

EVEN A CAGED BIRD SINGS!

*Discover how you may
"rejoice in the Lord always"*

even a caged bird
SINGS!

Discover how you may "Rejoice in the Lord always"

Michael O. Ojewale

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To...

*Pa. Benjamin O. Akinbode,
Chief Michael Olorunfemi,
Mr. Francis Ogunbanjo,
Engr. E.O.J. Solagbade, and
Rev. Steve Oluwawalemi*

*for their friendship, support, and unparalleled commitment
toward my housing project in Lagos.*

WORKS BY THE SAME AUTHOR:

The Sun Will Rise Again
Comfort, Hope & Healing
Emotional Wellness
The Caring People

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Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice! Let your gentleness be known to all men. The Lord is at hand. 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. Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things (Phil. 4:4-8).

FOREWORD

God's providential workings never cease to amaze my mind and amuse my heart. Michael, a Nigerian agriculturalist, finds his way to Brooklyn; while I, the son of a minimum wage earner, grew up on a farm that lacked the basic facilities of a mid-twentieth century home. The Lord works through his providential hand and brings us both to faith in Jesus Christ.... In due time Michael and I meet as professor and student through a Distance Education program in Biblical Counseling. Then God takes part of one lecture in which I was demonstrating how the student must teach the counselee how to implement biblical truth and burns it into Michael's mind and heart. Again in due time, God massages this teaching into Michael's own experience and he writes this book, which now I will use in my teaching and counseling ministry.

Through ample biblical and personal illustrations Michael leads the reader into the art of rejoicing in the Lord. He helps us see the "good hand of God" upon us in the midst of trials and suffering. He teaches us how to live our lives in the environment of God. In the process he provides insights into many other dimensions of the Christian life.

Here is a book that is written in language of the pew that even the sophisticated theologian will appreciate. It almost goes without saying that the biblical counselor will find this a great home-

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work assignment for depressed counselees and those suffering from what our society calls low self-esteem.

I commend this book for your personal edification (I certainly was edified reading the manuscript), and for your ministry.

Howard A. Eyrich, ThM, DMin
Associate Pastor, Briarwood Presbyterian Church
Biblical Counseling Professor

P R E F A C E

EVEN A CAGED BIRD SINGS!

By nature, Birdie (or whatever her name) belongs in the jungle; but there she is, confined to what looks like a one-foot cube cage, hanging outside the windows of a pet shop. Birdie's song pierces the air, even rising above the noise of the busy traffic. There is something inviting in her sound. If the shop owner has positioned her outside the windows to advertise the shop, it works. At least, the sound of Birdie's voice attracts me to visit the shop; and, like one interested in a purchase, I engage the attendant in a discussion.

"Will this bird continue to sing cheerily like this if I take her home?" I ask, sounding like a prospective buyer.

"You sure bet," answers the attendant. Then he adds in a measured tone, "As long as she is alive and has food and water, she will sing for you!"

"Singing for her is living out her purpose," booms the shop manager's voice from behind the sales desk, also trying to encourage me to consider a purchase.

I ponder: *Even a caged bird sings*. Then I remember Maya Angelou's bestseller: *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*.¹ But I cannot recollect reading anything in that poet's book specifically about a caged bird or why it sings. I scratch my head, trying to figure out why the caged bird sings. I watch Birdie, adorned in

¹ Maya Angelou, *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* (New York: Bantam Books, 1993).

her beautiful plumage, for a few more minutes chirping and hopping from one crossbar to another, and making the most of her confinement.

In that moment—believe me—I seem to *hear* a story in that caged bird’s song. (I am okay; I don’t hear voices. It is just that *some* pastors do hear stories even when no language is used!) This may not be her lyric but *this* is the story I hear when I stare in her cage:

Sure, I once soared the skies before I fell into a trap and was captured. Now my wings are clipped. I am deprived of my interaction with untamed nature. I live day and night locked in this cage. But nothing and no one chains my spirit. That, thank Almighty, is in my power, and I am not about to give it up.

Mind you, I don’t sing to impress, I sing because my spirit is free. In this cuboid I am powerless. But, even here, nothing controls my spirit. The shop manager may display and sell me, but no one will ever own or manage my spirit! Sad or happy, I sing because I am not totally powerless—’cause the real me can’t be confined.

I whisper an “Amen!” and step out of the shop onto the sidewalk singing—not so much because I feel like singing—but much more because *even a caged bird sings*.

Just then it occurs to me that the phrase, “even a caged bird sings” will be a good title for the book I am working on. Because like Birdie, many unsuspecting humans have been trapped or caged by situations that seem to take the sun out of their universe.

In the Scriptures, joy or rejoicing is often the product of obedience, the consequence of doing the right thing. However, this book is less of a thesis on rejoicing or praise worship (though it encompasses both), and more of an exposition on Philippians 4:4-8.

CHAPTER ONE

FEELING TRAPPED?

DO YOU FEEL TRAPPED...

- ...in a scheme you are convinced is set against you?
- ...in a situation in which you have no power?
- ...in a negative past experience that still cripples you?
- ...in a marriage from which you want out?
- ...in a “waiting” situation that lingers and dampens your spirit?
- ...in a job you detest?
- ...in an addictive dependence on a substance you know may ruin your health?
- ...in an abusive relationship to which you ought to say “No more!”
- ...in a series of reversals and downturns?
- ...in a vicious cycle in which you see no way out?
- ...in a diseased body that limits you?
- ...in a relationship that belittles you?
- ...in a power struggle in which you are more of the pawn than a player?
- ...in a family dynamic that is deadlocked?
- ...in a contract that mortgages your future?
- ...in a system that devalues you and deifies the dollar?
- ...in a ministry where your gifts and services are not appreciated?

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- ...in a program that humiliates and dehumanizes you?
- ...in a monotonous routine?
- ...in a financial quagmire?
- ...in a culture that distrusts you?
- ...in an environment where you are the suspect?
- ...in an institution that victimizes you?
- ...in a wounded childhood that continues to define you and hold you back?

Richard Lovelace penned these words in the seventeenth century, *Stone walls do not a prison make, Nor iron bars a cage.*² How true. Today, as was the case when Lovelace wrote those words, more people are imprisoned, caged, enslaved, or in bondage to someone, something, or some situations than the modern society would like to admit. We pump our chest as we sing of the “land of the free,” yet, sadly, we are trapped in other things than stone walls and iron bars.

Whatever your situation, I invite you to learn a lesson from a caged bird. The key question is: who or what controls your spirit,

*You may not understand,
much less control, what
goes on around you, but,
as a thinking being, you
are responsible for the way
you internalize whatever
is going on around you,
and how things take shape
and meaning within you.*

your inner environment? Everything hinges on what is going on inside you. That is the place to begin to appropriate and assert victory through Christ. You may not understand, much less control, what goes on around you, but, as a thinking being, you are responsible for the way you internalize whatever is going on around you, and how things

² Richard Lovelace, as quoted in ed. Emily Morison Beck, *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*, 15th ed., rev. and enl. (Boston, Massachusetts: Little, Brown and Co., 1980), p. 296.

take shape and meaning within you. Hence, the Bible challenges us to *be transformed by the renewing of [our minds]* (Rom. 12:2), that is, to hold a biblical (or God-centered) opinion and reflection on whatever goes on around us. This point is so important that the whole process of Christian growth and maturity hangs on it. When our mind is renewed in the Word of God, our spirit may be out of tune with the world, but it will be in tune with heaven. And the climate of heaven is always blissful.

Like everyone else, most Christians rejoice when a problem is gone. But how do you behave during the hard times? Do you lash out? Do you give up?

Paul, the imprisoned epistle writer from the Bible, proposes another antidote: joy.

“Joy?” you ask.

Yes, joy.

Joy that comes when you tap into resources beyond you, yet, paradoxically, within you; that is, our union with Christ. Believers’ union with Jesus Christ is the most unique and indispensable element of Christianity. This union is all-encompassing, that we can speak of being *in... Christ* (Rom. 8:1; 2 Cor. 5:17), *with Christ* (Eph. 2:4-7), of *Christ who is our life* (Col. 3:3,4), and of Christ living in us, *Christ in you, the hope of glory*, and *No longer I who live,*

Christ intends to live His life in and through us, strengthening and empowering us in our everyday activities that we may be effective witnesses for Him—witnesses who radiate heaven’s joy and peace.

but Christ lives in me (Col. 1:27; Gal. 2:20; also Rev. 3:20). Christ intends to live His life in and through us, strengthening and empowering us in our everyday activities that we may be effective witnesses for Him—witnesses who radiate heaven’s joy and peace (Phil. 2:13; 4:13; also Acts 1:8).

In fact, Paul, in the midst of being persecuted and incarcerated, does not tell us merely to

rejoice when times are bad, but we are to *rejoice in the Lord always* (Phil. 4:4). Why would he say this? Paul was oppressed. He was imprisoned. What was there to rejoice about?

Paul's life disclosed to us the importance of maintaining a healthy, joyful inner environment regardless of external circum-

*Even the youths shall
faint and be weary, And
the young men shall
utterly fall, But those
who wait on the LORD
Shall renew their
strength; They shall
mount up with wings
like eagles, They shall
run and not be weary,
They shall walk and not
faint (Isa. 40:30,31).*

stances. Whether incarcerated in a prison cell, shipwrecked, discredited by the churches he founded, misrepresented by those who opposed his ministry, stoned, beaten with rods, or standing trial for the umpteenth time for Christ's sake, the Apostle Paul's demeanor portrayed a knowing that his real self—the self housed in a human frame, the inner self recreated in Christ—could rejoice *in* and *through* any problem, and could not be subdued by any adversity.

Of his missionary team, Paul once wrote,

We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed...Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day.

When, like Paul, in a crisis situation, *we do not lose heart* (2 Cor. 4:8,9,16), and are able to stand tall in our spirit being, we also are already *more than conquerors* (Rom. 8:37)—where it matters most.

Although some people are hardy, tough fighters by nature and don't easily give up in any situation—a trait most developed in their subconscious as part of their growing up survival strategies—the kind of resilience we are focusing on here transcends such

human ability and comes from a soul that has been surrendered to Christ, and is indwelt and strengthened by Christ's Spirit. To put it in another way: it is one thing to "hold on to the Rock"—you expend your energy doing so—and quite another for "the Rock to hold" you—by this you rest your total weight on something immovable! Truth is that in this life, regardless of the advantage of age, expertise, and natural endowment, there comes a time when

even the youths shall faint and be weary, And the young men shall utterly fall, But those who wait on the LORD Shall renew their strength; They shall mount up with wings like eagles, They shall run and not be weary, They shall walk and not faint (Isa. 40:30,31).

If we have a proper, biblical perspective of problems, then we should rejoice when problems come because they are opportunities for us to grow and experience God's grace and miracles.

Those who *wait on the Lord* derive their inner strength from the Lord.

Paul knew that even a caged bird sings. He knew that there was something to be gained from tribulations and sufferings. In Romans 5:3,4, Paul wrote, *we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; per-*

severance, character; and character, hope (NIV). James agreed with this concept when he said, *My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience* (James 1:2,3). If Paul and James are right, and I believe they are, then we should welcome, embrace, and befriend our problems instead of kicking and fighting against them. If we have a proper, biblical perspective of problems, then we should rejoice when problems come, because they are opportunities for us to grow and experience God's grace and miracles.

This book is based on Paul's letter to the Philippians. Unlike the other epistles of Paul, Philippians is a friendly letter, more like

a “thank-you” letter written by the apostle from prison. Though the author is imprisoned, the theme of his letter and admonition is to rejoice. In fact, Paul uses the word *rejoice* in this small epistle more than he does in any other letter. Here is a selection:

What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is preached; and in this I REJOICE, yes, and will REJOICE... That your REJOICING for me may be more abundant in Jesus Christ by my coming to you again....I am glad and REJOICE with you all. For the same reason you also be glad and REJOICE with me...Finally, my brethren, REJOICE in the Lord....

For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, REJOICE in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh...REJOICE in the Lord always. Again I will say, REJOICE! But I REJOICED in the Lord greatly... (Phil. 1:18,26; 2:17b,18; 3:1,3b; 4:4,10; emphasis added).

Without minimizing or denying your reality, I want to develop through biblical examples the scriptural injunction and counsel Paul gave us in Philippians 4:4 to *rejoice in the Lord always*, for I believe that we, like Paul, have the power to rejoice in all circumstances.

With the benefit of hindsight, we may one day realize that adversities, rather than prosperity, have been our best teachers and allies, and that every stage of maturity we attain has been through the path of some hardships.

Does *rejoicing in the Lord always* sound impossible? Too trite? At first glance, what you are going to read may not sound like the remedy for your messy, troubled situation, but hang in there. We are dealing with content that belongs to another realm, a higher and spiritual

realm of thinking and feeling. With the benefit of hindsight, we may one day realize that adversities, rather than prosperity, have

REJOICE IN THE LORD ALWAYS

been our best teachers and allies, and that every stage of maturity we attain has been through the path of some hardships.

Are you a caged bird? Let God show you how to rejoice in Him....

*Lord, set my spirit free
That I may praise You.*

*Lord, set my spirit free
That I may rejoice in You.*

*Lord, set my spirit free
That I may see in every problem an opportunity,
And see every obstacle as a stepping-stone.*

*Lord, set my spirit free
That I may rise and soar above
All that binds and attempts to hold me down,
And when adversity is the result of my bad choice*

*Lord, stir my spirit unto repentance
"And restore to me the joy of salvation" (Ps. 51:12).*

*Lord, set my spirit free.
That I may become the person You want me to be.
Dear Lord, let Your anointing that breaks every yoke (Isa. 10:27)
Be my portion today, I pray.*

CHAPTER TWO

JOY—THE BIBLICAL ANTIDEPRESSANT

Joy vs. Happiness

Before going any further, we need to understand the true meaning of joy, for it is commonly confused with happiness. Joy, however, is deeper than happiness. Joy springs from the heart, while happiness comes from events. Joy is the reflection of the inner environment, happiness of the external.

