A SKETCH OF GENESIS

TITUS CHU

How beautiful is the book of Genesis! It is a description of our experience of the growth in life. We began in a situation that was formless, void, and dark. We progressed as the Spirit of God moved over us and gained us. As we give ourselves to the Lord, He brings us through the experiences of those in Genesis, including Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Eventually, He brings us into the maturity of Joseph for the fulfillment of God's glorious eternal plan.

If we are simply churchgoers who are busy with spiritual things, our knowing of the Lord will be limited. We must experience Him and walk the way of life, progressing higher and higher, until we are fully matured and able to richly supply life to others. Though we may feel short and ashamed that we have wasted so much time, the Lord is giving us a heart that desires to grow in life. To grow in Him, we need to seek and experience His presence all the time that He might mold us and work on us. We need to know His desire and be filled with Him that we may become a blessing to the church.

This e-book contains a number of blank pages.

They have been left in this version intentionally, when converting the book from print format, so that the page layout of this electronic version matches that of the print version.

A SKETCH OF GENESIS

TITUS CHU

A Sketch of Genesis by Titus Chu

August 2013 PDF & Print on Demand

© 2013 by Titus Chu ISBN: 1-932020-56-X

Distributed by
The Church in Cleveland Literature Service
3150 Warren Road
Cleveland, Ohio 44111

Download the PDF version of this book at MinistryMessages.org

Available for purchase online. Printed by CreateSpace, an Amazon.com company.

Please send correspondence by email to TheEditors@MinistryMessages.org

Published by Good Land Publishers Ann Arbor, Michigan

Unless otherwise noted,
Scripture quotations are taken from the
New American Standard Bible®,
© 1960, 1995
by The Lockman Foundation.

The quotation on the back cover is taken from pages 202–203 of this book.

Contents

1.	The Experience of Growing in Life In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth	3
2.	The Life Supply of God A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden	15
3.	The Causes of Man's Fall "In the day that you eat from it you will surely die"	25
4.	God's Dealing with Man's Fall Man lifted up from the dust	33
5.	The Principle of Serving God Where there is no vision, the people are unrestrained	41
6.	Two Lines of Mankind (1) The line of self and the line of life	53
7.	Two Lines of Mankind (2) A new covenant	65
8.	God's Calling "Follow Me"	77
9.	God Himself as the Way By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed	87
10.	The Gaining of God "Walk before Me and be blameless"	97

11.	The Spirit Gains a Bride for Christ "Take a wife for my son Isaac"	117
12.	The Position and Living of Isaac Abraham gave all that he had to Isaac	125
13.	The Selfish and Prevailing Natural Man Jacob, the supplanter	137
14.	The Principles of the Spirit's Working on Men "You have striven with God and with men and have prevailed"	147
15.	The Turning Point of the Spirit's Work He touched the socket of Jacob's thigh	153
16.	The Result of the Work of the Spirit Israel bowed in worship	163
17.	Experiencing the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob He is the God of the living	175
18.	Joseph, the Conclusion of the Experience of Life "God will surely bring you to the land"	189
	Works Cited	205

This book is based on spoken messages given by Titus Chu in 1973 to a group of young adults participating in a one-year Christian perfecting training in Taiwan.

These messages were originally published as a book in Chinese,

then translated and reedited for this English version.

1 The Experience of Growing in Life

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth

God begins the unveiling of His purpose in Genesis 1. Our lifelong experience of growth in life is also pictured in this chapter. The carrying out of God's purpose results in our growth, and our growth is the way God gains us for the fulfillment of His purpose.

God created man in His image so that He would, through man, rule over the earth (Gen. 1:26-28). God loves man and desires the earth. However, we don't usually think like this. We think God chose us because we are gifted. This concept causes us to think too highly of ourselves and too lowly of others. If we see ourselves as gifted, we are proud; if not, we are discouraged (1 Cor. 12:15-16, 21). This wrong concept causes us to pay more attention to what we do rather than who we are. As a result, we don't rest in God but instead try to please Him through our work. May the Lord open our eyes to see that He wants to gain us simply because we are men. This is why He has saved us and is leading us to experience His grace day by day. He treasures us not because of our talents or achievements but because we are men. If we desire to fulfill God's purpose, we should share God's love for man and His desire to rule over the earth.

Genesis 1 shows us five points needed for our growth in life.

In the Beginning

"In the beginning God created..." (Gen. 1:1). The growth in life needs a beginning. A seed has life in it, but its growth does not begin until it sprouts. In the same way, Christians have the seed of life in them, but that seed needs to sprout for them to begin growing in life. It is God who initiates this beginning. Without such a divine beginning, our service is outward and of little value. It is possible for Christians to be regenerated for years yet never grow in life. This is because the divine seed within them has not sprouted. They need a beginning. They need God to touch them, perhaps through a Christian meeting or a hard environment. Then the Lord will become real, lovable, and touchable to them. The world around them will feel different, and the church will become valuable. This is a beginning, the first step of growing in life. It is the foundation of God's work in us.

God

God is the initiator of our growth in life. Once He touches us and we experience our beginning, we spontaneously trust Him. At times we may feel weak and seem to have lost all our faith, yet a deep assurance remains with us: He is the eternal, almighty God. He is "the author and perfecter of faith" (Heb. 12:2). He will lead us all the way till the end, when we are "conformed to the image of His Son" (Rom. 8:29).

Our desire to grow in the Lord and walk His way is not due to our own determination or diligence. The Almighty has caught us and we cannot escape. Even though we have had a new beginning, at times we may argue and fight with Him. At other times we may be weak and even fail. However, God Himself is our assurance. He will cause us to walk the heavenly way. He loves us, so we cannot help but love Him (1 John 4:19). Whether we are overcoming or failing, high or low, we have the assurance within us that we belong to God. Nothing can separate us from the love of God (Rom. 8:35–39).

Creation

When God gives us a beginning and we know Him as our assurance, God's gift will begin to be manifested within us. For example, we might have been slow of speech and without knowledge before, but now we receive light from the Word and begin to speak for the Lord. Gradually we become spiritually rich. God's gifts are many and varied and are given according to the grace given to each one of us (Rom. 12:6–8). God's giving of gifts to us is His creation in our growth in life.

The Spirit of God

"The Spirit of God was moving..." (Gen. 1:2). Because the Spirit of God is moving over us, we continue to grow even if we fall into a situation which seems "formless and void" with "darkness...over the surface of the deep" (v. 2). Our condition may seem desolate, but the Spirit of God operates to save us from this situation.

The Word of God

"Then God said, 'Let...'" (Gen. 1:3). The Spirit of God was moving, and the word of God was operating. Starting from this verse, we can see the operation of the word of God. The more we experience the word of God, the more we grow in life.

In our growth in life we can never graduate from these five points. Furthermore, in the process of our experience, there are six steps which we can see in the six days of creation.

The First Day: Light

"Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness....And there was evening and there was morning, one day" (Gen. 1:3–5). When God begins to work on us, the first thing He does is give us light (2 Cor. 4:6). Light causes us to grow in life step by step. It rids us of sinful and worldly things and reveals the heavenly things.

On the first day of creation, God created the light. As Christians, our lifelong growth is according to the light, not the teaching, we receive. The more we receive light, the more our Christian life changes, the more we grow, and the more we are useful to the Lord. The more we are in our spirit, the more we should be enlightened (Prov. 20:27). We see things we couldn't see before. As a result, we do things we didn't do before, and dare not do things we once felt free to do (Eph. 5:8). The operation of the Spirit of God first brings us light. Our growth in life is based on this light.

God's work on us is based on light. When we were in the "land and shadow of death," light dawned (Matt. 4:16). Light overcomes death. God uses light to overcome all of the death element in our old man. The more we follow the Lord, the more we need the light. The more we bow down before the Lord, the more He shines on us. When people ask what we have gained as Christians, we shouldn't tell them, "I learned about the books of Romans and Ephesians." We should tell them, "I have received the Spirit and the light. I had certain feelings and opinions, but God brought me into another realm." We meet God in the light. As He shines on us, we pass through His judgment (Eph. 5:13). Then He can be manifested through us. We were dead, but God saved us from death through His light. Therefore Paul says, "Awake, sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you" (Eph. 5:14).

The Second Day: Dividing the Waters

"Then God said, 'Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.' God made the expanse, and separated the waters which were below the

expanse from the waters which were above the expanse; and it was so. God called the expanse heaven. And there was evening and there was morning, a second day" (Gen. 1:6–8).

On the second day, God created an expanse to divide the waters below from the waters above. As we grow as Christians, we begin to touch a heavenly realm. In our experience, the earthly things and the heavenly things become more distinct. This is not just a one-time experience. As we grow in the Lord, we should find we have a higher view. Once our view of the Christian life was only to have the joy of salvation and the peace of redemption. Our growth from the first day to the second brings us into a heavenly realm. Here we have a clear separation of what is above from what is below. In our experience we should be able to testify that we are different from what we were a year ago. If our knowing of the Lord is the same as last year, it shows we have not grown. If we only have doctrines with no new light or new sky, our growth is stunted. We should ask for God's mercy and tell Him, "Lord, I desire a clearer separation with a higher sky. I desire to be richer in knowing the things above."

How do we know we are higher and richer? We should know from our experience. When we received the Lord, we should have experienced an evening and morning. An evening experience is cold and difficult, whereas a morning experience is comforting and pleasant. If we haven't experienced such environments for a few months, we should kneel before the Lord and ask, "Lord, did You leave me?" This prayer will bring a lot of evenings. Even though this causes us sorrow, we should know that a morning is coming when we will have a higher sky and enjoy more riches. As the psalmist said, "Weeping may last for the night, but a shout of joy comes in the morning (Psa. 30:5).

The Third Day: Dry Land

"Then God said, 'Let the waters below the heavens be gathered into one place, and let the dry land appear'; and it was so. God called the dry land earth, and the gathering of the waters He called seas; and God saw that it was good. Then God said, 'Let the earth sprout vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees on the earth bearing fruit after their kind with seed in them'; and it was so....There was evening and there was morning, a third day" (Gen. 1:9–11, 13).

On the third day God produced dry land on which vegetation could grow. As we grow in Christ, God wants to gain a piece of dry land within our hearts on which He can grow fruit. Often we have good prayers and good fellowship, but afterward our hearts turn to other things. The light and supply from God cannot remain in our hearts. This indicates that we don't yet have dry land for God to grow fruit.

Some Christians love the Lord but don't have the dry land because they set their hearts on things other than the Lord (Matt. 6:21). God cannot do much with them, and they will not be very useful to Him. Although they may have been saved for many years, they have stopped growing. They may be busy in church service and full of spiritual talk when with other believers, but afterward they become another person. This is an indication that there is no dry land within them. There is nothing growing, nothing solid. Their service is like that of a hired hand (John 10:12–13). The Lord needs the dry land to bring us into a higher realm.

The Fourth Day: Sun and Moon

"God made the two great lights, the greater light to govern the day, and the lesser light to govern the night; He made the stars also. God placed them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth, and to govern the day and the night, and to separate the light from the darkness; and God saw that it was good. There was evening and there was morning, a fourth day (Gen. 1:16–19).

The Regulating Sun

On the fourth day, God created the greater light, the sun,

to govern the day and the lesser light, the moon, to govern the night. It is not enough that we have the dry land. In our experience, the sun is Christ shining within us, and the moon is the church reflecting Christ to the world. These two lights are more substantial than the light of the first day. Before we grow to the fourth day experience, we may be able to talk about Christ and the church, but they are vague. On the fourth day, however, Christ and church become substantial to us.

The more we grow and touch the Lord, the more His riches are substantiated within us. The more we grow, the more we are governed and regulated. We no longer just talk about the Lord in a general way—how good He is and how much we love Him. We have Christ as the sun within to enlighten and regulate us. He shines in every part of us. In every aspect of our daily life, His light is there. When we are pursuing Him, His light is there. When we think about drawing back, His light is also there. This light within will not allow us to escape or run away.

As long as the sun shines, there is regulation. When we touch the reality of the sun, we touch regulation. The more we receive the regulation, the more we are enlightened. If we don't have the governing of the light, our experience of the Lord is not very substantial. The experience of the first three days is the foundation; the experience of the fourth day is the substantiation. In the first three days, we touch heaven and grow fruit, but the light we have is not very consistent. It becomes consistent on the fourth day when we touch the Lord as the governing light.

Once we experience this light, we become different and cannot escape Him. No matter where we are, He is always there to regulate us. We dare not act according to ourselves. At this time we are one with the Lord, we have spiritual riches, we have been gained by God, and we live in the light of His countenance—we begin to know Christ as our person.

Receiving Help from the Moon and Stars

The fourth day includes both night and day. As we follow the

Lord, it is not always day. We experience the night as hardships and difficulties. It is during these times that we especially need the moon—the church—as our help and comfort. Besides the moon, we also have the stars—our fellow believers. Who can help us when we are in hardship? Often it is not Christ directly but Christ reflected by the church. This is the experience of the moon. When we are excessively burdened, the moon may seem more precious than the sun. We should learn to be supplied and governed by the moon, the church.

The light of the moon is actually the reflected light of the sun. The church manifests the Lord Himself. We are blessed if we know how to receive help from the church. We cannot grow in life well without the light of the Lord or the light through the church. Without the church, we will have problems. The church is our best protection during the night. Whether the moon is full or new, whether the church life is good or not so good, we will always gain the benefit when we immerse ourselves in the church life. The moon appears on the same day as the sun because they are equally important to us.

Paul said, "There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for star differs from star in glory" (1 Cor. 15:41). Besides the sun and moon, there are stars—the believers. As we grow in life there should be others who can help us. If we cannot receive their help, we are in real trouble. There is always someone who can help us in the church, although their help may not be what we expect. If we have problems with the church or with individual believers, we must be at fault. It is God's mercy that we have the sun, the moon, and the stars as our protection.

The Fifth Day: Fish and Birds

"Then God said, 'Let the waters teem with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth in the open expanse of the heavens.' God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarmed after their kind, and every winged bird after its kind; and God saw that it was good....There was evening and there was morning, a fifth day" (Gen. 1:20–22, 23).

On the fifth day, God created the fish and the birds. Fish live in water, which represents death (Rom. 6:4), so fish signify a life that overcomes death. If we have the experience of the fifth day, death has no way to affect us. Even when we are surrounded by an environment of death, we can overcome it. No matter how dead things around us become, we are alive and reign in life (Rom. 5:17). We can still serve and supply others. We are a living expression of the Lord. The life within us has grown to the extent that death cannot hold us.

God also created the birds on the fifth day. Birds signify heavenly transcendence. We are heavenly people who live a transcendent life. Many things in our environment try to pull us down. If we allow them, they will bring us despair and discourage us from pursuing the Lord. At such a time, we can still rise up and declare, "My Lord is here! He is so rich to me! The church is so full of hope!" We can rise above everything and live before the Lord buoyantly.

It is wonderful that as fish we overcome the death waters surrounding us and as birds we rise above our environment in heavenly transcendence. However, we are still in the ocean and in the sky. We are not yet on the earth, and it is the earth that God desires.

The Sixth Day: Man

"God made the beasts of the earth after their kind, and the cattle after their kind, and everything that creeps on the ground after its kind; and God saw that it was good. Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.' God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He

created them....And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day" (Gen. 1:25–27, 31).

On the sixth day, God created the land animals and man. He created man in His own image and gave him dominion. Christians in this step live in their spirit (Gal. 5:25). They do things like others but express the Lord Himself, and people see the Lord through them. They don't act special or pretend to be spiritual but express the life of the Lord spontaneously. They go to work and school like others, but they don't belong to the earth. Their living and walking on the earth is unfettered. Through them God gains the church, a corporate people, to rule over the earth. It is through our growth in life that the church is built up and manifested, and can rule over the earth. The gospel does not depend on the way of preaching but on the principle that "a city set on a hill cannot be hidden" (Matt. 5:14). The gospel should be like light shining from the church, a city set on a hill so that everyone can see it.

What God desires is a corporate man who rules over the earth. Although Satan usurped the earth and now controls it, God is gaining a group of people to rule over Satan and over the earth. This is the purpose of our growth in life.

The Evening and the Morning

The process of Christian growth illustrated in these six days is always in the principle of the evening and the morning. A day is defined here as evening first, then morning. It is surprising that God always brings us a long evening when He leads us one step forward. It seems that the longer the evening, the richer the morning. If our skies were always blue, we would remain in the same place. How does the Lord bring us into deeper experiences and further growth in life? It is not merely through spiritual endeavor but through hardships—the evening. Because God loves us, He won't let us lead a life that is always smooth and successful (Heb. 12:5–6; Rev. 3:19). On the contrary, we will meet hardships and difficulties so that we can grow. Our

lifelong growth is from God, who initiates these evenings and mornings. This is why the phrase "there was evening and there was morning" is used repeatedly in Genesis 1. Every evening is for the next morning. Every morning is for us to go through another evening. This cycle will last till those who have loved His appearing fulfill His plan.

We should cultivate a strong desire to grow in the Lord. For this, we must be open for the sun to shine on us, the moon to govern us, and the stars to fellowship with us. We want to grow until we are above everything and even death cannot hold us. We want to grow until we all, as the church, conquer Satan and rule over the earth.

2 The Life Supply of God A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden

Genesis 1 shows us the steps of our growth in life. In chapter 2, the life supply of God that is necessary for our growth in life is pictured in four ways.

The Human Spirit

Genesis 1 records the creation of man: "Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.' God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them" (vv. 26-27). In verse 26, image and likeness are mentioned, but in verse 27, only image is mentioned. "Image" indicates the inward life, and "likeness" the outward body. God's eternal purpose is to gain a group of people who have His inward image and outward likeness. The word "likeness" is used only once since it is not as important as the image—the life.

