hurt tend to hurt other people as well. Some get pleasure in hurting others, especially,

inflicting hurt on others before they can have the chance to hurt them. Their philosophy is: “Do unto others what they are likely to do to you and do it first to them.”

Some of you have family secrets—dirty things in the cupboard of your family history—that are killing you. What granddad, big Mama, great aunt or uncle did or didn’t do many years past are still impacting everybody in the family and keeping you from moving forward, yet, no one talks about these things. You feel choked, you can’t breathe and yet, you cannot divulge or talk freely about these chains that are binding you down and keeping you in bondage to your past. By the way, this is not the case with everyone because some of you have it altogether, you have not been abused or taken advantage of in your childhood, your parents are the best anyone could ask for, and they did their best for you. You are in jail because you are just knuckleheads.

[VII] Seven stages of Grief

Name the Loss. Naming is the first step to reclaiming yourself. Naming gives you a sense of autonomy and authority because it facilitates ownership and control over the problem rather than the problem owning and controlling you. The “demon” that’s named has been forced out of lurking in the dark and has lost a good amount of its venom thereby. **Journaling is a good way to release some tensions, especially, if you are vulnerable enough to write about your feelings.** Let your journal be an honest, heart-to-heart dialogue between you and your soul. Write it up and then hide it or tuck away the document. **You cannot overcome a situation you are unwilling to name and confront. The fires that God does not deliver us from, He delivers us through.** Without lament or proper grieving, we abort and short-circuit the process of recovery and returning to sanity.

Seven stages of Grief: Some put the stages as four, five or six. I am comfortable with these seven.

1. **Numbness:** You feel flat or frozen. It is not uncommon to feel numb, blank, detached or suspended emotionally, blurry, hazy, dazed. This is nature’s gift to us. If we feel the full blow of the loss in the immedi-

ate, we might lose our minds, or faint and fall down the wrong way. This delayed reaction allows us to regain some composure before we begin to process the information.

2. Denial: Our immediate response is to deny the reality of what we just heard. You will hear statements like, “No, it’s impossible.” “You’re kidding me, aren’t you?” “Tell me you are lying.” “No, how can that be true. Tell me it’s not true.” “Don’t play with me; be serious.” We don’t want to believe what we’ve heard.
3. Anger and Blaming: Anger is displayed in many ways and at many people. At ourselves—we feel we haven’t done enough. At the person—we feel it was his/her fault. At someone else—we feel they fail us and fail the deceased. We may even feel betrayed or abandoned by the deceased, be angry and blame him or her for leaving us. We are angry at the system, so we blame the hospital staff, the doctor was at fault, the response time was slow, something wasn’t done right, didn’t go right. We want to blame someone or something. We blame ourselves too. We are willing to sue and pursue justice.
4. Regret, guilt, and remorse: We hear or say statements like, “If I had...” “Had I known...” “Had it been...” “I wish I had...” “If not for...” all about second-guessing ourselves, having second thoughts about our actions, and decisions.
5. Sadness or Depression: Now the bad news is beginning to sink in, and we are overcome by grief, sadness. Darkness and gloom set in. The deep sadness is not always a clinical depression, though it could degenerate and progress to that point. If it does, that kind of situation requires a medical attention.
6. Bargaining and Negotiating: We are beginning to negotiate with fate and bargain with God. We are willing to promise God anything—to serve God better, to give more generously, to never again be a bad person—if God would just this time, just once, have mercy, forgive, alter the outcome, change the system, perform some miracles, etc.
7. Resolution and Acceptance: You work through your pain. You decide

to reinvest in life. You move on. You don't want to be chained to, defined by, or limited by the tragedies and mistakes of your past. The pain is still there but you choose to see the "good" part, to salvage the situation, to make the best of the bad situation. This is healing or recovery. You reach out to help others going through similar situation. You seek to make a difference, not in spite of, but more so because of your pain. You choose to dwell on and remember the good times. It is unhealthy to be stuck in any of the seven stages. You grab the pen and edit or rewrite your story to find meaning in all your losses, and to affirm your life regardless of past tragedies and bad decisions. You then say, **"It Happened, Because It Had to Happen; It's Time to Move On."** You Toss It Out, and Then Move On. **It's called being gracious, and forgiving to yourself and others, letting everyone, including yourself off the hook.**

That's when you can open a new page, and start afresh. Thankfully, God repeatedly gives us opportunities, again and again, to make yet another fresh start, another new beginning. It's called by many terms, such as, being born again, experiencing transformation, going through the process of sanctification, the blessing of the grace of repentance and the ability to turn around, making a complete 180 degrees U-turn.

As the saying goes, "The only way OUT is THROUGH." You cannot circumvent the process of grieving the deaths and losses that have occurred in your life; you pass through it. If you have something you've bottled up for many years and wish to unburden, offload, wail, lament and grieve over those things and losses in your life, tell your CO you'll like to see the chaplain. We will be glad to provide a safe place for you to blow off some steam.

If you want some privacy to talk things over, wail or lament, consider this an open invitation to come to the Chaplain's Office (Any of the four chaplains will be honored to see you).

Part 2

How Do You Grieve the losses you’ve experienced in life?

There comes the time when you have to say, “It Happened, Because it Had to Happen; It’s Time to Move on.”

Readings: John 9:1-42, esp. 1-12; Luke 13:1-5.

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. I must work the works of Him who sent Me while it is day; the night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” When He had said these things, He spat on the ground and made clay with the saliva; and He anointed the eyes of the blind man with the clay. And He said to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which is translated, Sent). So he went and washed, and came back seeing (vv. 1-7).

There were present at that season some who told Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And Jesus answered and said to them, “Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish” (vv. 1-5)

I] Three Propositions for This Miniseries:

Proposition—#1: There are no accidents in a world ruled by a Sovereign Intelligent Mind. *“He who planted the ear, shall He not hear? He who formed the eye, shall He not see?”* (Psa. 94:9). *“Behold, the Lord’s hand is not shortened, That it cannot save; Nor His ear heavy, That it*

cannot hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; And your sins have hidden His face from you, So that He will not hear” (Isa. 59:1, 2). “If it had not been the Lord who was on our side, When men rose up against us, Then they would have swallowed us alive, When their wrath was kindled against us” (Psa. 124:2, 3).

Proposition—#2: Freak accidents and misfortunes that defile logical explanations and are no-blame events abound in a misaligned world, such as we live in, John 9:1-5; Luke 13:1-5. This should not be surprising in a scenario where the Bible calls Satan “*the god of this age,*” (2 Cor. 4:4), “*the prince of this world*” (Jn. 12:31; 14:30). More than we can understand, many things happen, or are permitted to happen in the world, “*that the works of God should be revealed*” (John 9:3).

Proposition—#3: Such events and mishaps are that the work of God may be revealed either through direct divine intervention or God’s intervention through the acts of God’s children. It may be said that those evil things are not engineered by God but are also not disallowed by God, even though He could, because doing so would override man’s freewill to act as a free moral agent and reduce humanity to a mere robot instinctively and compulsorily obeying the cosmic orders.

II] Proposition 1: There Are No Accidents in A World Ruled by An Intelligent Mind

The concept that there are no accidents in a world ruled by an Intelligent Mind is based on the premise that a true or real accident in human life is a tragedy that EVEN GOD could not bring any good out of. That would be a tragedy beyond redemption, one that God would scratch His head, stroke His beard [speaking anthropologically—not that God is a bearded old man] and say, “This one is beyond My capacity.” As far as I am concerned, Satan has not and can never come up with such situation that the Almighty Creator-God cannot handle. Unfortunately, for some of you, in your pride, you

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would like to think that you have such a problem, that your case is so difficult that God has been racking His brain for a long time to find a solution to it, and God hasn't come up with one yet. That's the devil's lie. It's the height of pride. It portrays an abject ignorance of God.

First and foremost, the Sovereignty of God must be one of our non-negotiables as people of faith. If anything can happen to us, or happen in this world, for which God is blindsided and taken unawares, then we are in trouble. If God could ever say, “I never saw that coming, how did it happen?” then we have no sure anchor in the storms of life. We must come to a place where we truly believe the Sunday school song, “He's got the whole world in His hand” and know that God is indeed in control, and in charge. That God has a plan that is working according to God's predetermined schedule. That God is not panicky despite the horrifying highlights of the 6:30pm, 10:00pm or 11:00pm world news.

- Psalm 24:1—“The earth is the Lord's, and all its fullness, The world and those who dwell therein.”
- Colossians 1:16—“For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him.”
- Revelation 4:11—“You are worthy, O Lord, To receive glory and honor and power; For You created all things, And by Your will they exist and were created.”

“How Can You Say There Are No Accidents? Preacher, I Can Tell Many from The Bible—the same Bible that you read.” I hear you.

What I mean by there are no accidents is that the REAL accidents or misfortunes are those tragedies that EVEN GOD cannot redeem or bring out any eventual good out of the accident or misfortune. I am here to submit to you that no devil in hell has come up with a tragedy in human history that God cannot superimpose a redemptive tone on. There is one Story in the uni-

verse; it is the Story of God. However, there are stories within the Story; our individual, family and community stories are stories within that Story. What comes up as a tragedy, accident, or misfortune in the story within the Story, may be artistically woven into the tapestry of the Big Story and incorporated into the cosmic storyline.

For example, in reading through the Bible, what appears like a misstatement from a prophet or an improbability in Genesis may become clearer as a possibility or an eventuality in 1 and 2 Samuel or 1 and 2 Kings, only to become an actuality in Matthew. Yet, those who lived during the era of Genesis or 1 and 2 Samuel or 1 and 2 Kings would never know this, because they didn't live long enough to see the unfolding of prophetic events. It is one Story of which they knew only their portion of the Story. The apostle Peter said of the prophets of old,

Of this salvation the prophets have inquired and searched carefully, who prophesied of the grace that would come to you, searching what, or what manner of time, the Spirit of Christ who was in them was indicating when He testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. To them it was revealed that, not to themselves, but to us they were ministering the things which now have been reported to you through those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven—things which angels desire to look into... knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit (1 Pet. 1:10-12; 2 Pet. 1:20, 21).

We live in time and space and our understanding is limited to time and space, but God is eternal—no past, present or future. There's no yesterday, today and tomorrow with the Eternal because God can see the end from the beginning. Let me repeat my point: The real accident in God's universe is a tragedy that the Sovereign, Omnipotent, Omniscient, Eternal God Himself cannot redeem or bring eventual good out of it. I may say on the authority of the Bible that Lucifer, the prince of the dark world, has not devised a problem that Eternal God could not unravel and incorporate into the storyline of

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redemption. It is not that God inspired the evil or harms done, it is that God works through the evil to bring out an eventual good.

Simply put: YOU ARE NOT A LOST CAUSE AND YOUR CASE IS NOT BEYOND REDEMPTION. It is pride, from the pit of hell, to think otherwise. It is your pride, fueled by Satan, that makes you think that God has to do overtime thinking how to solve your problem, that God would scratch His head in vain and finally say, “This one is beyond Me!” No! That’s not the God I preach. Our God is *“able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen,”* (Eph. 3:20, 21).

Here, below, let me remind you of some “accidents” or “mishaps” that have been artistically woven into the Story of God.

- a) What looked like an accident in the loss of a borrowed ax head turned out to be an opportunity to demonstrate God’s power, with whom all things are possible, including making an iron piece of ax head to float on water—2 Kings 6.
- b) What looked like an accident in the story of Mephibosheth turned out to be one of God’s illustration and prefiguring of grace in Christ (2 Sam. 4:4; 9:1-13). We cannot understand concepts such as grace; they are too abstract. God provides us with human-interest stories in real life to illustrate grace. David’s initiative to be good to Mephibosheth was a good illustration of God’s grace. Nothing about it was dependent on Mephibosheth; everything came from David’s bowel of mercy and yearning. We read in 2 Samuel 9:1, *“Now David said, ‘Is there still anyone who is left of the house of Saul, that I may show him kindness for Jonathan’s sake?’”* It was David’s unconditional choice to be good to anyone from the line of Jonathan. David was a type of the Savior, who is seeking and wooing the sinner and willing to be good to the sinner; Mephibosheth, was a type of each one of us today, destitute, crippled by sin, a prince living in obscurity outside the palace,

and needing a Deliverer.

For example, our Muslim brothers and Jewish friends cannot understand grace and question the logic how an innocent person could take the punishment of a wicked person because we preach that sinless Jesus died in our stead to pay the punishment for our sins, and take away our sins. To them, what is justice in that? Yet, even in their religious tradition a sinless animal had always been offered in sacrifice to be slaughtered and die in place of the sinner who identified with the animal by laying his hands on it before being slaughtered. Through such instances, God had been illustrating the big sacrifice and its meaning to those of old. None of those millions and millions of animals sacrificed in the OT died in vain because each one, in its little story, was a story within the Redemptive Story of God, until the coming of *“the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”* (John 1:29).

- c) What looked like a set of misfortunes in Naomi’s loss of her husband and two sons in a foreign land, turned out to be a classical illustration of the kinsman-redeemer which brought a poor widow into wealth through re-marriage and also brought Ruth, a Gentile, into the family line of the Savior. The story is told in the book of Ruth. To be a kinsman-redeemer, like Boaz was to Ruth, required three criteria: had to be a close family member, willing, and able. Incidentally, the unnamed closest relative of Elimelech, Naomi’s husband, who was first in line to perform the duties of kinsman-redeemer for Elimelech, and his deceased male children, Chilion and Mahlon (Ruth 4) was a relative and was able but was unwilling. So, it was passed to the next relative, Boaz, who was willing, able and a relative. This unnamed closest relative of Naomi did not see the offer of kinsman-redeemer as a service to community and privilege to help to *“perpetuate the name of the dead through his inheritance”* (4:5), so, he turned it down for selfish reasons, saying publicly before the council of elders of the community, *“I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I ruin my own inher-*

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itance” (4:6). Jesus is our Kinsman-Redeemer; He had the means, He was willing, and He was a member of the human family through incarnation. The unnamed, most qualified family man was selfish, Boaz, the next qualified family man was unselfish. Yet, Boaz’s unselfishness paled in comparison to Jesus’ who paid the ultimate price for sins He did not commit, dying on the cross for a grossly unthankful human race. What looked like a misfortune in one story/season became clearer later in the Story. Through such stories, grace, which may be abstract, is illustrated, simplified, and demonstrated.