Joy springs from the heart, while happiness comes from events. Joy is the reflection of the inner environment, happiness of the external.

happiness of the external. Joy comes from a spring that is untouched by “weather” conditions. Happiness, on the other hand, swings with changing circumstances, rising and falling like a thermometer.

Happiness depends on *happenings*. If you have a good job, live in a good neighborhood, and enjoy good health and deep relationships, the world says you should be happy. But what happens if circumstances change? What if things don’t *happen* as you’d like them to? Like a pendulum, your feelings can then swing from happiness to despair in one large swoop, until life changes for the better once again.

Just look at little, innocent babies. They giggle and wiggle in their cradles when they are comfortable, feel safe, and have nothing

to cry about. But let them feel a little discomfort in their stomach, have a soiled diaper, or place them in an unfamiliar place, and they'll immediately (and sometimes literally) "raise a stink."

Joy, on the other hand, is not the result of innocence. Nor is it dependent on fortunate circumstances. Joy does not state that "ignorance is bliss" or that people should deny their problems. Rather, joy is the state of the soul *in spite* of what goes on around.

Joy comes from God

The Bible gives us numerous examples of how joy comes from the Lord. In 1 Samuel 1:1-19, we read about Hannah, a woman who, anguished by her barrenness, poured out her heart to the Lord, pleading for a son. When God heard her heart and granted her request for a child, Hannah was overjoyed! But instead of connecting her joy with now having a son, she attributed it to the Lord: And Hannah prayed and said: *My heart rejoices in the LORD; My horn is exalted in the LORD. I smile at my enemies, Because I rejoice in Your salvation* (1 Sam. 2:1).

What about King David? David, in confessing his sins of adultery and murder—sins that normally carried death sentences and had no Levitical provision for cleansing—entreated God with a broken and contrite heart: *Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, And uphold me by Your generous Spirit* (Ps. 51:12). One thing David could not live without was the joy of salvation—the joy of knowing that his soul was right with God.

Having *joy in the Lord* includes *joy in the Spirit*. In contemplating the essence of the Kingdom of God, Paul says, *For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit* (Rom. 14:17). In fact, joy is one of the results of being full and led by the Holy Spirit. Galatians 5:22 tells us, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, JOY, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness..." (emphasis added).

We also find joy in Jesus Christ. In His last discussion with His disciples, Jesus said to them,

These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full... Until now you have asked nothing in My name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full... (John 15:11; 16:24).

Jesus wanted us to be *full* of joy. Not half or three-quarters full, but full to the brim. Are you full of joy? Or are you feeling empty and depressed?

The Joy of the Lord Is Your Strength

Scripture is clear that we will have many trials in this world (John 16:33; Rom. 5:3,4; James 1:2,3; 1 Pet. 1:6). And under troublesome circumstances, it is easy to become depressed and overwhelmed. But Scripture gives us a remedy for these tough times:

Scripture is clear that we will have many trials in this world. But Scripture gives us a remedy for these tough times: the joy of the LORD is your strength.

the joy of the LORD is your strength (Neh. 8:10).

Again, don't misunderstand joy for happiness. Paul does not tell us to "be happy always," but to "rejoice in the Lord always." We will not always get things right. There will be times when we may feel attacked by a depressive sense of guilt,

unworthiness, hopelessness, and failure. We will have moments of sadness and pain. But despite these rough times, joy is possible when God is kept in the picture. Keeping our eyes on God and rejoicing in His strength and power are key to fighting those depressive moments.

Rejoicing: A Key to Inner Strength

Let's look at Nehemiah in the Bible (Neh. 8). In Nehemiah's time, when Ezra the priest and scribe read the *Book of the Law of Moses* to the Israelites who had returned from exile, the people

discovered how far they had, again, strayed from God's way. Just barely eighty years earlier, their nation had been defeated and plundered, the gates broken down, the Temple desecrated and destroyed, and the nation carried away into captivity—all as a result of their disobedience and idolatry.

*Paul does not tell us to
"be happy always" but to
"rejoice in the Lord
always."*

But now a remnant had returned from exile and was trying to resettle, get their priorities right, and rebuild their city gates, the Temple, and their political and religious systems.

However, at a national celebration when the book of the law was read, they soon discovered they were far from getting things right. It seemed the nation was in for another showdown just when the people were trying to recover from the humiliation of their nation's captivity.

Brokenhearted and on the verge of losing hope and sinking into depression, their leaders quickly responded by calling the people to refocus:

And Nehemiah, who was the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people, said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn nor weep." For all the people wept, when they heard the words of the Law. Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat, drink the sweet, and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not sorrow, FOR THE JOY OF THE LORD IS YOUR STRENGTH." So the Levites quieted all the people, saying, "Be still, for the day is holy; do not be grieved" (Neh. 8:9-11; emphasis added).

It was okay that the people were brokenhearted and sad for having broken God's laws, but it was not okay for them to wallow in self-pity. The Law was meant to draw them to God for mercy and forgiveness; it was not intended to label them as doomed and banished from God. Nehemiah and Ezra informed the people that

the reading and hearing of the Law was to encourage the people to change, to be reconciled, and to see the Lord as their strength,

*When Satan destroys
your joy he also saps
your strength. "The joy
of the Lord" is our
weapon against the
depressive spirits
in the world.*

not to keep them in their miserable state.

It was true the people did not measure up to the Law, but if they lost their joy, they would lose their strength, too. If Nehemiah and the other leaders had not quickly acted to encourage and admonish the people, they might have lost

that quiet assurance of the soul that comes from knowing God. And they wouldn't have the confidence they needed to fight their daily battles either, for when Satan destroys your joy he also saps your strength. "The joy of the Lord" is our weapon against the depressive spirits in the world.

In the chapters that follow, I intend to share, not only the importance of this *joy*, but how to obtain and maintain it; especially, how to use the spirit of joy and praise as our weapon in life's warfare. (Do you recall that on the instructions of a prophet, King Jehoshaphat literally sent singers before his army to sing the praise of God as Judah marched into a battle—and he won without even lifting a sword? Wonderful! The story is in 2 Chronicles 20.) The spirit of joy and praise is indispensable in the face of life's struggles.

*Lord, true joy comes from You;
My soul longs for this deep-rooted joy.
I ponder within myself: Am I happy or joyous,
or neither happy nor joyous?
It is easy to be caught in the flow of the world and the world's mindset.
I pray for the joy that the world can neither give nor take away —
Joy that comes only from You,
The joy of my salvation, of knowing that I am Your child
And that all is well with me because You are still on Your throne.*

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*I claim this joy today: the joy of the Lord,
The joy that is untouched by the surrounding
Because it is the fruit of the Holy Spirit.
I ask and therefore receive
The joy of the Lord.*

CHAPTER THREE

THE POWER OF EXAMPLE: PRAYER AND PRAISE FROM A JAIL ROOM

Head, Heart, and Hand

When I was a third-year university student majoring in agriculture, I had the opportunity to put my academic learning into practice. In school, I had learnt about de-beaking poultry—cutting the birds’ beaks in order to prevent them from pecking or killing one another.

One of my peers knew a woman who had a large backyard poultry farm. With little success, she had been trying to de-beak her chickens with a pair of scissors. The trouble with using scissors

*It seemed we got it right
in our heads and hearts,
but not in our hands.
Something was missing
in the equation, or in
our education.*

was that if the cut went too deep, it would open blood vessels, resulting in blood loss.

Hearing of the trouble she was having, Gbenga and Kanmi—also fellow agricultural students—set out with me on a Saturday morning to help her de-beak her poultry. She

had gotten ready many pairs of scissors and stainless steel knives, according to our request, and so we started in. However, less than ten chickens later, there was blood all over the place! It seemed we

got it right in our heads and hearts, but not in our hands. Something was missing in the equation, or in our education.

How embarrassing and frustrating this was! Here we were, third-year agricultural students, and we couldn't even de-beak a chicken!

*I sometime feel like
shouting at some pastors,
"Don't just tell me what
to do! Show me! Show
me how you are living
out what you're
preaching to me!"*

Fortunately, a local poultry farmer lived nearby. The three of us ran to him for help. Smiling politely at our ignorance, the gentleman took the time to show us how to use a hot blade to make a smooth cut while at the same time closing up the cut and sealing off the

open blood vessels. Then, each one of us, while in his presence, de-beaked one or two chickens. We were successful! No drops of blood. With our morale returning, we went back to the farm to finish our job.

We were educated agricultural students. But though we knew *in theory* how to de-beak poultry, we could not put what we knew into *practice* because nobody had showed us how. Without an example, a coach, or mentor, we were groping in the dark.

If this kind of situation is unproductive in business, it is worse in the church. Thankfully, Scriptures instruct us, not only by precepts and commandments, but also by many examples, testimonies, and historical accounts of those who obeyed or disobeyed biblical injunctions. All scripture is God-breathed, but all scripture also has a human face.

Precepts and Practice

I related the de-beaking incident to call your attention to the power and necessity of an example, of showing and telling, in all arenas of life. Perhaps you are still feeling skeptical that rejoicing in the Lord in all circumstances is really possible. Perhaps you are

like me, who sometimes feels like shouting at some pastors, “Don’t just tell me what to do! *Show* me! Show me how *you* are living out

Paul writes to believers in Philippi who have seen Paul live out what he tells them. He is an example and model of his teachings.

what you’re preaching to me!” Perhaps you are reading Paul’s words in Philippians and saying, “Yeah, right. If ‘rejoicing in the Lord always’ is possible, go show me it’s possible.”

And rightly so. All preaching and no teaching results in zeal without knowledge, or passion

without substance. And teaching without preaching results in knowledge without zeal, or an enlightened mind with no passion. Many churches have not done an adequate job of both *telling* and *showing*. Without a balance of these two, however, people end up frustrated and discouraged, not knowing how to put principles into action. But together, preaching and teaching results in a change of mind and behavior. God not only taught the world the way of righteousness through the proclamation and writings of the O. T. prophets, He also *showed* the world, through the Incarnation, when God took up *flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes* (John 1:14; *The Message*).

If you do not yet believe Paul’s words, then believe his actions. In this chapter you will see that Paul was a practitioner of the principles he later preached in his Epistle to the Philippians. Paul writes to believers in Philippi who have seen Paul *live out* what he *tells* them. He is an example and model of his teachings to “rejoice in the Lord always.” If you are not yet convinced, then read on...

Paul, a Practitioner of His Precepts

Now it happened, as we went to prayer, that a certain slave girl possessed with a spirit of divination met us, who brought her masters much profit by fortune-telling. This girl followed

Paul and us, and cried out, saying, "These men are the servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to us the way of salvation." And this she did for many days.

But Paul, greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And he came out that very hour. But when her masters saw that their hope of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to the authorities.

And they brought them to the magistrates, and said, "These men, being Jews, exceedingly trouble our city; and they teach customs which are not lawful for us, being Romans, to receive or observe." Then the multitude rose up together against them; and the magistrates tore off their clothes and commanded them to be beaten with rods. And when they had laid many stripes on them, they threw them into prison, commanding the jailer to keep them securely. Having received such a charge, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.

But at midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all doors were opened and everyone's chains were loosed. And the keeper of the prison, awaking from sleep and seeing the prison doors open, supposing the prisoners had fled, drew his sword and was about to kill himself. But Paul called with a loud voice, saying, "Do yourself no harm, for we are all here."

Then he called for a light, ran in, and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. And he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:16-30).

Paul and Silas were unlawfully beaten! They were denied a fair hearing and imprisoned on false accusations! And for what? For helping someone be free from a horrible demon. How unfair! How unjust!

Now in jail, they were left to review such a horrid day.... It was midnight—a time of darkness and loneliness. The world was asleep and everything was quiet. Paul and Silas' clothes had been ripped off their backs, their feet were in stocks, and they were in the maximum-security section of the jail—a place reserved for the most dangerous criminals. Sitting there in the dark, their undressed wounds throbbing with pain, Paul and Silas could have complained, cursed, or blamed God. They could have focused on rebuking the “demons of persecution,” or could have spent the whole night second-guessing themselves and God. Any of these reactions would have been legitimate. But they didn't do any of these things. Instead, they responded in a couple of remarkable ways: *“But at midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them”* (Acts 16:25).

(1) They prayed. In the presence of the other prisoners, Paul and Silas prayed to the Lord. Why, of all responses, would they pray?

Perhaps it was out of Jewish habit (Dan. 6:10; Ps. 55:17). A cultivated routine of prayer can make prayer the natural response on

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days when the spirit is least in the mood for it. Or maybe they prayed in response to their affliction and pain. Scripture admonishes, *Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray* (James 5:13a). Besides, God instructs us to pray in times of trouble: *Call upon Me in the day*

of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me (Ps. 50:15). Or perhaps Paul and Silas prayed for the girl who had been delivered from the demon. Or maybe in the spirit of Christian forgiveness they prayed for the people who persecuted them. We don't know what Paul and Silas were praying about, but we do know that it wasn't the only thing they did.

(2) They also praised God. It seems that prayer makes sense in Paul and Silas' circumstance. But why praise God? Singing the

blues would be understandable, but not *praise* songs. Why would they do that?

I believe Paul and Silas sang praises to God—despite their pitiful condition—for several reasons. First, in spite of all they suffered, a soul had been saved. The girl who once served Satan now had another master—Jesus! To Paul and Silas, the girl’s conversion was “Mission Accomplished.” They had reason to celebrate.

In addition, being thrown in prison gave Paul and Silas an opportunity to witness to the other prisoners around them. Inmates often interrogate newly-admitted prisoners on the cause of their imprisonment. In telling their story, Paul and Silas saw a rare opportunity to present the gospel.

When Christians react to suffering and pain in a way different than most others, it speaks volumes to the unbelieving world.