Genesis 2 also describes man's creation: "The Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being" (v. 7). The very first and most precious life supply God gave to man

was the breath of life which He breathed into man's nostrils. In God's creation, He first formed man's body from the dust of the ground and then breathed the breath of life into him. This breath made man alive and created his spirit. When man's spirit and body met, his soul was produced (1 Thess. 5:23). Many translations of the Bible render the phrase "became a living being" as "became a living soul." However, the value of man is based on the breath of life, which is the spirit, the center of God's creation (Zech. 12:1).

In God's eyes, our value is our spirit, without which we are no different than the animals. Because we have a spirit, we can touch, gain, and experience God, who is Spirit (John 4:24). God desires to impart an abundant life supply to us, so He created our spirit. We must see what God sees and treasure what God treasures. Since our value before God is based on our spirit, we shouldn't be so concerned about other things, whether they be worldly or religious. Even our pursuing the Lord and serving Him shouldn't be our main concern. We should only focus on our spirit.

The Tree of Life

"The Lord God planted a garden toward the east, in Eden; and there He placed the man whom He had formed. Out of the ground the Lord God caused to grow every tree that is pleasing to the sight and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden" (Gen. 2:8–9). After God created man with a human spirit, He put him before the tree of life—the second picture of God's life supply. Since Christ Himself is life (John 14:6; Col. 3:4), this signifies that He wants to be man's life supply. God created our spirit so that we could receive Him as the sweet fruit of the tree of life.

We need not only our spirit but the supply of the abundant life. If we have the spirit but no life supply, something is short. For example, in a Christian meeting, all the right words might be said and all the right things might be done, but no one is satisfied. This is because there is a shortage of the fruit of the tree of life. It is this life supply of God which brings us into the heavenly riches.

Some believers have a spirit that is rich in the life supply. When they stand up and say a few words, we feel the satisfaction of life and the shining of light, which exposes our shallow condition. We cannot help but pray, "Lord, I need to grow more." This is the expression of the abundant life. It does not require eloquence, shouting, or spiritual terminology, but a normal manifestation of life. Such abundance of life in the spirit should be the goal of our pursuing today.

The River of Life

"Now a river flowed out of Eden to water the garden; and from there it divided and became four rivers" (Gen. 2:10). There was a river in the Garden of Eden—the third picture of God's life supply. From Eden, the river divided and became four branches. The first branch is related to God, the second to man, the third to Satan, and the fourth to fruit.

The River Pishon

"The name of the first is Pishon; it flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold. The gold of that land is good; the bdellium and the onyx stone are there" (Gen. 2:11–12). The first river is called Pishon, which means "freely flowing" (Young, p. 753). Our growth in life is according to the flowing of the river of life. The more it flows, the more we grow. If we allow life to flow through every situation, we will grow gold, bdellium, and onyx stone (Gen. 2:12). This is transformation.

It is significant that bdellium is mentioned only twice in the Bible. The first mention is here, and the second is in Numbers: "Now the manna was like coriander seed, and its appearance like that of bdellium" (Num. 11:7). Manna was the food of the

children of Israel in the wilderness once they escaped Egypt, and it had the appearance of bdellium. Where the flowing river went, there was bdellium, and manna looked like bdellium. This implies that the more life flows, the more we have food. Spiritual hunger is a sign that we need more of the flowing of God's life with its supply. This flowing of life brings in satisfaction and transformation. Transformation doesn't come from our striving but from the normal flow of life.

The result of the flowing of Pishon—gold, bdellium, and onyx stone—is for God's satisfaction. Gold signifies God's nature, bdellium signifies God's salvation, and onyx stone signifies God's glory. These are the materials of God's building in His eternal plan and are produced through the human spirit, the enjoyment of the tree of life, and the flowing of the river of life. We men of dust are able to become gold, bdellium, and onyx stone since we have a spirit, the enjoyment of the tree of life, and the flowing of the river of life.

The flowing of the river of life is primarily for God's need not ours. Since the first of the four branches is for God, their flowing should firstly satisfy Him. His need is above everything. From our point of view, it seems the four branches are for us. However, from the view of God's operation, they are not for man but for God and for His purpose.

Just because we read our Bibles and attend church meetings does not mean that we have touched the flow of the river of life. We may, after doing such things, still be far too free to do what is contrary to God's purpose. The flow of the river of life will bring us into God's purpose. We may have a self-centered view of growth in life, expecting that it is for our benefit—our salvation, our joy, our gift for our usefulness. However, the more the river of life flows, the more we grow from being self-centered to being God-centered. Eventually, we don't even care for our own need but that God's need be satisfied. Our life will be fully for God—our pursuing, serving, and labor will all be for Him.

Although young believers may seem pure, not many are entirely for God. They usually desire to be more spiritual, eloquent, helpful, and manifest. These are all self-centered desires, not necessarily for God. The flow of the first river washes out our selfishness and centers us on God Himself. Those who remain in the flow of the river of life serve and function in the church, but their focus is on God rather than themselves. They serve people because God desires to serve people. They supply others with life because this is God's desire. Their serving and ministering are not the goal. Their focus is God's need. If God doesn't need to do a certain work, they will never do it.

We should not have one hundred campus works simply because there are one hundred schools in our area. We need to go before God and ask Him, "God, what do you want?" If He answers, "I don't want your work this year. I just want you," then we have to give up all our works. However, God doesn't usually tell us that because we need such exercise for our own spiritual health. On the other hand, God doesn't want us to be distracted with much serving (Luke 10:40) so that we work too hard and exhaust ourselves. God is balanced. We need the river of life to flow in us until we want what God wants and do what God desires. At this point, God has the full authority over us. This is maturity in life.

Gihon

"The name of the second river is Gihon; it flows around the whole land of Cush" (Gen. 2:13). The river Gihon, which means "stream" (Young, p. 390), flowed around Cush, which means "black" (Young, p. 216). This second river is related to man, whose heart is black and cannot be changed (Jer. 13:23; Gen. 8:21). It needs the flowing of God's stream.

We can grow and be transformed through the flow of the river of life. However, our transformation may not be as we expect. The flow not only washes out the evil things of the old creation but also the good things of religion. As we are transformed, we expect to become meek, humble, comforted, and able to comfort others. The Lord Jesus expressed all these things, yet when necessary, He was still able to cleanse the

temple, using a whip to drive out those doing business there, along with their sheep and the oxen. He poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables (John 2:14–15). This wasn't religious meekness. The growth and transformation from the inward flow of the river of life makes our spirit rich and free. The more we grow, the more our spirit is free, and the richer the Lord's life becomes to us.

Hiddekel and Euphrates

"The name of the third river is Tigris [Heb., Hiddekel]; it flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates" (Gen. 2:14). The river Hiddekel, which means "rapid" (Young, p. 479) implying powerful and fierce, flows toward the east of Assyria. Assyria signifies the world, where Satan dwells. This river is fierce. It flows into the kingdom of Satan and deals with him directly. The more we live in the first two rivers, the more we have the ability to get people saved from the bondage of the world and to influence this age. Whenever we are in spirit, we are a testimony, shining on those beside us and influencing them. Wherever we are, Satan loses his power.

The fourth river, Euphrates, means "bursting, sweet" (Young, p. 309). Eventually, we burst forth with sweet fruit, satisfying both God and man.

We shouldn't just remember the names of the four branches of the river that flowed out of Eden. We must remember the principle—allow life to flow. Life is dreary when there is not much flowing but becomes an adventure as the flow increases. If we don't follow this principle, we will not grow well. Those who allow this life to flow out from them will grow faster than those who dare not. We should allow life to flow through us wherever we go.

In order to have more flow of life, we must exercise our spirit and live in our spirit. We should ask ourselves, "Am I in my spirit?" When we get up, get dressed, eat, and wait for the bus, we should be in our spirit. We should be positive, strong, and

free. We should not dwell in the spirit we enjoyed last year or even yesterday. Our spirit should be freshly flowing all the time. This is the secret of growing in life.

A Counterpart

We now come to the fourth picture of God's life supply: "Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him.'...So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that place. The Lord God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man. The man said, 'This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.' For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh" (Gen. 2:18, 21-24). The Bible here talks about the oneness of life. The word "suitable" (v. 18) in Hebrew means "a counterpart, or mate" (Strong, no. 5048). When we see an old couple, we know they are husband and wife. Their faces, character, and life match since they have shared the fellowship of life for a long time.

"The Lord God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him" (Gen. 2:18). God then brought all kinds of animals to him. Adam named every animal, but not one matched him as his counterpart (vv. 19–20). God caused Adam to fall asleep. He opened his side and took one of his ribs (v. 21). God made a woman from the rib and brought her to him. Adam said, "This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh" (v. 23). Eve matched Adam completely.

Adam and Eve signify Christ and the church (Eph. 5:30–32). Although our God is the Lord of all, without the church as His counterpart, He remains alone. Only His church can satisfy Him.

From another angle, however, this story shows how our growth in life eventually brings us into oneness with God. Only

what is produced from the growth in life can be presented to God as His counterpart. We cannot present sinful or worldly things, but neither can we present doctrines, Bible knowledge, or yesterday's spiritual experience. Only what comes from God's life matches Him, satisfies Him, and can be brought to Him.

The result of our growth in life is to be fully one with God. Nothing else will satisfy both God and us. In a sense, we are like Adam as he named the animals and did not find any among them that matched him. Nothing of the world can be our match. When things come to us, we should just give them names, then set them aside as Adam did. We can say, "This is a career," and put it aside; "This is a degree," and put it aside; "This is money," and put it aside. We can know things of the world but we should not let them capture our heart. We have dominion over them and make use of them, but we shouldn't marry them as our counterpart.

Adam faced all the animals on the earth. Whether they were pretty or ugly, flying or walking, running or jumping, big or small, he just gave them names and put them aside. For example, when a peacock came to him, he just said, "This is a peacock," and put it aside. We are different. We might not give it a name right away but observe it first and wonder at the beauty of its feathers. Finding it interesting, we might set aside four years to study it. Just like that, four years are gone. When a career comes to us, we don't say, "This is simply a career," and put it aside for our use. We say, "Oh, this is the hope of my life! This is my future. I want a life with a good career. This will be the way of my life." If we were in Adam's place and an elephant came to us, we might have said, "Oh, how big is this animal! Its trunk is so long and its legs so strong. I should marry it and study it." How ridiculous this is! However, this is our situation. We marry our career. After a few years, we discover how empty it is and are willing to put it aside.

Perhaps we are not attracted by the world but by spiritual things or experiences. Even these can replace God as our counterpart. For example, Bible study is like a beautiful horse we use everyday. After we name it "Bible study," it can be our

companion but not our counterpart. Bible study is useful, and even necessary, for us to grow to be totally one with God, but only God Himself can be our counterpart.

We should not take the first two chapters of Genesis as mere knowledge or doctrine. They should leave us with one desire: We need to grow! If we don't grow, we are left with nothing but empty talk. Chapter 1 portrays the growth of life in six steps. Chapter 2 portrays four kinds of life supply that God gives us for our growth: the human spirit, the tree of life, the river of life, and God as our counterpart. We are His love. When we are mature in His life, we are just like the description of the psalmist: "Whom have I in heaven but You? And besides You, I desire nothing on earth" (Psa. 73:25). We know things, appreciate things, and make use of things, but they are all under our dominion. We ourselves are for God, unto God, living in the life of God, and one with God completely.

The Causes of Man's Fall

"In the day that you eat from it you will surely die"

"Now the serpent was more crafty than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said to the woman, 'Indeed, has God said, "You shall not eat from any tree of the garden"?' The woman said to the serpent, 'From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat; but from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, God has said, "You shall not eat from it or touch it, or you will die."' The serpent said to the woman, 'You surely will not die! For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.' When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate" (Gen. 3:1–6).

Genesis 3 shows us four main causes of man's fall. These are also the reasons Christians fall today. These four causes of falling are (1) not being joined to the life of God; (2) the temptation of Satan—though if we are drawn away and enticed, it is because of our own lusts (James 1:13–15); (3) being for self; and (4) not keeping one's place.

Not Joined to the Life of God

The first cause of man's fall—and even the root of each of the

causes which follow—was not being joined to the life of God.

The tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil were both in the garden (Gen. 2:9). Adam and Eve didn't eat the fruit of the tree of life. On the contrary, they are the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This shows that they were not joined to the life of God. They could have asked God, "May we eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil? The serpent told us that if we eat it, we will become like You, knowing good and evil." If they had asked, they would have been saved. It is a pity that they forgot about God. They didn't have the sense of life. They didn't consider it important.

Today many of us cannot sense the difference between the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. At most we hate the evil and treasure the good, especially the religious good. If we have been saved for a period of time, we may know that the good works of unbelievers have limited value before God. However, we may not realize that the good works of believers may be the same if they don't know how to live according to the tree of life. The Lord will tell many who prophesied, cast out demons, and performed many miracles in His name, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness" (Matt. 7:23). God condemns good, including the religious good, as well as evil.

We may still consider that being religiously good has high value in the eyes of God. However, if we do not live in the life of God, we fall whether we are doing good or bad. It is altogether based on whether or not we are joined to the Lord in our life and work. We may think there is nothing wrong with our busy serving. We may behave humbly, and people may like and even praise us, but if we do not live in God's life, our behavior has no value. As long as our life and service are separated from God's life, our service has no value in the eyes of God.

The tree of life is contrary to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Genesis 2 speaks of both trees being in the midst of the garden because it is concerned with God's life supply. Chapter 3, however, only speaks of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil because it is concerned with man's fall. When we

forget the tree of life, we automatically focus on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. That is the moment we fall.

Some things are clearly evil, but often it is hard to say what is right and what is wrong. The more we pay attention to right and wrong, the more we are distracted from life. As we follow the Lord, we should not quickly judge ourselves or others (1 Cor. 4:3–5). When we are short of the life supply, we easily and unconsciously fall into the realm of good and evil.

It is not only the knowledge of evil that keeps us away from God but the knowledge of good also, including even spiritual knowledge. We may attend a Christian conference and leave feeling we know everything, but in fact we are in the realm of knowledge. Everything we gained can become Satan's tool if we only have the knowledge but not the Spirit. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil represents Satan. If we don't give people life, we give them Satan. If we don't express God, we express Satan (Matt. 16:23). There is nothing in between.

God said, "From the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die" (Gen. 2:17). It is a serious matter when we are not joined to God's life. If we are not joined to His life, we are in the realm of the knowledge of good and evil. When we touch the things of the knowledge of good and evil, we will surely die.

Those filled with the knowledge of good and evil are full of criticism and demands in both their personal lives and their church lives. Even if all their criticisms were right, they still result in death. Their lives are full of criticisms because they are cut off from the life of God. If God's life were active within them, it would have sounded an alarm to stop them. When they are about to criticize someone, they should feel something within stopping them and keeping them silent. This is life.

The life within us is joined to us. On the one hand, this life supplies us with all the positive things, and on the other, it takes away all the negative things. When this life flows within us, it supplies us with the Spirit, the tree of life, the river of life, and God as our counterpart. It also takes away all the things related to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. What

remains is only the life of God.

Sometimes we argue with others about the truth, but whether we win or lose, we don't feel particularly glorious. This is because we were away from life. If we don't touch the things of the knowledge of good and evil, which bring death, but live in life and in the enjoyment of life, we will be filled with the riches of life.

It is easy to fellowship with God in life. Paul wrote, "For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God" (Rom. 8:14). Because we are sons of God, the Spirit of God is continually leading us. Paul writes further, "For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, 'Abba! Father!" (v. 15). When we don't follow the leading of the Spirit, we often feel we are in bondage and are afraid to approach God. However, no matter how weak, dark, or defeated we are, we still have the Spirit. We can always come to the Lord to receive life. Some may think it is terrible to go to a movie, but what is really terrible is not daring to call on the name of the Lord while watching it (1 Cor. 1:2). We can get close to the Lord wherever we are. No matter how weak or fallen we are, we must remember this secret: God is with us all the time. We can be in our spirit, release our spirit, and exercise our spirit anytime. As a result, we can return to life and be joined to the Lord. Without this, we will become weak and will fall. Man fell because he cut off his fellowship with God and his life relationship with Him.

The Temptation of Satan through Lusts

The second cause of man's fall was the temptation of Satan. The serpent was more crafty than every other beast of the field (Gen. 3:1). Satan, as the serpent, tempted Eve with his craftiness to keep man away from the face of God. If we live in our craftiness, we live in the realm of Satan. Schemes and craftiness are the sharp tools of Satan to tempt us and keep us away from God's tree of life.

Outwardly, it is Satan who tempts us, but inwardly, it is our own lusts that entice us (James 1:13–15). The first way of dealing with the temptation of these lusts is fleeing. Paul taught Timothy, "Flee from youthful lusts" (2 Tim. 2:22). He also said, "Flee from these things, you man of God" (1 Tim. 6:11). If we don't know how to flee, there is no way we can fight against lusts. Some have allowed movies, gambling, computers, sports, or even overeating to be formed as a lust within them. Before a lust has been formed in us, we can still flee. Once a certain weakness or lust has been formed, it is hard to escape unless we live according to the power of the Spirit. Do not cultivate a lust, for this will bring in failure.

The second way to deal with the temptation of our lust is to live in the church life, pursuing "righteousness, faith, love and peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart" (2 Tim. 2:22). Not cultivating lusts has a lot to do with the church life. Buddhist monks think they can escape worldly temptations by staying in the mountains. During the Middle Ages, and even to this day, some Christians isolated themselves in monasteries to avoid contact with the complicating things of the world. This never works. They still can't overcome their lusts. If we do not want to cultivate a lust, we must flee our lusts and pursue with those in the church life. As a result, the positive will replace the negative. We will no longer have the time or desire for things that are not from the Lord. We will live in life, enjoy life, supply life, express life, and live for the Lord and the church.

Lusts cause us to fall. We cannot but admit that sin dwells in us (Rom. 7:17). We were born fallen flesh. The lusts of our flesh cause us to fail and to fall. We must learn to flee the lusts and not cultivate them. We should live in spirit and in the church life.