- d) What looked like an accident and shipwreck in Paul’s story, Acts 27, turned out to bring Paul and his team to the Island of Malta, and gave the Islanders opportunity to hear the gospel. The island was not part of a Christian missionary agenda, but God had a plan to send the Light to the Island. It was the detour; tempest and shipwreck in Paul’s journey that God, in His Providence, used to achieved this. When this happened, Paul was not on a missionary trip, he was a prisoner enroute to Rome. Yet, it was redemptive and it accomplished a Kingdom purpose.
- e) What was a classic case of repressive government, enslavement, and even killing the male children turned out to be God’s way of turning the tables. The very child that Pharaoh destined to be murdered was eventually protected and raised under the roof of Pharaoh. Moses led the Israelites out of slavery of Egypt after having been kept, trained, and provided for by those who had wanted him dead. Egypt saw those 10 devastating plagues before letting Israel go. God’s omnipotence and sovereignty might be abstract concepts but such stories of Moses, Pharaoh and the Israelites depicted God’s power and superintendence over creation. Parting the Red Sea became the measure of God’s power in the OT. *“He [Jehovah] rebuked the Red Sea also, and it dried up; So He led them through the depths, As through the wilderness... Then they believed His words; They sang His praise”* (Psa. 106:9, 12). Even the surrounding nations heard the reports and breathlessly

followed Israel's journeys. In Canaan, the word on the streets was, *"For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt... And as soon as we heard these things, our hearts melted; neither did there remain any more courage in anyone because of you, for the Lord your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath"* (Jos. 2:10, 11).

- f) What was family betrayal and dysfunction, sibling rivalry and selling Joseph into slavery turned out to have been anticipated, like a pre-written history, in the call of Abram—his name hadn't been changed to Abraham then (in Genesis 15). God told Abram that his seeds—Abram's offspring, while he was still childless, would be enslaved in a land and God would bring deliverance. God foretold Abram events of 400 years in advance. At the time God was speaking with Abram, God could see Moses, Joseph, Pharaoh and other future players and actors in the history in God's mind. While God did not condition Joseph's brother to hate him, God already had a plan to weave their dysfunction into the Story and bring good out of the mess.
- g) What was a terrible famine turned out to be the event that pushed Jacob and his family to Egypt, where God nurtured and raised Israel into a nation—Genesis chapters 42-47. Without the famine, Jacob (renamed Israel) would still be roaming the land of Canaan and would inadvertently be engulfed with tribal and territorial wars with his neighbors. In Egypt, however, Israel was at peace under the protective custody of the greatest empire of the day, and was free to multiply and grow, becoming a nation within a nation, which eventually was frightening to a later Pharaoh and initiated Egyptians' animosity towards Israel.
- h) What was dysfunctional family saga in Elkanah's polygamous family where barren Hannah was taunted by her rival child-bearing woman, Peninnah, led Hannah to seek God for a son, at a time when God desired to discard the current faithless priestly line of Eli—1 Samuel chapters 1 to 3. God probably wanted a Samuel than Hannah did,

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but Hannah had to get to a point of desperation for her to surrender the child to God’s service.

- i) How about the man born blind, the freak accident of nature in John 9? Jesus explained it that the man’s pitiful story was to bring glory to God in the big story, the One story of the universe. Jesus then healed the man to show God’s mercy and power over any disability of nature. To the disciples’ question: “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” v. 2. Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him” v. 3.
- j) What was a shady and disgraceful White House Scandal or Nix-on-gate led to the incarceration of many White House Staffers, including Colson. Colson became a Christian, founded a ministry for prison reforms and spiritual reforms through Prison Ministry, Angel Tree, and such programs. Colson’s imprisonment was redemptive.

Also, **NICK VUJICIC** (“voo-yi-chich”) an Australian-American born without arms or legs has become a world-renowned speaker, founder and leader of a worldwide Christian organization, ministering in many parts of the world. Without arms or legs, Nick Vujicic is a painter, swimmer, skydiver, and motivational speaker. He was born with an extremely rare congenital disorder known as Phocomelia, which is characterized by the absence of legs and arms. His condition was a freak accident of nature, but he was not an accident to God. What God said of Jeremiah, in 1:5, can also be said of Nick, that is, that God knew him and ordained him before he was born. We may not all be called to be prophets, but God has a purpose and an assignment for each one of us.

You say: Jesus healed the man born blind but Nick, a Christian, hasn’t been healed of his birth defect? Nick prayed fervently in his growing up years, questioned the purpose of his life, and even contemplated suicide. That was then. Now, Nick Vujicic, born in 1982 in Melbourne, Australia, married

with 4 children, best selling author of many books, life coach, entrepreneur, blessed with a thriving ministry, not in spite of but so much as a result of his handicap, has discovered a higher purpose for his life that he no longer prays for healing. While many see obstacles as hindrances and insurmountable roadblocks on their way to success, and therefore quit, for Nick, obstacles = opportunity; that's his philosophy and problem-solving mathematical equation. He is the founder and CEO of the non-profit ministry Life Without Limbs. Life Without Limits is one of his publications.

We were first in God's mind, with an assignment. We can believe God's word to Jeremiah, v. 1:5, as being true of each one of us. "Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying: *Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; Before you were born I sanctified you; I ordained you a prophet to the nations*" (vv. 4, 5). Not everyone is ordained to be a prophet; but we are all gifted, called and ordained for something. There are no illegitimate children; there are illegitimate relationships. A child born out of incest or rape is not illegitimate to God even though God does not approve of the relationship and circumstances of his birth. From Ephesians chapter 1, which I alluded to and contrasted with Ecclesiastes chapter 1, we recall that it takes more than biology of human sexuality to produce a soul. We were in God's mind long before the egg and sperm of our biological parents fused together as byproducts of sexual relationship.

Jeremiah was already a young man, but God wanted him to know that his call went back even further than his youth. Jeremiah existed in the mind and plan of God before he ever existed in his mother's womb. God told Jeremiah this so that he could walk in God's pre-ordained plan by his own will. This information wasn't given just to interest Jeremiah or to entertain him. It was given so that he would know God's will, be encouraged by that, and therefore align his will with God's revealed will. Paul speaks of his own call to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles in similar terms "*But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles,*" (Galatians 1:15-16a). The same is true of us all, "*Just as He chose us in Him before the*

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foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love... For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them,” (Eph. 1:4; 2:10).

Before Jeremiah was born, in God’s eternal counsel, God had designed him to be a prophet to the nations. The God who gave Jeremiah his commission was the same that gave him his being. The God that formed him in the belly and brought him forth out of the womb was therefore the rightful owner and might employ him and make use of him as he pleased. Jeremiah’s commission was given him in pursuance of the purpose God had purposed in Himself concerning him before he was born. “I knew thee, and I sanctified thee,” that is, “I determined that you should be a prophet and set you apart for the office.” **There are illegitimate relationships but no illegitimate child.**

The Strangest Sale’s Speech I Ever Heard

Although it is unsafe, dangerous, and even unlawful to do so, many panhandlers walk between subway cars. It was on a ride to Manhattan. As the panhandler burst open the door to my subway car, all eyes turned in his direction. It was a somewhat crowded car. Mothers held their kids closer. Every lady with a purse ensured it was zippered or tucked it under her armpit. The panhandler held one of the poles to steady himself, looked around at the faces in the car and started his strange sale’s speech.

I kid you not. He said, “No life is useless. Look at me!” We did. “Do you think my life is a waste? No.” He shifted his gaze to mothers in the car and said. “No. My life is not useless. When you talk to your children, I am the one you can use as an example of how not to live.” Like a drunk or comic, he continued, “You can tell your child not to quit school, not to waste the opportunities he has, not to throw away his life, so he doesn’t end up becoming like I am today. I quit school. I regret it, and I am living with the consequences today. Please talk to your boy before you go to bed tonight to stay in school if he doesn’t want to end up being like me, a homeless beggar.” We all looked bewildered, not sure if he was a clown or stand-up comedian of

a sort. Then he added, “Yes, if I can be the negative example to your boy of how not to live so he doesn’t become a drunk and panhandler like me, then my life isn’t a waste. If I can be the one—the bad example, though—to keep your boy from quitting school or going to jail, then I have made a difference in someone’s life; I have contributed something to life and I have helped somebody.” He paused, as if giving us space for his speech to sink in. He continued, somewhat somber, “I don’t do drugs, I don’t smoke, but I drink alcohol to keep myself warm in this cold world. You wouldn’t know what that means, or what it’s like. I am hungry; please give me whatever you can, so I may buy something to eat.” After his passionate appeal, he began to stagger from one end of the car to the other, shaking his cup for donation, until he reached the other end, and crossed to the next car, while the train was still in motion. ” I froze where I stood and held my breath, when he walked past me.

I cannot tell if his sale’s speech got him more than regular collection, but it left me wondering. Could he be right? I know he didn’t start off in life wishing to end up that way, to be a bad example. I wondered how and when he gave up hope and became reconciled to the condition as his contribution to life. He saw the value of his life, in that low state, as a real-life example of how not to live. The possibility of his story becoming the saving grace and vivid illustration for other boys became his justification or motivation for living and affirming his life as serving a purpose. I cannot, and dare not, theologize or theorize on the speech of this panhandler—that’s not to say that panhandlers cannot be custodians of uncommon insight. However, I began to wonder if the likes of Nick Vujicic, born without arms and legs, were to be nature’s examples to the rest of the world, of unlimited possibilities in a human soul that is in contact with its Creator, and the means to silence (or put to shame) the quitters, whiners, and lowlifes who have given up for lesser problems than a truly physically or mentally handicapped person faces.

“It Happened, Because It Had to Happen.”

Long Before “Born to Lose” was Tattooed on the Chest, “Born to Lose” Had Been Etched in the Mind

The late Dr. Norman Vincent Peale, the guru of Positive Thinking, shared a story of his visit to Hong Kong. While his wife was busy with a reputable seamstress taking her measurements, he decided to walk around the streets. He noticed a tattoo shop with different samples of what could be tattooed in the window of the shop, such as mermaids, dogs, flags of different countries, and one that especially caught his attention: Born to Lose. He went inside, got the owner’s attention, pointed and said, “That one!” The owner replied, “Take off your shirt.” He then told him that he didn’t want a tattoo but was just wondering, “Why would anyone tattoo ‘Born to Lose’ on his chest?” The tattoo shop owner, replied, pointing to his head, “Before they tattoo ‘born to lose’ on their chests, ‘born to lose’ is already engraved in their thinking.” In other words, the tattoo is a projection of how they already see themselves; they already have a “born to lose” mentality before walking into the tattoo shop to have it finalized and advertised.

One sermon title of the late Reverend (Dr.) Robert Schuler, of Crystal Cathedral/Hour of Power, a proponent of Positive, Possibility Thinking, was, “The Me I See, is the Me I Become,” based on Proverbs 23:7—*“As [a man] thinks in his heart, so is he.”* Maybe, just maybe, nobody shortchanged the panhandler in the subway; he probably just became the loser he had seen himself becoming. It might just be that he eventually actualized the image he had created for himself in his subconscious long before he showed up as a panhandler walking in-between subway cars. If that’s the case, then, the tattoo shop owner was 100 percent correct: “Before they tattoo ‘born to lose’ on their chests, ‘born to lose’ is already engraved in their thinking.”

Part 3

In a Misaligned, Skewed, Out-of-sync World, Freak Accidents Are Bound to Happen, Yet God is Busy Healing and Restoring the World and God is Asking Us to Be Partners with Him in the Recovery Venture.

“It Happened, Because it Had to Happen.”

I] Proposition 2:

Freak Accidents and Misfortunes That Defile Logical Explanations and No-Blame Events Abound in A Misaligned World.

Our case studies are the passages in John 9 and Luke 13. Jesus was confronted with the problem of pain, disease, suffering and random accidents, and the responses Jesus gave. When Jesus was told of Pilate’s senseless ritual killing of some Galileans, Jesus responded by saying those unfortunate Galileans and the ill-fated ones on whom the tower of Siloam fell were not singled out for such because of their sins. Rather, such mishaps could be the fate of anyone else, in this wicked world. Twice, Jesus emphatically stated, *“I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish”* (Luke 13:3, 5), without apportioning any blame to the victims.

John 9: The Man Born Blind

In Johannine narrative of the man that was born blind that Jesus healed I deduce a five-line principle that can help us. In John 9, Jesus encountered a man born blind. *“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,’”* vs. 2 and 3. Jesus said, *“This happened so the power of God could be seen in him”* (Jn. 9:3; NLT).

The man’s story was a freak accident of nature. According to Jesus, no blame was necessary, and no deeper theological explanation was necessary either than that it just happened. Its just life, life happens. Then Jesus said, *“I must work the works of Him who sent Me while it is day; the night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world,”* vv. 4 and 5.

Afterward, Jesus healed the man by making him an active participant in his own recovery. Jesus *“spat on the ground and made clay with the saliva; and*

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He anointed the eyes of the blind man with the clay. And He said to him, ‘Go, wash in the pool of Siloam’ (which is translated, Sent). So he went and washed, and came back seeing,” vs. 6, 7. I want to paraphrase the story this way, and reduce it to 5 points:

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From Jesus’ response in the two passages, we can deduce, “No Logical Explanation or Blame Necessary; It Could Have Been Your Lot, My Lot, or Anyone Else’s;” John 9:1-7 and Luke 13:1-5. Five statements develop from this fact.

1. Repeat after me, “IT HAPPENED.” Yes, the man was born blind; it happened. The tower of Siloam fell, killing innocent victims; it happened. Pilate abused his power and slaughtered some of his subjects for ritual purposes; it happened.

In a perfect world, such things wouldn’t and shouldn’t have happened, but we don’t live in a perfect world. So, it happened. The man was born blind. That’s plain to all. It cannot be denied unless you choose to be blind and deaf to the plain fact. Neither the parents nor the child in his pre-born stage had sinned or to be blamed. This was not God dishing out punishment for sin. If this were so, more children would have been born blind, deaf, and crippled. Thankfully, it is not so. In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, *“That you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for HE MAKES HIS SUN RISE ON THE EVIL AND ON THE GOOD, AND SENDS RAIN ON THE JUST AND ON THE UNJUST,”* (Matt. 5:45; emphasis mine).