I also believe Paul and Silas sang praise to God because they knew their condition could have been worse had it not been for the grace of God. Paul’s own people wanted him dead. In another situation, they might not have made it to prison alive.

Thank God for His mercy!

More than anything else, however, I believe Paul and Silas praised God in jail because they believed in a *theology of blessing*, as well as a *theology of pain*. Many Christians lack this balance. They hold only to a theology of blessing and prosperity, but when troubles come they easily lose faith. Jesus tells us,

BLESSED are you WHEN THEY REVILE AND PERSECUTE YOU, AND SAY ALL KINDS OF EVIL AGAINST YOU FALSELY FOR MY SAKE. REJOICE and BE EXCEEDINGLY GLAD, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you (Matt. 5:11,12; emphasis added).

“Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or

lands, for My sake and the gospel's, who shall not receive a hundredfold now in this time—houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, WITH PERSECUTIONS—and in the age to come, eternal life” (Mark 10:29,30; emphasis added).

Prayer and praise in a dungeon? Rejoice when you're persecuted? Count trials as joy? The Bible does not call Christians *peculiar* people for nothing (Titus 2:14; 1 Pet. 2:9). When Christians react to suffering and pain in a way different than most others, it speaks volumes to the unbelieving world. People start to ask questions. They wonder, “What has he got that keeps him going? What does she have which keeps her ‘looking up’ when things are down? What must *I* do to be saved?”

Heaven's Reaction to Worship

“Suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were loosed” (Acts 16:26).

The Bible indicates that God is “enthroned in the praises” of His people (Ps. 22:3), and we see that this is true in the jail in Philippi.

God came down. There was an earthquake. The prison shook to its foundation and the prisoners' chains were broken. Everyone was free to escape. But no one did.

I cannot guarantee that if you praise God and “rejoice in the Lord” in a crisis situation that the earth will quake or someone will be converted. I can assure you, however, that heaven will visit you in one form or another.

A presence was felt within the jail. Somehow, even the most hardened criminal and infidel knew a power beyond Rome was at work in the jail room that night. Though the rooms were still dark, a light had entered the heart of the prisoners.

The jailer, fearful that he would be charged with negligence of duty, was ready to commit suicide. But seeing that everyone was still present, the jailer fell on his knees, asking Paul and Silas, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” That same night, the jailer brought Paul and Silas out of prison into the warmth of his own house. He washed and dressed up their wounds and treated them to a delicious home-cooked meal; his households believed and were baptized. Early the next day, the jailer managed to expedite an official release of Paul and Silas. What cause to rejoice in the Lord!

I cannot guarantee that if you praise God and *rejoice in the Lord* in a crisis situation that the earth will quake or someone will be converted. I *can* assure you, however, that heaven will visit you in one form or another. Somehow, your chains will be broken. You will be loosed of all that binds you. Prayer and praise will bring you out of your dungeon. It will bring you into the hands of someone who can bandage your wounded body and soul. In some mysterious way, things will be different because God *inhabitest the praises* (Ps. 22:3; KJV) of His people.

In Acts 16, Paul showed that “rejoicing in the Lord,” no matter what the circumstances, *is* possible. In the following chapters, using biblical examples, I will now expound on four principles derived from Philippians 4:4-8 which I believe all Christians need to practice in order to make *rejoicing in the Lord always* possible.

If you have (1) the right focus, (2) the right behavior, (3) the right attitude, and (4) the right subjects, I believe that you, too, can learn how to *rejoice in the Lord* in any given situation!³

³ I owe this four-point outline—the right focus, behavior, attitude, and subjects—to Dr. Howard Eyrich, my biblical counseling professor. The outline is taken from his lectures on *Fundamentals of Biblical Counseling*. Used with permission.

REJOICE IN THE LORD ALWAYS

*Lord, I thank You for the inspirations
and examples we find in Scriptures,
Especially this example of Paul and Silas.
After they were unjustly beaten and imprisoned
They still prayed and sang in the hearing of all.
I wonder what they said to themselves at the end of that day,
in the midnight hour,
And then I think of what I tell myself when my pain
keeps me from falling asleep.
So I ponder within myself: How do I review my day?
Especially a hard day—
A day when nothing seems to have gone right,
And nothing seems to have gone my way,
A day when I have been misunderstood and misjudged.
Lord, help me always to put You in the picture
And to see past the pain and problems of a day,
So I may respond with a song in the night
Because I know that my God is good...
All the time.*

CHAPTER FOUR

THE RIGHT FOCUS

Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice! (Phil. 4:4)

You probably have done this game before: you were told a phrase such as “Teacher Next Door Program” or “Sound of Music” and then asked to put it out of your mind. The harder you tried, the more fixated it became. What is the essence of the game? To prove that we cannot forget anything by concentrating on that thing, or by trying hard to forget it. What you need to do is change your focus. Focus your energy on something else because what you give less attention to will soon disappear from your radar.

Have you ever had trouble falling asleep? Try as you might, you just can’t. In fact, the more you worry about not sleeping, the more you stay awake.

In order to stop worrying about sleep, some people try to change their focus. They read a book or watch a no-brainer TV program—anything to get their mind off *not* sleeping. By focusing their energy on something else, they divert their focus from the problem and soon are relaxed enough to fall asleep.

Similarly, when Christians find themselves in less than ideal circumstances, the challenge is not to focus on the problem (which will only make it seem larger), but on the One who has the solution to the problem—God! When Paul says, *Rejoice in the Lord always* (Phil. 4:4), the secret is in the phrase: *in the Lord*. The *Lord* is the right focus! As you praise and worship God, focusing on Him rather than your

problem, you will hear in your spirit the voice of the Lord, the Shepherd of you soul, saying, *This is the way, walk in it* (Isa. 30:21).

Focusing on the Lord and not on your problems does not mean you have to be happy about the problems or situations you find yourself in. Would you rejoice when acts of terrorism and tragedy seem to take the upper hand? Would you rejoice when a marriage ends in divorce or when children are abducted? Would you rejoice in sickness, unemployment, or affliction? No, of course not. These are not reasons for rejoicing and you can't be expected to rejoice in those *circumstances*. You can, however, rejoice *in the Lord* regardless of your circumstance—or *in the midst* of it—because God's Word remains true:

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.... The young lions lack and suffer hunger; But those who seek the LORD shall not lack any good thing.... I have been young, and now am old; Yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken, Nor his descendants begging bread (Ps. 23:1; 34:10; 37:25).

No matter what is going on in the world or in your own life situation, you can rejoice in God who loves and accepts you unconditionally.

No matter what is going on in the world or in your own life situation, you can rejoice in God who loves and accepts you unconditionally. You can rejoice in Jesus who died and rose again for you. You can rejoice in your Father who is able to see you through any difficult situa-

tion. You can rejoice in the Lord who sees and knows all things and is sovereign over all events of your life.

If we want to have the right focus, we need to concentrate on God's nature, His character, and His Word. God's Word reveals His mind, will, and purpose for our lives. And when we read His Word, we are reminded that *God* is sovereign, not our problems. Just look at the following two verses:

REJOICE IN THE LORD ALWAYS

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).

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).

*When I was home
recuperating, anytime
I thought of the future,
I would say to myself,
“Romans 8:28 and
1 Corinthians 10:13
are still true.”*

I found these two verses very encouraging and comforting after I experienced a set of mini-strokes. When I was home recuperating, anytime I thought of the future, I would say to myself, “Romans 8:28 and 1 Corinthians 10:13 are still true.” During this time I would remind myself of God’s hand in

the small details of life. How, for example, God could make table salt [NaCl]—crystals we use to season most meals—from elements such as a poisonous gas [Chlorine], and a combustible metal [Sodium]; or water [H₂O]—a liquid at room temperature—from elements such as a highly flammable gas [Hydrogen], and another gas that supports combustion [Oxygen]. If God, in the tiny details of nature, could produce good, useful compounds from poisonous, flammable elements, then He could also be trusted to bring good out of seemingly bad experiences in my life. Thankfully, in chemistry, as well as everyday life, the end products do not always indicate the nature of the raw materials or the sequence of the reaction. Whether we understand how or not, all things can still work together for good in those who love God (Rom. 8:28).

The questions to ask yourself are: “Who is on the throne in my life? Who is in charge of my destiny?” If your joy is dictated by or dependent on what is going on around you, then it, along with

your strength, is subject to fluctuation. However, if you focus on God and put Him on the throne, then joy in all circumstances is possible. The choice is yours.

Rejoicing Is a Choice

*You can either choose
to focus on your
circumstances, or
choose to put God in
the picture and in the
driver's seat of your life.*

Yes, you heard correctly. Rejoicing is a choice. You can either choose to focus on your circumstances, or choose to put God in the picture and in the driver's seat of your life. You can choose to magnify the problem, or choose to magnify God. You can choose to see

your problem as big, or to see God as bigger.

In Habakkuk 3:17-19, the prophet Habakkuk illustrates that rejoicing is a choice. Troubled by the apparent triumph of evil and prosperity of the ungodly Babylonians over his own country, Habakkuk complains to God. Opening his book with a series of questions directed to God, Habakkuk shows us that it is okay to question God when we don't understand the things going on around us.

God answers Habakkuk. He takes the time to answer the prophet's query and shares His plan with Habakkuk. Now Habakkuk has a choice. He can either trust the dire situation he sees around him, or he can choose to trust God's word and His character.

Habakkuk chooses to trust in the Lord. In fact, he comes to a point where he says that even if the worst-case situation happened to his society (total crop failure and loss of livestock due to an epidemic), he would choose to trust God. Though an epidemic would result in famine, loss of economy, vulnerability, and death, Habakkuk would not dwell on this. Rather, he would choose to set his mind on God and to rejoice in the Lord:

*Though the fig tree may not blossom, Nor fruit be on the vines;
Though the labor of the olive may fail, And the fields yield no
food; Though the flock may be cut off from the fold, And there be
no herd in the stalls—Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy
in the God of my salvation. The LORD God is my strength; He
will make my feet like deer's feet, And He will make me walk on
my high hills (Hab. 3:17-19).*

*If you believe God's eyes
are watching over you
and guiding your steps
(Ps. 32:8b), then your life
has a purpose and nothing
is an accident.*

Even in a worst-case scenario Habakkuk says he will rejoice in the Lord. To him, God is sovereign over nature and God has a plan for His own people. If you believe God's eyes are watching over you and guiding your steps (Ps. 32:8b),

then your life has a purpose and nothing is an accident.

Like Habakkuk, Paul chose to focus on God and to see his circumstances as opportunities to rejoice in the Lord. In his epistles, Paul refers to himself as “the prisoner of Christ Jesus” (Eph. 3:1), “the prisoner of the Lord” (Eph. 4:1), “an ambassador in chains” (Eph. 6:20), and “a prisoner of Christ Jesus” (Philemon 1). While serving a prison term under the Roman Empire, Paul sees himself in God's hand (as a prisoner of Christ) rather than in the emperor's hand. Therefore, God, not the emperor, has the last word about his case.

In light of God's sovereignty, Paul viewed his problems from a different perspective than most people would. For example, he saw his imprisonment as a benefit. In Philippians 1:12, he writes: “But I want you to know, brethren, that the things which happened to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel.” In fact, in verses 12-18, Paul mentions that all the palace and prison workers, and officers of the State have heard his testimony and the gospel. In addition, Paul observes that “most of the brethren in the Lord, having become confident by [his]

chains, are much more bold to speak the word without fear (Phil. 1:14). “Christ is preached,” he says, “and in this I rejoice, yes, and will rejoice” (Phil. 1:18b). Paul focuses on God and sees His hand in every unfolding detail—and this is cause to rejoice.

Who is your God and how big is He? Is He bigger than your problem? When you focus on God, do you see Him as He is portrayed in a movie; how He is described by the pen of a popular author, or by the lyrics of a commercially-oriented singer? Or do you see God as He is shown in Scripture, the One revealed in Jesus? If your God is the One who made the heavens and the earth, the One who dried up the Red Sea and made a highway for His people, the One who raised Jesus from the grave on the third day—then you have the right focus. Such a God is big enough to spark joy and excitement in your heart in any situation that may come your way.

*Lord, some days it is easy to rejoice,
Some other days, not so easy.
May I always rejoice in You.
Help me, Lord, to keep my focus on You,
To see You above and beyond all else,
And, like Habakkuk, to choose to rejoice come what may.
Because You, God, my Maker and Friend, are in control of my destiny,
I look away from all else and concentrate on You;
I proclaim You my Lord and Sovereign God.*

CHAPTER FIVE

THE RIGHT BEHAVIOR

Be anxious for nothing... (Phil. 4:6a).

In the old English of the King James Version Bible, Philippians 4:6a reads, *Be careful for nothing*, meaning, *be full of care for nothing*. The Revised Standard Version says, *Have no anxiety about anything*, and the New Revised Standard Version says, *Do not worry about anything*. I think God is trying to tell us something! We are not to worry or be anxious about *anything*. This includes finances, health, accidents, earthquakes, relationships, work, family—whatever!

Don't get me wrong. Not all stress is bad news, and neither can we eliminate all the stressors in our lives. Besides, a little stress is necessary for human survival, and we can use some of it to enhance our performance and productivity. We are, however, moving to a dangerous level of stress when we are sincerely overloaded, burnt out, or stressed out.

The question is: "Can we do without anxiety?" The Word of God commands us not to have anxiety. Obviously, then, we can do without it, because God will not command us to do that which we cannot. God commands us not to worry because His grace is available for us to overcome it:

Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow

nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? Which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature?

So why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?

Therefore do not worry, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?" For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble (Matt. 6:25-34).

Not all stress is bad news, and neither can we eliminate all the stressors in our lives. Besides, a little stress is necessary for human survival, and we can use some of it to enhance our performance.