Being for Self

The third cause of man's fall was being for self. Eve saw that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil "was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise" (Gen. 3:6). It could satisfy both body and soul. Because Eve was seeking her own satisfaction, she disobeyed God's command and brought in the fall. When we do not live by the divine life and are for ourselves, we not able to walk the way of God and will surely fall.

Many things are not sinful, but instead of being unto the Lord, they are done to satisfy the soul. Studying the Bible is certainly not sinful, but when it is done to build up the self, it is just religion. Simply because we read the Bible doesn't mean we are spiritual. If in our reading we don't come to the Lord to receive the Spirit and life (John 5:39), it is the same as doing other things and has no value in the eyes of God.

It is to be expected that unbelievers are for themselves, but it is possible that we Christians may also be for ourselves. Even our Christian service may be self-centered. If we are for ourselves, we will surely hinder the Lord's work. How terrible is the consequence! The main frustration to the building up of the church is not sin but religion. We must reject religion as well as sin.

We should learn not to be for ourselves in the church life. Are we willing to follow the Lord even if it means being misunderstood by others? Christian workers often compete with each other to see who is more spiritual and effective. Sometimes even if there are only two Christians in a Bible study, they compete. They each study the Bible before they get together in order to outshine one another. This is for the self. This kind of person is useless before the Lord. We need the Lord's mercy and should tell Him, "Lord, I am only for You. I do not seek what is for my own benefit even if it is pleasant to my eyes, good for food, and able to make me wise. What I desire is You. I serve and follow You and You alone. Whether or not I am appreciated by others, I am for You."

Not Keeping One's Place

The fourth cause of the fall was not keeping one's place.

In Genesis 3, Eve didn't keep her place nor did Adam. Paul wrote, "A woman must quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness. But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet. For it was Adam who was first created, and then Eve. And it was not Adam who was deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression" (1 Tim. 2:11–14).

None of us keep our place. I have seen some young women try to take a leadership role in their church. They think their taking the lead is very reasonable. They think their opinion must be heard before a decision is made. Things do not work this way.

According to the principle stated by Paul—"Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman" (1 Cor. 11:3)—women should not freely voice their opinions about church decisions. They must learn to keep their place and go before the Lord to pray. It is for the men who lead the church to decide whether or not the women's input is useful to them. Whether the leaders accept their suggestions or not, women should praise the Lord for the men who bear responsibility in the church. A newly saved young man who serves with a woman who has been saved for thirty years will receive benefit if he listens to her. If he doesn't listen to her, however, and his decision damages the church, she can only pray for him. This practice will save us from degradation.

Many problems in the church start with women, especially young women, who do not keep their place. They should know the place God has ordained for them. If Eve had gone to Adam before picking the fruit, perhaps they would have been saved from the fall. If Eve had told the serpent to talk to Adam instead of her, they might have been saved. Eve behaved as the head, which resulted in the fall.

The women of the church have a rich portion which should be respected and received. Otherwise, it will be hard to build up the church. However, they should not think too highly of themselves (Rom. 12:3; Phil. 2:3). In fact, none of us should think too highly of ourselves, no matter how long we have followed the Lord. We have to accept the place that God has apportioned to us. We should know when to keep silent and submit to God.

May God have mercy on us so that we may live in the divine life, drop all our craftiness and schemes, flee youthful lusts, lose our self life, and keep the place God has given to us.

God's Dealing with Man's Fall Man lifted up from the dust

God deals with man's fall in four ways: (1) He brings man back to His eternal will, dealing with His enemy in the process; (2) He disciplines man; (3) He causes man to partake of life and live in resurrection; (4) He causes man to be joined to Himself.

Brought Back to God's Plan

God's first priority is His eternal will, not man's need. We may feel that God saves us because of our need. This is not true. For example, after we lose our temper we might pray, "O Lord, I lost my temper. I am defeated and I am weak. Please save me from my temper." We may think that once the Lord saves us from our temper, everything will be fine. However, while our temper is our bondage today, the desire to be highly respected in the church will be our bondage tomorrow. Then we ask the Lord to save us from this. If the Lord saves us again, something else will enslave us. If we continue to focus on our personal problems and weaknesses, our need for salvation will be endless.

God deals with our weaknesses according to His eternal plan. He doesn't work for our need but works on us to meet His need and bring us into His plan. When God comes to meet our need, it is always according to His plan.

We need to learn the lesson for ourselves and for others:

Do not focus on solving problems. We must see God's plan and help others to see it. Do not just help others to deal with their difficulties but bring them into God's plan. When we live for God's plan, difficulties will mean nothing to us. Every situation will be the best experience for us to grow and mature (Rom. 8:28–30). We must consider this matter seriously before the Lord.

A New Beginning

After the man God created fell, He gave him a new beginning according to His will and plan. Genesis 3:8 says, "They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day." After the fall, it was not man who looked for God but God who looked for man. In the same way, we don't go to God because of our failure, but God sees our failure and comes to us. We don't consider ourselves to have fallen. We don't like to recognize our failures, but even when we do, we don't look for God. Only when God comes and touches us about our failure do we wake up and say, "Lord, forgive me."

Paul cried, "Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?" (Rom. 7:24). Why would any of us feel that we are wretched? It is only because God is giving us a new beginning. If He didn't work on us, we would not have this kind of experience. Every spiritual experience like this is a fresh beginning from God. Therefore, do not be afraid of failure, for every failure can bring a new beginning. If we don't think we have fallen, we won't grow well. I don't encourage you to fall intentionally. We should never indulge ourselves. However, I desire that you touch God and meet Him again whenever you fall. We surely desire to live a spiritual life everyday, but when failure comes—and it will—we shouldn't be disappointed. We are who we are. We should just allow God to have another beginning in us. He is much greater than we are. He has a way for us. We are in His hand and we should give ourselves to Him. Our spiritual growth comes from knowing of our failure.

When we are away from the tree of life, we are tempted and cannot keep our place. This is the time we should worship God, since He is coming. We will soon hear the sound of the Lord God walking about in the garden in the cool of the day, and He will call, "Where are you?" (Gen. 3:9).

This is God's way for us. We are just like Adam and Eve, for many times we eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and don't acknowledge our responsibility for our failure. We would either say, "The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me from the tree, and I ate" (v. 12), or "The serpent deceived me, and I ate" (v. 13). We don't like to admit that we have fallen, but God has a way to deal with us. He comes to us, walking about in the cool of the day. His coming exposes the hidden things in us. If we feel we are fallen and weak, we should not lose heart, for we are about to experience a new beginning from God. Be encouraged to follow the Lord further.

Dealing with Satan through Fallen Man

Genesis 3:14 says, "The Lord God said to the serpent, 'Because you have done this, cursed are you more than all cattle, and more than every beast of the field; on your belly you will go, and dust you will eat all the days of your life" Dust represents us, for we are made of dust (Gen. 2:7). God continued, "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel" (3:15). The woman's seed indicates Christ as well as us. We cannot be separated from Christ. Although man fell because of the serpent, God would bruise the serpent's head and destroy him through man.

After we lose our temper we should proclaim, "Hallelujah! God will destroy the power of my temper through me." It is amazing how God deals with us! Our every weakness is a tool for God to bruise and destroy Satan. Satan tempted man, who is made of dust, so God told Satan, "Dust you will eat all the days of your life" (v. 14). God's curse may have made Satan

happy because he thought he could swallow man from now on. However, God's word didn't stop there. He continued, telling Satan that the woman's seed would bruise his head. God uses our weakness to deal with His enemy.

Our dealing with the enemy is not based on our buoyancy and excitement but on our experience of God's new beginning. When we are weak and fallen, God brings us into a new beginning. When we meet Him, there is a power of life within us to overcome the power of Satan. We should joyfully proclaim to the enemy, "You are under my feet, and you have been dealt with!" No matter what weakness we indulged in before, we can proclaim, "Where, O weakness, is your power? The serpent used my weakness to swallow me, but now both the serpent and my weakness are under my feet!" Satan caused us to fail, but God has put him to shame through that very failure. Though we are still weak and fallen, Satan is being defeated through us. Hallelujah! This is the principle of the woman's seed bruising the serpent's head.

We should not dwell in our weakness. Once we have confessed our sins, we should boldly proclaim victory over Satan and our weakness (Rev. 12:11). The more we proclaim in this way, the more we will grow and be empowered. Once we confess, our sins are forgiven and our conscience is purified (Heb. 10:22). A pure conscience is not for dealing with Satan's accusation but for opening the way for fellowship with the Lord. If we have sinned, we only need to confess once (1 John 1:9). Then we can have the boldness to go forward into the presence of the Lord (Heb. 4:15-16). We must proclaim often, "Where, O weakness, is your power?" This is the way to be blessed before God. When God deals with our weakness, it is according to His purpose which will never change. He doesn't leave us or destroy us because of our fall. He saves us to fulfill His will. He will never desert us nor forsake us (Heb. 13:5). God will give us a new beginning. He will gain us and bring us back to His presence.

Praise God that His eternal purpose will never change! He proclaimed that He would destroy Satan through man's fall. Only God could do this. We are disheartened once we fall, but

with God all things are possible (Matt. 19:26). He is not afraid of man's fall. How amazing it is that God destroys Satan's success through our fall! As we walk according to the Spirit of life and live in the church life, we are above everything and swallow up the power of Satan. Satan made us fall but our fall puts him to shame.

God's Discipline

The second way God deals with man's fall is through discipline. God told the fallen man, "By the sweat of your face you will eat bread" (Gen. 3:19). When God dealt with man's fall, He was very severe with the enemy but full of mercy toward man. He indicated man would still have bread to eat, though it would now be by the sweat of his face.

We can trust ourselves to God. Although we are weak and fallen, we don't need to be afraid. We are in God's merciful hand. He knows our need and how to take care of us. Sometimes after we proclaim, "Where, O temper, is your power?" our temper comes back. We don't need to be afraid that God will give up on us. He is faithful to come to us and discipline us. His discipline is related to our intuition in our spirit. According to our reasoning we would choose to hide from God, but deep within we feel to come to God under the covering of His blood. This feeling is God's discipline, making us strong and useful in His hand. The more we are under His discipline, the more we can meet His desire.

As we follow the Lord, we gradually discover that, though our spirit is free, that very freedom brings discipline. If our freedom of the spirit doesn't bring discipline, our freedom is abnormal. The freer and stronger our spirit is, the more we should experience God's discipline. Through His discipline He deals with our fall and recovers us into His will. Those who don't recognize God's discipline are useless before Him. Those who do recognize His discipline but are not willing to be subject to it are also useless. On the one hand God deals with Satan

through our weaknesses; on the other hand, He makes us more useful through His discipline.

Partaking of Life and Living in Resurrection

The third way God dealt with man's fall was by causing man to partake of life and live in resurrection. Man became dust after his fall and lost his value before God (Gen. 3:19). However, God told man that he would eat the plants from the ground (vv. 17–19). These are life from the dust, representing resurrection. What man needs today is resurrection life. The more we live in the resurrection life, the more we are valuable in the eyes of God and meet the requirement of God's will. The more we experience this life, the richer we are. It is truly God's wisdom that He would cause us to partake of life and live in resurrection.

loined to God

The fourth way God dealt with man's fall was to join man to Himself. "The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife, and clothed them" (Gen 3:21). God killed the animals for Adam and Eve's sin, made garments of skin to clothe them, then drove them out of the garden of Eden (Gen 3:21, 23–24). The spiritual meaning of God's clothing man with garments of skin is that He clothes us with Himself and joins Himself to us (Rom. 13:14; Gal. 3:27).

According to God's plan, He desires the fallen man to deal with the enemy who is the root of man's fall. He also disciplines man and supplies him with resurrection life. Eventually, He is joined to man. This joining puts man under His covering. When man put on the garment that God made, his reproach was taken away completely. The garment indicates that God has covered man and man is in God. God has dealt with man's fall step by step and eventually recovered him to the point that he is joined to God in life.

We were away from God. Now, through God's dealing with our fall, we are joined closely to God. This joining happens gradually. The more we fail and receive God's discipline and His resurrection life, the more we are blessed and joined to Him.

Our life before God is a history of failure. If we dare to boast that we have done something for God, our boast itself is a failure. No matter how long we have been saved, we can boast of nothing but our failure (2 Cor. 12:9). However, it is amazing that the more we fail, the more we are in God, and the more we overcome. This will be our history. When the Lord returns, we will only be able to bow before Him and say, "O Lord, I praise You. My life has been a life of failure. I have nothing to offer You but failure. However, through my fall I overcame and entered into Your glory."

5 The Principle of Serving God Where there is no vi

Where there is no vision, the people are unrestrained

As soon as we touch the Lord, we begin to serve Him. In the eyes of God, life and service are crucial. The first three chapters of Genesis focus on life, providing a picture of the experience of life, the supply of life, and God's dealing with man's fall. The next two chapters talk about serving.

Cain and Abel's Service

The picture of service in Genesis 4 is in principle, not in detail. It is mainly the story of Cain and Abel, the first two sons of Adam and Eve. Abel kept sheep, but Cain tilled the ground. "Cain brought an offering to the Lord of the fruit of the ground. Abel, on his part also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and for his offering; but for Cain and for his offering He had no regard" (Gen. 4:3–5). God was very pleased with Abel and his offering but didn't pay any attention to Cain and his offering.

We may say that both Cain and Abel served God, but Abel's service was respected by God and Cain's was not. Did Cain do anything wrong? He tried his best to follow God's command. God had told Adam, "In toil you will eat of it [the ground] all the days of your life....By the sweat of your face

you will eat bread" (Gen 3:17, 19). After his fall, man was to survive by toiling on the ground. Cain tilled the ground and worked according to God's word. He labored on the ground and then offered from the fruit of his labor to God. From our point of view, his service was the best. We cannot find fault in him.

Abel tended sheep, which God never commanded man to do. It seems Abel was wrong. He didn't live according to God's word. In fact, at that time men didn't even eat meat (Gen. 1:29; 9:3). How then did Abel survive? Most likely he lived on the fruit of Cain's labor. Cain might have been kind to Abel and taken care of his need.

However, God only had regard for Abel's offering, not for Cain's. As a result, "Cain became very angry and his countenance fell" (Gen. 4:5). One day when the two brothers were in the field, "Cain rose up against Abel his brother and killed him. Then the Lord said to Cain, 'Where is Abel your brother?' And he said, 'I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?'" (vv. 8–9).

From this story we can see what kind of person's service is acceptable to God.

Serving with Vision

Abel offered a lamb to God because he served with vision. This is why Abel and his offering were regarded by God. Most likely his vision came from the fact that God provided animal skins to cover Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:21). The skins made him realize that he was a man of sin, unable to come to God without the shedding of blood. He saw that he needed to live according to God's salvation, not according to his own works. He recognized that man was under God's judgment and curse. He could only draw near to God according to His way of redemption. This was his vision, and it controlled his life, making him a keeper of sheep. Seemingly, his work didn't follow God's command, but in reality he had seen God's desire. His vision made him live a different life.

Serving without Vision

Without vision, our service will not last. The Bible says, "Where there is no vision, the people are unrestrained" (Prov. 29:18). This verse surely applies to serving. The first requirement of serving is to receive vision from the Lord. If we don't have a vision, we don't know what we are doing. We are spiritually nearsighted and not qualified or able to serve.

When church leaders with no vision come together, their fellowship may only be about the condition of their building and their meeting attendance. This is talk with no vision. Some church members complain that the leaders don't listen to them, but they may not have vision either. As the Lord said, "A blind man cannot guide a blind man, can he? Will they not both fall into a pit?" (Luke 6:39).

The problem with our serving is that we don't know what we are doing. We usually treat the symptoms, not the disease. In the church life, we all focus on our own things. Are we faithful? Do we love the Lord? Do we put in time to serve? Yes, but the church itself does not have a healthy expression. It is full of problems and cannot be built up because we who serve have no vision.

Without a vision, there will be many problems in our service and in our coordination with others. We may even cast off restraint in our personal life. In our serving we must have the vision of Christ as our life and the church as our living. We must consider our serving in the light of this vision. Sometimes our serving is not for Christ or the church but for a particular ministry. In this situation, the people cast off restraint. They argue with each other instead of working together. Those who serve young people fight for the young people and those who serve children fight for the children. If we often fight with others and consider our serving more important than theirs, then we do not have a vision but merely work as hired hands (John 10:12-13). Christ and the church must be our first priority. In all that we do we must consider: Will people gain Christ? Will the church be built up or damaged? If we don't have a vision, we may complain and protest to the Lord, "The one on whom I have labored

for so many years has been taken and is now being cared for by someone else. All my work was in vain!" This word shows we don't have a vision.

If we don't have a vision, we will contend with others to prove we are better than they are. We love Christ and are for the church, but without a controlling vision, we don't consider if our walk and service will cause the church to gain Christ and be built up. In the eyes of the Lord, our serving has high value only if we serve with vision.

"Where there is no vision, the people perish" (Prov. 29:18, KJV). Vision gives meaning to our service. Without a vision, it has no value and will end. Eventually, when we grow tired or our environment changes, our service perishes. This is why so many who consecrated themselves eventually disappear. When the environment changes—they begin a new career, get married, have children, etc.—they disappear. They served without a vision.

A Controlling Vision

All Christians who desire to serve God must have a vision that controls them. They may be weak, make mistakes, fail, and even damage the church. In spite of all this, they must have a vision that controls them so that they always know where they are heading, what they are doing, why they are laboring, and what kind of persons they hope to produce.

Christians who serve with a vision have high value, and their serving also has high value. If we serve people so that they can be in Christ, in their spirit, and absolutely for the Lord, our serving is meaningful. Even if we don't serve many, those we serve will become like us, serving with a vision. The thing we should fear most is producing a congregation of churchgoers who must be continually dragged along. Our commitment is not to gain many churchgoers but to express the body of Christ and build up the church. Our serving should not focus on quantity without quality. Good quality will bring in quantity. It may

take time but quantity will come.