In like manner, it just happened that the tower of Siloam fell on some innocent men and women. It wasn’t a statement of judgment or consequence for sin. It just happened that Pilate abused his position of power and committed ritual murder. The victims were not fated for such. Logic and rationality did not come into play, just plain random misfortune in the case of the fallen tower, and pure madness in Pilate’s wanton destruction of life.

2. Repeat after me, “IT HAPPENED... BECAUSE IT HAD TO HAPPEN.” There’s no logical explanation; it just happened because we live in a skewed, slanted world out of sync with the Creator. Jesus said it

was a no-blame event. There's no need to point fingers.

Why? The man was born into, and he lived, in a broken and fallen world. Freak accidents of nature happen in a sin-sick world. You cannot blame anyone for it. It is not for any logical reason of fate, destiny, predestination but simply because we live in a broken system. But for the grace of God, according to Jesus in Luke 13, there should have been more freak accidents and disasters in a corrupt world system ruled by Satan, referred to in Scriptures as, *“the prince of the power of the air,” “the ruler of this world,”* and *“the god of this age”* (Eph. 2:2; John 14:30; 2 Cor. 4:4).

My wife has a way of reconciling things in her mind and making peace with herself when bad things happen. She often says, *“The Son of Man goes as it is written of Him,”* (Matt. 26:24). This implies fate, destiny, or predestination. Not always so. I rarely agree with her. This is not about that. Jesus had a pre-written biography, written from Genesis and attested to by all the prophets. Jesus, *the Son of Man*, lived out the eternal divine script as our Savior. It was an agreement between the Godhead before the creation of the world, Eph. 1:4-6; 2 Tim. 1:9; Rev. 13:8. No one is destined or fated to be in prison, or be born blind, or die from gunshot. That's not written for anyone. But such things happen in a broken world, ruled by Satan, *“the prince of the air.”*

Relax! You are Safe. You Are Not Under The Devil's Control If You Belong To Jesus

Satan being declared *“the ruler of this world”* (John 14:30) should not strike fear in the Christian and shouldn't make any believer to panic, because Christians are not pawns on the devil's chessboard. First, we have been redeemed from the world, from the evil systems of the world, and the evil and dark powers of the world. This is the more reason that we need to present ourselves daily as living sacrifices to God, and *“not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of [our minds], that [we] may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God”*—Romans 12:1, 2. Though we live in the world we are not of the world. We belong to another kingdom. Jesus said to His disciples, and to us,

- If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because **you are not of the world**, but **I chose you out of the world**, therefore the world hates you (John 15:19). In His prayer to the Father, Jesus said,
- I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them because **they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world**. I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one. **They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world** (John 17:14-16). We have been translated into another realm:
- “Giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light. **He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love**, in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins” (Col. 1:12-14; emphasis mine).

Jesus defeated Satan and his diabolical works for the Christian. The Bible says, “He who sins is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning. **For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil**” (1 Jn. 3:8). “You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because **He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world**” (1 Jn. 4:4). For that reason, we are commanded, “*Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you*” (Jam. 4:7). “For **whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith**. Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?” (1 Jn. 5:4, 5; emphasis mine).

On the contrary, we read about those who are not covered by Christ’s Blood and saving grace, that they are pawns in the devil’s hand. First, they have been deceived by the devil: “*So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him*” (Rev. 12:9). In addition, they

are under the control, under the maniacal schemes and sway, of the enemy: “*We know that we are of God, and **the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one***” (1 Jn. 5:19). “*But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, **whose minds the god of this age has blinded**, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them*” (2 Cor. 4:3, 4; emphasis mine).

3. Repeat after me, “IT HAPPENED—He Was Blind and as Jesus Explained, it was—THAT THE WORKS OF GOD SHOULD BE REVEALED IN HIM.” Though Satan is called “the ruler of this world,” Satan is not the one in control. Where sin and Satan sow darkness, God goes to restore light.

This means that when Satan and sin are busy doing their worst, God is busy doing His best. There’s no situation that God cannot reverse. In a sin-sick, demon-infested, fallen world, God has a redemptive program for all that’s defective in His creation, and to prove that, Jesus healed the man. We read, “*God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him,*” Acts 10:38, implying that the Trinity—God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit were all involved in healing and restoration of life. God is restoring; God is busy deposing Satan and undoing his works.

Note that what happened to this man—his being blind from birth—did not in anyway reduce or change the fact that he was made in God’s image—for he was still God’s image bearer. Also, what had happened to him, and his pitiful condition, did not change the fact that God loved him unconditionally, for, even in that condition, he was still a beloved child of God. In one Synagogue episode (Luke 13:10-17), Jesus found a woman who was bent over, under satanic bondage for 18 years, yet Jesus proclaimed her, “*a daughter of Abraham,*” (v. 16). The woman’s sick and deformed condition did not change her spiritual status in the covenant community. The key thought here is your position in reference to God, your spiritual status that’s not dependent on anything shaky, flimsy or human, but is secured and guaranteed by God, and God’s grace alone.

“It Happened, Because It Had to Happen.”

4. Repeat after me, “JESUS HEALED THE MAN TO SHOW THE HEART OF GOD, WHO GOD IS, WHAT GOD WAS LIKE, AND THAT GOD COULD DELIVER FROM A BIRTH DEFECT MALADY.”

We Can Therefore Deduce That Whatever Happens To You Or Anyone, However It Happens, Even By Freak Accidents, It’s That, Somehow, God May Show Himself as the Merciful God and Therefore Be Glorified In The Person When He Has Been Restored—Acts 10:38; Isa. 53:4-6.

As the narrative goes with this man that was born blind, his soul was saved, his dignity was restored, and he rejoined the community. The community witnessed God’s power, as they never had. Satan was mad. The religious leaders went wacko and kicked the man out of synagogue. Jesus healed the man and God was glorified. God undid the wrong that nature did to the man. God can use any situation to demonstrate His grace to save even the worst of sinners and demonstrate His power to deliver to the uttermost.

I want to remind you that this man had been in the dark, unable to see, or function and perform tasks that other persons could, suffering unjustly all his life. Yet, he had a choice to make regarding his attitude to family, seeing individuals around him, the faith community that had kept him an outsider to the synagogue life, and God, who seemed to have looked the other way. He could be bitter, with pent up anger at society that wasn’t always kind to handicapped individuals. He had never been allowed in the synagogue so much so that when he heard of a new preacher in town working miracles, he could have rebuffed and snubbed Him completely, without giving it a second thought. However, the blind man remained positive and open to possibilities. You may not be able to control everything in your life, but you can control your attitude; regardless of any situation, you may still choose your attitude. In the end, attitude is everything; your attitude determines your altitude, that is, how far you go in life. The keyword here is attitude, your personal disposition regardless of prevailing circumstances.

Surely He [Jesus] has borne our griefs
And carried our sorrows;
Yet we esteemed Him stricken,
Smitten by God, and afflicted.
But He was wounded for our transgressions,
He was bruised for our iniquities;
The chastisement for our peace was upon Him,
And by His stripes we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray;
We have turned, every one, to his own way;
And the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:4-6).

5. Repeat after me, “JESUS MADE THE BLIND MAN AN ACTIVE PARTICIPANT IN HIS OWN HEALING. JESUS ANOINTED HIS EYE WITH MUD AND SENT HIM TO WASH IN A POOL.”

Jesus could have simply touched his eyes or given a word of command for his healing, but Jesus made the man an active participant in his recovery. The blind man could have been led there or simply tapped his way to the familiar spot. The important thing was that he had to put his faith and desire to be healed into actions. While God can do anything, God will not do for us what God has encouraged us to do and is willing to empower us to do for ourselves. Sometimes, if we listen to the whisper of God and act in faith, we can be the answer to our own prayer.

Was this man totally powerless? No. Did he have options? Yes, even if limited because of his condition. Did Jesus treat this man like a victim of fate or like a person of worth, made in God’s image? You bet; Jesus did not see a victim. He saw a man with potentials who had been locked out of opportunities, waiting for deliverance. Jesus saw him as a perfect candidate for “*the works of God*” to be revealed to the world. Jesus did not question what nature had taken away from him; Jesus tapped into what the man still had left. After a tragedy, some people spend the rest of their life wailing and bemoaning the things they have lost and remain blinded and unresponsive to myriads

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of resources they still have left. If they would just embrace the remains that’s left, they probably could build a new empire from the ashes of their past. The blind man might not be able to see, he still could walk, and he could walk to a familiar spot. Though he had lost much and been deprived of much, yet, he hadn’t lost everything. You are not without options. Even when you feel boxed in, you are not completely hopeless because the box isn’t so tightly closed that it is without some space for air. (In case your box is a vacuum, with air totally sucked out, just bask in your weightlessness and float around in the box. Just kidding.) There’s always something you can do to improve yourself, or get closer to your miracle. You always have the power to make one critical, life-changing decision. Right now, you might just be one critical, crucial decision away from your biggest breakthrough. It is in your power to make that decision. This blind man did just that. He was open to Jesus, and he followed Jesus’ instruction. The keyword here is choice, personal decision.

What has all these got to do with you? I’m glad you are wondering that way. Plenty!

III] Life Application: How do I make this concept meaningful and applicable to my situation?

What Happened—to you and in you—had Happened. Period! The question is: What’s the Next Step?

We may ask, and it will be appropriate to ask:

- **Where is God in All These? Where is God in your incarceration? In your sickness?**
- **How do we find God, or how can we find God, in our mess and messed up life—and in this messed up world?**
- **How can anyone find peace and meaning under a corrupt world system ruled by Satan—“the god of this age,” “the ruler of the world” (2 Co. 4:4; Jn. 14:30)?**
- **Is there a path to grace and redemption? What is the Good News?**

I want to give you a 5-line confession of truth to deal with your situation. It is the extension and application of my previous 5-lines on our case study of the man born blind.

1. Repeat after me, “IT HAPPENED.” Yes, sadly, it happened to you. You sinned; you were sinned against. Your world has forever changed as a result.

In a perfect world, such things wouldn't have happened, but we don't live in a perfect world. So, it happened. What happened? It could be one of two things: (1) you messed up. You're screwed up. Admit it. *“All have sinned and come short of the glory of God,”* (Rom. 3:23). Your own manner of sinning may be different from another, but we are all fallen short of God's glory. You are a knucklehead like the rest of us. (2) You were messed up. The people in your life did you wrong. *“All have sinned.”* What they did to you was their way of sinning. They touched you in the wrong way and messed up your thinking and self-identity. They abandoned or neglected you when you were vulnerable and helpless. Admit it. The people you trusted and relied on violated and abused you. Sadly, everybody around you is messed up. You've sinned and have been sinned against. It's a skewed world.

In Isaiah 6, when Isaiah *“saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up”* (6:1), he said, *“Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, The Lord of hosts”* (6:5). Isaiah was too spiritual and old-fashioned. In today's language, what he wanted to say was, “I am messed up; I live among people who are messed up; I went to messed up elementary school; I graduated from a messed up High School. I live in a messed up neighborhood; I was raised by messed up parents; everywhere I turn, I see messed up people; why was I so slow to recognize that we are all messed up?”

2. Repeat after me, “IT HAPPENED... BECAUSE IT HAD TO HAPPEN.” It's a messed-up world, what else do you expect?

Why did it have to happen? Two reasons: (1) you are a sinner, a knucklehead;

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you did what sinners and knuckleheads like you do. (2) The world is full of evil and wicked men and women, sinners and knuckleheads who harm and hurt others. **It had to happen not because you were predestined or assigned by fate to be incarcerated, no, it happened for no such logical or rational justification but simply because “all have sinned,” we are all broken, and we live in a broken world.**

If you bring fate and rationality into the picture you are going the wrong way and will end up in a fatal crash of faith and lose your sanity. If God had fated the man to be blind and it was God’s will for other sick and leprous persons to be deformed, then Jesus spent His life undoing God’s work because He healed them all. Jesus seemed to be saying to His disciples, “Forget blaming anyone and forget predestination in this matter. It just happened. Do whatever you can to help the victim, to be a blessing and be the solution.”

I believe this is what the late Dr. Wayne Dyer meant when he said, **“there are no justified resentments,”** as one of the ten points in his PBS telecast seminar on “Ten Secrets for Success and Inner Peace”. Give up all blaming. As the saying goes, “Let go and let God” because God is not against you, but on your side that you may be the best you could be, and because God is able to handle it—any situation whatsoever—better than you can. There may be good reasons for them, but I agree with Dr. Dyer that there are no justified resentments because we are all in the same boat, we are all messed up. To some degree, we are both victims and culprits.

Here We Go Again—Fatherlessness in America

I’ve heard all sorts of sad and pitiful stories from inmates especially about their biological fathers, from total absence to sadistic abuses. I’ve had inmates in their 30s, 40s and 50s still lamenting and mourning that they don’t know their father, their father left when they were young, the father has not been a part of their lives, they (and their mothers) were abused by an alcoholic and beastly man who was not a stable presence but in and out of their life, good natured when he wasn’t drunk but never a time when he was not drunk, they have no good or caring male role model in their lives, that the absent

father syndrome has messed up their lives and is the reason they flunked out of school, and the reason for their incarceration, Mama and Grandma tried their best but they couldn't understand or handle their testosterone impulses, etc. That's sad. I cannot and don't minimize it, or say such treatments are not consequential. I can only tell you to take back the remote control from this invisible, ephemeral person who is still inflicting pain on you. If you keep on nursing the pain of your past abuse, neglect and abandonment, keep reliving and replaying the videos of the sad episodes in your mind, it is like you have given this absent person the remote control to your life. He is still pulling the strings; controlling and dictating the terms as if you were his puppet. This is one person you don't want to keep alive in your mind; he is dead to you as far as human relationship is concerned and should be treated as a nonexistent individual.

I don't intent to turn this into another Father's Day sermon, but remember what the Psalmist says in Psalm 27:10, "*When my father and my mother forsake me, Then the Lord will take care of me.*" Many of you have testified that God has been there for you. God put some father figures in your life, good, honest men, who took interest in you, grade school teachers, Sunday school teachers and neighbors who served as role models and nurtured you as if you were one of their biological children. It is his loss that your biological father was not there to raise you and play ball with you. Let it go. Be determined not to be the same kind of father to your own children. Even if no male adult stepped up to the plate, thank God for Mama and Grandma who were there. Believe it or not, I know two women in Concord Baptist church in Brooklyn, who, for a period of time, took up the leadership of the Boy's Scout in their part of Brooklyn because no man stepped forward to lead the group and these women wanted to keep the club alive for their children's to have a place to go and peers to play with.