God wants us to seek Him and lay our worries at His feet. This is the right behavior that will help us to rejoice in the Lord always. In 1 Peter 5:7, we read, *[Cast] all your care upon Him, for He cares for you.* Did you hear that? God cares for you; therefore you can relax and rejoice! Your shoulders are not broad or strong enough to carry your

problems, much less the problems of the world. But God's are.

A worrier meets every problem three times. First, *before* the problem comes. Second, *when* the problem comes. And, third, even *after* the problem is gone. How do I know? I know this because I am a worrier. Long before I got my doctorate degree in Biblical Counseling, I had a PhD in Worry from the private University of

Anxiety and Needless Concerns. In fact, I think I graduated from that school at the top of my class!

I became a Christian before I was twenty and was ushered into leadership positions right away. In spite of my conversion, I had a stomach ulcer before I was thirty and a mild heart attack before I was forty. Not long after I turned fifty, I had Transient Ischemic Attacks (TIAs), otherwise known as mini-strokes. These health conditions can be physical or hereditary, but they are more often the by-products of a stressful, worry-filled life. Though my name was in the *Book of Life*, my eyes were not focused on the Lord; they were focused on the circumstances of my life.

When friends and family members heard of my TIAs, they

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counseled me to take it easy. But the question I always had was, "How?" Learning how to be less anxious has not been achieved immediately. In fact, it has become a *daily decision*. Most days I have to remind myself of verses such as Philippians 4:6 or Matthew 6:25-34, telling myself, "Have no anxiety, God is in control."

I have to do this over and over again, and it's like adhering to the directions on a prescription bottle that say, "Take three times daily," or, "Take when necessary." So when I step out of bed and remember all my unfinished tasks and my list of "To Dos," I reach for my pills: "Have no anxiety about anything." When I open the newspaper and the headlines make me sad, I grab my pills: "Have no anxiety, God is in control." When I feel the first sign of stress, I take a deep breath and swallow my pill: "Have no anxiety about anything!" I am continually reminding myself of what God has promised to us in His Word:

Cast your burden on the LORD, And He shall sustain you; He shall never permit the righteous to be moved.... You [God] will

EVEN A CAGED BIRD SINGS!

keep him in perfect peace, Whose mind is stayed on You, Because he trusts in You (Ps. 55:22; Isa. 26:3).

Many of our anxieties are concerning things that will never happen. While fear is usually specific, anxiety is a floating concern over nothing. It results from negative thoughts and mental images we nurture in our minds, and as they take root, they become strongholds.

A friend of mine once told me of a young woman who sought his counsel after he had spoken to a group of people. Though he had not preached about childrearing, this was the topic foremost on her mind. Apparently, this woman had read a book about the challenges of parenting today and she began to agonize over whether she would ever raise godly children.

"Well, how old are your children?" my friend asked.

"Actually, I don't have a child yet," she answered.

"How soon are you planning to have a child?" he questioned.

"Well, I can't tell how soon. That is still in God's hands," she responded.

Supposing she might have an infertility problem, my friend inquired, "Have you been married long?"

"Well, I'm not married."

Puzzled, and wondering if she was helping to raise a child, my friend probed, "Well then, do you have a child living with you?"

"Oh no," came the reply.

My friend stared at the woman. Finally he said, "Why are we having this conversation? What comes first, ma'am, the egg or the chicken?"

This woman had cultivated a habit of worry. It's likely that her worry about raising godly

children was only a symptom of a deeper, buried problem. Or perhaps there might have been something in her family history that

*When I step out of bed
and remember all my
unfinished tasks and my
list of "To Dos," I reach
for my pills: "Have no
anxiety about anything."*

made worrying for any future children a real concern for her. And maybe it's possible that her concern was not even about raising

*Many of our anxieties are
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will never happen.*

kids at all, but really about how she had been raised. In any case, this woman was *in bondage* to worry.

You cannot trust God and worry at the same time. Those two activities don't go together. Worry says, "It is up to me and I feel inadequate." Faith says, "It is in God's hands and He is able."

God Is Good

One of the antidotes to worry—and the right behavior—is to believe that God is good and that He has our best interests at heart. The Bible is full of examples of God's goodness. In fact, it is a recurring theme, especially in the Psalms:

Good and upright is the LORD; Therefore He teaches sinners in the way. The humble He guides in justice (Ps. 25:8,9a).

Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good; Blessed is the man [or woman] who trusts in Him! (Ps. 34:8).

For the LORD is good; His mercy is everlasting, And His truth endures to all generations (Ps. 100:5).

The story of Naomi and Ruth also gives a good example of God's goodness. During a dark period in Israel's history, a time of great moral decline when every person lived by his own law (Judg. 17:6; 21:25), Naomi and Ruth chose to believe in the goodness of their protector's heart and character and in the ultimate goodness of God.

Naomi, her husband, and two sons had left Bethlehem in Judah for Moab during a time of famine. In the course of time, Naomi's husband and two sons died in Moab, leaving behind three poor, destitute widows: Naomi and her two daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth.

Worry says, "It is up to me and I feel inadequate." Faith says, "It is in God's hands and God is able."

Hearing that the situation in Bethlehem had improved, Naomi decided to return to her homeland, but she implored her daughters-in-law to remain with their own people and remarry. During this time, if a

woman's husband died, it was the job of the nearest relative of the deceased husband to take care of the widow. Naomi, however, had no other son who could perform this obligation (Deut. 25:5-10). In the levirate marriage arrangement, a young widow would marry within the family to continue the family name and keep inheritance within the clan. This was a patriarchal society and an age when marriage and childbearing were a woman's main function, so the levirate arrangement was like a welfare system, designed to protect widows and ensure they were cared for.

Naomi had tried to discourage the young widows from returning with her because she had no hope of them being remarried into the family since she had no other sons. Taking Naomi's advice, Orpah remained with her own people. Ruth, however, insisted on going with Naomi to Bethlehem, even though the future looked bleak.

Once in Bethlehem, Ruth went to work gleaning barley for their sustenance. As it happened, she went to the field of a man named Boaz. Amazingly, we see God's hand orchestrating the events in Ruth and Naomi's lives, for as we find out, Boaz was next of kin to Naomi's husband. This meant Boaz could perform the duty of a "kinsman-redeemer" to either Naomi or Ruth. In a case where a deceased husband had no male sibling to marry his widowed wife, a nearest relative to the deceased could volunteer to marry the widow and take responsibility for the extended family. However, the *nearest* relative was not mandated to marry the widow. If he chose not to, the next in line could take his place.

By right, Naomi deserved to have Boaz as her "kinsman-redeemer," but she passed the right on to Ruth, the younger widow.

Naomi and Ruth chose to believe in the goodness of their protector's heart and character and in the ultimate goodness of God.

In the third chapter of the book of Ruth, we see that Naomi devised a scheme, according to the custom, for Ruth to inform Boaz that he could be her kinsman-redeemer. Boaz was interested; he had been impressed by

Ruth's devotion to her mother-in-law, her virtuous qualities, and her hard work and initiative. But, as it turned out, Boaz was *not* the closest kinsman. Apparently, there was yet another man who should have had first rights to marry Ruth. Boaz promised to see this next of kin and offer him the proposition, and if he was not willing to take up the obligation, then Boaz would.

The matter was now out of Naomi and Ruth's hands. This is where they had a choice of how to behave. They could either worry and pace, or trust and wait. It was a time of uncertainty and struggle, but Naomi had faith in Boaz, and she told Ruth so: *Then she [Naomi] said, 'Sit still, my daughter, until you know how the matter will turn out; for the man will not rest until he has concluded the matter this day'* (Ruth 3:18).

Naomi believed that Boaz would not only do the right thing, he would also do it with urgency and in a timely manner.

True to character, Boaz gave heart to the matter. He quickly arranged to meet the other relative—the nearest next of kin—and summoned a council of elders as witnesses to the negotiations (Ruth 4). As it turned out, the next of kin declined the offer. He felt he would lose out from this deal, and furthermore, the deal might complicate the inheritance he had planned for his own children. But Boaz acted selflessly and chose to perform the role of kinsman-redeemer. He married Ruth, and the first child of their union was Obed, who became the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David, and David the great, great grandfather of Jesus, the promised Messiah. What far-reaching consequences!

Naomi knew that Boaz was a good and trustworthy person. Therefore, she confidently told Ruth, *Sit still, my daughter... for the*

EVEN A CAGED BIRD SINGS!

*Once a matter is put
to God in prayer,
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Himself rest until He has
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man will not rest until he has concluded the matter this day. Do you think and feel the same way about God? That God loves you and cares for you and that He is so committed to your well-being that He would not put your case on the back burner? Just as Naomi had confidence in Boaz, we, too, as Christians, should have confidence in God's goodness and His commitment to our welfare. Once a matter is put to God in prayer, we should be able to walk away knowing that God will not give Himself rest until He has seen to our case. We should rest assured knowing that God is good and will do the right thing at the right time. Why worry anymore when God is working on the matter?

Think of it this way: if you had a good boss—someone who is caring, competent, and dependable, someone who tells you he is taking action on a matter that concerns you—would that put your mind to rest? Or would you still be agitated about the matter?

God is a good boss. He is *the* Good Boss. Below is a copy of a memo that was once circulated through e-mail. I ask that you read it and think of it as God's personal note to you today.

God is a good boss. He is *the* Good Boss. Below is a copy of a memo that was once circulated through e-mail. I ask that you read it and think of it as God's personal note to you today.

MEMO

From: GOD, THE BOSS
Date: TODAY
Reference: LIFE

To: YOU
Subject: YOURSELF

I am God. Today I will be handling all of your problems.
Please remember that I do not need your help.

If life happens to deliver a situation to you that you cannot handle, do not attempt to resolve it.

Kindly put it in the SFGTD (something for God to do) box.

REJOICE IN THE LORD ALWAYS

It will be addressed in My time, not yours.

Once the matter is placed into the box, do not hold onto it.

If you find yourself stuck in traffic; Don't despair.

There are people in this world for whom driving is an unheard-of privilege.

Should you have a bad day at work; Think of the man who has been out of work for years.

Should you despair over a relationship gone bad;

Think of the person who has never known what it's like to love and be loved in return.

Should you grieve the passing of another weekend;

Think of the woman in dire straits, working twelve hours a day, seven days a week to feed her children.

Should your car break down, leaving you miles away from assistance;

Think of the paraplegic who would love the opportunity to take that walk.

Should you notice a new gray hair in the mirror;

Think of the cancer patient in chemo who wishes she had hair to examine.

Should you find yourself at a loss and pondering what life is all about, asking "what is my purpose?"

Be thankful. There are those who didn't live long enough to get the opportunity. Should you find yourself the victim of other people's bitterness, ignorance, smallness or insecurities;

Remember, things could be worse. You could be them!!

Should you decide to send this to a friend;

You might brighten someone's day!

In the midst of our uncertainties, turmoil, and pain, God—the best Boss we can have—says to us, *Be still, and know that I am God* (Ps. 46:10a).

EVEN A CAGED BIRD SINGS!

I still don't know for sure why the caged bird sings. But I recall that on several occasions Jesus gives hints why the *wild* bird sings. He says the bird in the jungle, though it owns no plantation or storehouse, lives without anxiety over its physical needs. Jesus says,

Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they...? Therefore do not worry, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?" For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things (Matt. 6:26,31,32).

*In the midst of our
uncertainties, turmoil,
and pain, God—the best
Boss we can have—says
to us, Be still, and know
that I am God.*

Jesus also reminds us that, even when a million predators surround it, the wild bird lives with the assurance that its fate is in God's hand, not in the enemy's. Challenging His disciples, Jesus says, *Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the*

ground apart from your Father's will. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows (Matt. 10:29-31). Recording the same incidence, another Gospel writer pens, *And not one of them [those common sparrows] is forgotten before God (Luke 12:6).* The refrain of a church hymn says, *His [God's] eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me.*⁴

Why does the caged bird sing? Maybe, like its wild counterpart, the caged bird lives with a sense of security in the heavenly Father's provision and protection.

*Lord, in the midst of the hustle and bustle of life,
Today, may I find the time and space to say to myself:*

⁴ (Mrs.) C.D. Martin, "I Sing Because I'm Happy," *The New Church Hymnal* (Lexicon Music, Inc., 1976), No. 151.

REJOICE IN THE LORD ALWAYS

*“Be still my soul,
God is trustworthy and dependable;
You can count on God’s promises.
Even now, God cares for you, and He is at work on your case.
Take courage, God’s angels are busy carrying out
errands on your behalf;
The good Lord is in control.
God is arranging your circumstances
To the end that all things may work
together for your good (Rom. 8:28),
And God will perfect that which
concerns you (Ps.138:8)
Even today.”
If Naomi counseled Ruth to sit still,
relax, and not worry,
Simply because she could vouch for Boaz
to be a good and trustworthy person,
How much easier it should be for me to relax
and trust the Almighty with my cares!
The Lord God, merciful and gracious,
He sent His Son to die in my place;
Jesus, my Savior, lives in me, lives for me, and prays for me;
The Holy Spirit, my Counselor and Comforter, empowering me daily;
Blessed Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the seal of my salvation!
Lord, help me today, just for today, to trust and not worry.*

CHAPTER SIX

THE RIGHT ATTITUDE

But in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God (Phil. 4:6).

Do you pray with attitude? I'm not talking about the kind of attitude that makes you think you have entitlement to do what you want, when you want, wherever and to whomever you want. No, I'm talking about the kind of attitude that will help you *rejoice in the Lord always*—the right attitude!

God does not want us to pray to Him with an attitude that views Him as simply the granter of all our wishes. Though He wants us to bring our requests to Him, He wants us to pray and ask for things with an attitude of *thanksgiving*. This is the right attitude.