We have to see clearly that our serving is for the building up of the church (Eph. 4:16). Only a built up church can magnify the Lord and be a dwelling place for God (2:21–22). This should be our vision. When we have this vision, we become different. We don't serve to please men (Gal. 1:10). We serve according to the vision we have received from God. Because we are responsible to God, we should be willing to do anything for the church. Our work and daily walk are for the church.

We are for the building up of the church, not for pleasing men. We must let our vision control our walk even if others misunderstand us. We must ask ourselves, "Is what I'm about to do for the benefit of the church?" If the answer is yes, we must put ourselves in and be willing to die for it. If the answer is no, we should have no part in it. This should be our controlling vision. Whether we go to school, work, or serve, it is all for the building up of the church. We will do only that which builds up the church. This kind of serving is strong, high, and according to God's desire.

Purposeful Service

No matter how many years we have been saved, we must have a clear vision. This is necessary if we are going to stand and fight the spiritual battle. Without a clear vision, we can only do a religious work like Cain. He labored according to God's word, working the ground and eating bread in the sweat of his face (Gen. 3: 17–19). However, he didn't have a vision. He thought he was doing a good work, offering the best fruit to God, but God didn't respect it. God wanted a man with a vision. Today in the church life we need to be people with vision. If we don't know what we are doing, we are wretched. May the Lord save us from this.

What is the purpose of our serving? We cannot just say, "We have a good church life. The Lord is really blessing us. We have a lot of increase." We must go on to ask what is the purpose of

our increase? Many groups have increase, but do they have a vision? Without a vision, the Lord will treat us like Cain, not regarding our offering.

Those who serve with a vision don't focus on immediate results. They are not excited about numbers. They know what they are doing and know what to expect in two years and in ten years. Whether people criticize or praise them, they know what they are doing. They are willing to be balanced by others, but at the same time, they have a blueprint within them. Without this clarity, how can we serve the Lord?

Most Christian groups like to have increase. However, if we only focus on getting people to meet with us, offer money, and do church work, we have no vision for our serving. "Where there is no vision, the people are unrestrained." Without a vision, the church has no direction. The Lord must work the vision into us. Because Abel had a vision and lived before God according to that vision, God respected him and his offering (Gen. 4:4).

Living for God's Will

If we have vision, we will live for God's will. We will not care what we eat or how we live. We will live for God to the extent that we choose His will over our own need. We will be in union with God and live solely for Him.

At Abel's time, people didn't eat meat, yet Abel was a keeper of sheep. His desire was to satisfy God, not himself. He didn't care for his daily need. Abel was special since he lived completely for God. He didn't care for his own feeling. His life may have seemed useless in his brother's eyes, yet he could testify that his life was an offering to God. This is a real serving one.

We should not consider that our labor or speaking can be our offering to God, but rather that our person must be our offering. What kind of person we are determines our serving. If we do a lot of work and God does not regard it, all we have done is in vain. However, if our person is right, God will be pleased, and our work will have high value.

In serving the Lord, we need to be the right kind of persons—those who live for God's will, not caring for self. If we cannot preach the gospel on an empty stomach, or if we insist on traveling in comfort, we are not God's servants (Phil. 4:11–13). The church doesn't need such serving ones. The church needs those who don't work for themselves but live absolutely for the Lord. When put to shame, despised, and misunderstood before men, they continue to stand firm before God. They have a vision and know what they are doing. These are servants of the Lord.

"No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth" (Matt. 6:24). We cannot pursue money and serve the Lord at the same time. It is impossible. Our life will leak out as our desire to become wealthy increases. If we want to serve the Lord, we must serve with a vision and be loyal to the Him as our one Master.

Not Stealing God's Glory

Our serving is not to satisfy our lust for appreciation from men. When Abel served God by offering up a lamb, he gained respect from God, but from man he gained nothing but death.

When we lust for praise from men in our service, we steal glory from God. As we serve, we easily focus on the enjoyment of others' appreciation and are stumbled. Young people often crave the praise of more experienced Christians. If they are told they are no good, they will be depressed. If they are told they are good, they get excited. We must beware of this danger. Our reaction to both praise and criticism shows if our serving is healthy or not.

This lust for praise comes to all who serve, but especially to those who share a good message. They enjoy the praise of others and steal the Lord's glory. They will be destroyed by their pride if the Lord doesn't intervene. Gaining praise is not the purpose of our serving. We cannot judge our serving based on others' reactions. We must have the reality of spiritual things. When we forsake our satisfaction and enjoyment in our serving, we become lowly and can easily coordinate with others. No matter where the Lord puts us, we just flow out life.

It should not matter whether or not we are the leaders in our serving. We can always supply life to others. If we can only be strong when we are the leaders, we have a problem. We steal the Lord's glory by our desire to be satisfied through our serving.

Do not overly give or receive praise. The more we receive praise for our service, the more powerful we feel. If we bask in the praise, eventually we will lose our power like Samson did once his hair was shaved off (Judg. 16:17-20). Immediately we discover that in ourselves we are unable to serve. This is the Lord's mercy. He exposes us all the time through our outward environment and inwardly enlightens us so that we know we can do nothing. When we feel we are good and enjoy our achievement, the Lord disciplines us (Heb. 12:7). The more we say, "Well done," to ourselves, the more the Lord disciplines us. He will discipline us to the extent that we no longer trust our own ability. When we feel we can do nothing, the Lord will bless us. In that blessing, we again congratulate ourselves. The Lord disciplines us once more so that we can say, "O Lord have mercy on me. I am a useless vessel. I really can do nothing. I repent of trying to steal Your glory. I only want to deny myself, take up my cross, and follow You." This is the way the Lord exposes us. There is no exception. When others criticize us, we should not lose heart. When others praise us, we should prepare for the Lord's discipline.

Abel did not seek his own satisfaction. He tended lambs simply to serve God and satisfy Him. In our serving, we shouldn't steal the Lord's glory. We should thank the Lord for His blessing. However, we don't look for or dwell in the praise of men. There is still a long way for us to walk, many things for us to learn, and many hardships for us to bear. With this attitude we can gain what the Lord wants us to gain.

True Service Resulting in Death

Abel was a servant of God, but his service resulted in his death. This is a principle: true service always results in the death of the serving one's soul life. Our serving should not result in being exalted or puffed up but in the death of our soul life.

We should have an attitude that our serving is for us to die. The more we serve, the more we are put to death. Two Christian brothers may realize the need for the church to gain new ones. The younger one may do so imagining that he will become the church's hero by his evangelistic efforts, whereas the older brother realizes from his experience that he will have to deny himself and take up the cross in the process (Matt. 16:24). The serving of this kind of person has real value and is respected by the Lord.

The genuineness of our service is not judged by how much fruit it produces but by how much it causes us to die. Did it bring us into weakness, fear, and much trembling (1 Cor. 2:3)? Did it cause us to be afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down (2 Cor. 4:8–9)? Did we lose confidence in our human wisdom and our ability to persuade others (1 Cor. 2:4–5)? If so, our serving will be respected by God.

The more we experience being put to death, the more we lose confidence in our natural abilities and are able to put them aside. The more we die like this, the more God values our serving. Abel was so pure before God, but God still allowed his blood to be shed. Through his death, Abel became a testimony, and God's authority was manifested (Heb. 11:4).

In our serving, we shouldn't look for praise but only deeper death. When we serve, we should expect to pass through many difficulties that will put us to death. Those who choose the easy way are useless. They think that their area of service is too hard and look for something easier. "It is too hard to serve in this church. Let me go to another church." It is useless to serve with this attitude. If we exercise our own choices and our own considerations, how can we stand before God? Such an attitude shows we know nothing about the lesson of the cross.

If we find ourselves competing with others, we are not yet dead. The dead do not compete. This is not a small thing. If a church leader praises us, we remember it forever. We always desire to be better than others. When we begin to serve, we must give up this thought. The result of serving is death. The more we serve, the more we die.

We need to see this clearly in the beginning of our serving life. In our serving, we don't have our own choice, we don't seek others' praise, and our end is death. If we have this view, we will serve with a different attitude. We will enter a new realm.

True Service Bringing in Resurrection

After the death of Abel, Adam had another son whom Eve named Seth, saying, "God has appointed me another offspring in place of Abel, for Cain killed him" (Gen. 4:25). In the eyes of God, therefore, Seth and Abel are one person. Abel represents our first experience. He had a vision which caused him not to live for himself or for his own spiritual enjoyment. Eventually he was put to death. Seth, who lived in resurrection, represents our second experience, which is even higher.

In the beginning we have Abel, who had a vision of God's will, lived for God's will, and was put to death. After his death he became Seth, who was appointed by God. He changed, becoming the manifestation of the vision. When we enter into this experience, we can say with assurance, "For to me, to live is Christ" (Phil. 1:21). We realize that we have been appointed. We can express the Lord and are in complete union with Him. We do the work the Lord wants to do, speak what He wants to speak, and serve as He serves. We are joined to the Lord.

If in God's mercy we are brought into death through serving, we will discover something marvelous—when we are in death, the appointed one rises up within us in resurrection. At this time we are not bothered by sin. We are not damaged by fruitfulness. We have a deep union with God. We speak as God speaks and work as God works. When we release life, the

Lord expresses Himself through us. True service always goes through death and brings in resurrection.

Two Patterns of Serving

We must abandon fallen concepts that make us love ourselves and covet the praise of men while serving the Lord. The Lord wants to remove these concepts by putting us to death. We need to die. As Jesus said, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me" (Matt. 16:24). The service He values always passes through the cross and puts our self-life to death. Only this death experience will make us appointed ones and bring us into a union with the Lord. Death will make us God's testimony, and His authority will be manifested.

The first pattern of serving that we need to be brought into is that of Abel. This is the beginning of true service to the Lord. No matter how many people we bring to the Lord, no matter how much we serve Him, we only live for Christ under the controlling vision of His church. We do nothing for ourselves and do not seek others' praise. We are worthy of nothing but death.

Through death and resurrection, we are brought into the second pattern of serving, which is that of Seth. In resurrection, we are appointed to be the Lord's testimony and exercise His authority. Though our talent and effectiveness in serving may be lacking, the church is blessed through us and is brought more into God's will.

No one can change the way of serving that God has ordained—denying ourselves, taking up our cross, and following Him. If we want to serve the Lord, we must walk this way. If we don't want to serve the Lord, we may go back. Those whose goal is their own spirituality, effectiveness, and manifestation may leave now, for they are useless in the Lord's service. They have no vision. We should all pray, "O Lord, I am worthy of nothing but death. Like Abel, I want to serve You with vision

A SKETCH OF GENESIS

52

and be willing to die. My life and work are all for You. I have nothing to boast of. I only have a little lamb to offer You. Give me the experience of denying myself, taking up my cross, and following You so that the appointed, resurrected Seth may be manifested in me."

Two Lines of Mankind (1) The line of self

and the line of life

Two Men, Two Lines

Starting from Cain and Abel, there are two lines of mankind: one is the line of life in God's will, and the other is the line of self and the world under Satan's control. These two lines correspond to the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the garden of Eden. Man either chooses one tree or the other. God would never allow us to partake of both (Gen. 3:22-23). We don't please God when we partake of the knowledge of good and evil. We only please Him by partaking of life.

These two lines are described in Genesis 4–5. Chapter 4 shows us the beginning of these two lines, and chapter 5 shows us the expressions of the line of life.

Chapter 4 tells us there are two kinds of service: Abel served in life and Cain served in the knowledge of good and evil. Cain's service resulted in his killing Abel, which caused God to drive him out (v. 14). He went forth from the presence of God and dwelt in the land of Nod, east of Eden (v. 16) where God had placed the cherubim to guard the way to the tree life (3:24).

Nod means "wandering" (Davis, p. 569). Cain wandered east of Eden. He still desired God and hoped to see Him again. Cain represents a man in religion. He wandered outside of the way to the tree of life. He was desirous and hopeful, but he didn't have the reality of life and was excluded from the presence of God. We must be careful not to fall into religion and end up wandering outside of God's presence.

The Current of the Age

Later, Cain built a city to dwell in and named it after his son Enoch (4:17). Now Cain had a home and didn't wander anymore. God desires a city. The consummation of His eternal plan is a city, the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:2). However, it was Cain, a man judged by God and apart from His presence, who built the first city.

It is surprising that when God desires something, Satan does it first. Therefore Paul says, "The spiritual is not first, but the natural; then the spiritual" (1 Cor. 15:46). We shouldn't think these two lines are easily differentiated, one good and the other evil. They may look the same. Even some of the names are identical ("Enoch" and "Lamech" appear in both genealogies) or similar ("Cain" and "Kenan," "Methusael" and "Methuselah"). If we only judge by right and wrong, we will be puzzled. The church life should be in the realm of life, not good and evil. God doesn't want us to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He only desires that we enjoy the tree of life.

Although musical instruments were invented by a descendant of Cain (Gen. 4:21), they were later used by God's people in their worship of Him (Psa. 150). At least from the time of Martin Luther, secular tunes have been used for Christian hymns. Some have condemned this use of secular tunes, but if we judge people for the tunes and instruments they use, we are still in religion. As long as hymns supply life, they are good hymns. We need to be simple and live by the tree of life. With a spiritual view we can use Satan's own doing to bruise his head (Gen. 3:15).

We need a spiritual view to see the current of this age. We should not be conformed to the world (Rom. 12:2), but we shouldn't be ignorant of it, either. We should observe this age,

yet live in God's desire so that the church can advance with more power and strength. The current of this age was started by Satan, but eventually it became an instrument used by God. We don't imitate this age, but we must have a spiritual view of the current of this age to see God's move. Church history shows that this current keeps advancing throughout the ages. From the time of the church's union with the Roman Empire under Constantine, the church had outward unity. The current of the age in Martin Luther's day allowed for more freedom of thought, and thus he was able to proclaim the truth of justification by faith and use the new printing press to open the Bible to the masses. The people of that generation were able to break the bondage of tradition and become free from old creeds and traditions. Our view must be broadened and enlarged so that we can see God's work in our age.

The Line of Self

Those who are not in the line of life are in the line of self. Eventually they become like Cain's descendant, Lamech. Though there is only a short description of him, we can see how extremely arrogant and conceited he was. He said, "Adah and Zillah, listen to my voice, you wives of Lamech, give heed to my speech, For I have killed a man for wounding me; and a boy for striking me; if Cain is avenged sevenfold, then Lamech seventy-sevenfold" (Gen. 4:23–24). This was his haughty declaration. Such crazy talk is an abomination to God. This is the situation of all those who don't live by the tree of life, even if they don't seem to be as terrible as Lamech.

In the line of Cain, there are four expressions of self: Cain built a city (v. 17), Jabal raised livestock (v. 20), Jubal played music on instruments (v. 21), and Tubal-Cain was a metal worker (v. 22), probably mainly for weapons. These four expressions are all for self—the existence of "I." I want to live a comfortable life. I want good things to eat and drink. I want to have a good time. I want to possess power to fight so that I won't lose my profit.

The Line of Life

The expressions of the line of life are recorded in chapter 5. This line was not started from Cain nor Abel, but from Adam whom God made. Chapter 5 makes it seem that the things in chapter 4 never happened. It is really amazing! It says, "When Adam had lived one hundred and thirty years, he became the father of a son in his own likeness, according to his image, and named him Seth" (v. 3) According to this verse, Adam's first son was Seth, not Cain or Abel.

In the eyes of God, Abel and Seth were one person. Abel suffered death and Seth resurrected. Abel pleased God, and after his death God appointed Seth instead of Abel. The Bible says Seth was in Adam's "own likeness, according to his image." Adam was surprised to find that Seth was like him not only outwardly but inwardly as well. Since Adam was in God's likeness and according to His image, Seth was also. Hallelujah! How wonderful is God's wisdom! "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor?" (Rom. 11:33–34).

According to birth order, Seth was not the firstborn, but according to God's selection, he was. He was appointed by God (Gen. 4:25). Through him God had the authority and was able to carry out His will. Through his line, God will bring in His kingdom and fulfill His purpose. Indeed, Seth signifies Christ who died and rose. We who are in Christ also have the same experience (Rom. 6:4).

The eight descendants of Seth listed in chapter 5 represent eight expressions in the line of life. In our experience, these eight expressions are concurrent and represent the content of the line of life.

Enosh

"To Seth, to him also a son was born; and he called his name

Enosh" (Gen. 4:26). "Enosh" means mortal man (Hitchcock, "Enos"). After Abel and Seth, who together represent Christ who died and rose again, we come to Enosh, that is, we see ourselves as fragile, mortal men. The more we see that the Lord is the all-inclusive One, the more we see ourselves for who we are. In ourselves, we have nothing to boast of but fragility, but in Christ, we have a lot to boast of (2 Cor. 12:9; Gal. 6:14). On the one hand we are fragile, and on the other we are strong. This is Enosh. After God appoints us (Seth), we have a lot of experiences of being weak, fragile, and mortal (Enosh). Although I am weak, the Lord is my strength. This is the wisdom of God. On the one hand, He causes us to know who we are; on the other hand, we partake of His abundant grace. Because we live in weakness, we look to Him, rely on Him, call His name, and partake of His sufficient grace.

Starting from Enosh, "men began to call upon the name of the Lord" (Gen. 4:26). Enosh knew he was fragile so he called on the Lord's name, which was precious to him. Why do we call on the Lord's name? It is because we know how weak we are. We call, "Lord Jesus! Your grace is sufficient for me. Your strength is made perfect in my weakness." If we rely on the Lord and look to Him in our weakness, we will be like Kenan.

Kenan

"Enosh lived ninety years, and became the father of Kenan" (Gen. 5:9). The name Kenan means "possessor, purchaser" (Hitchcock, "Cainan"), and it refers to the gaining and possessing of the reality of life. When we feel weak, we naturally call upon the name of the Lord and partake of His riches (Rom. 10:12). When we call, we gain Christ as life (Phil. 3:8). Do not look down on calling upon the name of the Lord, for we gain life this way.