One inmate was having a meltdown, talking "gibberish" incessantly and showing obsessive-compulsive disorders. He was unstable mentally and emotionally that it was contemplated whether or not to put him on suicide watch. What was his repeated agonizing statement in my office? "They raped me!

My uncles raped me when I was young. I was abused and violated. Nobody did anything about it. I was dehumanized. It's disgusting.” He wasn't being raped in jail; he was going through a different crisis that triggered his childhood pains. His mother was sick and probably dying and he wasn't there to help her when she needed him most. When we are failing or in a vulnerable state in our health, relationships, goals and future aspirations, emotions or finances, we often go back to the feelings and emotions of our childhood. It's as if the umbilical cord hadn't been severed. In his anxious thoughts of the possibility of his mother's passing, he was experiencing the same feeling of abandonment, powerlessness, nakedness, and violation that he had experienced when the older boys in his life, who should have protected him, were the same who had raped him. It was as if he was being molested again. This tendency to default to our childhood is one of what Sigmund Freud, the psychoanalyst, was known for. This inmate was probably in his 40s. He said he wanted to go back home and kill everybody. Would that solve the problem?

No! I am not discounting your pain when I said, “It happened because it had to happen; it's time to move on.” I am only offering you a way to put the past behind you, the ugly, dirty past, and move on with your life in a new direction. It shouldn't have happened, but it happened. Now is the time to toss it away behind your back. Toss away as well those who did it to you. You don't need them in your life anymore. They don't belong in your future. At a certain point in your life it will no longer be a discussion of what this person or these people did to you; it will now be what you are doing to yourself because you have refused to take control of your life and write your own story, regardless of the past. It will not be easy, but you can carve a new story for yourself, anytime you decide to have a new beginning. That's why some choose to call us human becoming, not simply human beings.

You are no body's puppet; take back the control of your life from people who have not invested in your life, and those who have negatively impacted your life. They should not matter to you any longer. I led a monthly prayer seminar/bible study as a volunteer in Arthurkill Correctional Facility, before it was shut down. During one of the meetings, an inmate told me: “When

I was growing up, and running with the boys in the neighborhood, my grandma would say to me, “The way you are going, if you are not dead, you’ll be in jail.” He paused, looked at himself in prison uniform, and said, “Look at me. Here I am, in jail today. Her words came true. I hope I can turn my life around and do something that will make grandma proud of me in her grave. I’ve been trying all my life; I don’t know if I can do enough, or have done enough, to please her and make her proud of me.” Say what? Words are powerful. What grandma said repeatedly to her young grandson became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Yet, this inmate hasn’t taken back his life. He’s still tied to grandma in her grave, hoping to be able to do something that would make grandma proud of him in her grave. When will he be himself; mature enough to do things for his own happiness. I probably would have been less shocked if he had said something like he wanted to go and pee on grandma’s grave, whose negative prophetic declaration over his life had come true, than his continuing striving to please her. They say, “Success is the best revenge because it’s sweet and simple. It’s you coming into your identity and power, rather than allowing anyone else to define who you are or what you’re worth.” Frank Sinatra said, “The best revenge is massive success.” Go for it.

3. Repeat after me, “WHAT HAD HAPPENED—The Mess I Did and The Mess That Was Done to Me—DID NOT DIMINISH GOD IN ME AS GOD’S IMAGE BEARER AND DID NOT DIMINISH GOD TOWARDS ME AS HIS BELOVED CREATION.”

This is the reason we have a gospel to preach, a message of redemption.

This is important if you can wrap your head around this. **Nothing you’ve done or that’s been done to you has changed who God is, or who God is to you, or how God feels about you.** The man who was born blind (John 9) and “*woman who had a spirit of infirmity eighteen years, and was bent over and could in no way raise herself up*” (Luke 13:11) were both God’s image bearers, even in their deformed conditions. “*For the Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart*” (1 Sam.

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16:7). This is the reason why the worst sinner is still redeemable and why the greatest loss in life is not doomed but restorable and recoverable by God’s grace. This implies that, with God, we can thrive and find peace and meaning in life under any circumstance. The recovery and restoration may or may not be in the form of what was lost. In Job’s case (Job 42:10), or even David (1 Samuel 30:8), they recovered what they had lost in human and property. For you, recovery may be in form of discovering and developing other God-endowed skills and ministries that you have, unearthing your untapped skills and potentials, making you begin to thrive in other areas previously unknown and unexploited. That’s when your mess becomes your message.

God is Love. God is our Loving Father, not an angry Monster. Whatever has happened has a three-fold purpose, or may eventually serve one or all these 3-fold purposes:

- i. That the work of God may be revealed when God reclaims and restores what the enemy has done; that is God undoing the evils the enemy has done or transforming that evil into something good in the end. An example is Joseph in Genesis 50:20—“*But as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good...*” also, Genesis 45:7, 8 and Romans 8:28.
- ii. To forge character out of you because of what has happened to you, thus making you a better person (James 1:2-5). Example, a Yoruba adage, “You claim to be wise but have not suffered, who taught you?” Meaning that suffering is our best teacher. The result of what happened to you may also bring you into a new ministry when your mess is transformed into your message. Example, MADD—Mothers Against Drunk Driving founded by Candace Lightner after her daughter was killed by a drunk driver, Prison Fellowship started by Charles Colson after his incarceration, etc. You are never the same person after suffering. You either get bitter or better, you either shrink or expand, but you are never the same again.
- iii. To provide opportunity for God’s children to respond with com-

passion and unconditional love as God's agents in God's redemptive program. Example, *"I was hungry, and you gave me food... inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me."* *"He who has pity on the poor lends to the Lord, And He will pay back what he has given,"* (Prov. 19:17). God will not send down Angels to feed the hungry orphan crying to God. God will do it through one of the orphan's neighbors or passersby. We are God's hands of mercy. This is what my proposition number 3 is about.

4. Repeat after me, "THAT BEING THE CASE, BY GOD'S GRACE, WHAT HAD HAPPENED TO ME WILL NOT DIMINISH MY ABIDING IN GOD AND WILL NOT DIMINISH MY AFFECTION TOWARDS GOD." This is where personal decision and choice comes in.

This is my plea to you. This is what I ask you to decide and believe. This is the attitude factor, your personal disposition to happenings around you. Don't let any problem drive you away from God. Rather, let them draw you closer to God. This is your way of echoing what the Psalmist said, *"I will lift up my eyes to the hills—From whence comes my help? My help comes from the Lord, Who made heaven and earth"* (Psa. 121:1, 2). Lifting up of our hands is usually a symbol of submission and surrender, as well as a way of opening ourselves up, like a funnel, to receive from God. You will recall that the blind man played a part in his healing. He couldn't heal himself, but he believed Jesus' words and trusted that he would be healed if he just did what Jesus told him to do.

Back in the day, it was expected for parents to whip or smack their kids. It was called discipline or correction done in love. Mrs. Susannah Wesley raised 19 children who became a blessing to Christendom, notable of mention were, John Wesley, founder of Methodism and Charles Wesley who composed 7000 hymns. John Wesley, in one of his journals, said when his mother whipped him for disobedience when he was growing up, the whipping was less intense the closer he got and stayed with his mom. But if he stayed far

or attempted to run away, then the mother could reach him better and the whipping worked better and delivered greater pain on him. He likened that to what our attitude should be under discipline or whipping by God. The closer we get to God, the less intense and painful the lashing, and the farther we are the more effective and painful the beating.

Why is this important? If you think it is the Lord who is spanking you, you had better draw closer to God than running away. If you think it is the devil afflicting you, what do you do? You still need to run to God for deliverance, safety, and sheltering. What if you believe your problem is self-made? The recourse is still to run to God for help. You cry out to God for you cannot fight life's battle alone by yourself.

Your part is to believe that God “*is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, ACCORDING TO THE POWER THAT WORKS IN US,*” (Eph. 3:20; emphasis mine), because God is at work in us (Philip. 1:6; 2:13). We must work out what God has worked, and is working, in us; live in to and up to what God has called us. Or, as some have put it, “we believe before we behave.”

I find something interesting in King David's story when “*Satan stood up against Israel, and moved David to number Israel,*” (1 Chron. 21:1) and David sinned thereby. Census was not the problem; there's a book in the Bible, the fourth of the Pentateuch, called Numbers, that's all about census. The problem was pride, leaning on numbers and shifting focus away from God. This was the way David sinned. David's army generals and national leaders warned him not to do this but, like a politician, he wanted to brag and boast of numbers (2 Sam. 24:3, 4; 1 Chron. 21:3, 4). In the courts of heaven, with the universe witnessing the proceedings, sinning with impunity would not go unpunished—even if you were “the man after God's own heart”. However, God gave David a rare chance to choose between what he considered the least of three evils, as forms of his punishment. David knew that, even if God was angry with him, his case was still better in God's hands.

God sent a prophet to him for David to choose one of three suggested forms of punishment—2 Sam. 24:10-18, esp. vs. 11-14? The choices were:

three years of famine, three months of being chased, pursued, and fleeing from his enemies, or three days of plague in the land—v. 13. What was David’s choice? He was smart enough to know that the wrath of God was milder than men, for even in anger, God is merciful. David said, *“I am in great distress. Please let us fall into the hand of the Lord, for His mercies are great; but do not let me fall into the hand of man”* (v. 14; emphasis mine). He chose the 3 days of plague, from which God relented before the full measure—v. 16. David would rather have God spanked him than for God to leave the spanking to the devil or his enemies. (See also Prov. 17:10; and Mic. 7:9, esp. 8-10—*“I will bear the indignation of the Lord, Because I have sinned against Him, Until He pleads my case And executes justice for me. He will bring me forth to the light; I will see His righteousness”*—v. 9).

Why did I make this reference to David? Just for this: If you think your suffering or problem is of the Lord, I want you to know this, it is better that way than suffering in the devil’s or human’s hand. For one thing, that your suffering is under the Lord’s purview is good news. It is better that way than to be from men or Satan. As long as you are aware that, regardless, you are still under God’s sovereign surveillance, there’s hope and all is not lost. *“For the Lord your God is gracious and merciful, and will not turn His face from you if you return to Him”* (2 Chron. 30:9d).

5. Repeat after me, “GOING FORWARD, I CHOOSE PEACE AND GRACE OVER GUILT AND SELF-DEPRECIATION.” This is when you refuse to be a victim or helplessly doomed person; rather, you choose life over death, you choose hope and progress over doom and stagnation.

This should be your choice. It is a way of giving yourself permission to be human. For, “to err is human, to forgive is divine.” Give yourself another chance to try again. We are all work in progress. None of us is a finished product.

This will not be easy. It will be a fight because the enemy will like nothing more than to get you bogged down in guilt, condemnation, and self-depre-

ciation. I believe this is one of what apostle Paul meant in his letter to young Timothy, “*Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, to which you were also called and have confessed the good confession in the presence of many witnesses,*” (1 Tim. 6:12). Being determined to lay hold on to peace and grace is a fight of faith.

In Deuteronomy 30:19, 20, Moses, in his valedictory speech enjoined the Israelites this way:

“I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that **I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live;** that you may love the Lord your God, that you may obey His voice, and that you may cling to Him, **for He [God] is your life and the length of your days;** and that you may dwell in the land which the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give them.” As Moses said, I am saying the same, “**I HAVE SET BEFORE YOU LIFE AND DEATH... THEREFORE CHOOSE LIFE... FOR GOD IS YOUR LIFE.**”

Moses’ successor, Joshua, left a similar admonition in his final speech as well. Joshua said,

“Now therefore, fear the Lord, serve Him in sincerity and in truth, and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the River and in Egypt. Serve the Lord! And if it seems evil to you to serve the Lord, **choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve,** whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. **But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord**” (Jos. 24:14, 15). As Joshua said, I am saying the same, “**CHOOSE FOR YOURSELVES THIS DAY WHOM YOU WILL SERVE.**”

It is about decision, it boils down to one word: choice. If bad and negative choices had led to your incarceration, then the good, positive choices you make from now on can lead you out of jail into a productive life. Joshua couldn’t choose for his people, but he established his personal resolve. He said before them all, “*But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.*” What’s

your choice? What are your new decisions? You need to be firm, resolute in your decision to pursue peace, love and self-acceptance because you have been unconditionally accepted and loved by God.

IV] Invitation & Conclusion

You know your own story. You know how you feel most of the time. You know what takes sleep off you every night and what agitates your mind night and day. If today you've come to the end of your rope and you are determined to cross the line, going forward to choose peace and grace over guilt and self-depreciation, I ask you to step forward that the church may pray with you. For, there's power in the name of Jesus to break every yoke and set the captives free.

Part 4 “*That the works of God should be revealed*” (John 9:3)

(We are God's Workmanship, Created in Christ Jesus for Good Works.)

Readings: Matthew 25:31-46; (Also, Luke 4:18, 19; Acts 10:38; Ephesians 2:10).

The phrase, “It Happened, Because it Had to Happen,” Eventually Opens the Door for Ministry Rather than Self-righteous Pontification

My Proposition #3—God invites us to be partners with Him in every aspect of restoration of human dignity, feeding the hungry and clothing the naked, advocating for fairness, justice, and mercy.

I] Implications of Proposition—#3: Because freak accidents, no-blame misfortunes do happen, and because such events are that “the work of God may be revealed,” then the Christians, God's people, who reflect God's glory and character have a mandate to respond as God would, with love and compassion, and behave as God's answer and God's helping hands at such times and situations.

In another similar instance, “*When Jesus heard that [Lazarus was sick], He said, ‘This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God*

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may be glorified through it.” Thereafter, Jesus returned to Bethany, stepped forward, faced the tomb and called the dead man back to life, after Lazarus had been 4 days in the grave. Jesus’ delay was on purpose. It was for the higher glory of God, for a greater demonstration of His power, and to reveal to the world that He was “*the Resurrection and the Life*” (Jn. 11:25).

You ask: If there are no accidents in a world ruled by an Intelligent Mind and we have freak accidents, disasters, devastating hurricanes and flooding, global pandemics, and tragedies, what do you have to say about those? Based on propositions two and three, I say: They are opportunities (1) to reveal the work of God (John 9:3) when God intervenes with a miraculous act, and (2) to display the compassion and good works of the people of God—Ephesians 2:10 by which they are God’s agents of healing.

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** (Eph. 2:8-10; emphasis mine).