Why does God want us to pray with a thankful attitude? Because He knows that cultivating a thankful heart helps us view our present circumstances more *completely*. First, praying with thanksgiving causes us to look at our life *retrospectively*, looking back and recounting past blessings and victories with gratitude. It also causes us to be *introspective*: to look within and around at our present blessings—friends, health, jobs, a roof over our heads—things we can be thankful for even in a crisis situation. Furthermore, it causes us to have a *prospective* view: looking ahead with hope, and not being blinded and trapped by our problems. Praying with thanksgiving allows us to rejoice always—in the present, past, or future—because we know God has taken care of us before, and He will continue to take care of us now and in the future.

Praying with thanksgiving allows us to rejoice always—in the present, past, or future—because we know God has taken care of us before, and He will continue to take care of us now and in the future.

When Paul says, *in everything by prayer...* (Phil. 4:6), he is reminding us of our dependence on God. Jesus taught us to pray *Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us... lead us... deliver us...* (Matt. 6:11-13) because we need God and His provision, pardon, presence, and protection on a daily, even hourly basis! When we take our burdens to God in thankful prayer, in effect we are saying:

“God, I have seen You work in the past, so I will trust You now and in the future.”

What is the result of this kind of prayer? Paul tells us, *And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus* (Phil. 4:7). This is the peace that results in knowing that God is in charge of all the details of our life, and it is a unique gift of Christ to those who trust Him: “Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid” (John 14:27).

This peace that Christ gives does not belong to the human realm of thinking and feeling and cannot be defined in human terms. It surpasses all modern academic research. It defiles all rational laws. As the apostle Paul says, *it surpasses all understanding* (Phil. 4:7). The result is a calm assurance while the storms of life rage.

Father, I Thank You

Jesus was the perfect example of someone who prayed with an attitude of thankfulness. To illustrate, let’s look at the story of Lazarus being raised up from the dead (John 11:1-44).

Jesus was a family friend of Martha, Mary, and their brother Lazarus. He knew the family well and loved them greatly. Thus,

when Lazarus became sick, Martha and Mary quickly sent message to Jesus: *Lord, behold, he whom You love is sick* (John 11:3).

Jesus was the perfect example of someone who prayed with an attitude of thankfulness.

Rather than leave immediately—as was His habit when His help was needed—Jesus stayed back four days, responding to the news of Lazarus, *This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of*

God may be glorified through it (John 11:4).

Mary and Martha kept waiting and waiting, hoping against hope for Jesus to show up. *Where was Jesus?* they wondered. Their brother's case was worsening, so the sisters kept praying and looking down the road for a sign of Jesus' arrival. He did not come.

Before Jesus arrived, Lazarus died. Knowing Jesus had raised the dead before, the sisters delayed in burying, still waiting for Jesus to come. However, when they could no longer delay the burial without breaking custom, they finally buried their brother.

By the time Jesus and His disciples arrived, Lazarus had already been in the grave four days. Many mourners wept over Lazarus' death. All hope for a physical reunion on this side of life was gone, for the corpse was now beginning to smell.

When Jesus met with Martha and Mary, they were both in deep anguish: *Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died* (John 11:21,32), they both responded. Other onlookers voiced their disappointment and confusion as well: *Could not this Man, who opened the eyes of the blind, also have kept this man from dying?* (John 11:37).

Jesus was *deeply moved in spirit and troubled* (John 11:33; NIV) when he saw the mourners weeping. And when Jesus Himself saw where Lazarus was laid, He, too, was moved to tears. Against this background, Jesus looked up and prayed: *Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. And I know that You always hear Me...* (John 11:41b-42a).

With teary eyes—for the Lord Himself wept (John 11:35)—Jesus prayed with an attitude of gratitude. Even in the midst of mourning and tears, Jesus said, *Father, I thank You*. He knew the Father always

heard Him and would hear Him even at that moment. He knew God was bigger than the grave and even more powerful than death.

Knowing that God is our Father, and that our life is no accident, we may also confront any situation with an attitude that says, Father, I thank You.

Knowing that God is our Father, and that our life is no accident, we may also confront any situation with an attitude that says, *Father, I thank You.* When news is good we can say, "Father, I thank You because every good and perfect gift comes from You." When news is not so good we can say,

"Father, I thank You because You can fix me and my problem; nothing is impossible with You." When onlookers shake their heads at an unfortunate situation we can say, "Father, I thank You because you are more powerful than any problem I face today. You, Lord, who raised the dead, are able to give me a testimony to Your own glory. I thank You, Father, that I am not an orphan; I have You as my Father in heaven."

God is bigger than any news—good or bad! And it is God's desire that we thank Him in everything: "In everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" (1 Thess. 5:18).

I Thank God for You

Cultivating a thankful attitude toward God is important, but it is also important to be thankful for the people around us. Although there is no verse of Scripture that directly says, "Give thanks for everyone," we can deduce or imply its truth from 1 Timothy 2:1,2:

I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority... (NIV).

First of all, I ask you to pray for everyone. Ask God to help and bless them all, and tell God how thankful you are for each of them. Pray for kings and others in power... (CEV).

In simple language, Paul wants us not only to pray and intercede for everyone, but also to give thanks for (or find something worthwhile or thankworthy in) everyone.

Being thankful for others is a difficult task, but Paul lived it out. No matter what was going on in Paul's life or in the lives of

*Scripture enjoins us
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the various churches he wrote to, the Apostle Paul always had a word of thanksgiving for his recipients. He opened most of his epistles in a spirit of prayer, praise, and gratitude to God for His work in the people. For example, to the Romans, a peo-

ple he had not yet visited and had only heard reports of (and also a church not yet properly organized), Paul wrote, *First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world* (Rom.1:8). To the Corinthians, a church ridden with divisions, disorders, and immorality, and many members who were harshly critical of Paul, the apostle wrote, *I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given to you by Christ Jesus* (1 Cor. 1:4). And to the Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, and his personal friends and protégés like Timothy and Philemon, Paul wrote similar remarks of thanksgiving—praying for the churches and individuals he wrote to, and thanking God for them.

Who are the people in your life? Identify something specific within them that you can thank God for. Is there a difficult boss or coworker in your life? Perhaps you can thank God that, despite their difficulty, they make you aware of your vulnerability and areas of sensitivity. Is there someone you find irritating? Perhaps you can thank God that you are learning patience through them, and that you are being driven to your knees for grace and mercy. In spite of the tension in your relationship, do these individuals possess certain traits, gifts, talents, qualities, and abilities for which you may commend and compliment them, thank them for

how they have served and blessed others with their gifts, as well as thank God for their lives?

None of the churches or individuals Paul wrote to were perfect, but he found something about each of them to thank God for. We should attempt the same—to find something positive or thankworthy to rejoice for in everyone.

Thanksgiving, Praise, and Worship

God deserves our thanksgiving, praise, and worship. In *thanksgiving*, we verbalize our appreciation of God's goodness to us for the tangible and intangible gifts and blessings we receive daily from Him. We revel and celebrate in God and His goodness. *Praise*, which comes from the old French word *preisier* means *to value or prize*. When we *praise* God, we exalt, bless, and honor Him. We recount or

*God deserves our
thanksgiving, praise,
and worship.*

sing of His love, power, wonders, and attributes. The word *worship* comes from the old English word *worthscipe*, meaning, *worth-ship*. In *worship* we

worship God for His worth-ship. We worship Him for who He is—His very essence and being. We declare His worth; adoring Him and vocalizing our highest esteem of God, or silently reverencing Him.

These actions—thanksgiving, praise, and worship—are actions fit for someone of great reverence: the King of kings and Lord of lords! In Bible times, if someone were to visit a monarch, he would have to walk first through a gate, then to an outer court, and finally to an inner court or inner chamber where the king sat on his throne. In like manner, we are reminded in Psalm 100 that thanksgiving opens to us the gate from the outside, praise leads us to God's court, and worship brings us into His throne room and holy presence.

The psalmist reminds us that thanksgiving is our gate pass to God's presence. Therefore he says, *Enter into His gates with thanksgiving, And into His courts with praise. Be thankful to Him, and bless His name* (Ps. 100:4). As we approach God's court (the holy place)

Prayers of thanksgiving express our appreciation of God's goodness. They acknowledge that we are dependent on God, and they portray our confidence that God can get the job done in a present or future crisis.

and think about God's attributes, the psalmist invites us to praise God: *For the LORD is good; His mercy is everlasting, And His truth endures to all generations* (Ps. 100:5). Nearing the inner chamber (the holy of holies) and humbled and awed by the Almighty's presence, the writer bids us to worship God: *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 (Ps. 100:3).

Prayers of thanksgiving express our appreciation of God's goodness, they show that we acknowledge that we are dependent on God, and they portray our confidence that God can get the job done in a present or future crisis. We are to come before the Lord and approach His gates with the gift of gratitude and the attitude of the Psalmist:

Open for me the gates of righteousness; I will enter and give thanks to the LORD. This is the gate of the LORD through which the righteous may enter. I will give you thanks, for you answered me; you have become my salvation (Ps. 118:19-21; NIV).

Prayer with thanksgiving is a total prayer, born on wings of grace. It looks back with gratitude for past blessings, looks at the present crisis with confidence and faith in God's goodness, and looks forward with hope to a future in which God's goodness and mercy are following.

*Oh, for grace to thank You, Lord, in everything,
In the confidence that You are not aloof from me
and all that concerns me,
For You are my environment, like water is to a fish, or soil to a seed;
"You know my sitting down and my rising up;*

EVEN A CAGED BIRD SINGS!

*You understand my thought afar off.
You comprehend my path and my lying down,
And are acquainted with all my ways.
For there is not a word on my tongue,
But behold, O LORD, You know it altogether.
You have hedged me behind and before,
And laid Your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
It is high, I cannot attain it.
Where can I go from Your Spirit?
Or where can I flee from Your presence?" (Ps. 139:2-7).
Truly, in You "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).
You are the Vine, I am the branch,
and without You I am nothing (John 15:5);
You, Lord, are my environment, my total space,
my beginning, and my end;
I am in You, You are in me, You are over and above me.
Lord, I praise You, I worship You, I exalt Your name,
I bless You, I love You;
I magnify You, adore You, honor You, and bow before Your Majesty.
I thank You for the gift of salvation by grace through faith,
I thank You for free pardon, forgiveness, and cleansing through Christ,
I thank You for access to Your presence through the blood of Christ,
I thank You for trial and temptations, for pain and problems,
For because of them, I am driven to pray, to trust,
and to seek Your face,
And through seeking Your face, I grow to be more and more like You.
I just want to say, Father, thank You; thank You, Father,
For everything! Yes—for everything.*

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE RIGHT SUBJECTS

Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things (Phil. 4:8).

You're having another sleepless night. Okay, it's time to focus on something other than sleep. You reach for that action-packed novel you were reading yesterday. It is so riveting you can hardly put it down.

An hour passes. Then another. Before you know it, half the night is gone and now you can neither put the book down, nor sleep! *What went wrong?*

Obviously, you turned your attention the wrong way. Instead of reaching for a warm mug of milk, or watching a boring TV program, you focused on something that confounded the problem of sleep. If you wanted to sleep, you should have put away the stimulating book and focused on something that would get you where you wanted to be: *asleep!*

Learning how *to rejoice always* is similar to this example of trying to fall asleep. If you want to learn how to rejoice, even when times are tough, then it's not just a matter of diverting your focus from your problem, but redirecting your mind to worthy subjects.

What are these subjects? Paul gives us a think list: *Whatsoever things are true... honest... just... pure... lovely... of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things (Phil. 4:8; KJV).*

You may wonder why it is so important to think "right." Paul puts so much emphasis on thinking correctly because *we are what*

we think. Proverbs 23:7 tells us, *For as [man] thinks in his heart, so is he.* That means what you think about, or what you think of yourself, is what you will become! For good or bad, each person is the architect of his or her life by the thoughts they allow to shape, forge, and fashion their lives. In essence, people reap what they sow.

Sowing and Reaping

It's easy to understand the principle of "sowing and reaping" when it pertains to agriculture. If you sow maize seeds, you reap a harvest of maize. If you want cowpea, you sow cowpea. And if

For good or bad, each person is the architect of his or her life by the thoughts they allow to shape, forge, and fashion their lives.

you don't want pumpkin, you don't sow pumpkin—because if pumpkin is what you've sown, pumpkin is what you'll get.

The principle of sowing and reaping, however, applies to more than agriculture. The Bible says,

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 (Gal. 6:7,8; emphasis added).

You reap what you sow—*always!* If you practice the piano, you will improve. If you neglect to brush your teeth, you will get cavities. And whatever you sow in your thoughts is what you will reap in your life. Sow negative thoughts; reap a negative life. Plant positive, edifying thoughts; reap a life of blessing.

Everybody is a seed planter. Whether we like it or not, or whether we know it or not, we are always planting seeds—good or bad—which will some day bring a harvest. You don't wake up one day and find yourself a disgruntled, bitter, complaining person just by accident. Neither do you suddenly find one day you

*You reap what
you sow—always!*

are a peaceful, caring, productive individual. Neither disposition is the product of chance or circumstance. It is more the

result of your inner circumstance, the culmination of years of sowing bitter seeds and thinking resentful, sour thoughts.

To be truly human is to exercise the power of choice, to take charge and control of our thoughts, and to be intentional with the content and meditations of our hearts so that we may gladly reap a desired harvest. Therefore, if you want love, be intentional in sowing seeds of love by loving others. If you want to receive, be deliberate in giving to others. If you want people to pay attention to you, give them your undivided attention. Do you want others to listen to you? Listen to them actively. If you want people to smile at you, smile at them first. If you want friends, be friendly first, for *A man who has friends must himself be friendly* (Prov. 18:24a). This is much like the golden rule where Jesus says, *Whatever you want men [or women] to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets* (Matt. 7:12). Whatever you want in life, be deliberate in planting its seeds.

What Is in Your Heart?

Keep your heart with all diligence, For out of it spring the issues of life (Prov. 4:23).