Religious people don't like to call on the Lord's name because they don't know they are weak. If we don't know we are

weak, we won't realize our need to gain life. Many look at the church life through dark glasses. They come to the church life as judges to criticize and find faults. Why do they wear dark glasses? They don't know they are weak and in need of the Lord. Instead, they boast of how many years they have been saved, how many people they have led to the Lord, and how successful their service to the Lord has been. The more they think about "I," the darker their glasses become. They are full of self-assurance and do not see their own weakness. How pitiful! They feel they are full, but they cannot supply life. They are full of judgment and criticism, considering everyone else as too shallow, too immature, too wild, or too soberminded. The more they criticize others, the less they have the presence of the Lord. How wretched they are! This is a sober matter. Because they are so self-assured and don't know they are weak, they do not gain life. We should be able to receive life from even newly saved Christians simply by enjoying their spirits. We should not look down on them as though they have nothing. Their word may be immature, but we can enjoy their fresh spirit.

If we don't know we are weak (Enosh) and don't live humbly in the light of God, we cannot gain anything (Kenan). These two are simultaneous, not consecutive. We are Enosh at the same time we are Kenan.

Mahalalel

"Kenan lived seventy years, and became the father of Mahalalel" (Gen. 5:12). The name Mahalalel means "praising God" (Hitchcock). We call upon the name of the Lord and look to Him to gain the reality and supply of life. Then we feel the Lord is glorious, and we praise Him. The Lord of glory is manifested through us (Rom. 9:23) and brings us into His glory (Heb. 2:10). Many times as we pursue the Lord with others, we are filled with praise and glory. It seems we are in the third heaven. Hallelujah! This is the experience of Mahalalel.

Jared

"Mahalalel lived sixty-five years, and became the father of Jared" (Gen. 5:15). Jared means "coming down" (Hitchcock), implying common, humble, and not proud. It is amazing that when we taste the Lord's glory, it doesn't make us proud, arrogant, haughty, or conceited. On the contrary, we feel that we are under the Lord's mercy, that we are no better than others, and that we have nothing in which to boast. When we touch the Lord, we are never puffed up. We won't refuse to do lowly things for the church because we have tasted the Lord's glory. Our life, walk, and conduct should be common. We should not be proud, but rather easy to approach. Although we have touched the Lord's glory (Mahalalel), anyone can still approach us and fellowship with us (Jared).

Do not think those who have God's word and are full of glory will shine like angels and cause others to feel inferior and insignificant. Such people may seem glorious like Mahalalel, but actually, they are in the line of Lamech, the line of the flesh. We must be Jared as well as Mahalalel so that we don't give others the feeling that we are so high, distant, and unapproachable. Our Lord Jesus was a real Jared in the line of life. Inwardly He had the glory of God, yet outwardly He had no form or majesty (Isa. 53:2). He was a slave of all (Phil. 2:5–8). This should be our expression.

Enoch

"Jared lived one hundred and sixty-two years, and became the father of Enoch" (Gen. 5:18). Enoch means "dedicated; disciplined" (Hitchcock). Those in the line of life have the characteristics of Enosh, Kenan, Mahalalel, Jared, and also Enoch. They are not loose but dedicated and disciplined in spiritual things and in the details of daily life. They have the Lord's anointing and give others the feeling that God is with them.

I once knew a servant of the Lord who went to a place to

give a conference where he noticed a promising new brother in the Lord. After the meeting, he went directly to the brother to fellowship with him although he himself was very tired. On a different occasion, we went to the airport to welcome this same servant of the Lord. When one among us spoke something inappropriate to him, his countenance fell immediately. He didn't play politics. This gave me a deep impression that this servant of the Lord was a disciplined and learned man. On the one hand, he really loved others and desired to perfect them. He had no regard for himself and didn't put on airs. He was easy to be with and made himself available. On the other hand, he was not loose. He would not lower his character to win people over. He respected the portion he had from the Lord regardless of others' criticism. When we touch such a servant, it is like touching the Lord. We feel shallow and insufficient, and we sense the need to learn more in a disciplined way.

"Enoch walked with God three hundred years....[A]nd he was not, for God took him" (5:22, 24). According to our natural concept, God took Enoch because he was reading the Bible and praying all the time. We aspire to be like him in the hope God that will take us some day. We need to change our concept. It is good to read the Bible and pray, but without real discipline, our Bible reading and prayer are merely decorations which puff us up. We must learn "how to get along with humble means, and...how to live in prosperity" (Phil. 4:12). We must learn how to bear an evil report and a good report (2 Cor. 6:8). We must learn to coordinate with others and to summit to authority. We must learn how to be in the world but not of the world (John 17:15–16). We must learn to have the freedom and the impact of the Spirit in every situation (2 Cor. 3:17).

Those who are disciplined have learned to be neither proud nor ashamed. Because they have a commitment from the Lord, they have the assurance to move forward. Many have vision but are not disciplined. If we don't have a heart to learn, the healthy environment that the Lord gives us for our spiritual growth is wasted. May the Lord have mercy that we would have the discipline to learn day by day.

Methuselah

"Enoch lived sixty-five years, and became the father of Methuselah" (Gen. 5:21). Methuselah means "he has sent his death" (Hitchcock). Enoch must have named his son this because of his prophecy recorded by Jude: "Behold, the Lord came with many thousands of His holy ones, to execute judgment upon all, and to convict all the ungodly of all their ungodly deeds which they have done in an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things which ungodly sinners have spoken against Him" (Jude 14–15). Although this judgment was fulfilled on one level at Noah's time through the flood, it will be fulfilled in a more complete sense at the Lord's second coming. Methuselah must have lived his life in view of this coming judgment. Like him, we should live soberly as sons of light, watching expectantly for the Lord's coming (1 Thess. 5:2–10). No matter what we do, we should do it in view of the Lord's coming.

Methuselah had the longest life in human history—nine hundred sixty-nine years (Gen. 5:27). Even his son Lamech died before him. Methuselah faithfully waited over nine centuries for the fulfillment of Enoch's prophecy. Our pursuing—gathering with other believers, praying, reading the word, watching and waiting for the rapture—should not be motivated simply by outward signs of the Lord's return. Our living under the control of the Lord's coming is a genuine testimony. It shouldn't matter to us exactly when the Lord returns. It might be five years, ten years, or fifty years. Our attitude should remain the same—we live under the control of the Lord's coming, watching and preparing daily. Though we may have to pass through the valley of death before He comes, our hope is for His approval when we see Him (Matt. 24:45–51).

Lamech

"And Methuselah lived one hundred and eighty-seven years, and became the father of Lamech" (Gen. 5:25). Lamech means

"the wild man" (Easton). How could a faithful man who is waiting for the Lord's coming be a wild man? God wants a wild Lamech—not the Lamach in the line of self but the Lamech in the line of life who is beside himself for God's will.

We need Lamechs in our church life today. Many are desirous, pursuing, and lovely, but meek. They are more like lambs than lions, never wanting to offend people. They cannot speak strong words for the sake of God. We need to be more like John the Baptist, who was not afraid of people or authority. He was strong and bold in order to be faithful to God's commitment. Not caring who opposed him, he willingly sacrificed his life (Mark 6:17-18). He was beside himself for the Lord to the uttermost. We don't have much time. Today is the day to be wild for the Lord! We shouldn't wait until we are older, know more, and have become leaders in the church. We need to be beside ourselves today. We need to be crazy for Christ and the church! We shouldn't be afraid to use the sword of the Spirit to pierce even to the dividing of soul and spirit (Heb. 4:12). May we all be beside ourselves for the Lord's desire. May we be so crazy that we cannot eat or drink until His will is done.

To accomplish His will, the Lord needs Lamechs who are willing to be crazy for Him. They are like the seven thousand in Israel who did not bow their knees unto Baal (1 Kings 19:18). Not only should we be like Enosh, Kenan, Mahalalel, Jared, Enoch, and Methuselah, but we should also have the expression of Lamech. We should not only have the good report but also the evil report from the religious people. If this is our case, we are blessed. May we all be so wild that we tell the Lord, "If You don't work, I won't let You rest." We must become Lamech! We must be strong, not caring for anything but the Lord's interest. The Lord will only have His way in the church when He gains a group of people like this!

Noah

"Lamech lived one hundred and eighty-two years, and became

the father of a son. Now he called his name Noah, saying, 'This one will give us rest from our work and from the toil of our hands'" (Gen. 5:28–29). Noah means "repose" (Hitchcock). The more we are like Lamech, the more we trust the Lord and are peaceful in spirit. Although we labor with sweat and tears, we have the assurance that it is not us but the Lord who does the work. The will of God can be fulfilled through those who have such restful assurance. When people see us, they should see those who labor and toil outwardly yet are restful inwardly. This is Noah.

In our experience, these eight expressions of life are not eight consecutive steps but are simultaneous. From these eight expressions, we can see how God has blessed us with the riches of His grace and glory. These riches are ours to enjoy. May we live in the line of life. May the Spirit write this word in us as our lifelong vision and goal. If we have these eight expressions, we are today's Seth appointed by God to fulfill His will.

Two Lines of Mankind (2) A new covenant

The time of Noah marks the beginning of a new relationship between God and man. When God created Adam, He made him in His own image and commanded him to rule over all the earth (Gen. 1:27-28). God wanted man to fulfill His purpose of ruling for Him. However, at Noah's time, the earth had become corrupt before God and filled with violence (6:11). Man had been exposed as being completely unable to fulfill God's purpose. After Noah, God placed the demand on Himself. He made a new covenant with man and set the rainbow in the sky as the sign of this new covenant (9:12-17). When God sees the rainbow, He knows that the demand is all upon Him.

Mixture

Man fell in Adam, and that fall continued. It reached its lowest point with the mixture of spirit and flesh: "The sons of God saw that the daughters of men were beautiful; and they took wives for themselves, whomever they chose....The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of men, and they bore children to them. Those were the mighty men who were of old, men of renown" (Gen. 6:2, 4). This mixture of the sons of God (fallen angels, Jude 6-7) with the daughters of men produced

the Nephilim, or giants, the mighty men of renown. God hated this mixture. He reacted to it, saying, "My Spirit shall not strive with man forever, because he also is flesh" (Gen. 6:3). In God's creation everything was according to its own kind (1:12, 21, 25). God desires purity. If we love the world as well as God and desire the things on the earth as well as the things above, our situation does not match God's desire (1 John 2:15–17).

We Christians often serve both in the spirit as well as in the flesh, using our own ways. This is the principle of mixture. We find it hard to walk solely by the spirit, so we mix the spirit with the flesh. This produces "mighty men of renown." On the one hand we pray with our spirit, and on the other hand, we are full of plans and try our best to handle things according to the flesh. This is mixture. As a result, we build ourselves up, seeking to become mighty men.

Without Christ we will look for outward things to rely on. We shouldn't seek to become "mighty men of renown," looking for outward results or praise from others. We should only pay attention to the Christ within us. The early disciples had nothing to rely upon but Christ, even proclaiming, "I do not possess silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you: In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene—walk!" (Acts 3:6). This is not an easy way, but it is the way of salvation.

It is easy for us to search for ways to do things without relying on Christ. We may feel led of the Lord to have a special gospel event or church outing, and yet our planning and doing may be entirely our own effort. We are trying to accomplish a spiritual goal without Christ. This is mixture. The Lord indicated that we may even study the Bible and still miss Him (John 5:39–40).

When we mix the spirit and the flesh or bring the world into the church, God withdraws His hand. He wants to gain those who are pure, one hundred percent for Himself. We should be careful about mixture and be pure. When we read Genesis, we realize that the mighty men are not pleasing to God, yet in our own Christian service, for some reason we desire to produce such mighty men. By mixing the spirit with the flesh, God's way with man's way, we marry "the sons of God," hoping to gain

impressive results and be appreciated. Even if we were to baptize twenty people in one day, it should not be to our glory but the Lord's. We need to have a heart that is purely for the Lord. Like Paul, we should "count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Phil. 3:8). If we want to gain the world as well as the Lord, serve with our own goals as well as the Lord's, and supply others with things from ourselves in addition to things from the Lord, eventually we will discover we are not walking the way of God.

When they are young, many Christians desire to become great teachers or evangelists to gain the praise and appreciation of others. Because they are not pure, they use all their own ideas and skills to accomplish what they think is God's plan for them. At some point they realize that this plan is not going to be fulfilled. The disappointment that follows causes them to give up all service and take a back seat or even leave the church altogether. Only those who are pure and without mixture can stay healthy.

We must aspire to be so pure that the focus of our service is only the Lord and His will. Otherwise, we will become like the sons of God who married the daughters of men and produced the mighty men of renown. This result seemed good, but God condemned it, saying that man was flesh, and "every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Gen. 6:5). Not only would the Spirit of God not strive with man, but man would be destroyed from the face of the earth (Gen. 6:3, 5, 7).

Flesh

Although flesh is first mentioned in Genesis 2, by the time we come to the mixture in Genesis 6, man as flesh was fully exposed and condemned by God. Mixture produces problems. Only purity can build up the church (1 Cor. 3:9–15). We are useless to God if we are not pure. We may make mistakes or cause troubles, but if we are pure, the church will still be built up. However, those who have a hidden agenda frustrate the

building work of God. Because they are a mixture, God cannot work through them to accomplish what He desires. Mixture manifests the flesh, and the Spirit of God is in constant opposition to the flesh (Gal. 5:17).

The flesh is not manifested suddenly. One day the Lord might lead us to pursue an advanced degree so that we are better equipped to serve Him. After we have our degree, we see others using their degree to start their own business, so we do the same. Others buy a grand house, so we do also. Others buy good cars, and we follow their example. Eventually our flesh is fully manifested.

Regardless how the Lord leads us, we need to be pure. Otherwise, we open the door to the flesh. In the beginning, we stray from the Lord just a little, and then gradually we move further and further away without realizing it. We may think we are fine since we are still active in the church life, yet our heart is with our degree, business, house, and cars instead of the Lord. We have become fleshly. This is not a sudden fall. If we fell suddenly, we would realize it and get up immediately. For example, after suddenly losing our temper, we repent. That kind of fall is not as serious as a gradual easing into mixture, with the result of becoming fleshly.

It is never too late to come back to the Lord, but it may be too late to spend our best years for Him. Those years were already wasted on the world. We did not develop our spiritual function as we should have. God's judgment is serious: "My Spirit shall not strive with man forever." When we have mixture, we become fleshly, and the Spirit of God will not strive with us. We need the Lord's mercy so that we can love Him with a pure heart. Otherwise our heart will be drawn away to other things. We will bear mighty men and be judged by the Lord.

Evil Thoughts

After mixture was brought in, "the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent

of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Gen. 6:5). Mixture brings in flesh, which brings in evil thoughts. Evil thoughts are those which don't involve Christ. If our thoughts concerning money, a degree, our future, or our career are separate from Christ, these thoughts are all evil. The more we dwell on things apart from Christ, the more we are away from the presence of God.

God's Grieving Heart

God never gives up. Even when man fell to the point of having children with fallen angels, God didn't give up. Man was hopeless, but God was still working. When He could no longer carry out His will through man, He carried it out Himself, doing His work according to His will.

"The Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart" (Gen. 6:6). The deeper man falls, the more God is grieved. The love that God has for man is amazing. He is reluctant to punish him. God rarely punishes man. He doesn't punish us simply because we do something He doesn't like. Every time we depart from the face of God, He is grieved in His heart. Instead of letting us go, He disciplines us in His love. He will have another beginning and start His work again.

The eight persons from Enosh to Noah represent the eight expressions in our Christian experience. How glorious this is! Yet in the days of Noah, man fell again. God was grieved in His heart, so He worked again to rid the earth of the mixture that frustrated His will.

The Living Word of God

"Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord....Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his time; Noah walked with God" (Gen. 6:8–9). Noah walked with God—he walked in life. Because of

this, he found favor in the Lord's eyes. The great things in God's plan are always generated from life.

Because Noah found favor in the sight of God, God spoke to him, giving him His living word (vv. 13–21). If we don't want to be weak, we must walk with God by calling upon His name in spirit and living in fellowship with Him. If we want to be God's testimony and serve Him, we must also have the living word of God, without which we can do nothing.

God told Noah to build an ark three hundred cubits long, fifty cubits wide, and thirty cubits high with lower, second, and third decks (vv. 15–16). God's word really got into his heart: "According to all that God had commanded him, so he did" (v. 22). What God spoke was living to him and became part of him. He didn't forget about it. We also have the word, but it may not be living in us and controlling us. We have the word but it may not be our life supply. God gained Noah through His living word which energized him to carry out God's command.

When we read the account of Noah in Genesis, it seems that the ark was built very quickly. In fact, it took many years. We cannot imagine how Noah suffered people's scoffing for those many years. He didn't build the ark silently but warned the people of that age as a preacher of righteousness (2 Pet. 2:5).

"Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his time" (Gen. 6:9), but he still needed the living word of God to carry out His will. Although God sees us as righteous and blameless in Christ, we also need the living word to serve God and do His will. The living word energizes us to become different people. Those who have the living word of God don't just talk about the need to be pure and faithful. When there is something impure within them, they feel the need to become pure. When there is something unfaithful within them, they have an inward demand to become faithful. The word is planted in them and controls them (James 1:21–22). This is the experience of having the living word. As we follow the Lord, we need His living word constantly.

The living word strengthens our inner man whereas the letter of the word kills (2 Cor. 3:6). A preacher may share a similar

message numerous times. If we are not open to a fresh speaking from the Spirit, we may react, saying, "I have heard this before." This shows we are not open to the living word. Without the Spirit, we don't have the reality but only knowledge, which makes us arrogant (1 Cor. 8:1) and causes us to live in the flesh and speak foolishly. The more we have the living word, the more we live in God's favor and "put no confidence in the flesh" (Phil. 3:3).