Christianity is not a religion of DON’TS; I don’t do this, we don’t do that. We are known by what we do. We do “**good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them**”. In Jesus’ parable of the sheep and goats, in Matthew 25, we read the commendation, “*I was hungry, and you gave me food,*” v. 35. We also read the denunciation, “*I was hungry, and you gave me no food,*” v. 42. By implication, this means that where and when we see hunger and hungry people, God expects us to step in and help with food.

In Luke 4:18, Jesus declared His manifesto. Jesus said, “*The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, Because He has anointed Me To preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind. To set at liberty those who are oppressed.*” We also read in Acts 10:38, “*how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed*

by the devil, for God was with Him.” If this is our Master’s declared agenda and life’s work, how can we close our eyes to the sick and suffering in the community, or walk past the homeless, orphans, and poverty-stricken of society and not be moved to compassion and action? To do less, or strive for less, is to be less of His disciples.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus declared the lifestyle of His Kingdom. In Matthew 5:13-16, King Jesus said of the subjects of His Kingdom: *“You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men. You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. **Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven**”* (Emphasis mine). While good works do not save us, our good works bring glory to God.

No, no, no! God does not orchestrate evil, sickness, poverty, war, carnage and untold sufferings in the world, but God has allowed such in His world that the works of God in reversing Satan’s plan may be revealed and that God’s people may find ministry of compassion and act like their Father to undo the works of sin and Satan.

The apostle Paul writes,

For we are His [God’s] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them (Ephesians 2:10).

Teresa of Avila said,

“Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which He looks [with] compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which He walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which He blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are His body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.”

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John Wesley said,

“Do you not know that God entrusted you with that money (all above what buys necessities for your families) to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to help the stranger, the widow, the fatherless; and, indeed, as far as it will go, to relieve the wants of all mankind? How can you, how dare you, defraud the Lord, by applying it to any other purpose?”

St. Augustine had said, “Without God, we cannot; without us, God will not.”

Consider these scriptures and God’s invitation to us to be partners with Him in every aspect of human and societal restorations:

- He has shown you, O man, what is good; And what does the Lord require of you But to do justly, To love mercy, And to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8).
- He who has pity on the poor lends to the Lord, And He will pay back what he has given. (Prov. 19:17).
- He who oppresses the poor reproaches his Maker, But he who honors Him [God] has mercy on the needy. (Prov. 14:31).
- For He will deliver the needy when he cries, The poor also, and him who has no helper. He will spare the poor and needy, And will save the souls of the needy. (Psa. 72:12, 13).
- For He shall stand at the right hand of the poor, To save him from those who condemn him. (Psa. 109:31).
- Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.’ ... And the King will answer and say to them, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.’ (Matt. 25:34-36, 40).

Teach Them

- For you have the poor with you always, and whenever you wish you may do them good; but Me you do not have always. (Mark 14:7).
- The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, Because He has anointed Me To preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the broken-hearted, To proclaim liberty to the captives And recovery of sight to the blind, To set at liberty those who are oppressed (Luke 4:18).
- But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you; for you shall be repaid at the resurrection of the just. (Luke 14:13, 14).
- For “whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? (Rom. 10:13, 14).
- They desired only that we should remember the poor, the very thing which I also was eager to do. (Gal. 2:10).
- But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased. (Heb. 13:16).

Because such events—freak accidents, unexplainable incidents, and such acts of God incidents like earthquake, tornadoes, volcanic activities, avalanches and floods, tsunamis, landslides—are that “the work of God may be revealed,” then the Christians, God’s people, who reflect God’s glory and character have a mandate to respond as God would, with love and compassion—being God’s representatives on earth.

Since some sad events and bad things are past simple explanations or deep theological exploration and blame finding, we need to do, and not do, the following:

First, we need to be:

1. Less judgmental and critical of one another. “Judge not, that you be not judged,” Matt. 7:1.
2. Less self-righteous and pharisaic, simply because you’ve been spared by grace—“there go I but for the grace of God.”
3. Less in partnership with Satan, the accuser of the brethren; less of

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condemning others.

4. Less a part of the problem by being silent than questioning, less intrusive and more accepting.
5. Ask: Are my actions and attitude helping to fuel, rather than undo, the works of Satan, as Satan would, in his diabolical acts on earth today?

Then, we need to be:

1. More accommodating, as in giving the benefit of the doubt, and room for the other person to be human.
2. More sympathetic, as in putting yourself in the other person's shoes before you speak.
3. More of the hands, legs, and eyes of Jesus in whatever we do; to represent Christ.
4. More a part of the solution in any way possible.
5. Ask: Are my actions and attitude helping to undo the works of Satan, bring relief to the sufferer, as Jesus would, if He were to walk the earth today?

II] A Panacea for Misplaced Anger

I am not a mind reader, but I can guess what you are thinking or saying: I know the question on your mind. You are thinking: How can you say to a mother whose 9-year-old son was hit and killed by stray bullets from gunshots of quarrelling gangs that “It happened because it had to happen”? Where is the comfort in that for the woman? Or, saying, “It happened because it had to happen” to a woman whose 7-year-old daughter died of an incurable childhood disease? Is that comforting? “It happened because it had to happen”, tell that to the woman who prayed for a child for many years and gave birth to a child with severe Down syndrome or autism. You are saying, “It happened because it had to happen.” Tell me, preacher, how comforting that is. How does that bring comfort to my situation?

No. You are right. In any of the cases it is not comforting to suggest, or even come close to suggesting, “It happened because it had to happen.” But it may help the mothers from misplaced anger.

For those women, a misplaced anger will eat their souls and offer no redemption or healing for their wounded hearts. A misplaced anger is when the woman whose child was shot by gang member, or the woman whose child died from a childhood disease begin to blame themselves for what happened. They aren’t gods and they are not in total control of things happening around them. To blame the shooter and hold anger against the hospitals and medical profession will get them nowhere. A rightly place anger would be to throw their weight and energy in fighting to reduce gangs, easy access to guns, raise awareness in the medical field to focus on studying, learning and gaining more understanding about the disease, raising funds to support research and finding cures for the disease, so that what happened to them would not happen to another mother. That’s honoring and it is respecting their deceased children and redemptive of their pain.

III] Invitation & Conclusion

From Proposition #3: When next you see a man born blind, a derelict, or one destitute of daily living, don’t turn up your nose and ask, “Who sinned, or who has failed him, or why is he jobless?” Don’t yell, “Get a job!” Don’t rush to judgment and conclusion that he is in that condition because he is lazy or weak-minded. But ask, “How may I be the one to reveal the glory and work of God in this situation? What can I do, how may I act, that I become this person’s miracle, the answer to his prayer, or be “God” in human form to this person? What can I do that after I’m gone, he could swear that ‘that was God or an angel of God’ who just passed by?”

From Proposition #2: You know your own story. You know how you feel most of the time. You know what takes sleep off you every night and what agitates your mind night and day. If today you’ve come to the end of your rope and you are determined to cross the line, going forward to choose peace and grace over guilt and self-depreciation, I ask you to write a little note to

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yourself, that today, you are determined to cross over the line to peace, joy, life, and total surrender to God. Don't quit on life. Don't give up hope. On the contrary, *“Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life”* (1 Tim. 6:12). *“Choose life,”* (Deut. 30:19). Say, *“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me”* (Philip. 4:13). There's power in the name of Jesus to break every yoke and set the captives free.

From Proposition #1: There are no accidents in a world governed by an Intelligent Mind. You remind yourself that you are not here by your own will and power. There's a purpose, a divine plan. You are not an accident. Remember, Jeremiah 1:5, *“Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you.”* No matter how hard, difficult or strange life may have been for you, you are not a cosmic mistake. God did not make any mistake about you. *“For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth [that includes you], visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him [that includes you as well]”* (Col. 1:16; insert mine). There's no disaster or misfortune that has happened or can happen in your life that's not redeemable, and no tragedy that can come your way that God cannot bring good out of. Romans 8:28—*“And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.”* What does not make sense today, in time and space, will make abundant sense and meaning when viewed in the backdrop of the eternal storyline of the One Story of God.

Is Your Mind Made Up?

In 1992, Frank, a homeless wanderer who was looking for meaning in his life came to the door of a young Amish family. They kindly took him in and tried to help him, believing that he had a genuine desire to shake off his old ways of life and live the Christian life. Weeks passed and one day Frank was gone. Not empty-handed though, with \$800.00 from the family. He left a note on the table. It reads: “I'm very sorry, Amos, to be doing this to you. Please forgive me, will you? Frank.” Meaning that: Before the crime was committed, and while it was in the process, the confession or apology was also taking place.

I have told this true story of Frank to show why changes don't happen. Not because there's not enough power in Christ but because the individual isn't ready. The prayer of confession or repentance is from the mouth, not from the heart. While we are crying to God to help and change us, we are at the same time, making plans to remain the same or commit the same sin. The decision is half-hearted, and half-hearted decisions do not attract supernatural powers or divine resources. Just like Frank, stealing yet confessing and apologizing, while walking away with the loot.

There is a saying, "When the student is ready, the teacher appears." Here is my belief: **A Made up Mind Attracts the Powers and Resources of Heaven, along with an Abundance of Destiny Helpers, which Leads to Divine Breakthroughs.** Or, putting it another way, **A Mind made up sets off a chain of divine synchronicities leading to surprising outcomes.** The powers of heaven are at the disposal of the person whose mind is made up for God. We read in 2 Chronicles 16:9, *"For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show Himself strong on behalf of those whose heart is loyal to Him."*

Can we change? Can we repent? Do we have the guts to break from our past and move on in a new direction? My answer is Yes and No. I know the Bible commands us to repent. John the Baptist preached repentance; Jesus preached it, and Jesus' apostles preached repentance as well. Yet, the apostle Paul reminds us, in Romans 2:4, that it is God's goodness that leads us to repentance. *"Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and long-suffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?"* In John 6:44, Jesus says, *"No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day."* If we cannot change or repent the Bible wouldn't have commanded us to. The power to change is not in us but is promised, available and guaranteed (See Jn. 1:12, 13; Acts 1:8; Philip. 2:13; Gal. 2:20; Eph. 2:9, 10; 3:20). What's expected is a mind that is truly made up. Unfortunately, this is usually the missing piece.

Is your mind made up? I mean is it truly made up to go in a different direction the Holy Spirit is beckoning you to go? When you are ready, all the

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powers of heaven will be at your disposal. To quote Hudson Taylor, “There are three stages to every great work of God; first it is impossible, then it is difficult, then it is done.” The Holy Spirit is here, and He is living in you. Jesus is here and in you. God is here and in you. The only way to unlock divine power and unleash divine resources is to have a mind that is truly made up. It is not enough to be prayed for, you must be willing to say, “All to Jesus I surrender,” and sincerely do so, let go. Then you can stand still and do as Moses commanded his people when they faced the Red Sea,

And Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid. Stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord, which He will accomplish for you today. For the Egyptians [your troubling issue] whom you see today, you shall see again no more forever. The Lord will fight for you, and you shall hold your peace” (Exodus 14:13, 14).

I conclude this with the much loved and quoted Prayer of St. Francis:

Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace;
Where there is hatred, let me sow charity;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is error, truth;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light; and
Where there is sadness, joy.
O, Divine Master,
Grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console;
To be understood as to understand;
To be loved as to love;
For it is in giving that we receive;
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
And it is in dying to ourselves that we are born to eternal life.
Amen.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Write a reaction essay of about 1000 to 1500 words in response to “It happened because it had to happen,” highlighting those areas or points of view you consider
 - a. The strong points,
 - b. The weak points, and
 - c. The gray areas in the presentation.
 - d. The balanced Biblical exegesis, and
 - e. Humanistic therapeutic approach.
 - f. Acceptable in Jail church service but debatable in churches in the community.
2. If you could sit with the author, what questions would you like to ask him, and why?
3. i) What part is most helpful to you? ii) What part is most disturbing? iii) What part is like “a breath of fresh air” to you? and iv) What part provides a new understanding/approach to life’s problems?
4. The whole chapter rests on the two passages in John 9, the man blind from birth, and Luke 13, the Tower of Siloam that collapsed and killed many people and Pilate’s ritual killings. Name current instances and modern-day stories that are analogous to these two events, that is, buildings collapsing with many trapped and dead, ethnic, and political cleansing in different countries, and birth deformities/birth defects. How do communities of faith respond to these events?
5. The rest of the chapter seems to build upon this statement in the introduction: “Nothing should be strange or unheard of anymore when we acknowledge that we live in a sick world inhabited by knuckleheads, governed by knuckleheads who have sold their souls to the devil in exchange for wealth and fame.” Isn’t that a slanted, pessimistic view of the world? How appropriate or inappropriate? (See 2 Timothy chapter 3). Discuss.
6. Why should Christians living in this physical world not be bothered

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or anxious with Satan referred to as the “the prince of the power of the air,” “the ruler of this world,” and “the god of this age” (Eph. 2:2; John 14:30; 2 Cor. 4:4)? Give scriptures to support your answer and explain where lies the strength and security of the believer.

7. What do you think of the concept, “It happened because it had to happen” and how it was preached, especially following the book of Lamentations? (1) Is it something applicable only in prisons or, to those in the regular churches as well? Discuss. (2) Losses come in different forms and shapes, such as, loss of freedom, loss of health or dwindling vitality due to aging, loss of a loved one, loss of a business deal, loss of a vital relationship, loss of means of gainful employment, loss of ability to perform some tasks as previously, loss of memory, loss of hearing, taste, vision or feeling sensations in some areas, loss of a body part, loss of peace of mind, etc. What losses have you experienced recently or are experiencing now? How are you coping?
8. Have you ever read the book of Lamentations in the Bible? Its name in the Hebrew Bible is the first word, HOW! That’s a primordial cry. Life is full of “how” questions, often asked from a feeling of shock and despair. a) If any, what are some of the “how” questions you have lived through, and b) is this a season in your life when you are perplexed, dumbfounded, and, like Jeremiah, asking “How”? Discuss.
9. Explain why you agree or disagree: “Many achievers, scientists, inventors, and authors whose work and life have impacted the world did not have a problem or trouble-free life. They achieved and contributed to the world, not because of good health, fortunes, inheritance, support, and resources, but in spite of all their handicaps and limitations. They transcended their condition in a way that could make them earn the title of ‘saints among us.’” If you agree, please give some examples to support your answer.
10. Of the seven stages of grieving, name the stage (1) that’s often inadvertently prolonged or unduly shortened, (2) in which people seem to get stuck, and what may help to unstock them from being trapped

in the stage, and move on, (3) least understood by friends and easily misinterpreted as wanting undue attention than moving on.