Our thoughts give birth to our circumstances. In the Bible, Jesus emphasized the importance of guarding our thoughts, because a

*Our thoughts give birth
to our circumstances.*

sinful thought is as bad as the actual deed. For example, Jesus says to contemplate adultery is as guilty as having done it: *But I*

say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart (Matt. 5:28). As well, if such sins of the mind are left unchecked, they can actually lead to a host of other sins in both thought and deed. For example, covetousness

starts in the mind, and if left unchecked, it can result in stealing, deception, murder, adultery, and other such sins.

The story of Achan, which we read about in Joshua 7, illustrates this downward spiral of unchecked sins of the heart. Achan, along with the other Israelite soldiers, had been forbidden by God to take anything from the plunder of the battle of Jericho, for it was to be entirely consecrated to the Lord (Josh. 6:18,19). However, Achan's covetous heart eventually led him to the sin of stealing:

Indeed I have sinned against the LORD God of Israel, and this is what I have done: When I saw among the spoils a beautiful Babylonian garment, two hundred shekels of silver, and a wedge of gold weighing fifty shekels, I coveted them and took them... (Josh.7:20,21).

Achan's sin led to Israel's defeat in a battle that they could have won if God was pleased with them. His sin began in his thoughts and heart, and led to more dire consequences. What is true of covetousness is true of any thought—good or bad. You soon act on your thoughts or live them out.

Jesus also teaches that whatever a person says is first in the heart before he or she says it. Chiding the Pharisees, Jesus told them,

Brood of vipers! How can you, being evil, speak good things? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things (Matt. 12:34,35).

We don't just speak from our lips; our speech is the product of our heart, coming from the controlling center and depth of our being. Our words reflect the condition of our heart.

In essence, then, the heart is the wellspring of all actions. What we do is the product of our hearts and thoughts. As Jesus said,

For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wicked-

ness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within and defile a man (Mark 7:21-23).

Our words reflect the condition of our heart.

A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things (Matt. 12:35a)

The negative, as well as the positive comes forth from our hearts. So, if change is to happen, the heart and mind are the areas where change must start.

Learning to Think Anew

Perhaps by now you have detected wrong and negative patterns of thinking in your life and are wondering if there is hope for you. I want to give you good news: *there is hope*. In Romans 12:2, we read, *And do not be conformed to this world, but BE TRANSFORMED BY THE RENEWING OF YOUR MIND, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God* (emphasis added).

Although change is hard, it is not impossible, for God has provided the means by which our hearts and minds can be transformed and renewed.

How do you transform and renew your mind? Well, first of all, you must admit that you are responsible for your thoughts—that you have played a part in sowing bad seeds in your mind. The good news is if you change your thoughts, you can change your life. You may not be able to help bad or negative thoughts from flashing through your mind, but you don't have to entertain them or dwell on them. You have choice.

Second, it is important to understand that transformation does not happen simply by telling yourself to stop thinking bad thoughts. Rather, you fight bad thoughts by thinking on good subjects, such as that in Philippians 4:8: items that are true, honest, just, pure, lovely, of good report, virtuous, and praiseworthy. Ephesians 4:22-24 tells us,

EVEN A CAGED BIRD SINGS!

That you PUT OFF, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and BE RENEWED IN THE SPIRIT OF YOUR MIND, and that you PUT ON the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness (emphasis added).

Old habits may be ingrained, but as we feed the new, we starve the old, and invariably snuff life out of it. Only as we cultivate and practice a new, positive lifestyle and invest in it do we experience change.

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can be transformed
and renewed.*

The center of change is in the mind, the perspective, the worldview, or the thought pattern. Without a change of mind, or re-education, any change is merely external and temporary. It is possible to “put off” a bad habit and “put on” a new one without having a change of

heart, and by simply rearranging your environment. But because there is no heart change, as soon as the environment is no longer favorable, you will revert back to your old patterns because, “As [man] thinketh in his heart, so is he” (Prov. 23:7; KJV). At best, this type of change is reformation, not transformation.

The “put off” / “put on” language Paul uses does not only pertain to thoughts, but also to new ways of living. This means we need to “put off” *places, people, and practices* that do not edify us. And this means we need to visit *right* places, spend time with the *right* kind of people, and be engaged in the *right* type of practices that will transform us into the kind of people God wants us to be. There are places that are in our best interest to avoid. There are people who are not a good influence. There are magazines, web sites, movies, and television programs that you do not have to look at; for remember: you reap what you sow, and become what you think about.

I See You as You See Yourself

In Numbers 13:17-33, we read about the story of Joshua and Caleb and the ten spies. This story shows the place perception plays

There are magazines, websites, movies, and television programs that you do not have to look at; for remember: you reap what you sow, and become what you think about.

in our lives and underscores the importance of right thinking.

Joshua, Caleb, and the rest of the Israelite nation were on the threshold of the land promised to them by God. Getting there had been a long, arduous journey, but throughout their pilgrimage, the Israelites had witnessed the mighty power of God in many ways. First they

had seen, after four hundred years of slavery, how God, true to His promise, delivered them out of the hands of the Egyptians. They had also witnessed God's judgment of the Egyptians through a series of ten plagues. They had experienced God's protection as He parted the Red Sea, giving them a way of escape from their enemies; and they had a first-hand encounter with God's providence as He miraculously provided manna and quails for them to eat throughout their journey.

Against this background of victory and deliverance, the Israelites were now facing the unknowns of their Promised Land. *Who lived there? Was it a strong, prosperous country? How would they take possession of this land?* Not knowing what to expect, Moses sent twelve spies, one leader from each of the twelve tribes of Israel, to scout out the land and bring a report:

Then Moses sent them to spy out the land of Canaan, and said to them, "Go up this way into the South, and go up to the mountains, and see what the land is like: whether the people who dwell in it are strong or weak, few or many; whether the land they dwell in is good or bad; whether the cities they inhabit are like

camps or strongholds; whether the land is rich or poor; and whether there are forests there or not. Be of good courage. And bring some of the fruit of the land."

Now they departed and came back to Moses and Aaron and all the congregation of the children of Israel in the Wilderness of Paran, at Kadesh; they brought back word to them and to all the congregation, and showed them the fruit of the land. Then they told him, and said: "We went to the land where you sent us. It truly flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. Nevertheless the people who dwell in the land are strong; the cities are fortified and very large; moreover we saw the descendants of Anak there. The Amalekites dwell in the land of the South; the Hittites, the Jebusites, and the Amorites dwell in the mountains; and the Canaanites dwell by the sea and along the banks of the Jordan."

Then Caleb quieted the people before Moses, and said, "Let us go up at once and take possession, for we are well able to overcome it."

But the men who had gone up with him said, "We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we." And they gave the children of Israel a bad report of the land which they had spied out, saying, "The land through which we have gone as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people whom we saw in it are men of great stature. There we saw the giants (the descendants of Anak came from the giants); and WE WERE LIKE GRASSHOPPERS IN OUR OWN SIGHT, AND SO WE WERE IN THEIR SIGHT (Num. 13:17-20a, 26-33; emphasis added).

The "land of giants" was too much for the Israelites to hear about. This report weakened the resolve of the people to press on and take the land. *How could God do this? they wondered. How could He lead them all this way, only to be confronted with impossibility?*

The people wept all night and wished they had died in Egypt where they were at least ensured a burial. Dying in Egypt was preferable to dying on a battlefield! Hastily, they made plans to

select another leader and return to Egypt. Only two of the twelve spies—Joshua and Caleb—urged the people to believe God’s promise and count on Him to give them victory in the battle.

The ten spies who brought the discouraging report confused fact with opinion. Yes, it was a fact that the land was well-fortified and the people were giants. But it was their *opinion* that they couldn’t overcome them. Caleb and Joshua, who saw the same things as the other spies, had a different opinion on the matter:

The land we passed through to spy out is an exceedingly good land. If the LORD delights in us, then He will bring us into this land and give it to us, ‘a land which flows with milk and honey.’ Only do not rebel against the LORD, nor fear the people of the land, for they are our bread; their protection has departed from them, and the LORD is with us. Do not fear them (Num.14:6-9).

Yes, it was a fact that the land was well-fortified and the people were giants. But it was their opinion that they couldn’t overcome them.

The ten spies sinned because they left God out of their reports. And because of their doubt and rejection of His leadership, God said none of those ten spies, nor the others who had witnessed His power yet still disbelieved, would make it into the Promised Land. Israel

then wandered in the wilderness for forty years, burying their dead, until the generation that doubted God was entirely wiped out.

Israel’s problem was in their perception. While Joshua and Caleb said, *They [the Canaanites] are our bread; their protection has departed from them, and the LORD is with us. Do not fear them (Num. 14:9b)*, the other ten spies said, *We were like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight (Num. 13:33b)*. The ten spies couldn’t see past their fear and their own inadequacies, but Joshua and Caleb saw their strength and victory in God. They approached the situation through belief in God’s promises, and so

declared that, in spite of the walls around the Promised Land, the “giants” within would have no protection against the Israelites, who had God on their side.

*The way you perceive
yourself is often how
others will perceive you.*

The way you perceive yourself is often how others will perceive you. If you see yourself as a grasshopper, as the weaker one, the loser, the incompetent, or the beggar, the

world will also refer to you that way. If you see yourself as able, as *more than conquerors through [Christ]* (Rom. 8:37), as one who *can do all things through Christ who strengthens* (Phil. 4:13), the world will see you this way. How we think of ourselves is obviously quite important.

Thoughts and Attitude

It is God’s world. God has allowed some laws to govern the physical universe, as well as some laws to govern the spiritual. For example, God once decreed, *While the earth remains, Seedtime and harvest, Cold and heat, Winter and summer, And day and night Shall not cease* (Gen. 8:22). In like manner, gravity and floatation (in physics), diligence and virtue (in ethics), are all part of God’s laws. Anyone who follows these laws (or principles) will reap the fruit of obedience—even if that person is not a Christian. The same rule applies to our thoughts and attitude.

What do you think of and say about yourself? The answer to this question can have far-reaching consequences. When you say, “I am able; I can,” both the physical and spiritual worlds respond to you with resources beyond your imagination to make you live out your dreams. Somehow, something brings you to the right place at the right time, people give you attention and show you favor; and the difficult task, which you never believed impossible, is accomplished. Similarly, when you say, “I am not able; I can’t,” seen and unseen forces begin to work *against* you, incentives and

creativity withdraw from you, the environment is hostile and unhealthy, and everything reinforces your statement that you are *not* able and you can't. The Bible tells us,

You are snared by the words of your mouth; You are taken by the words of your mouth.... He who guards his mouth preserves his life, But he who opens wide his lips shall have destruction.... A fool's mouth is his destruction, And his lips are the snare of his soul.... Death and life are in the power of the tongue, And those who love it will eat its fruit.... Whoever guards his mouth and tongue Keeps his soul from troubles (Prov. 6:2; 13:3; 18:7,21; 21:23).

When you say, "I am able; I can," both the physical and spiritual worlds respond to you with resources beyond your imagination. And, when you say, "I am not able; I can't," seen and unseen forces begin to work against you.

Did you hear that? You are *snared* by the words of your mouth! Unbeknown to you, your words create your world, and you also project your thoughts to others. For example, if you go about with "the world owes me" mentality, don't be surprised when the world returns the message and makes demands that *you* owe it. Or if you go about with a "how may I serve you" mentality, the world will respond in

the same way, wondering how *they* can serve *you*.

Before you blame your friends, family, co-workers, and acquaintances for how they respond to or relate with you, check the messages in your heart. What is your "self-talk"—your inner conversation and inner thoughts? What seeds are you planting there? What messages are you projecting to the world? If you must blame anyone, blame the person in your mirror, because remember: you are what you think. The place to start is with you. Be willing to probe, confront, and ask yourself: *What is*

going on inside? What are my fears? When I peel off what I do for a living, who I'm related to, who I know—who am I deep down within?

The world may not read your thoughts, but they read your attitude and posture, which results from your thoughts. I was once a homeroom teacher in a public middle school in downtown

*The world may not read
your thoughts, but they
read your attitude and
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from your thoughts.*

Brooklyn, New York. We met together in a room that I didn't teach in, and the class that used it for homeroom didn't receive instruction in this room, either. So by the time we returned for afternoon homeroom, the class was always in a mess—seats

disarranged, books and paper balls strewn all over the floor, panels damaged and lockers broken. If I asked the students to help tidy up the room they'd protest, "We didn't do it."

One Friday it had rained and the students who used the room after lunch had been outside and had tracked in mud and dirt. The room was an eyesore. I hated staying in the room in that condition, but I just resigned myself to it, hoping the ten minutes of homeroom time would pass quickly. One boy walked up to me and said, "You don't look good. Are you okay?" I told him I was unhappy about the mess on the floor. "We didn't do it," he replied. Soon after, another girl came to me and said the same words, "You don't look good. Are you okay?" I told her the same; it was the messy room. "You know, we didn't do it," she answered. Then it dawned on me: my face betrayed the condition of my heart. My anger and frustration could be read on my face. The kids were right; *I didn't* look good. My face was the mirror of my spirit.

Now if I lived that way day to day, carrying my frustrations on my sleeve, that depressive look would become a permanent feature of my face. Nobody would need to ask if I was okay; they would just know it to be my "natural" look. Proverbs puts it succinctly, *As in water face reflects face, So a man's heart reveals the man* (Prov. 27:19).

Many people today look pitiful, sickly, or ugly, not for any

*You cannot be truly
beautiful or winsome
without thinking beautiful
and positive thoughts
of yourself and others.*

ugliness or deformity in their physical features, but for a lack of inner beauty—because of the ugly and dirty thoughts they carry with them all day, all year, and all their life. The fact is that you cannot be truly beautiful or winsome without

thinking beautiful and positive thoughts of yourself and others. Think: if we had the technology to transcribe and project your thoughts onto a public screen for just one day, would you be embarrassed by what people would see and read? Even without such technology, our face projects our spirit to others by the way our thoughts color our disposition.