The Controlling and Enabling Word

Noah served the Lord, suffered people's misunderstanding and persecution, and for all those years, focused on the one thing God told him to do. It may have seemed overwhelming. If we were Noah at that time, would we have believed God and built the ark according to His command? Instead, we may have moved to the top of a high mountain to escape the flood. However, Noah remained to build the ark according to God's word. Like Noah, we should not only hear the word of God but also allow it to live in us and control us.

God also told Noah, "You shall take with you of every clean animal by sevens, a male and his female; and of the animals that are not clean two, a male and his female" (Gen. 7:2). Although this also may have seemed overwhelming to Noah, he didn't ask whether it was possible. If we have the living word of God, we can do anything He commands, no matter how peculiar it seems. How the church needs the living word today! The living word will influence and control us. It will cause us to live before God and carry out His will. Not only do we need to walk with God and exercise our spirit, but we must have the living word of God which will enable us to carry out the will of God.

Walking with God in spirit is the foundation (Gal. 5:16, 25). Without this foundation we cannot receive God's word. However, even with this foundation, if we do not have the living word, we cannot come to the full knowledge. For example, we might pray, "Lord, I am nothing and You are everything," but

do we really consider ourselves nothing? Only the living word of God can show us who we truly are. When the light comes, we confess, "Lord, I didn't know who I really was. I didn't realize how poorly I served You. Now I know how bad I am." One time Watchman Nee was accused of something, and his sister-in-law told him about it. He answered, "I am much worse than their accusation." He didn't argue or fight. He wasn't upset or angry. We need to pray, "Lord, I need Your living word for my every step." God's living word is the way to carry out His will.

God spoke to Noah, and this living word controlled him. We cannot serve the Lord with our whole heart simply by declaring our intent to do so. This won't work! We need God's living word to control, direct, and supply our life. Though we may be touched by the Lord even to the point of tears, this does not mean we have necessarily received God's living, controlling, and supplying word.

God told Noah, "You shall make a window for the ark" (Gen. 6:16). A window lets in light. When we are controlled and supplied by the living word of God, our serving is under the light so that people can know our work is according to God's desire. Only when we have the living word are we enabled to live uniquely for Christ and the church. Through the Lord's living word, He becomes our life, and as the church becomes our living, we become His testimony.

A Fresh Start in Resurrection

Once the ark was built and the animals were in it, God shut Noah and his family in the ark, and it rained for forty days and forty nights, flooding the earth. Eventually, as the waters receded, the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat (Gen. 8:4) which signify resurrection.

The ark is not mentioned again in the Old Testament. It was lost. Though Noah's experience of death and resurrection in the ark was precious to him, he didn't seek to preserve it. He was truly spiritual. What he treasured most was God. Unlike

Noah, many people hold onto a spiritual experience. Given the chance, they would recreate it. They even measure others according to their own experience. It seems that only their experience is the work of God. How shallow this is! Noah wasn't like this. We must learn not to hold onto our past experiences. God is always advancing. Our blessings from the past are for us to go forward.

After the flood, Noah lived in the fresh experience of resurrection life. As the waters receded, he sent out a raven. Ravens are unclean animals (Lev. 11:15) that eat the flesh of carcasses, so they are related to death. When the raven saw so many bodies floating on the water, it had no desire to return to the ark. This shows that outside the ark there was nothing but sin, darkness, and death.

Noah also sent out a dove. Doves are clean animals that don't like to touch the dead. When it found out there were nothing but dead bodies everywhere, it returned to the ark. Noah waited one more week and sent out the dove again. The dove came back in the evening with "a freshly picked olive leaf" (Gen. 8:11). The old creation had been taken away, and Noah and his family began to live in the new creation. His life became an expression of resurrection. He lived a fresh, renewed life.

Every day we need to have that day's freshly picked olive leaf. Do not go back to yesterday's portion. We need to tell the Lord, "I want a fresh portion from You for this day." The freshly picked olive leaf tells us that God is leading us. We should not remain in our past experiences. We need to live a new life and experience Christ in a fresh, living way. This makes us fresh, and God is able to gain what He desires.

God Bearing the Responsibility

When Noah went forth from the ark, he was on the ground of resurrection. Here he built an altar, and offered burnt offerings on it (Gen. 8:18–20). When God smelled the soothing aroma from Noah's offering, He said, "While the earth remains, seedtime

and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease" (v. 22). The mixture that God hated was gone, and there was a fresh beginning. From that day, God would never again curse the ground for man's sake or smite every living thing (v. 21).

God led man from Genesis 3 through Genesis 8. Whenever man was damaged by the enemy, God always had a way to go forward. When man fell in Eden, God had a way. When Cain slew his brother, God had a way. Eventually, when mixture came in and man showed he was utterly incapable of fulfilling God's expectations and hope, God used the flood to judge and destroy what had become absolutely corrupt and to usher in a fresh start.

After God judged the world with the flood, His work on man was no longer according to man's behavior. Although Noah had been described as "a righteous man, blameless in his time" (6:9), after the flood Noah "drank of the wine and became drunk, and uncovered himself inside his tent" (9:21). This shows that God's work on man was not based on man's behavior. No matter how fallen we are, we can come to Him like a child and ask for His mercy. We now live in a new age with a new covenant in which God bears all the responsibility.

A Covenant Initiated by God

Before Noah, it seemed that God had hope that His purpose could be fulfilled by man. However, at the time of Noah, mixture came in, and man was exposed as being hopeless. God detests mixture. He loves purity and everything after its kind. Today God is cleansing us of our mixture. We either belong to God, or we belong to Satan. We cannot serve two masters. When God saw the mixture at Noah's time, He sent the flood to destroy it. Eventually, only the eight people in Noah's household were saved.

God established a covenant with Noah and with all living creatures in which He bore all the responsibility: "I set My bow

in the cloud, and it shall be for a sign of a covenant between Me and the earth" (Gen. 9:13). He would never again send a flood to destroy all flesh. This covenant with Noah was the first of a series of covenants that God made with man. He later made a covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (15:18; Exo. 2:24) and made a covenant with the people of Israel (Exo. 24:8).

This covenant between God and Noah began a new relationship between God and man. Before Noah, God had charged man, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth" (Gen. 1:28). However, He made no such demands in His covenant with Noah. No matter how corrupt man would become, God would find a way to fulfill His purpose.

When Adam fell, God drove him from the garden of Eden. When Cain slew Abel, God drove him from His presence. When the sons of God mixed with the daughters of men, God sent the flood. God's way at that time was to remove the offenders. Today, God no longer drives sinners away but draws them to Himself (John 12:32). When we fall, God encourages us to return to Him with boldness to receive mercy and grace (Heb. 4:16). He changed from "go away from Me" to "come to Me." This is God's way of working with man in the age of the new covenant.

In our experience, we are not in the age of Adam but in the age of God's covenant with Noah. God doesn't drive us away but invites us to come to Himself. Even though Israel crucified the Lord Jesus, the Bible still says, "All Israel will be saved" (Rom. 11:26). As in the covenant God made with Noah, God's demand today is only on Himself and He bears all the responsibility. He has no expectation toward us. He doesn't ask us to work for Him but carries out His work Himself. Praise the Lord! This is truly a good tiding.

Today we live in the age of the new covenant (Heb. 9:15). God initiated and established this covenant with us. He bears the responsibility, enabling us to carry out His will. Though Noah failed God in his behavior, God still fulfilled His desire

through him. Today, God works in us to fulfill His desire, as Paul says: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them" (Eph. 2:8–10). He has no demands on man. His care, His mercy, and His blessing are all based on His faithfulness. This is the meaning of Noah's experience. Our living is based entirely on God's faithfulness!

8

God's Calling

"Follow Me"

Man's Rebellion

The people of the earth desired to exalt themselves and determined to build the city and tower of Babel, saying, "Come, let us build for ourselves a city, and a tower whose top will reach into heaven, and let us make for ourselves a name" (Gen. 11:4). Satan had a similar desire when he rebelled. He wanted to exalt his name and make himself like the Most High (Isa. 14:13–14). Satan wasn't trying to replace God or overthrow Him but to be equal to Him. This was the reason he was cast "as profane out of the mountain of God" (Ezek. 28:16).

The building of the Tower of Babel exposed the rebellious nature of man. The people of the earth thought, "It is all right that God is the Lord and King, but we also want to make a name for ourselves. We want to have our portion just as God has His." This is rebellion. We may think rebellion is fighting with people or losing our temper. However, these things are not rebellion but merely our weakness, the expression of our sinful nature in Adam. Our self, which is related to our soul-life, is more dreadful than our sinful nature. The self is the origin of rebellion. Even a Christian work can be in the principle of rebellion if we use it to build up ourselves and gain a name. When we consider that the work is ours rather than the Lord's, we are no longer under the authority of God. We no longer allow the Lord to be

our Lord. Instead, we try to bear the responsibility ourselves. In the eyes of God, this is to exalt ourselves, to seek equality with God. God has His portion, and we want ours. God's name is proclaimed, and we want ours proclaimed also. God has a throne, and we want ours. When we are in this situation, God cannot accomplish anything with us.

God remembered His covenant with Noah and didn't destroy the earth when men rebelled by building the Tower of Babel. Instead, He punished them by confounding their language so that they couldn't communicate (Gen. 11:7–8). This stopped their work and scattered them. Then He called out Abraham, through whom all the nations under God's judgment would be blessed (12:3).

The Experience of God's Calling

The process of God's calling includes five items which are experienced by everyone He calls. When God called Abraham, he experienced these five items: (1) God's initiating; (2) God's appearing; (3) God's call; (4) God's promise; and (5) God's power and unchanging nature.

When we are called by God, we experience these five items. How did God gain Peter and Andrew? They were fishing when the Lord came to them (Matt. 4:18–20). The Lord took the initiative to appear to them. Jesus seemed to be nothing more than a Nazarene—could anything good come out of Nazareth (John 1:46)? He had no attracting form or comeliness (Isa. 53:2). Why would anyone follow Him? Yet when the Lord appeared to Peter and Andrew, they saw a glorious Lord and recognized His value. Then the Lord said to them, "Follow me." This was His call. Immediately they left their nets and followed Him. The Lord also told them, "I will make you fishers of men." Peter and Andrew received this promise. Although Peter later failed and denied the Lord when Jesus was arrested, judged, and crucified (Matt. 26:69–75), the Lord who had called him did not change but remained as the holding power

of his faith (Luke 22:31-32).

All who are called by the Lord and follow Him experience these five steps. The Lord initiates, He appears and we see His loveliness, He calls us, we receive His promise, and we have the assurance that He remains as the holding power of our faith and will never change.

God's Initiating

This was Abraham's experience when God appeared to him. God initiated the calling (Acts 7:2; Gen. 12:1). That was a beginning. God took the initiative many times from chapter 1 to 11 in Genesis. This shows that we continually experience new beginnings. Every work of God in us begins with Him. He always takes the initiative. None of us loved God without His first loving us (Rom. 5:8; 1 John 4:19). None of us sought for God (Rom. 3:11), but He came and began to work on us so that we might desire Him (Luke 19:10).

What causes us to walk the way of the Lord? It is God's initiation. At first we didn't think about loving the Lord or following Him. One day, seemingly for no particular reason, God came and touched us. Suddenly we realized that the Lord is so wonderful! We began to follow Him. This doesn't mean that we picked up a lot of outward Christian practices but that we found the Lord to be so lovely. Perhaps we cannot describe what we have seen, but we truly know that the Lord is lovely, precious, and wonderful.

God's Appearing

God appeared to Abraham repeatedly throughout his life. This led him to walk the way of God and gain God Himself. God's appearing does not produce an outwardly religious person but one who has truly encountered God.

If the Lord has not appeared to us, our serving is like the

building of the Tower of Babel. We must ask ourselves, "Am I building a tower or am I serving the Lord?" True service is the result of the Lord's appearing to us. We met the Lord and touched Him. We cried because His love encouraged us. Because He was so wonderful, precious, and loving, He captured our heart. Once we have been captured by His appearing, we need not fear that we will leave Him to walk our own way. If we have the Lord's appearing, we cannot be chased away but will be willing to suffer for the Lord even with tears. Sometimes we may feel reluctant, but something within holds us. Once the Lord appears to us, we immediately enter another realm.

Our Christian service can be like unbelievers doing business. We should not serve like teachers taking care of students or employers managing employees. It is not a matter of what we do in our serving or how we stir everyone up. We should ask ourselves, "Do I have the Lord's appearing in my serving?" We cannot go on without His appearing.

The root of our blessing is His calling, which He initiates by appearing to us. Without His appearing we have no way. If we live a religious Christian life, our serving is from ourselves. We initiate where to go and what to do. This is in the principle of the Tower of Babel. We must have the Lord's appearing. Once we have the Lord's appearing, we can go anywhere He leads. The Lord has first priority. Our mind will be broadened and our view enlarged when the living Lord appears to us.

Serving by God's Appearing

God's appearing should control our life. When we have His appearing, we are not affected by people's criticism. Our only concern is to have a fresh touch with the Lord. Many who serve the church are constantly looking for zealous members whom they can bring into church service. Many of these may be young Christians without much experience of the Lord. These young ones only learn how to work, take attendance, and stir people

up. They remain short of the Lord's appearing. We should be careful. We may serve in this way without even realizing it. It is hard for us to have spiritual insight, to recognize when the Lord has initiated His work in others. We may not see people as God does but only as objects for our service. This type of service will ruin others.

I don't mean we should not encourage others to serve, but their service must be dependent upon God's appearing to them. The key to serving is not primarily ability but the Lord's appearing. We shouldn't ask others to serve if they do not have the fresh appearing of the Lord. We should bring others into serving only according to how the Lord is working in them through His appearing. We need God's mercy in this matter.

Our following the Lord is based on God's initiating and appearing. The more He appears to us, the healthier and more absolute our Christian walk becomes. We no longer find it hard to walk His way. Our Christian work and service are no longer heavy but light (Matt. 11:28–30). We see only the Lord.

God's Call

When God appears, He calls. These two actions are related. When the Lord appeared to Peter, Peter didn't leave his nets until the Lord called him, saying, "Follow Me" (Matt. 4:19–20). When a great light shone and Paul fell to the ground, he didn't just stand up and praise the Lord. Trembling and astonished, he asked, "What shall I do, Lord?" Jesus answered, "Get up and go on into Damascus, and there you will be told of all that has been appointed for you to do" (Acts 22:10). The appearing brings in God's calling, which is His living word.

When the Lord appears to us, we see something of Him, causing us to realize how wonderful He is. This is followed by His call—His speaking within concerning His heart's desire, which guides us in our Christian walk. We are held by this call. It

will not allow us to leave the Lord, no matter what difficulties we encounter. Though we may temporarily be swayed by others' opposition or persuasion, when we return to the Lord and enjoy Him, His word comes back to us unchanged.

In order to follow the Lord, we must heed His call. This was the way Abraham followed the Lord. God's call to Abraham in Genesis 12 was not His first call. The first call is recorded in Acts 7 where Stephen testified, "The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, and said to him, 'Leave your country and your relatives, and come into the land that I will show you'" (Acts 7:2–3). When God appeared to Abraham, He called him.

God's Promise

When God called Abraham, He said, "Leave your country and your relatives." This call was followed by God's promise: "And come into the land that I will show you." Here we see the land of promise. God's call brings in His promise. How wonderful that our Lord is living! He is not a distant God far away in the heavens. He initiates, He appears, He calls, and He promises.

God's Power and Unchanging Nature

Once we receive God's calling, we need to rely on His power and unchanging nature. Without this, we are building a Tower of Babel. We are nothing but trouble. God initiated, appeared, called, and promised, but our following is not automatic. Our following can only be based on God's power and unchanging nature.

Abraham failed many times. God had promised to give him a son, saying, "I will bless [Sarah], and indeed I will give you a son by her (17:16). However, Abraham told King Abimelech that Sarah was his sister and gave her to him (Gen. 20:2). How could Abraham have a son by Sarah if he sent her away? With-

out Sarah, his life of following God would have been almost in vain. Although Abraham sent Sarah away, God protected her so that Abimelech never came near her (v. 4). Even though Abraham failed and became faithless, God was able to make him stand (Rom. 14:4). Since God has chosen us, we don't need to be afraid of our weaknesses. If God has appeared to us, He will also enable us to stand.

We are able to follow the Lord based on His choosing. He initiates, and we have His appearing, His call, His promise, and His power and unchanging nature. God bore responsibility for Abraham to the end through His power and unchanging nature. God has power. With this power He caused Abraham to have a son by Sarah. With this power He enabled Abraham to walk before Him. We have two protections in our walk: from God's side, He is always the same; from our side, we experience His power continuously. The exceeding greatness of His power is toward us (Eph. 1:19). Since He never changes, we can experience His power and preservation. As a result, God's purpose will be fulfilled in us. How wonderful are these five steps of God's calling!

The Purpose of God's Calling

There are three items in God's promise to Abraham: first, "Go forth from your country...to the land which I will show you" (Gen. 12:1); second, "I will make you a great nation" (v. 2); and third, "in you all the families of the earth will be blessed" (v. 3). These three items—land, nation, and blessing—are God's will. His will is that He become our good land, the inheritance of the called ones (Col. 1:12). His will is that He reign over us, the fellow citizens of a holy nation (Eph. 2:19; 1 Pet. 2:9). And His will is that through us, His called ones, He would fulfill His purpose to bless all the families of the earth. Abraham is the father of faith. How God called him, He calls us. The Lord may speak differently to us, but the purpose of His calling remains the same—the fulfillment of His will.

The Land

When God called Abraham, He said, "Go forth from your country, and from your relatives and from your father's house, to the land which I will show you" (Gen. 12:1). This land was the land of Canaan. God seemed to be telling him, "Leave everything you are familiar with. From now on, I will be your portion, and you will experience Me and gain Me." The portion of a called one is nothing but the Lord Himself. Without the Lord, all that we have and experience is in vain. We should not think that the gift God has given us is our portion. The reality of all our God-given spiritual gifts is the Lord Himself. Without Him, there wouldn't be any gifts. Eventually all the gifts will be done away, and only the Lord will remain (1 Cor. 13:8). The good land promised to Abraham is a picture of Christ as the portion of the called ones.