11. What's your take on the 3 propositions?
 - a. There are no accidents in a world ruled by a Sovereign Intelligent Mind.
 - b. Freak accidents and misfortunes that defile logical explanations and are no-blame events abound in a misaligned world, such as we live in, John 9:1-5; Luke 13:1-5.
 - c. Such events and mishaps are that the work of God may be revealed either through direct divine intervention or God's intervention through the acts of God's children.
12. The author states, "What I mean by there are no accidents is that the REAL accidents or misfortunes are those tragedies that EVEN GOD cannot redeem or bring out any eventual good out of the accident or misfortune." How convinced or satisfied are you with that notion? Did he establish his points with the examples given? Discuss how thorough or inadequate that was.
13. "In a misaligned, skewed, out-of-sync world, freak accidents are bound to happen, yet God is busy healing and restoring the world and God is asking us to be partners with Him in the recovery venture." Justify or refute that statement and buttress your points with Scriptures.
14. From Jesus' response in the two passages, John 9:1-7 and Luke 13:1-5, the author deduced that Jesus was, in essence, saying, "No Logical Explanation or Blame Necessary; It Could Have Been Your Lot, My Lot, or Anyone Else's." Do you agree with that? Explain why you do or don't.
15. (i) How was the work of God revealed in (1) the blind man from birth in John 9, (2) the woman bent over for 18 years in Luke 13, and (3) raising Lazarus from the grave in John 11? (ii) How is God's work being revealed in the world today? (iii) How have you experienced "the work of God" today?

16. Point 4 sentence reads, “Jesus healed the man to show the heart of God, who God is, what God was like, and that God could deliver from a birth defect malady.” Point 5 sentence that follows reads, “Jesus made the blind man an active participant in his own healing. Jesus anointed his eye with mud and sent him to wash in a pool.” Why was it important that the sightless man was made to demonstrate his faith by tapping his way to the pool?
17. “After a tragedy, some people spend the rest of their life wailing and bemoaning the things they have lost and remain blinded and unresponsive to myriads of resources they still have left. If they would just embrace the remains that’s left, they probably could build a new empire from the ashes of their past.” How can you help anyone in a similar situation described in the statement?
18. “You may not be able to control everything in your life, but you can control your attitude; regardless of any situation, you may still choose your attitude. In the end, attitude is everything; your attitude determines your altitude, that is, how far you go in life. The keyword here is attitude, your personal disposition regardless of prevailing circumstances.” (1) Why was attitude a factor in this man’s healing? (2) How critically important is attitude in life? (3) People say, “Your attitude determines your altitude.” If this is true, how come we have nasty persons with bad attitudes and foul spirits in high offices in government, business, and even church? Discuss.
19. If the author’s comments are true, what then are the implications of this paragraph in ministry today? “Nothing you’ve done or that’s been done to you has changed who God is, or who God is to you, or how God feels about you. The man who was born blind (John 9) and “woman who had a spirit of infirmity eighteen years, and was bent over and could in no way raise herself up” (Luke 13:11) were both God’s image bearers, even in their deformed conditions.”
20. Explain the possible three-fold purposes suggested by the author. He said that whatever has happened to any person may eventually serve

one or all the three, one way or another.

21. Explain why proposition #3: “God invites us to be partners with Him in every aspect of restoration of human dignity, feeding the hungry and clothing the naked, advocating for fairness, justice, and mercy” and all of Part 4 may be summed up with Ephesians 2:10, which reads, “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.”
22. How do you make sense of this? “God does not orchestrate evil, sickness, poverty, war, carnage and untold sufferings in the world, but God has allowed such in His world that the works of God in reversing Satan’s plan may be revealed and that God’s people may find ministry of compassion and act like their Father to undo the works of sin and Satan.” Explain it in the light of the Prayer of St. Francis that concludes the session.
23. The author explains his approach as an effort to prevent misplaced anger. (1) Explain why you are satisfied or not satisfied with it. (2) Is a vengeful spirit synonymous to a misplaced anger? Explain.
24. (i) How important is a “made-up-mind” to change? (ii) Explain how the saying, “When the student is ready, the teacher appears,” is helpful in understanding the individual’s role (the student) and the ready, immediately available help from the Holy Spirit (the teacher) in the saying. (iii) “We change our behavior when the pain of staying the same becomes greater than the pain of changing. Consequences give us the pain that motivates us to change.” (Dr. Henry Cloud & Dr. John Townsend). Do you agree or disagree with them? Comment.

Epilogue

(Especially to Pastors and Church Leaders of My Generation) “Another Generation Arose After Them Who Did Not Know The LORD,” (Jdg. 2:10)

For quite some time, since the turn of the century, I had been captivated by the sad report at the end of the book of Joshua and beginning of the book of Judges in the Bible. A couple of verses in those books had arrested my attention and led me to shift my priorities and refocus my ministry. One big factor was that, at that time, my world revolved around teenagers and young adults, because I was teaching in middle and high schools in Brooklyn, New York. I couldn't imagine how little my generation has done to equip and prepare the next generation in terms of character, virtue and spirituality. Here are the verses:

Israel served the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, who had known all the works of the LORD which He had done for Israel ... So the people served the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great works of the LORD which He had done for Israel... When all that generation had been gathered to their fathers, *another generation arose after them who did not know the LORD nor the work which He had done for Israel* (Josh. 24:31; Jdg. 2:7, 10; emphasis mine).

“Another generation arose after them who did not know the LORD nor the work which He had done for Israel” (Jdg. 2:10b). How did that happen? It happened because the generation that followed Joshua dropped the baton. They did not heed the injunction to tell the story to their children, who would in turn tell their own children of the wonderful works of God. After

this piece of information, the rest of the book of Judges is a continuous chain of sordid events and unbridled spiral spiritual downfall. We would later read, “*In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes,*” (Jdg. 17:6). Violence, sexual immorality and self-serving idolatrous practices were so prevalent that this verse, (17:6), was repeated verbatim as the closing verse of the book, Judges 21:25.

Moses had told them, “*And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall TEACH THEM diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up,*” (Deut. 6:6, 7; emphasis mine). However, they failed to teach their children. They failed to tell and retell their story of God.

A Story of Two Uncomfortable Extremes

Today, across the globe the story of Christendom reads like a story of two extremes; like “A Tale of Two Cities,” an 1859 historical novel by Charles Dickens, which indeed was a tale about two cities—London and Paris, and the intertwined lives of people living in those two cities during the upheaval of the French Revolution. It was the best of times in London perhaps, but it was the worst of times in Paris, where chaos reigned. Dickens had penned, “It was **the best of times**, it was **the worst of times**, it was the **age of wisdom**, it was the **age of foolishness**, it was the **epoch of belief**, it was the **epoch of incredulity**, it was the **season of light**, it was **the season of darkness**, it was the **spring of hope**, it was **the winter of despair.**” Wow! What a set of opposite dualities! Bringing it home, today, it’s the story of two persons enmeshed in the same realities and staring at the same glass: one sees a glass half empty; another sees a glass half full. It all depends on what preposition—*in* or *out*—describes your faith. Even in times of crises, faith people confidently sing, “Because He lives, I can face tomorrow; Because Christ lives, all fear is gone. Because I know He holds my future, And life is worth the living just because He lives” (Bill & Gloria Gaither).

On one extreme in the story of Christendom, church attendance had dwindled to near zero, many openly talk about a post-Christian era, and

church buildings that once housed thousands of worshipers have either been sold and turned into spaces for commercial uses, or remodeled for housing or more beneficial civic uses. The resultant spiritual vacuum has been unashamedly exploited by some entrepreneurial church or gospel celebrities who have found “doing church” a thriving and booming enterprise, and religious TV production a lucrative “end-time” venture for solicitation. The people of my age group in some parts of the West tell childhood stories how their parents had dragged them to church, any time the doors of the church were opened, because they didn’t give them other options. As a result, the life and culture of the church gave them their roots, formed their worldview and churchgoing remains part of their weekly routine. Yet, modern thoughts forbade them from pushing religion down the throats of their children. They prayed and hoped their children would grow up and choose a religious belief and their children did; just not the religion or God that their parents serve. They had shielded their children from those things that would have toughened them, built their character and developed resilience and other virtues in them. Now they are either scared of their children or scared for them, or both.

On the other extreme in the story of Christendom, with new churches and denominations springing up here and there every day on every street and church attendance bursting at the seams you expect a godly, sane or transformed society but what you see is corruption, insanity and decadence everywhere, even on Church Streets and Sanctuary Avenues. Is the old gospel still being proclaimed in those places, or is it a watered-down, adulterated, diminished version of it being preached? In some African and Third World countries, those of my age group are happy to see the growth of vibrant, indigenous churches and how fervently the young people have embraced the church but are at the same time confused at what they are seeing and are unsure how to react—with lamentation or jubilation. They question if what’s happening is a spiritual transformation or spiritual aberration. Are they witnessing a church that’s liberating or one that’s enslaving, or emerging church leaders (and self-professed prophets) who are true shepherds of God’s flock or wolves in sheep’s clothing ready to devour or fleece the sheep? Are they

looking at the world deformed into the church, or the church malformed into the world? It is hard to tell but it is one or the other. It is an incomplete metamorphosis on both sides. The result of the amalgamation is a monstrous 21st century Holy Roller, in the name of Christian religion, that's neither analogous to an earthbound caterpillar nor a sky bound butterfly.

One part of the globe, some parts of the West, is suffering from spiritual malnutrition and apathy, the other half, some parts of Africa and the Third World, is suffering from spiritual obesity and hysteria. Neither is a condition of spiritual vitality. If Charles Dickens was right in the past, he is even more so today. These are “the best of times” as well as “the worst of times,” “the spring of hope” and “the winter of despair.” Under life's pressures, you either break or stretch, shrink or expand, get better or bitter, grow or cower, decrease or increase, but you cannot remain the same. Thankfully, in any circumstance, the people of faith can move from abject misery and squalor to hope and resurrection. During the pandemics of our time, faith propels us from meaninglessness to purposefulness, from disgrace, death and the grave on Good Friday to new life and resurrection on Easter Sunday. Nothing challenges the authenticity of our faith than the days we live in, and nothing proves, validates and affirms our faith better than the pressures of life we face. True faith sheds light on the darkness around us and brightens our little corner.

Will the Parents Please Stand to be Counted?

The Charlatans May Remain Seated.

To those younger in faith and age, Paul described himself playing the role of a nursing mother. *“But we were gentle among you, just as a nursing mother cherishes her own children. So, affectionately longing for you, we were well pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God, but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us,”* (1 Thess. 2:7, 8). Paul also stated how he played a fatherly role; *“As you know how we exhorted, and comforted, and charged every one of you, as a father does his own children, that you would walk worthy of God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory,”* (1 Thess. 2:11, 12). Paul was a true parent who could be a caring father or a nursing mother, playing the particu-

lar role that met the needs of the spiritual babes. Pastors, Bible teachers, and seminary instructors are many in the church but, sadly, fathers, or parents, in the faith are few. *“For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers,”* (1 Cor. 5:15a).

What separates pastors, evangelists and Bible teachers from spiritual parents, that is, fathers and mothers in the faith? Sometimes they are one and the same, but not always so. Some pastors, teachers and preachers do their ministry, and many get paid for it and there’s nothing wrong with that. *“For the Scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain,’ and, ‘The laborer is worthy of his wages.’”* *“Do you not know that those who minister the holy things eat of the things of the temple, and those who serve at the altar partake of the offerings of the altar?”* (1 Tim. 5:18; 1 Cor. 9:13; also 1 Cor. 9:9-14). Problems come when the temptation to make a name, build a towering religious empire and monuments to self, monetary gains and profiteering loom large as the motive and motivation for the ministry of preaching or helping the less privileged. In such scenarios, the relics of the demons of greed, autonomy and self-aggrandizement from the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11) would be found on the scene. Parents on the other hand are altruistic to a great degree. Parents make untold sacrifices. By their other-centered caregiving, parents exemplify, reflect and amplify God’s unconditional love to their biological and spiritual children.

Parents spend and are spent in the process of parenting biological or spiritual children. They are happy to do it, and will do it again, even when their sacrifice is not appreciated, and their love is not reciprocated. They nurture, encourage and teach in hope that they can impart and let go a nourished individual. Their joy is not in the size of the paycheck—which is nonexistent, but the lives they’ve impacted for the greater good. Parents invest themselves. They heartily expend their time and energy, which have no monetary equivalent or value. Above all, parents model. They teach by action rather than by words. This is the reason Paul could write to the Corinthian Christians, *“Therefore I urge you, imitate me,”* *“Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ”* (1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1). Jesus had warned the multitude and His disciples regarding

the religious teachers and leaders of His generation, the Scribes and Pharisees, who taught the right things but were doing the opposite. Jesus cautioned, “*Do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do,*” (Matt. 23:3c). They were charlatans. Sadly, Jesus’ indictment could be said of many great preachers today, “*For they say [they preach], and do not do.*” As the saying goes, “actions speak louder than words.”

Now, I am a senior citizen. If you are from my generation, you probably can claim three generations as dependents on your income tax form: your dependent parents or aged parents-in-laws, sadly, your grownup children—who really haven’t been weaned off yet, and your grandchildren who are the present jewels of your life. (I hope and pray you are not saddled with such responsibilities.) Another portion of the Scriptures that has gripped my attention in recent years is 2 Corinthians 12:14, 15, where the Apostle Paul writes,

Now for the third time I am ready to come to you. And I will not be burdensome to you; for *I do not seek yours, but you. For children ought not to lay up for the parents, but the parents for the children. And I will gladly spend and be spent for your souls; though the more abundantly I love you, the less I am loved,*” (emphasis mine).

Paul’s words to the Corinthian church echo the old school mentality and approach to ministry (which I pray will return to Christian ministry). Just like you most probably were, Christian leaders who embodied these words of the Apostle Paul mentored me. They spent and were spent for us. They modeled for us hard work, studying and lifetime learning, intercessory prayers, integrity and selfless service. Sadly, today as ever, there are too many charlatans parading themselves as ministers of God and leaders of God’s people, (2 Cor. 11:13-15) and “*false prophets... in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves,*” (Matt. 7:15). As the apostle Paul did, I do caution myself as well, “*Who [am I] to judge another’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand,*” (Rom. 14:4).