Thoughts, Dreams, and Achievements

Our thoughts also follow our personal dreams—those deep-seated desires against which we set goals and make plans. Every concrete thing or measurable achievement in life was once a dream; it once existed only in the thoughts and imaginations. To enable us to become the person God created us to be, God often helps us change our focus by giving us a dream or vision that will alter the way we think and feel about ourselves.

Already when Joseph was seventeen, God gave him a series of dreams to prepare him for the future leadership role he would have (Gen. chapters 37-50). Later when Joseph experienced the hatred of his siblings, enslavement, false accusations, imprisonment, and other trials and temptations, Joseph remembered God had given him a dream, and that he was destined for leadership. Without the visions—which were all he had to hold on to—Joseph could have succumbed to the pressure and settled for a low life. Joseph's dreams, visions, and thoughts about himself were not dictated or controlled by his surroundings; they came from the depth of his being—from his faith in the God of his fathers.

*Every concrete thing or
measurable achievement
in life was once a dream;
it once existed only
in the thoughts and
imaginings.*

toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be" (Gen.15:5). God entered into a unilateral and unconditional covenant with Abram, in which it depended solely on God to bring about His promise. From then on, Abram began to see the unseen; God had changed his thinking. Now, every time he saw stars in the sky, Abram thought of his descendents as numberless and uncountable as the stars.

However, as Abram and his wife Sarai got older, it became increasingly difficult for them to believe that Abram would be the "father of all nations." After all, they were now in their nineties, way beyond the age of childbearing. To help Abram and Sarai believe in His promise, God changed their names. *Abram* (meaning

*When you focus on the
risks, your life tends to
gravitate towards fears,
doubts, excuses, and the
negatives; but when
you focus on rewards,
you seem to gain the
momentum to overcome
all obstacles in your way.*

Abram is another case study. God promised Abram at age seventy-five that a nation would descend from his lineage (Gen. 12). This was at a time when Abram had no children. To begin to change Abram's vision, God *brought him outside and said, "Look now*

high father) was changed to *Abraham* (meaning *the father of a multitude*), and *Sarai* was changed to *Sarah* (meaning *princess, queen*). In addition, God determined that Abraham and Sarah's child would be named *Isaac* (meaning *laughter*) because Abraham and Sarah had laughed at God's promise of a child. However, in God's time, when Abraham was one hundred years old, the child Isaac

was born (Gen. 21).

Before you can make progress toward God's plan for your life, you need to change your focus, have some dreams, and begin, by God's grace, to see the unseen, considering God's promise as a done deal. No individual is bigger than his or her dreams. No group of people rises higher than their visions of themselves. Dreams give birth to goals, and goals lead to a focused and disciplined life, which in turn lead to success. So dream, and dream big! And don't limit your dream to your resources. Stake your dreams on God, the big, Almighty God who made the heavens and the earth.

It is important to be informed and aware of the pros and cons of an endeavor, but to focus more on the risks than the rewards is not a good habit. When you focus on the risks, your life tends to gravitate towards fears, doubts, excuses, and the negatives; but when you focus on rewards, you seem to gain the momentum to overcome all obstacles in your way. When you focus on the rewards of a project, you are empowered to make the sacrifices, discount the pain, and aim for the finish line. Jesus illustrated this point at Calvary; He was able to endure the agony of the cross because He focused on the reward or result of it all, and we are admonished to follow His example: *Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God* (Heb.12:2).

Biblical Motivation

Christian motivation parts way from secular motivation because the former is realistic and God-centered; the latter is humanistic and egocentric. For example, it is not uncommon to hear a secular motivational speaker say carte blanche, "If you believe it, and believe in yourself, you can achieve it." Christian motivation, on the other hand, accepts limits and encourages creativity within the parameters of one's gifts, talents and abilities.

Let us say that, though a man, I really wanted to be a woman; there is no amount of believing or seeing in my mind (unless I am deluded) that would turn me into a woman, even if I wore skirts and blouses. Here is a more practical illustration: I am not athletic—and that’s okay, that’s part of the limits that I joyfully accept—there is no amount of visualizing my fifty-year-old body in the shoes of Carl Lewis or Michael Jordan, that would turn me into an Olympic medallist. I am better off visualizing myself growing and blossoming within the parameters of my gifts and talents. That’s being realistic.

All humanity is equal in the sight of God. All are created in God’s image and likeness, all have sinned, Christ died for all, all are redeemable, all are freely and unconditionally loved by God, and God desires fellowship with each and every one. However, the individual is endowed with different abilities, culturally and geographically positioned to experience the world through different sets of circumstances. God does this with the purpose that each one may really be a unique individual, complete in Christ, filling a specific role, and performing a particular task in society. It is the individual’s awesome responsibility to discern and discover that activity for which he or she has been divinely equipped and ordained to do. Even the church, the body of Christ, upholds “unity in diversity” because

There are diversities of gifts, but by 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. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all... . But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills.... For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function.... Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them (1 Cor. 12:4-7,11; Rom. 12:4,6a).

According to the parable of loaned money or talents (Matt. 25:14-

30), the master divided the money (talents) among his servants according to their abilities (vs. 15). No one received more or less than he could handle. The money in this parable represents any kind of natural or spiritual resource we are endowed with. When it was time to render account, the issue was not how much the servant returned but how faithfully and diligently he had been investing the master's resource (vs. 21,23). It is the same with us: the issue is not how many talents or gifts we have or don't have but how faithfully and diligently we develop, hone, and use the gifts and skills we have. "Real

*Biblical motivation
accepts limits, and
equally acknowledges
unlimited potentials in
one's gift areas. It
suggests that there
are things I cannot be
or do, but also that there
is a lot I can do or be,
with excellence, too—
to God's glory.*

life," Jesus says, "is not measured by how much we own (Luke 12:15b NLT).

Biblical motivation is also rooted in the resources God makes available to us in Christ. The Apostle Paul accepted his limits, but also stretched his mind into the unlimited possibilities of what he could do or be, *through Christ*. Paul said he could do all things—*through Christ* who strengthened him (Phil. 4:13); he was not sufficient of himself, but *his sufficiency was*

of God (2 Cor. 3:5), that in all things we are more than conquerors *through Him* [Christ] that loved us (Rom. 8:37), and *if God be for us*, who can be against us? (Rom. 8:31). Paul never bragged of his own ability or skill, but often boasted of what he could do through Christ empowering him. Those prepositions: *in*, *with*, and *through* Christ make all the difference between a God-made person and a self-made individual. As we see ourselves in God, our self-confidence becomes God-confident.

The Mind Is the Battlefield

EVEN A CAGED BIRD SINGS!

The mind is the battlefield of life's problems. It is there that the battles of life are either won or lost. Satan and his agents constantly attack and bombard our minds with all sorts of negative, defeatist thoughts and ideas. These thoughts and mental images have the potential to assume reality (or become strongholds) not only in our thinking, but also in the ways we interpret and interact in the world.

But we are not on our own in our struggles. God has given us superior weapons—the Name of Jesus, the Word of God, the Blood of Christ, the Holy Spirit, the fellowship of believers, prayer, the fruit of the Spirit—that we may *take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ*.

For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ (2 Cor. 10:3-5; NIV).

God has given us
superior weapons—
the Name of Jesus,
the Word of God, the
Blood of Christ, the Holy
Spirit, the fellowship
of believers, prayer,
the fruit of the Spirit.

Yes, we can rejoice in the Lord always when we have (1) *the right focus*—in the Lord, (2) *the right behavior*—have no anxiety, (3) *the right attitude*—prayer with thanksgiving, and (4) *the right subjects*—thinking good thoughts. We will not be

able to be perfectly joyful in our lifetime, however. We will have hurts and pain, and we will not always react correctly to our situations or focus fully on the Lord all the time. But we know that as we serve our Lord Jesus Christ on earth, we can anxiously rejoice in our incorruptible inheritance reserved in heaven,

where there will be joy unspeakable:

In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, whom having not seen you love Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory (1 Pet. 1:6-8).

This *inexpressible* joy is the greatest joy. Nothing compares to it.

The greatest reason for rejoicing, coming from the lips of our Master Jesus is—because your name is written in heaven.

The Greatest Reason for Rejoicing

A child opens his Christmas present and, to his wild excitement, finds a much-desired favorite toy. Well—I don't mean to burst his balloon—but the happiness and excitement of that moment cannot even compare

with the joy reserved for those who love the Lord; the joy of being *born from above* (John 3:3,7; NRSV).

A lady receives a long expected engagement ring from her lover, a newly employed head of household gets his first pay check after many months on the unemployment line, a pastor leads a soul to Christ and realizes that even the angels rejoice in heaven over the soul (Luke 15:10), a missionary just experiences that, at her command, praying in the name of Jesus, the powers of darkness tremble and fade away (Matt. 10:1). All this will bring tears of joy to our eyes but—don't think I am a joy killer—they don't compare with the joy of spending eternity in God's heaven. For sure, no human being could make or ever made such claims because none has ever been to heaven and back but Jesus—the One who knows heaven and earth too well—said so.

EVEN A CAGED BIRD SINGS!

After a busy day and many exorcisms, *the seventy* [that Jesus sent on the mission field] *returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name"* (Luke 10:17). Without dampening their joy, Jesus gave the disciples a better reason to rejoice. Jesus told the seventy,

Behold, I give you the authority to trample... over all the power of the enemy [Satan and his demons]... Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the [demonic] spirits are subject to you, but rather rejoice because your names are written in heaven (Luke 10:19,20).

The greatest reason for rejoicing, coming from the lips of our Master Jesus is—*because your name is written in heaven*. This heavenly record is mentioned in Revelation 20:12,15 as the *Book of Life*.

Have you experienced this indescribable joy of knowing that your sins are forgiven on the merits of Christ and that, by His grace alone, your name is written in heaven?

*"Search me, O God, and know my heart;
Try me, and know my anxieties;
And see if there is any wicked way in me,
And lead me in the way everlasting"* (Ps. 139:23,24).
*"Create in me a clean heart, O God,
And renew a steadfast spirit within me"* (Ps. 51:10).
*"Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
Be acceptable in Your sight,
O LORD, my strength and my Redeemer"* (Ps. 19:14).

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE OLD, OLD STORY

*There is joy in the presence of the angels of God
over one sinner who repents (Luke 15:10).*

I love good stories. As a child when I heard *once upon a time*, I gave my undivided attention. Stories opened my mind to the world within and beyond. I propose to end this little book with the best story ever told.

We can understand and also correct most problems in life simply by retracing our steps (or our thoughts) back to the point where we made the wrong turn, but for some problems we actually need to return to the very beginning before we can gain an understanding of the situation, or ever fix the problem. In such case, once the problem exists, every move or effort after that—in any direction whatsoever—is a wrong move, and the situation can't be remedied without a return to the first steps. For example, did you ever button your shirt (or blouse) the wrong way? As simple as that is, to fix it, first, you must totally unbutton your shirt, and then start all over again, making sure that each button is in the right hole. In like manner, to understand the basic human need for divine pardon, peace, and purpose, we also have to go to the beginning of human existence, and retell the "old, old story."⁵

The story of the original humanity's sin and consequent sepa-

⁵ Catherine A. Hankey, "I Love To Tell The Story," *The New Church Hymnal* (Lexicon Music, Inc., 1976), No. 435.

ration of the race from God (referred to as The Fall in church circles) began long before you and I were born. In the opening pages of the Bible, we read that God created the first human parents as free, moral beings. This implied that they were not puppets, pawns, or robots but were endowed with the power to think, make decisions, and act, as free moral beings. In His own wisdom, the Almighty-Creator ordained a relationship with humanity based on reason and love, rather than force and coercion. But it

In His own wisdom, the Almighty-Creator ordained a relationship with humanity based on reason and love, rather than force and coercion.

was clearly spelt out from the onset that the sustenance of this God-human relationship was dependent on humanity's voluntary obedience to God's Law and dependence on the Almighty.

As we know, freedom demanded wisdom and a sense of responsibility, without which it could become the greatest curse. Our first parents could do whatever they chose to: they could obey or disobey God, love or hate Him; although whatever they did carried its consequence. As it turned out, this tremendous privilege of volition and choice became the root of their problem. Deceived by Satan, they soon misused their freedom by choosing a wrong course of action, which resulted in separation from a holy God. Consequently, their sin of disobedience put them, and the human race, out of fellowship with God and a downward spiral of events began to occupy the pages of human history.

Going by the Bible's account, humanity's sin put God in a kind of a delicate dilemma because in His dealings with sinful humanity, God had to be loving and merciful, holy and just, at the same time. For illustration, think of a Judge who is also the parent of a teenage girl arraigned before his court for speed violation. What is the State appointed judge supposed to do? And, what is the loving father supposed to do? Does he pronounce the fine, or simply dis-

miss the case? Can he simultaneously perform both duties as an impartial judge and a loving father? Does he have options? You see, the Creator-God loved His creation, especially humanity; yet

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same time.*

God's holiness demanded that He punish humanity for their sin. If God is just, then justice must be served. Justice, in this sense, meant eternal death, that is, eternal separation from God.

If God loved humankind enough to desire fellowship with humanity, however, without denying His own holiness, then a solution must be provided. To balance the books, we

either pay the price of our disobedience or someone pays it for us. And, to complicate the matter, that *someone* has to be perfect and sinless, otherwise, he or she is of no use to pay the price for another's disobedience. This clause ruled out all the great leaders of the world's religious movements because none of them had been found perfect or sinless.

In heaven's court, *Justice*, the prosecutor, declared, "God's Law has been broken. The offender—in this case humanity—must be punished. It is the Law. The stated penalty of eternal death must be served. To do otherwise, or look the other way, is to condone sin. If God does that, God will be portrayed as attempting to bend or break His own moral Law. This will not augur well because it will compromise God's holy character. I propose that a holy and just

*Sure, love always
finds a way.*

God won't do that. And, I'd also like to remind this court that all creation—including Satan—is witnessing the proceedings of this court. However this court

rules is bound to be a precedent. If creation cannot find justice in heaven, where else can it look for justice?"