Since Christ is our portion, we can gain Him through all our various circumstances (Phil. 3:8; 4:11–13). We all have different experiences. Some are high and some are low or difficult. In whatever circumstance we find ourselves, God's will is for us to gain Christ. If we are not gaining Christ, then all of our joy, sorrow, prosperity, and hardship are in vain. The purpose of God's calling is to be our portion. If we are gaining the Lord, all things have value. If not, all things are vain.

It is God's desire that we know Him as our portion. In calling us, He laid hold of us. Now He wants us to "lay hold of that for which also [we were] laid hold of by Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:12). We should not focus on our difficulty. Christ is our portion. Difficulties are nothing. What is important is that we gain Christ in our difficulties. When we are going through hardship and the Lord seems far away, we should realize that He is still with us, and we can still gain Him. We should have such experiences as we are following the Lord. No matter what we would like Him to give us outwardly, God's intent is to give us Christ.

The Nation and the Blessing

God told Abraham, "I will make you a great nation" (Gen. 12:2). Eventually, when others saw him, they said, "You are a mighty prince among us" (23:6). They saw a nation in Abraham because the Lord reigned over him. The more we gain Christ, the more we express such a nation, for God is reigning over us. Sometimes when we see older believers, we feel that the Lord's authority and reigning is with them. We should all aspire to gain the Lord to this extent. Then when people see us, they will see the heavenly authority. All the families of the earth will be blessed in us, and God's purpose will be fulfilled.

Although God gave up those building the Tower of Babel, He gained a group of people through the calling of Abraham. Just as God's covenant with Noah indicated that God would bear all the responsibility, God's calling of Abraham was a further testimony of this. Today, God takes the initiative to call us to Himself. We may come and experience His appearing, His call, His promise, His power, and His unchanging nature. Through all our circumstances, we gain Him and reign through Him. In this way, God is fulfilling His eternal purpose.

9 God Himself as the Way

By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed

Abraham represents all who are called by God. From him we see what marks the life of the called ones: everything depends on God. When we truly walk the way of the Lord, we discover that everything depends on Him. We may rely on ourselves when we preach the gospel, read the Bible, or serve the church. However, if we desire to walk the way of the Lord and answer His call, we cannot rely on ourselves but on Him. He must be our unique source. Without Him, we have no way to go forward. Without His protection and provision, we are finished. Our every step must be in God. He is the way of the called ones.

God as Our Way

In our Christian walk, we must have God as our way. God doesn't give us an experience just for the experience itself but because He wants us to walk in Him and experience Him. For example, a Christian brother who fails a test in school might say, "This is the discipline of the Spirit. I should study harder next time." His word may be spiritual, but he isn't walking in God. When another brother fails a test, it becomes a turning point in his spiritual life because he is walking according to God's leading and experiencing God Himself. The word of God is alive and God is real to him.

If we don't have God and walk in Him, all is in vain. Our fallen religious concept is that we will be successful in all that we do if we love the Lord. Otherwise the Lord would be shamed. This concept is from Satan. If we truly know God, we will see that He is our only way. It doesn't matter whether we are successful or not as long as we walk in God. If we walk in Him, we will praise Him regardless of our situation. Otherwise, our walk is in vain.

We expect God will always lead us into outward blessings. However, He leads us into both green pastures and the valley of the shadow of death (Psa. 23:2, 4). No matter where He leads, His intent is that we would find Him, know Him, and experience Him. We should tell the Lord, "Have mercy on me. I want to walk in You. You are my way. I never want to leave You. Without You I have no way. I don't preach the gospel just to preach. I don't read the Bible just to read. I don't serve the church just to serve. My life, my work, my speech—my entire walk—are for me to gain You." Whoever has this experience is following the way of Abraham.

We still have a lot of natural concepts regarding how to obtain a bright and prosperous future. We consider the value of graduating from a specific school, having a certain occupation, or living in a particular neighborhood. However, we only need to ask one question: "Is God my way in what I am doing?" Whether we are attending Harvard or a community college, whether we are working as a doctor or janitor, if we are gaining God in doing so, we are blessed. Our concept that one school or occupation is more valuable than the other is fallen. We don't have any future other than God. He is our unique way. We should focus on gaining God. In our planning and considering for our future, we should not forget God. He leads and guides those who are pure in heart. He becomes their unique way.

God becomes our way by (1) His appearing, (2) His provision, (3) His discipline, (4) His promise, and (5) His authority.

God's Appearing

Abraham is the father of faith (Rom. 4:11, 16). His faith came from God's appearing (Gen. 15:1, 6). It is hard to see Abraham's faith in Genesis. Even though God had promised him a son (12:7; 13:15-16), he told God, "What will You give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" (Gen. 15:2). He also said, "Oh that Ishmael might live before You!" (17:18). God spoke to Abraham repeatedly. He gave him His promise, saying, "Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them.... So shall your descendants be" (15:5). However, when God told him that Sarah would give him a son, he fell on his face and laughed, saying in his heart, "Will a child be born to a man one hundred years old? And will Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" (17:17). Does this sound like faith? Yet we should not look down on Abraham's seeming lack of faith. When we are more mature in the Lord, we may have a similar reaction, asking God, "Why do You want a person like me?"

Faith is amazing. Real faith is not based on an emotional stirring or logical reasoning. If it were, after the stirring and reasoning disappear, faith would seemingly be gone. One day God appeared to Abraham in Ur and said, "Leave your country and your relatives, and come into the land that I will show you" (Acts 7:3). God told him to leave his country, but He didn't tell him where he was to go. When Abraham eventually left Ur, he got as far as Haran, which is north of Canaan, and dwelt there. It seems that Abraham was not very clear about what he was doing. He knew God wanted him to move, but he didn't know where. Then God appeared to him again and told him, "Go forth from your country...to the land which I will show you" (Gen. 12:1). Although Abraham had the assurance that it was God who appeared to him, he was still not clear where God wanted him to go. "He went out, not knowing where he was going" (Heb. 11:8) and eventually came to the land of Canaan. God's appearing does not always result in clarity. We follow

the Lord beyond our reason.

In our experience, God's appearing is often unclear and beyond our reasoning, yet we cannot deny we have touched something real. Once God appears to us, we begin to walk the way of the Lord, though, like Abraham, we may be unclear about where we are going. Living by faith according God's calling is not what we imagine. Although it is beyond our thought and not very clear, it makes us walk. Because we have touched something real, we walk. If someone asks what we touched, we could not give a clear answer. This is God's appearing, and it leads us to walk His way.

For us to walk with God as our way, He needs to appear to us that we might have faith. The more He appears, the more we have faith. Yet in the midst of tests and trials, we may find it hard to say, "I believe You, God." When trials come, we find we don't have the faith we thought we had. And yet, how is it that we continue to walk with Him as our way and consecrate our time to Him? We have to say it is beyond our reasoning, and we cannot but walk this way. When the Lord appears to us, He leads us to live a life of faith and walk by faith, which is beyond all reason. We feel we should go this way, and there is an inward urging to go forward, so we keep on walking. As we do so, we experience God as our way.

God's appearing attracts us so that we have faith to walk the way of faith and willingly give ourselves to Him. We do this not based on logic but because the Lord calls us onward. He appears and we walk. He appears again and we walk further. Our walk in faith is according to His appearing. There is something mysterious yet undeniable about the Lord's appearing and our resulting faith. Without knowing it, we are growing and advancing. How wonderful is this life of faith! We will have nothing to boast in when we see the Lord. We will only be able to say, "O God, I don't even know why I walked this way. I don't know how You conformed me to Your image so I can stand here." If God has mercy on us and we are caught up with the overcomers, we will be surprised that we are counted worthy to be among them. This is the attitude of

those who know themselves before God and are walking the way of faith.

God's Provision

God's appearing led Abraham to walk His way without even realizing it. As Abraham walked God's way, he discovered God's provision—the promised land of Canaan. Abraham made three stops in this land: Shechem (Gen. 12:6), Bethel (v. 8, 13:3–4), and Hebron (13:18).

Shechem means "the neck (between the shoulders) as the place of burdens" (Strong, no. 7926), which is a place of strength. In Shechem, God appeared to Abraham and promised him, "To your descendants I will give this land" (Gen. 12:7). This was God's first provision for Abraham, which strengthened him to build an altar to the Lord. When God appears and speaks to us, without even knowing it we are strengthened to walk the way of God.

Abraham then pitched his tent between Bethel and Ai and built another altar. Bethel means "the house of God" (Smith, p. 87). In the New Testament, the house of God refers to the church (1 Tim. 3:15). Abraham's tent was between Bethel and Ai. Ai means "heap of ruins" (Smith, p. 28). Our life is between the church and the heap of ruins. In other words, it is between the church and our flesh. God's second provision brings us to His house so that we may experience all His riches. Just as those without a house cannot have a healthy living, those without the church life cannot have a healthy spiritual walk in the way of God.

Later, Abraham moved his tent to Hebron and built another altar there (Gen. 13:18). Hebron means "seat of association" (Strong, no. 2275), which implies fellowship. In fact, it is derived from a word whose meaning includes fellowship (Strong, no. 2266). When we follow the Lord and live in the church life, we need to fellowship with God continually. This is God's third provision. In the fellowship, God provides us with all the

riches so that we can live a life of the altar and tent. The altar represents a life lived totally for God, and the tent represents a life not settled on the earth.

A Life of the Altar

The more God appears to us, the more we experience His provision and supply, but His appearing is not necessarily followed by our building an altar. We can live a life of the altar only when God appears to us in a proper place. When God appeared to Abraham in Ur, he didn't build an altar. When God appeared to him in Haran, he didn't build an altar either. However, when God appeared to him in Shechem, Abraham built an altar. It is God's provision, not His appearing, that produces the altar. When we have God's provision, we will consecrate ourselves to Him. God's appearing enables us to walk the way of God and His provision enables us to consecrate ourselves to Him.

A Life of the Tent

A life of the tent is a life not settled. Those who live in tents are ready to move whenever and wherever God leads. It is easy for us to become settled. If we violate the principle of the life of the tent and become settled in any way, we will have difficulty following God's leading. We should be able to tell the Lord, "I live in a tent. I am not rooted. I will go where You lead. I will do what You ask. I will walk the way which You choose. I can pack up my tent and start my journey anytime. I am here waiting for Your leading." As Mary Gardiner Brainard wrote in her hymn,

Where He may lead I'll follow, My trust in Him repose; And every hour in perfect peace, I'll sing, "He knows, He knows" (Martin, no. 417). If we don't have enough experience of God's provisions—God's strength (Shechem), God's house, the church (Bethel), and the fellowship with God (Hebron)—we will fall into a situation in which other things become our life—a school, an occupation, or our Christian service. We need to live in a tent and not be rooted in one place. We should always be looking to the Lord as to where He would lead. Those who live like this are valuable to God and are blessed. To live like this, we need God's provision and supply. We need to learn to live in tents, not rooted on the earth but in God, waiting for His command. Then the Lord will have a way with us.

Today many of our problems are because we lack the life of the tent. We all consecrate ourselves to the Lord, but we don't want to move once we have built this altar of consecration. We must have a feeling, "Lord, You put me here, and I will be faithful to You while I am here. I am not afraid of hardship. If You want me to bear a responsibility, I will be strong to bear it. If You want me to drop what is in my hand, I will obey. I am willing to live a life of the tent and follow You." This is what it means to walk in God. The more we walk this way, the closer and sweeter our experience of the Lord becomes. We should be simple and tell the Lord, "I live a life of the tent and enjoy Your provision—Your strength, Your house, and Your fellowship. Through Your provision I walk in Your way, living a life of the tent. I will go anywhere You lead." Then God will have a way with us.

God's Discipline

While Abraham was in Haran, he had his first experience of God's discipline through the death of his father (Gen. 11:32). Abraham's father represented the origin of his natural existence and the source by which he lived his natural life. When his father died, this strength he relied on disappeared. Only then was he able to rise up and began to walk. Only God's discipline can take away our natural reliance. He not only appears to us

and supplies us but also disciplines us. Many adversities make us suffer, but because of them our reliance upon our natural strength is taken from us. God takes away the things that our flesh depends on for strength.

God disciplines the believers both outwardly through their environment and inwardly through the discipline of the Spirit. The Spirit within restricts us, sometimes by withdrawing the sensation of His presence. God's work in us takes away our reliance on natural things. As we follow the Lord, it is easy for us to rely on natural things and natural abilities. Praise the Lord for His discipline. If we rely on our own schemes, God will discipline us to teach us to rely only on Himself.

Abraham's second experience of God's discipline was a famine that caused him to go down to Egypt (Gen. 12:10). We might think that once the Lord saves us, He would never allow famine to touch us. This shows that we are short of spiritual understanding. Sometimes we lose the sensation of the Lord's presence or don't feel spiritually supplied when we meet with other believers. In our spiritual experience, these are famines. Though the Lord will never leave us, our sensation is that He has. Though we are receiving a spiritual supply, our sensation is that we are not. Just as Abraham ran to Egypt due to a famine, we may turn to the world.

Once Abraham arrived in Egypt, he lied to Pharaoh about his wife. When the lie was exposed, he was put to shame (vv. 11–20). God was merciful to Abraham and blessed him, even in his failure. When Abraham returned from Egypt, he was "very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold" (13:2). Because of the famine and his weakness, he went to Egypt and came back with blessings.

Although Abraham's going to Egypt was his failure, God is grand and could still bless Abraham in that failure. When Abraham came back to Bethel, he was doubly blessed—he was blessed with material riches, and he was blessed with a heart that wasn't captured by material riches. He seemed blind to them. For example, when his servants strove against Lot's, he didn't fight to keep the best land. Instead, he gave Lot the first choice,

saying, "Is not the whole land before you? Please separate from me; if to the left, then I will go to the right; or if to the right, then I will go to the left" (13:9). Because of Abraham's weakness, he was put to shame. Because of his being put to shame, he was blessed. Because of his being blessed, he overcame the attraction of outward riches.

On the one hand, Abraham's journey to Egypt was a failure and seemed to be a waste. On the other hand, he came back different. God used his failure for his growth. We may have an idealistic expectation regarding our Christian growth: God appears, we follow, and we live forevermore in the heavenly realm. No! Sometimes He allows us to fail, but once we return, we discover our failure brings us to another realm.

This is all God's doing. He started the famine, and He spoke to Pharaoh. Abraham would not have gone down to Egypt if God hadn't allowed such an environment. Abraham would not have left Egypt if God hadn't spoken to Pharaoh, who then made him leave. All of this was so Abraham would know God and gain Him. As a result, Abraham was different. He had grown.

If we desire to pursue God, He may put us into a similar situation of spiritual famine. The feeling of dissatisfaction comes from Him. This will eventually bring us into a deeper experience in life.

God's Promise

God told Abraham, "Now lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; for all the land which you see, I will give it to you and to your descendants forever" (Gen. 13:14–15). God then gave him the way to experience this divine promise: "Arise, walk about the land through its length and breadth; for I will give it to you" (v. 17). Up to this point, Abraham had only experienced God's provision in Shechem and Bethel. Now he was to rise up and walk throughout the promised land. This would bring him into a deeper experience and richer enjoyment of God.

It is only when we rise up and begin to walk in Christ that we apprehend "the breadth and length and height and depth" of Christ as the reality of the promised land (Eph. 3:18). Little by little the unsearchable riches of Christ transfuse into us through our walking. This is what God meant when He said to rise up and walk through the land according to its length and its width. The land with all its riches is ours. Rise up and walk! Take possession of what God has promised!

God's Authority

After receiving God's promise concerning the good land, Abraham went forth and arrived at Hebron, a heavenly realm, and lived a life of fellowship with God (Gen. 13:18). Following this, war broke out between four kings and five kings, resulting in Lot being carried off with all of Sodom as battle spoils. When Abraham heard of this, he fought against the kings and overcame them (14:12–16). After Abraham's victory, Melchisedec, king of Salem and priest of God Most High, blessed Abraham, saying, "Blessed be Abram of God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand" (14:19–20). As Possessor of heaven and earth, God has authority over heaven and earth. Melchisedec indicated that Abraham's overcoming life came from God's authority.

Only God's authority can make us overcomers. As we walk in Christ as our promised good land and partake of His provision of fellowship, we exercise God's authority which enables us to live an overcoming life.

More than this, through us God also magnifies His triumph. Man overcomes through God's authority, and God magnifies His authority through man's overcoming. God is Possessor of heaven and earth. Let us tell the Lord, "May I walk in You. I don't care about my failures, weaknesses, or even my strengths. I only want to walk in You."

The Gaining of God "Walk before Me and be blameless"

God was Abraham's portion, and He is also our portion as His called ones. The gaining of God as the called ones' portion has a principle, a process, a manifestation, and a result.

The Principle to Gain God

There is a principle to the gaining of God. If we live according to this principle, we will be in the right position to gain God as our portion. Otherwise, it is easy for us to fall into religion, substituting our own concepts for the reality of God Himself as our portion. According to the experience of Abraham, the first item of this principle is to know God as our shield and reward.

Our Shield and Reward

After Abraham conquered the kings and returned, the Lord spoke to him in a vision, saying, "I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward" (Gen. 15:1, NKJV). Both the shield and the reward are God. Without this understanding it is hard to follow the Lord and gain Him. We must realize that our strength, our gifts, and even our spiritual pursuit are nothing; God is everything. He is our inward reward and our outward

shield. These two are closely related. Because of the shield without, we have the reward within, and the inward reward enlarges the outward shield.