Moses had said to God’s people of old times, “*Teach them,*” (Deut. 6:7). In what is often called the Great Commission, Mathew 28:18-20, Jesus gave

us the mandate to “teach them,” (v. 19). In the same vein, Jesus commissioned Peter, “*Feed My lamb... Feed My sheep,*” (Jn. 21:15-17). In Romans 1:14, 15, the apostle Paul says he’s a debtor both to the Greeks and barbarians, to the wise and unwise to preach the gospel to them all. I believe you and I are indebted to pass on the baton of authentic faith to the next generation. This book, *Teach Them*, is my attempt, as feeble as it may be, to achieve this purpose. It is not about book sales; it is about our collective responsibility to “teach them.” You and I are debtors of the grace and mercy of God and we dare not be quiet. Let’s be the true fathers to this generation. True fathers who, rather than siphon from them will make sacrifices to equip them. I pray that it will not be said, when you and I have gone off the stage, that *another generation arose after them who did not know the LORD nor the work which He had done.*

The Law of Entropy

In general, entropy is neither good nor bad. Entropy is defined as a state of disorder or decline into disorder; it’s a state of chaos that makes no sense and isn’t predictable. It is the natural tendency of things to lose order. Left to its own devices, life will always become less structured. Entropy is an important mental model, because it applies to every part of our lives. It is inescapable, and even if we try to ignore it, the result is a collapse of some sort. Truly understanding entropy leads to a radical change in the way we see the world.

This two-volume book, *Teach Them*, strives to provide help to some disturbing spiritual questions. To do nothing is to perpetuate the status quo and watch things degenerate further. To attempt or to do something positive is to open the doors to the possibility of changes. Like it or not, change is inevitable. Yet, when we are proactive, the changes are planned and intentional than changes that are forced on us. According to the laws of the universe, nothing is static; things are bound to change in some direction.

Sadly, when left to themselves, things often progress in the negative direction, from bad to worse, from order to disorder. For example, do no damage or refurbishing to a house or building but leave it to itself, or do no harm or

nourishing to a marriage but leave it to follow its own course, or leave a child with no boundaries to grow and evolve on his own and see what happens in ten years. The result is devolution. It is the Law of Entropy. If you got hold of daily newspaper headlines some 100 years ago, the headlines might contain the same crimes as in the news today, but today's details would be so gory and gruesome they made the century old news like child's play in comparison. It's also what the apostle Paul wrote in his epistle to his protégé, Timothy, that would characterize this age:

Now the Spirit expressly says that IN LATTER TIMES some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron.

But know this, that IN THE LAST DAYS perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God... But evil men and impostors will GROW WORSE AND WORSE (or "GO FROM BAD TO WORSE," NIV), deceiving and being deceived.

For THE TIME WILL COME when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables (1 Tim. 4:1, 2; 2 Tim. 3:1-4, 13; 4:3, 4; emphasis mine).

The "*terrible times in the last days*" (2 Tim. 3:1; NIV) are already upon us. Let's work together on a project such as this while time is still on our side. Look through the chapters; skim the content. How many copies of this book can you put in the hands of the young people, teenagers and young adults, or young in faith or young both in age and faith around you? How can you facilitate distribution in a college/university? All I am trying to do is appeal to you that we "*Teach Them*" together, one way or another as a joint project.

Six Words that Sum up this Two-Volume Work

If you asked me to succinctly describe this work, or give a summary of its intent, I would employ six words: **“Passing on the Baton of Faith”**. That’s what it’s all about. That’s what the Apostle Paul urged Timothy to do as Paul’s time for transitioning into the next life drew nearer, and believe it or not, our own time is drawing nearer, too. Paul had urged Timothy, *“And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also,”* (2 Tim. 2:2). Four generations, or four runners in the relay of faith, are sandwiched in that little verse. The first generation or first runner, Apostle Paul, passed the baton to his protégé, Timothy, in the presence of many witnesses. Although “many witnesses” were beneficiaries of Paul’s teachings, Timothy was Paul’s intentional choice as his teammate in running the race. Timothy, the second generation, passed the baton to “faithful men.” “Faithful men,” the third generation, passed the baton to “others also,” the fourth generation. “Others also,” hopefully ran to the finish line. The apostle Paul didn’t want a repeat of “dropping the baton,” as it had happened after Joshua’s generation. A second reason for this work would be to honor those who had come before us, who had faithfully and sacrificially served the Lord and their generations and had eventually passed on the baton to us.

The interesting thing about passing on the baton in a relay race is that, in the brief moment of the exchange, the two runners—the one who has possession of the baton and the next in line to receive it—must be in motion simultaneously: one losing momentum out of exhaustion and another accelerating and gaining momentum. When the baton exchange is smooth, it enhances the chances of winning the race, but when the exchange is clumsy, even the team of the fastest and best runners stand the chance of losing to a not-so-talented relay team with a smoother baton exchange. It’s game over if a runner accidentally drops the baton or bumps into the other during the split second of the two runners touching each other. Just six words aptly capture the essence of this work: **PASSING ON THE BATON OF FAITH** to the next generation to the end that they may be well positioned to *“Remember*

Teach Them

*now [their] Creator in the days of [their] youth, Before the difficult days come,
And the years draw near when [they] say, "I have no pleasure in them," (Eccl.
12:1).*

Appendix 1

Introducing *Auntie 'Wanle Memorial Foundation/Back to Basics Ministry*

Back To Basics Ministry/Auntie 'Wanle Memorial Foundation:

Primarily to Serve University & College Students Everywhere, Beginning with OAU-IFE and UNILAG Students in Nigeria

I have been blessed with exceptional women who have sacrificed much and sown bountifully and selflessly into my life, beginning with my mother, Mama Omoboade Asande Ojewale, my late wife, Olawanle Titilayo Ojewale, who died of endometrial cancer on March 17, 2014, and my present wife, Praise Onyeka Ojewale.



Given: May 26, 1959
Taken: March 17, 2014

Olawanle and I were wedded on April 5, 1986.

Olawanle and I first met in the mid-70s as students of the University of Ife (now, Obafemi Awolowo University; Unife, for short). She studied economics; I studied agriculture. We were both born-again Christians from different high schools and we joined the Student Christian Movement (SCM) of the institution. We were especially in proximity as members of the SCM during fellowship meetings, Bible studies, prayer meetings and outreach

programs where we served together as brother and sister in Christ, but marriage never came into our discussions until we both graduated. After graduation, and

for my National Youth Service Corps in 1979-1980, I was the national traveling secretary for the SCM of Nigeria, and during that time I visited more than 20 colleges and universities in Nigeria. After our marriage in April 1986, we both made Lagos our home. I was working with Every Home for Christ (EHC), pioneering, and directing its Universities & Colleges (Literature) Ministry and the Prayer School Ministry. I traveled extensively and visited or mailed cartons of literature to more than 40 colleges and universities in Nigeria.

In God's providence, I became the first full-time Protestant chaplain of the Chapel of Christ Our Light of the University of Lagos, Akoka, Lagos, in 1990. That word, "providence" (or Divine Providence) in the last sentence sums up the process, and it is weightier than I can unpack or even attempt to unravel. True to her nickname, "Ms. Independent," Olawanle was not one who readily aligned herself with the next new thing or new sermon series that her self-professed Christian strategist, visionary-dreamer-husband came up with (and who would blame her with my track record?), but when she did eventually sign on, she was the one person whose feedback I craved, cherished and could not ignore.

By and large, our lives and ministries revolved around the youth, students, university campuses, students' ministry, and equipping the next generation. We strove not only to be able to pass the baton of faith to those coming after us but much more to be said that we bequeathed a legacy of authentic *faith of our fathers* that's substantive in content and character. It is for this reason that the circulation of this not-for-sale two-volume book, *Teach Them*, donations to Back to Basics Ministry, the rent from Olawanle Memorial House in Isolo, Lagos, and other joint assets will go into the coffers of Auntie 'Wanle Memorial Foundation to be used for distributing copies of the two-volume book to students in both Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU), Ile-Ife, and University of Lagos, (Unilag), Akoka, Lagos. These two institutions helped to shape our worldviews, and the relationships we forged therein provided stability and support system for us. Olawanle Memorial House at No. 12, Samuel Okpara Street, Ilamose Estate, Oke-Afa, Isolo, LAGOS, Nigeria, will also serve as the official headquarters of Auntie 'Wanle Memorial Foundation/Back to Basics Ministry.

Olawanle Was Here

I was a science teacher in middle schools in Brooklyn, New York City, back in the day when chalk and blackboard were in use, which was before the era of smart boards. I sometimes traveled from class to class to teach, especially when other teachers and classes were using the science rooms. Most teachers would have come across this kind of graphic art: you got to a new class and by the corner of the chalkboard you'd find the decorated scribble: "**Reggie was here,**" or, "**Clara was here.**" It was usually a few students in the whole school who had this habit, and you would find their fingerprints on the blackboards of every class where they'd been. Reggie and Clara were usually some characters in the school. I always erased the scribble with a smile, because I didn't think it was ordinary graffiti; I thought I understood what the kids were saying or trying to convey. They were saying, "I'm not invisible; see me, notice me for who I am." They were saying or trying to say to all and sundry that they were important; that their lives mattered, that they'd left their footprints behind, that they had indeed been here. Reggie and Clara were not phantoms they were real and had been here.

What Reggie and Clara were doing on the chalkboard is what every one of us craved for. It is a search for the meaning of our lives. Do we matter? Do we count in the scheme of things? Have we made any significant impact? Would our footprints be noticeable in the sands of time? Have we sung our song? Did we dance our dance? Did we fully play our part before exiting the stage of life? Would anyone miss us when we are dead and gone? Would there be any writing on some non-erasable chalkboard, some painting or photograph, or some engravings, or something chiseled on the curbs or pavement that read: "He was here; Reggie was here." After he learned of the passing of my late wife, Olawanle, a fellow chaplain shared a Jewish saying with me. He said the Jews say, "Only those who are truly dead are those who've been forgotten." Olawanle fully played her part in life, and especially, in my life. I am proof positive, and this work is, that OLAWANLE WAS HERE! OLAWANLE IS STILL HERE. She's alive in the hearts and memories of family and friends.

By the same token:

Gideonite Oladele Otaniyi was here

Pa. (Deacon) Paul Omehen Uwaya was here

The Reverend (Prof./Mrs.) Kenny Ayenibiowo was here

The Reverend Gbenga Ewejobi was here

The Reverend Dele Ijagbulu was here

Bishop Titus Gbenga David was here

The Reverend (Dr.) Bisi Orebayo was here

Evangelist (Reverend) Bola Sanni was here

THEY ARE STILL HERE, in the hearts and memories of families and friends.

A Book of Remembrance

In a sense, this is my book of remembrance. Even God has a book of remembrance (Malachi 3:16).

The Old Testament prophet Malachi mentioned “the book of remembrance.” A book of remembrance, among other things, will likely provide a simple record of and memorial to the deceased, the name of the deceased and a suitable epitaph. Isn’t it interesting that God would have such a book?

In four future generations (or one hundred years) from now everyone who knows or remembers them (and me, too) would have died—and with that all their memories will fade away. At that time, I pray that this work, *Teach Them*, dedicated in their honor, and this ministry of book distribution would continue in one form or another and thus outlive and outlast us, and our remembrances.

We read in Malachi 3:16—

“Then those who feared the Lord spoke to one another. And the Lord listened and heard them; so a BOOK OF REMEMBRANCE was written before Him for those who fear the Lord and who meditate on His name,” (emphasis mine).

This will not be a true book of remembrance without giving you the opportunity to recall, remember and revisit family members and friends who

had been an integral part of your life and with whom you had shared life and joint stories but had departed to glory. When they departed that part of your life in relationship with them was gone; yet, even though they are no more with you a part of them is still with you, if not physically, emotionally and in your subconscious self. Their story was not complete without your part, and your story is incomplete without their part. Together you had woven an embroidered, multicolored tapestry of (borrowing from a book title) “The Story of Us, The Story of God.” In the box below, insert the name or names of some individuals you will like to remember, who are no longer here, because they have gone to life beyond. Remember the Yiddish saying I cited earlier, “Only those who are truly dead are those who’ve been forgotten.”

Today, I thankfully and fondly remember:

1. _____
was here, and is still here in one form or another
2. _____
was here, and is still here in one form or another
3. _____
was here, and is still here in one form or another
4. _____
was here, and is still here in one form or another
5. _____
was here, and is still here in one form or another

¹³ But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. ¹⁴ For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those

who sleep in Jesus.

¹⁵ For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. ¹⁸ Therefore comfort one another with these words. (1 Thess. 4:13-18).

“Love is stronger than death even though it can’t stop death from happening, but no matter how hard death tries it can’t separate people from love. It can’t take away our memories either. In the end, life is stronger than death.”

Unknown

Appendix 2

The Mission of *Back to Basics Ministry* in a Nutshell

Primarily, *Back to Basics Ministry* is a literature saturation organization that seeks to work with, through and in partnership with the local churches and university/college chapels.

Teach Them Books 1 and 2 are our primary ministry tools. With these, we seek to

1. Enhance the Youth, Discipleship, Small Groups, and other ministries of the local church/chapel through our resource materials, books 1 and 2, and seek the support of the local church for free distribution of these books outside the four walls of the church/chapel.
2. Encourage, build, and equip students in colleges and universities, our future leaders, through free distribution of books 1 and 2.
3. Cheerleaders' Program: Adopt-a-High School; to "Catch Them Young" we seek to distribute book 1 to high school graduating students in targeted communities.
4. Cheerleaders' Program: Adopt-a-Prison; to project hope and offer the gospel of transformation through the new life Christ offers to inmates about to return to society through distribution of book 2 in prisons.
5. Connect, Empower, and Support the ministry of missionaries by sending free copies of book 1 and book 2 to help their follow up of new converts and emerging study groups.