Then *Love*, standing in the advocate's box, pleaded, "First, I submit that the Creator-God is bigger than any problem in His creation. So I boldly ask: Isn't there a way for a gracious and merciful God to satisfy the just requirements of the Law without breaking the Law? Sure, love always finds a way. I insist that the omniscient God can figure a way to simultaneously uphold His

*To balance the books, we
either pay the price of our
disobedience or someone
pays it for us.*

holiness and love, to punish sin and forgive the sinner. And I hereby propose that a God who can't figure that out isn't big and loving enough. It may not be easy, and the price may be high, but is there any price too

high that love cannot pay? If love can't find a way, we may have to question how strong that love is, in the first place."

According to biblical records, the council of heaven found only one way out. Yes, you heard right, heaven proposed only one way out of the dilemma! That one way was substitution, or scape-goating. A perfect, sinless person was required to take the punishment and thereby pay the price for the world's sin. The sacrifice had to be human because

*In the fullness
of time, Jesus—as a
representative of
humanity and a delegate
of the Godhead—took our
punishment, died on
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humanity had sinned, and the sacrificial offering had be greater than the whole world put together, for that was the only way one sacrifice could suffice for all humankind once and for all ages. You ask: Who else could meet those criteria but God Himself? That's right! Only God was found to meet the criteria.

The drama took a different tone when the Creator-God became flesh, was born as a baby, and later died on a cross to fulfill the Law for His erring creation. The Old Testament is replete with offerings

and sacrifices of lambs, sheep, goats, and other animals as a prelude to the coming of Christ. These O.T. practices were types, and examples, and also served as a prophetic reminder of that one divine way for reconciling humanity back to God.

In the fullness of time, Jesus—as a representative of humanity and a delegate of the Godhead—took our punishment, died on a cross and rose again from the dead for us. He alone met the just requirements of God’s law on our behalf and transferred the credit to the account of all who believe and trust Him. From heaven’s standpoint, the sacrifice of Christ was the only way God could right what was wrong in our relationship to our Creator. On the cross, justice was served, love also prevailed,

The sacrifice had to be human because humanity had sinned, and the sacrificial offering had be greater than the whole world put together, for that was the only way one sacrifice could suffice for all humankind once and for all.

and humanity was the beneficiary. That’s why everything about our salvation begins and ends in Christ’ work on our behalf. The Scripture says, *For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life* (John 3:16).

The Gospel is a love story. To conclude this book, let me remind you that in spite of everything else, if you know,

by grace through faith, that your name is written in the *Book of Life* preserved in heaven, then you have reasons to rejoice and celebrate. But if you are in doubt, the assurance can be yours today because God is just a prayer away from you. That is a guarantee on the authority of God’s Word. Please don’t delay the possibility of a relationship with God any longer. Repent of your sins, entrust your life to Christ, and let the rejoicing begin in you and over you—right now.

EVEN A CAGED BIRD SINGS!

God, be merciful to me a sinner! (Luke 18:13b).
I have gone astray like a lost sheep (Ps. 119:176a).
To You, O LORD, I lift up my soul.
O my God, I trust in You;
Show me Your ways, O LORD;
Teach me Your paths.
For Your name's sake, O LORD,
Pardon my iniquity, for it is great.
Keep my soul, and deliver me;
Let me not be ashamed,
for I put my trust in You (Ps. 25:1-2a,4,11,20).
Lord, save me! (Matt. 14:30).

REFLECTION

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Chapter 1: Feeling Trapped? (Read Ps. 124:7,8; Isa. 40:25-31)

1. How do you relate to the “caged bird” metaphor in the preface?
2. Imagine you are the leader of a small group meeting for study and prayers. More than half of your membership is willing to admit that they feel trapped in some situations they are unable to free themselves from. As the leader, **(a)** how would you tailor the group’s programs and create an environment that is conducive to helping your members *unearth* and *address* such feelings? **(b)** Do you think the members really want you to “fix it” for them, or to listen to them, affirm, and journey with them in their struggle? **(c)** Which role are you more comfortable with: fix-it mode (caretaker style) or a caring-listener mode (caregiver style), and why?
3. **(a)** When the apostle Paul wrote, “*we are perplexed, but not in despair... struck down, but not destroyed,*” was he referring to sheer will power, positive thinking, or tenacity? Explain. **(b)** Your co-worker who is a New Age leader is visiting your study group. After listening to the reading of Colossians 1:27 and Galatians 2:20, he is excited that those scriptures actually say, *Christ in you, the hope of glory* and *It is no longer I who live, but*

Christ lives in me. He suggests that this Christian dogma of *Christ living within* is what the New Age movement teaches as the god-self; that Christians and New Agers merely use different terms for the same concept. What is your position: do you agree or disagree with him? Give reasons to explain yourself.

Chapter 2: Joy—The Biblical Antidepressant

(Read Neh. 8:1-12)

1. James' prayer request is, "to be more transparent and honest in my relationship to God, my family, and to my brothers and sisters in the church," but he seems to be alone with such request in the prayer meeting. From the silence you can almost sense others thinking, "Who wants to be transparent? That is like being naked before others!" The members who pray for James emphasize honesty in relationship with God, but practically gloss over the aspect of his request concerning transparency and honesty in his relationship with others. **(a)** Why do some Christians seem to wear a mask, hide their true feelings, or relate to others through a protective shield? **(b)** What attitude and/or practices do you use as your "mask" or "protective shield"? **(c)** Take an honest look into your own heart and probe yourself whether you are happy or joyous, or neither happy nor joyous. **(d)** Whatever the state of your heart, how long has that been the condition of your heart and why?
2. In your own words define **(a)** happiness, and **(b)** joy. Do you agree with the author's definition and explanation of both? Explain.
3. A new believer was admonished with the scripture, *the joy of the LORD is your strength*, but it sounded much like a cliché to him. He did not understand the passage and asked you to please help him unpack it. Using the *context* of the *text* as your springboard, explain how a new believer may both find **(a)** an encouragement and **(b)** a kind of "spiritual gauge" in this passage.

Chapter 3: The Power of Example (Read Acts 16:6-28)

1. Many political activists, imprisoned for their opinions, have been known to maintain an indomitable spirit throughout their ordeal. **(a)** If we could gain access to, and also decode, their prison diaries and memoirs, how would their daily journal compare with those of Paul and Silas, and how would they be different? Stretch your imagination and be creative. **(b)** How would their motives and/or motivations for enduring suffering compare?
2. Joe relieves himself of daily pressures by listening to praise songs through the earphones of his portable cassette player, or attending a prayer meeting where he says, his “spirit is lifted with the worship songs.” In addition, once a week, Joe attends a Bible seminar under a ministry with a goal to “teach faith, motivate, and empower God’s people for the end-time ministry.” Although most Christians who know him will describe Joe as an active Christian, on fire for the Lord, and one who loves the Lord, in their heart of hearts, no one desires Joe’s kind for a boss or an employee, simply because Joe is a difficult person to reason with. He is a classical example of the “never-wrong/always-right” personality. Joe himself is worried and confused about his career path because he has not been able to hold down a job for many years since leaving college—he was often fired a few months before completing probation. Following another layoff, Joe pleads with you in earnest, “What really is wrong with me? Tell me: Why do I go through the same pattern of being terminated just prior to finishing probation? Is God trying to say something to me? Please be honest with me. I ask for your help.” **(a)** How would you counsel Joe, and would you be honest as he pled? **(b)** If Joe is desperate for help, design a behavior modification assignment to improve his interpersonal relations, especially his ability to be a team player in the workplace.

3. The writer says, "I believe Paul and Silas praised God in jail because they believed in a *theology of blessing*, as well as a *theology of pain*." Articulate a balance between these two.

Chapter 4: The Right Focus (Read Hab. 3:17-19)

1. (a) How has your faith or faith journey prepared (or failed to prepare) you to find God in all places and seasons—high and low—of your life? (b) David writes, *If I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there*—Ps. 139:8b. One interpretation and/or application of this scripture is that even if life becomes a living hell for him, David believes that God is still present with him; that David is ever cognizant of God's presence and active role in his life, no matter how unbearable a situation is. In what ways does your story bear testimony to this application?
2. Don has learned to make positive confession and say nothing negative in all situations. When friends from the church visit him on his hospital bed as he is recuperating after a surgery, Don keeps punctuating every sentence with "praise the Lord, the Lord is good, glory, hallelujah, Amen," but his body language and non-verbal expressions suggest a denial of reality. Can a Christian be authentic with his/her (physical and emotional) pain and at the same time be positive and *rejoice in the Lord*? Explain your answer.
3. "You can choose to magnify the problem, or choose to magnify God," wrote the author. How do we do this?

Chapter 5: The Right Behavior (Read Ruth 3:1-18; 4:1-22)

1. Messie is a single mom and head of household who recently lost her job and is desperate to find another. She has a mortgage and other bills to pay, in addition to feeding and clothing her two teenage children. Much as she tries not to, Messie cannot stop thinking about her problem day and night, but every

time she does, she tries to turn her thoughts into prayers. A born-again Christian of many years, Messie believes that if she prays *once* in faith about anything (Mark 11:24), she just needs to wait and see the result, but that has not been her experience, at least, in this instance. Therefore, she is worried **(a)** that her mind is constantly on her problem, **(b)** that she has been praying again and again on the same issue, which suggests to her that she is lacking in faith, and, **(c)** that she has been too repetitive in her prayer—saying the same words to God countless times. Is there a problem here or not? Explain.

2. What is your reaction to the e-mail in this chapter—the memo?
3. To illustrate God’s care for humanity, Jesus calls the attention of His hearers to sparrows, saying, *And not one of them [the sparrows] is forgotten before God* (Luke 12:6). **(a)** Did you ever find yourself in a situation in which you felt or thought that God might have forgotten or forsaken you? If yes, explain. **(b)** How does knowing that God cares and thinks so much about tiny, common, sparrows help relieve our anxieties?

Chapter 6: The Right Attitude (Read John 11:1-53)

1. Deacon Richard’s son recently died in an auto accident. When some members of the church visited, a deaconess who prayed for the family quoted in her prayer the scripture that says, “In everything, give thanks.” But Deacon Richard did not take kindly to the reference to this verse in his loss. Unfortunately, the verse kept coming to his mind and nagging him, but he kept ranting and muttering, “What is there to thank God for—thank God that my son is dead, or that it was I who buried my son and not he that buried me? And how dare the deaconess, a mother of grown-up children herself, say such things to me? Is she trying to imply that my son wouldn’t amount to anything, and was better dead than alive? What does she think of herself? After all, her children are not doing

better than mine!" Richard later confided in a professional counselor, but to him, the therapist was not helpful. The counselor simply acknowledged that the deaconess was not very sensitive and that he was glad that Richard was coping well with his loss and doing well with his anger. Put yourself in the shoes of these three—Richard, the deaconess, and the counselor. If any, what would you do differently and what would you do the same?

2. A preacher says, "Your attitude determines your altitude in life and ministry." Discuss.
3. List or discuss several things that may be helpful in obeying the scriptural injunction, *In everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you* (1 Thess. 5:17).

Chapter 7: The Right Subjects (Read Num. 13:17-33; 14:1-19)

1. (a) "You reap what you sow—*always!*" Discuss. (b) A small group is engaged in a series of biblical personality studies. When it concludes the character study on king David, the attendees are asked to suggest an *overarching* biblical principle from David's life. Jane suggests a principle of "cause and effect," that a consequence always follows an action. Julie, a member of another church, says the umbrella principle from David's story is "grace and mercy," that God does not deal with us according to our sins. (i) From your knowledge of King David's life, which of these two do you favor as an overriding principle, and (ii) are these two opinions a matter of perspective or simultaneous truths?
2. Have you ever thought deeply on something and discovered that "something" showing up in your dreams at night? Or, have you dreamed of something at night only to find it happening like a replay during the day? Suggest several possibilities to explain this dynamic. (See Ecclesiastes 5:3).

3. The author writes, "If you see yourself as able, as *more than conquerors through* [Christ] (Rom. 8:37), as one who *can do all things through Christ who strengthens* (Phil. 4:13), the world will see you as this way." The writer of Proverbs writes, *And a man is valued by what others say of him* (Prov. 27:21b). **(a)** Who does *the world* here refer to? **(b)** When is the world's perception of us correct, when is it dangerous, and what is the best way to consider the world's opinion of us? Discuss.

Chapter 8: The Old, Old, Story (Read John 3:1-21)

1. You walk into a heated argument between two boys in their early teens. Steve is a young Christian witnessing to his friend. In his attempt to save his friend from ending up in hell, Steve quotes John 3:18: *He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.* His unsaved friend, Mike, does not know a scripture to cite or quote but insists that Steve not only misinterprets the Bible but also that he misrepresents God, because, according to Mike, God is loving and merciful and such a loving Creator will neither condemn nor send one of his creation to hell. Mike, articulate and eloquent, quizzes his friend, "Steve, do you take pleasure in destroying your own work, the labor of your hand? Answer me. Think for a minute Steve, what kind of Designer or Artist would create something as magnificent and unfathomable as the universe, or even the human body, and then destroy it with his own hand? Where is the logic in what you are saying? Don't equate God with Hitler or Stalin; God is not, believe me." What is your response to these two teenagers?
2. "Heaven proposed only one way out of the dilemma!" wrote the author. **(a)** Is this bigotry? See also John 14:6; Acts 4:12. **(b)** In a society that clamors for tolerance and plurality, how

EVEN A CAGED BIRD SINGS!

does a Christian remain authentic to his/her understanding of the biblical message and mandate to preach to all nations?

3. If you are in a group setting, relate your experience of “the joy of salvation,” or recount when this joy was first real to you.