Minimum Goal in OAU and Unilag, Nigeria

We hope to strategically, freely distribute Books 1 and 2 to whosoever, in these two institutions of higher learning in Nigeria. As a minimum starting point and yearly goal, by whatever process or manner those in charge deem fit, we hope to freely distribute,

- 1000 copies of Teach Them, Book 1 to First Year students in both OAU and Unilag in September/October or during the orientation for new students or any suitable time during the first semester, (500 copies in each institution) and
- 1000 copies of Teach Them, Book 2 to graduating students in both OAU and Unilag in March/May or any appropriate time during the second semester, (500 copies in each institution).
- Logistically, we may supply 500 copies of each book and leave the timing and method of distribution of the books to the discretion of our liaisons in the institutions. Depending on the judgment of those on ground in the institutions, the two books may be distributed any time and any way they deem best.

Building Relationship with the Local Churches and University Chapels as Partners

Basically, the two-volume publication, Teach Them, is a tool for youth ministry and a resource for one-on-one discipleship. We believe they will enhance the ministry of the local church and college chapel.

The books will neither be sold nor distributed freely in local churches, university/college chapels, or to the public but will be offered as a ministry tool and Christian discipleship resource materials to local churches and college chapels as well as a means to raise funds for free distribution of the books to students in colleges/universities. We will give a complimentary copy of each book to the pastor or chaplain for vetting. We will then ask the pastor or chaplain for a **Church Liaison**, to relieve the pastor of further burden.

The Local Church Liaison

The Local Church Liaison could be a deacon or minister, suggested and recommended by the pastor. The local church liaison will be responsible for creating awareness and displaying the books for at least four Sundays to the local church members—unless the pastor asks for time extension. He/she will offer the books to church members for a stated minimum gift in the following terms:

- Get a book with a minimum donation/gift of \$10.00 or \$XX. (\$XX is the amount suggested by the church/pastor/chaplain).

After about four weeks of creating awareness and exposing the books to the local church, the offerings/donations collected and the remaining books will be collected from the liaison, unless the church asks for extension beyond four weeks. In addition to receipts from the book display we will ask for donations from the church. All donations/gifts will go towards funding the books for free distribution to students in colleges/universities.

Field Staff & Approved Volunteers

The **field staff** and **volunteers** help to initiate relationship with local churches. They visit **pastors** and churches to intimate them with the books as tools for ministry, create awareness for the books and how they could be of use in the local church setting, and also explain the program of free book distribution to students in colleges and universities.

Character Education Books, *creating a future of civility, virtue and decency.*

When the *Teach Them* publications are on display beyond four weeks in a local church, the character education books by Dr. M. O. Ojewale may be displayed alongside and introduced to parents and teachers in the congregation. The titles include, *Moonlight Stories from West Africa*, *Let's Talk About That!*, *Teens of Character*, etc. They are books for sale at discounted prices; and the proceeds are ploughed back into the ministry.

Teach Them

Back to Basics Ministry is committed to resourcing our schools and teachers with materials and resources to help create a future of civility, decency, and virtues without which human society degenerates into a jungle. The books are designed as supplemental or additional resources for English Language teachers (ELA), Social Studies and science teachers. Teachers are free to make copies of any part of the books for their students.

Promotional T-Shirt & Newsletter

For publicity and to create awareness in a local church, volunteers and liaisons may be supplied and wear a T-shirt or Polo shirt with the words, TEACH THEM—Matt. 28:20; 2 Tim. 2:2 in front and BACK TO BASICS MINISTRY in the back. We will update partner churches through a monthly/periodic newsletter.

Seasonal Offers

Periodically, during Easter or Christmas *Back to Basics Ministry* will utilize media in a targeted community to offer free copies of our books. This can be in form of fliers, billboards, posters, or even TV/radio ad. Examples as in the textboxes:

Tired? Blank? Puzzled?

Are you at your wit's end? Does it seem like you've run out of options? Feeling trapped, chained down and locked up in your mind and body? Do you really want to be free from the habits, relationships and lifestyle that have held you captive, against which you are powerless?

WE CAN HELP, AND WE LOVE TO BE OF HELP

Send for a free copy of our book: Pathway to True Freedom & Echoes of Hope from a Prison Chaplain's Prison Ministry

Visit our website: www.backtobasicsministry.org for a free copy

Scared? Angry? Resigned?

Are you confused and unsettled? Are you full of questions and questioning and getting little or no answers? Agitated with doubts and questions about life, purpose, family, God, love, society, afterlife, etc.

WE CAN HELP, AND WE LOVE TO BE OF HELP

Send for a free copy of our book: Biblical Counsels on Thorny Questions for Youth & Truth Seekers

Visit our website: www.backtobasicsministry.org for a free copy

Appendix 3—Free Resources Available on Our Website

Free Resources, e-books, and audio books available on our website—www.BackToBasicsMinistry.org

Christian Publications by the Reverend (Dr.) M. O. Ojewale

1. **God and Suffering**—*A Theology of Hope and Healing*, published 2002, 151 pages
2. **Blessed Are Your Tears**—*Making Sense of Pain and Suffering Through Community and Storytelling*, published 2001, 149 pages
3. **Emotional Wellness**—*A Biblical Recourse to Mental and Emotional Well-Being*, published 2004, 191 pages
4. **Even a Caged Bird Sings**—*Discover how you may “Rejoice in the Lord Always”*, published 2004, 96 pages

Christian Audio Books by the Reverend (Dr.) M. O. Ojewale

1. **Uncle Mike Answers Your Questions**—Read by a paid professional, 119,702 words, 21 chapters, 2014.
2. **Why Do Babies Die?** (an excerpt from Uncle Mike Answers Your Questions)—read by Deacon Harry Franklin of Concord Baptist Church of Christ, Brooklyn, NY, 31,653 words, 2015

Character Education Books, especially for public schools and concerned parents interested in promoting civility, decency, and virtues; non-religious, story-based, by Dr. M. O. Ojewale

1. **Success Motivation and Life Skills**—*Promoting Civility, Culture and Character among Teenagers*, published 2008, 320 pages

2. **Moonlight Stories from West Africa**—*Teaching and Learning Social Skills and Life Lessons through Storytelling*, published 2008, 224 pages

Character Education Books, especially for public schools and concerned parents interested in promoting civility, decency, and virtues; non-religious, story-based; teacher-and-students friendly, workbook format, standard/letter paper size (A4 or 8.5" x 11"), downloadable and printable, by Dr. M. O. Ojewale

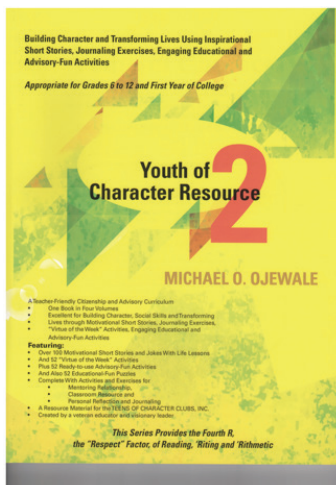
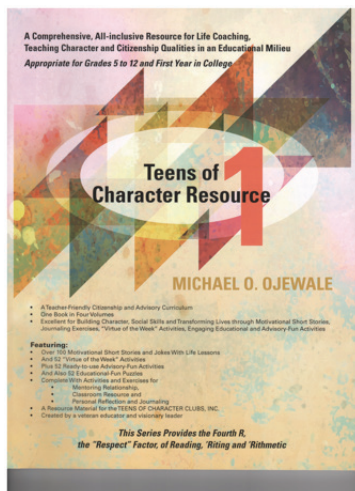
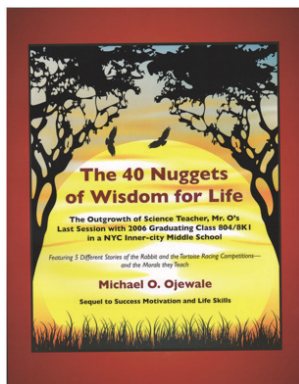
1. **Moonlight Stories from West Africa**—*Featuring Fifteen Tortoise Folktales*, workbook format; published 2012, 224 pages
2. **Let's Talk About That**—*30 Talking Points for Teen Success* (2nd edition of *Success Motivation and Life's Skills*—workbook format, 2017, 208 pages.
3. **The Forty Nuggets of Wisdom for Life**, *Sequel to Success Motivation and Life Skills*, 2008, 166 pages
4. **The Forty Nuggets of Wisdom Virtues Exercise Workbook**, *Students' Workbook and Journal*, 2017, 64 pages
5. **Teens of Character Resource Book 1**—*A Comprehensive, All-inclusive Resource for Life Coaching, Teaching Character and Citizenship Qualities in an Educational Milieu*, published 2013, 240 pages
6. **Youth of Character Resource**, (Teens of Character Book 2), published 2013, 208 pages
7. **Youth With Purpose**, (Teens of Character Book 3), available online as e-book only, 2013, 206 pages; downloadable and printable
8. **Youth With Impact**, (Teens of Character Book 4), available online as e-book only, 2013, 178 pages; downloadable and printable

On Religion and Politics—Free e-books

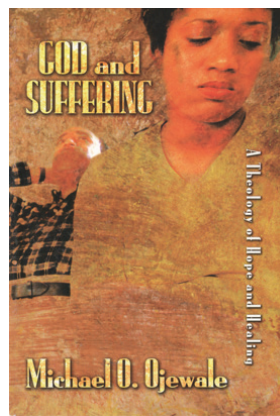
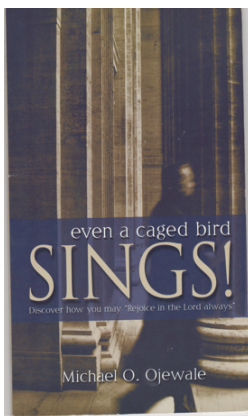
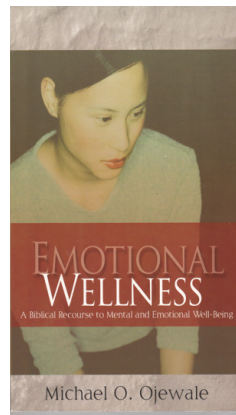
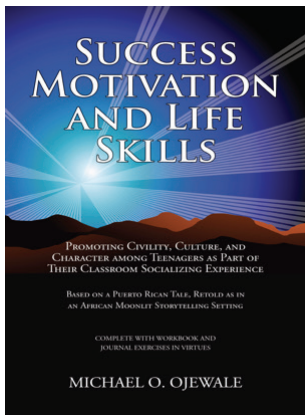
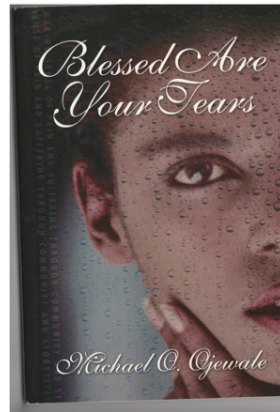
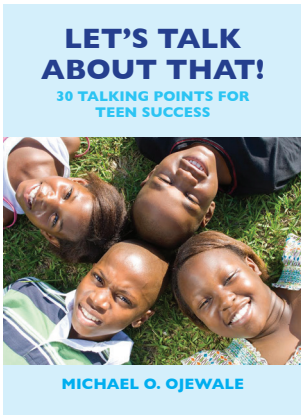
1. **Pulpits, Pews, & Political Parties in the US: Who is Using Who?** Dec. 2020, 24 pages
2. **Nigeria's 60 Tumultuous Years (1960-2020)**—Which Way For-

ward? Dec. 2020, 34 pages

SAMPLE FREE E-BOOKS, and many more, by Dr. Michael O. Ojewale,
AVAILABLE ON OUR WEBSITE @ www.BackToBasicsMinistry.org



Appendix 3—Free Resources Available on Our Website



Modus Operandi

“Teach Them” is NOT FOR SALE. “Teach Them” is circulated in churches on the basis of “Get 1 book for a minimum donation of \$10.00 or \$XX.00”, where \$XX.00 is the amount suggested by the pastor.

Back to Basics Ministry is a Literature Ministry to, and in Partnership with, the Local Church; for Equipping and Encouraging the Youth of Today, the Leaders of Tomorrow, through Distribution of “Teach Them” Publication, Books 1 and 2 in Higher Education Institutions. Our goal is to be a local church and readership-supported literature ministry. We all agree our youths are worth any investment or sacrifice we make today for posterity.

Our appeal to pastors: We kindly ask you to:

1. Read, or browse through the books, or give them to an associate who can do so on your behalf, vet, and make recommendations regarding our proposals. We strive for mutuality and collaboration, where we are a blessing to the mission of your congregation, and you are a blessing to the vision of our ministry.
2. Suggest a trusted associate who will serve as **Church Liaison**, to reduce your workload. We will keep future communications and relationship-building with the liaison, who also will be responsible for displaying and promoting the books within your local church. See appendix 2 in the book for our modus operandi in a nutshell.
3. Since the books are not for sale, and knowing that we seek financial support from your church, we leave it to you to suggest a minimum donation from your members to obtain a copy. Alternatively, in concert with the church liaison, permit us to hold a “30-Minutes Youth Rally” in your church when we bless each youth in attendance with a free copy of *Teach Them* Book 1.

Modus Operandi

4. Come on board by (i) adopting a school, college, prison, or missionary outpost where your church can strategically distribute copies of *Teach Them* at printing cost, (ii) having special editions of *Teach Them* printed for your church/organization, with your church's/organization's info, news and reports inserted, (since we are in it together), and (iii) being the bridge that connects us to neighboring churches and pastors.

About the Author



Michael O. Ojewale, BS (Agric.), MS (Animal Science/Nutrition), MDiv, PhD (Biblical counseling), is an ordained clergyman, a seasoned educator, NYS certified biology/general science teacher, 7-12, board certified clinical chaplain (BCCC), and author of several books, especially Christian/theological and books and

curriculum for Character Education. He published his first work, *The Reality of Life*, in 1984 for the University and College Ministry of *Every Home For Christ* (Nigeria). He's taught at all levels and grades: elementary, middle and high schools (mostly inner city), and doctoral-level seminary students.

Dr. M. Ojewale's first passion is to affirm the "image of God" and dignity in every person, to see people come to know and experience the abundant life available in Christ, and to see them grow and mature in Christlikeness. His second passion is promoting *a future of character, civility, etiquettes and citizenship* as an integral part of classroom culture. He was the Protestant Chaplain of the University of Lagos, Akoka, Lagos-Nigeria, before relocating to the US in fall of 1996. He lived in Brooklyn New York for 18 years where he taught in public schools and also served as an associate pastor (pastor for prayer) in Concord Baptist Church before relocating Upstate. He is currently a Protestant Chaplain in a State Correctional Facility, and a member of Loudonville Community Church, Albany, NY.