Initially, we have a tiny shield, since our experience of the Lord as our reward within is so little. Gradually, as our experience of the Lord as our reward increases, our shield is enlarged. Eventually that shield will be so large that we are surrounded by it. Our whole soul—mind, emotion, and will—will be protected from spiritual attacks. No matter how people attack us, we won't be affected or offended. However, those who have small shields are vulnerable to the flaming arrows of the evil one (Eph. 6:16). If anything touches their minds, they will be easily beguiled (2 Cor. 11:3). If anything touches their emotions, they will be too sad to get up. Because their shield is so small, there are many unprotected places. We must gain Christ as our portion so that our shield can be enlarged.

The reward is inward and the shield is outward. The outward shield blocks all the flaming arrows of Satan. The inward reward increases as we gain more of God's riches within us. This renders us more growth in life and becomes our eternal life supply. Some Christians are quite mature in the Lord. No matter how Satan attacks them, how people trouble them, or how hard their environment is, they stand firm and are not touched. The schemes and flaming arrows of the devil cannot touch them (Eph. 6:11, 16). People's thoughts and words cannot affect them, either. Their inward reward is great, and their life supply is abundant. However, even with such believers, there is still the danger of becoming self-confident and proud. This annuls the shield, and opens the door to the enemy's attack.

When we follow the Lord to gain Him, we must know from the beginning that it is not our work, not our will, not our love, not our spiritual pursuing, and not our zealousness that will increase our reward and enlarge our shield. We are nothing. It is all God. He is our outward shield and inward reward. The responsibility does not lie with us but with the Lord who does all. He is able to withstand all the flaming darts of the enemy without, and He becomes the life supply within. From now on,

we don't need to say, "Wretched man that I am!" The "I" has disappeared. We need no longer work or struggle. From the beginning to the end, it is all Him.

Abiding in the Initial Vision

The God of glory appeared to Abraham and told him, "Leave your country and your relatives, and come into the land that I will show you" (Acts 7:3). This was God's first call to Abraham, and it was the first vision Abraham received. When he left Ur, Abraham didn't know where he was going or what the future held, but he knew he had met God. Although he didn't know the way to the land God had spoken of, because of his vision he was clear that he would follow the God who had appeared to him. Abraham never left this initial vision, and this is the second item in the principle to gain God.

Like Abraham, we also met God on the day of our salvation, and like Abraham, we had no idea where He would take us. We were very simple. When we met Him, all we wanted to do was to love Him and follow Him. Our first vision was of Him alone. We must abide in this vision continually.

Peter was simple when Jesus called him. Jesus was a Nazarene who had no outwardly attractive appearance, stately form, or majesty (Isa. 53:2), but when He walked beside the Sea of Galilee, Peter was attracted to Him. Jesus said, "Follow Me" (Matt. 4:19), and Peter immediately left his fishing nets and followed Him. Peter was simple. He didn't consider, "You are a Nazarene. How can I follow You? Where are You going? What is my future if I follow You?" He simply followed Jesus.

The Lord is worthy for us to follow Him all our life. When He first appeared to us, we were amazed to discover that He was so wonderful and precious. As we abide in this initial vision, we have the steadfastness to pass through the many trials and temptations that come our way. In order to truly follow Him, we must abide in this appearing. Many who once loved the Lord stopped following Him when they found a job or married.

Our vision is the foundation that enables us to follow the Lord all our life.

Those who follow the Lord must abide in this initial vision. Once this vision grows dim, we may discover we are following others rather than following the Lord. At this point, we have two options. The first is to get desperate before the Lord to renew our initial vision of Him. The second is to forget about living for the Lord and start living for our own future and career. Sooner or later, those who are not abiding in the vision of the Lord will give up the church life. It is better for them to go sooner rather than waste their time. If we desire to follow the Lord, we must tell Him, "I must see You afresh. Otherwise I am wasting my time. I want to have Your appearing and abide in it."

Our Foundation

Our initial vision is our foundation for following the Lord. Rather than replacing this foundational vision, every further appearance of the Lord builds upon and expands it. Take Abraham for example. The first time God appeared to him, He spoke of the land, saying, "Leave your country and your relatives, and come into the land that I will show you" (Acts 7:3). The second time God appeared, He spoke of the land again but added, "I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing" (Gen. 12:2). Since the land was Abraham's first vision, it was the foundation for the blessing of the second vision. Since our first vision is of Christ, He is our foundation (1 Cor. 3:11). We don't need to consider whether we will bless others by becoming apostles, elders, or vessels greatly used by God. It is not our business but the Lord's. We only need to ask whether we have the Lord's appearing.

Without the presence of the Lord, our work and labor are in vain and have no value. If our Christian work is not firmly based on an initial vision of Christ, one day we will stand before Him shameful and miserable. Though we may be able to speak of the many things we have done in His name, He may tell us, "I never

knew you; depart from me, you who practice lawlessness" (Matt. 7:23). Our first vision of Christ is our foundation. On that day, our only acceptable offering to God will be the Christ we have seen, experienced, and laid hold of in our life and service.

God appeared to Abraham at least seven times. Each time He appeared, the vision became higher and richer in the unveiling of God's desire. Each additional vision built upon the foundation of the initial vision. We will not get a second vision to replace the first or a third to replace the second.

God as Our Unique Portion

When Sarah died, Abraham bowed down before the children of Heth and asked for land to bury her (Gen. 23). God had called him, and he served God for the rest of his life. Yet in the end, he didn't even have land to bury his wife. He had to bow down before the people of the land and say, "I am a stranger and a sojourner among you; give me a burial site among you that I may bury my dead out of my sight" (23:4). This man had nothing but God. He didn't complain, saying, "Where is the land You promised me? I have been dwelling in this land, but I don't own any of it." He knew that the God who appeared to him was more precious than His promise. He was directly related to God from the beginning to the end. He had nothing but God.

The first time God appeared to Abraham is recorded in Acts 7. In this initial vision, God only mentioned the land (v. 3). When God appeared in Genesis 12, He mentioned both the land and the nation (vv. 1–2). In Genesis 13, God said that He would make Abraham's seed as the dust of the earth in number (v. 16). In Genesis 15, God said that Abraham's seed would be as numerous as the stars of the heavens (v. 5). In Genesis 17, God promised that He would make nations of him and that kings would come forth from him (v. 6). In Genesis 22, God promised that Abraham's seed would be like the stars of the heavens and the sand on the seashore, the seed would possess

the gate of his enemy, and in his seed all the nations of the earth would be blessed (vv. 17–18). Each appearance brought a new experience of God, but God would never alter the initial vision that He, as the land, is the portion of the called ones. In his lifetime, Abraham never saw his seed multiply, possess the gate of his enemy, or bless all the nations of the earth. However, he did gain and experience God Himself. His portion was God alone.

Today the church needs people who know that all the blessings are God Himself. Without God, all Christian work is in vain. Without God, we lose the foundation of our first vision.

Although God has called us, appeared to us, and given us His promise repeatedly, nothing can replace God Himself. He has brought us through many experiences so that we may be blessed and strengthened in order to complete our Christian journey. However, these experiences cannot replace God Himself. God indeed promised us a land but eventually we will testify that in our life we have many experiences of God but we don't hold anything in our hands.

God's desire is the church. It is the center of His will. Although we are for the church, it is not in our hands. God's promise, appearing, calling, and leading are all for the church. Just as Abraham walked through the land which didn't belong to him, we live in the church life, yet the church is not a work or possession in our hands. With this understanding we can declare, "Lord, I can gain nothing but You in my life. You are my only reward. I am willing to give everything for the church but I don't need to have any position in the church. The church is not my work. Although I am willing to give my life for the church, the church is not under my control. It belongs to You." This lesson is not easy to learn.

We need the Lord to purify us. Why do we feel those we serve are more important than others? Why do we hold onto our service so tightly? Because we have a concept that we should hold onto what God has put in our hands. This is wrong. We shouldn't replace God with His gifts. What God wants to give us is just Himself.

A Smoking Furnace and a Flaming Torch

In Genesis 15, Abraham offered a heifer, a female goat, a ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon to God (vv. 9–10). Birds of prey came down on the carcasses, and he drove them away (v. 11). This signifies that Satan will attack our sacrifices, and we must chase him away by faith (James 4:7; Eph. 6:16). Verse 17 says, "It came to pass, that, when the sun went down, and it was dark, behold, a smoking furnace, and a flaming torch that passed between these pieces" (ASV). In our experience of life we cannot get away from these two things: a smoking furnace and a flaming torch.

The smoking furnace signified darkness and difficulties. Deuteronomy 4:20 says, "The Lord has taken you and brought you out of the iron furnace, from Egypt." The years that the Israelites spent as slaves in the "iron furnace" of Egypt were dark and difficult. The torch of fire represented light and glory, the opposite of the dark, smoking furnace.

In our experience, we have evening and morning, evening and morning (see Chapter 1), furnace and torch, furnace and torch. David had the same experience. After he killed Goliath, the women sang, "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands" (1 Sam. 18:7). Then Saul set David over the men of war, and David became Saul's son-in-law. How glorious it was! At that time he was in high spirits, for he was in the flaming torch experience. He never imagined that things could change so quickly. Saul became jealous and sought to kill him. He spent years fleeing and hiding from Saul. This was David's smoking furnace experience.

Our experience is the same. Sometimes things go smoothly. Our spirit soars, and we sing, "Hallelujah!" At other times we are in hardships and difficulties and cannot rest peacefully at night. These are the experiences of the torch and furnace. We can never get away from them. When we are buoyant, we should get ready for the smoking furnace. When things are difficult, we should not lose heart but know that the flaming torch is coming. If we never experience this cycle of the smoking

furnace and the flaming torch, we should seek the Lord, for something is wrong.

We shouldn't overly appreciate the flaming torch or fear the smoking furnace. When things happen to us, no matter big or small, we should immediately know the torch or the furnace is coming. The furnace is for the torch and the torch is for the furnace. If we are always peaceful and seem to have the presence of the Lord, there must be some problem. Young Christians, especially, should have profound experiences from time to time. If we have experienced no hardship or adversity for an entire year, we should wonder why, since "those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives" (Heb. 12:6).

The Lord told the church in Laodicea, "I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I wish that you were cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth" (Rev. 3:15–16). The Lord wants us to be in one extreme or another—cold or hot. If we are hot, we are full of feeling, zealous for the Lord, loving and pursuing Him. If we are cold, we are also full of feeling, realizing our need to come back to the Lord. However, if we are lukewarm, we are religious and make no trouble, but experience no growth. This is offensive to the Lord. We need the experience of both the torch and the furnace for the Lord to deal with us and mold us into useful vessels. Through this process, we also begin to know who God really is.

If a church is growing in life and new ones are coming, there will be many troubles. We will need to spend much time with these new ones. This kind of church life grants us many experiences of the furnace and the torch. If our church life is merely a meeting life, we have become lukewarm and are finished. The experience of both the torch and the furnace cause our Christian life to advance. In appearance we seem to have ups and downs; in reality we are advancing all the time. If we constantly have the experience of the furnace and the torch, we are useful in the hands of the Lord.

When we are passing through the difficulties of the smoking

furnace, we should recognize the disciplining hand of the Lord. "All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness" (Heb. 12:11). If we recognize the Lord's disciplining hand on us, we will never leave Him. We cannot but walk the way of the Lord. Those who willingly receive the furnace as well as the torch are blessed.

The Process of Gaining God

God's promises to Abraham were all related to the seed. Though God had promised Abraham a seed, the fulfillment of that promise did not come right away. Abraham told Him, "Since You have given no offspring to me, one born in my house [Eliezer] is my heir" (Gen. 15:3). God responded, "One who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir" (v. 4). Since Sarah was so old and barren, she thought it was impossible for this promise to be fulfilled through her, so she told Abraham to take her maid, Hagar, and have a son through her (16:2). Abraham listened to his wife and produced Ishmael (v. 15). When God again appeared, Abraham said to Him, "Oh that Ishmael might live before You!" (17:18). God answered, "No, but Sarah your wife will bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac" (v. 19).

Abraham's three possible heirs, Eliezer, Ishmael, and Isaac, represent the process of gaining God. Eliezer represents living by our natural concept, Ishmael represents trying to fulfill God's desire by our own fleshly strength, and Isaac signifies being born of the Spirit.

Eliezer—The Natural Concept

Abraham asked God, "What will You give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" (Gen. 15:2). According to Abraham's natural concept, since he

was childless, his steward would have to be his heir. When we first begin to follow the Lord, we do so according to our natural concept. It is very natural to begin mimicking the behavior of the believers around us. We watch how they speak for the Lord and do same. We listen to how they pray and do our best to imitate them. This kind of mimicry fits our natural concept. It is what Eliezer represents. Do not think it is spiritual to simply mimic the outward behavior of those who are spiritually mature. It is like a parrot mimicking the voice of a human being but lacking the human life. When we begin to follow the Lord, we all present an Eliezer. We have a long way to go in the process of gaining God Himself. We see a vision and begin to walk. We need the light of God to see our condition. As we grow in life, we recognize our condition and spontaneously no longer rely upon our natural concept. This is why Eliezer never became a problem to Abraham.

Ishmael—The Works of the Flesh

After Abraham produced Ishmael through Hagar, God appeared to him again and told him he and his household needed to be circumcised (Gen. 17). God also told him that he would have a son, Isaac, through Sarah (v. 19). Once Isaac was born, Ishmael mocked him, which led to Hagar and Ishmael being cast out under God's direction (21:9–14).

An even bigger problem than our natural concept is our flesh, represented by Ishmael. Our flesh is not as manifest in the beginning but appears gradually. After God appears to us, our tendency is to use our own strength to fulfill what God has shown us. In Paul's words, this is in the principle of "the works of the Law" (Gal. 3:2), an effort to be "perfected by the flesh" (v. 3). He continued, "Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, to perform them" (Gal. 3:10). God has a desire, but we try to fulfill it in our way. This is Ishmael.

Abraham got rid of the flesh by being circumcised and, once Isaac was born and weaned, by casting out Ishmael. The way to gain God is simple—live and walk in the Spirit (Gal. 5:25). If we do this, God will give us an environment to get rid of our flesh. He will give us the strength to "cast out the bondwoman [Hagar] and her son [Ishmael]" (4:30). If we carry out a Christian work according to our own strength, eventually this will become a frustration to the true work of the Spirit. "As at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also" (v. 29). We need God's promise and free grace so that we can become spiritual, without any impure motive. He enables us to face everything in the spirit by faith. We don't want Eliezer or Ishmael. We need the Lord's mercy so that we become a true Isaac, simple and reliant only on God.

Isaac—Born of the Spirit

Isaac, the promised seed, was born of Sarah. He became Abraham's sole heir (Gen. 25:5). He represents what is born of the Spirit (Gal. 4:29). Only that which is born of the Spirit is acceptable and fulfills God's promise. If we try to use our natural concept (Eliezer), God will reject it. If we try to use our law-keeping flesh (Ishmael), God will tell us to cast it out. Only what is born of the Spirit (Isaac) fulfills God's promise and can remain. If we live and labor according to the principle of Isaac, God will have a way in us.

The Manifestation of Gaining God—Blameless

Not many believers know their true condition. Though we identify with Paul when he claimed to be "the very least of all saints" (Eph. 3:8), when others point out our faults, we defend ourselves. This shows that we don't really know ourselves. Those who are blameless before God may not be filled in spirit every day or live a life full of glory, but they know their weaknesses and faults and cast themselves upon the God who justifies (Rom. 8:33).

The All-bountiful God

In Genesis 17:1, God told Abraham, "I am God Almighty; walk before Me, and be blameless." The original Hebrew for "God Almighty" is *El Shadday*. Concerning this title, Gridlestone writes, "...While the name *El* sets forth the might of God, the title *Shadday* points to the inexhaustible stores of His bounty" (Gridlestone, p. 46). The Almighty God is all-bountiful. It was after Abraham failed by having Ishmael that God revealed Himself to him as the All-bountiful God and told him to be blameless. Being blameless before God is not based on our victory but our knowing of our own faults and knowing God as the All-bountiful One.

Some may say, "If that is the case, let's go gamble and party every day—we'll still be blameless." No. That is indulging in lusts. Once we have expended all the strength of our flesh, God comes to reveal Himself as the All-bountiful God. After Abraham failed in his attempt to fulfill God's promise, God didn't come to rebuke or comfort him. Instead He revealed Himself as the All-bountiful God and told Abraham to be blameless. How great and how high He is! Only He can do things like this.

If we are victorious in our Christian life and God asks us to be blameless, we would tell Him proudly, "Hallelujah! Lord, You see how good and blameless we are." However, if we are weak and God asks us to be blameless, we can only bow down before Him and say, "O Lord, we need Your mercy. We need You to work on us and supply us. Otherwise we cannot be blameless."

God thoroughly knows our inward condition. When He says, "I am the All-bountiful God," it seems He is saying that though we are unable, He is sufficient to supply all our need, enabling us to walk before Him and be blameless (Jude 24).

Abraham's Laugh

When God speaks to us, we should realize our inability to fulfill His desire through our own efforts. We are far from

blameless. As we repent before the Lord, we feel both sweet and shameful. We thought we couldn't believe, yet we still believed. This is the root of blamelessness. Abraham saw that he had nothing. It seemed hopeless when he considered his own body as good as dead, as well as the deadness of Sarah's womb (Rom. 4:19). When God promised him a son through Sarah, it almost felt that God was making fun of him. He wanted to believe but he couldn't. We sometimes have the same experience. When God calls us, we are too shocked to believe, saying, "God, You must have found the wrong person. How could it possibly be me?" Then we laugh—not merely a joyful laugh but one with a whole spectrum of feelings. Abraham expressed all these feelings when he laughed (Gen. 17:17). On the one hand, he couldn't leave God. On the other hand, he found His word unbelievable. On the one hand, with God all things are possible. On the other hand, with him all things seemed impossible. His true condition was laid bare before him. He knew he could do nothing and felt completely useless.

If we still consider ourselves capable, we don't know ourselves. When we feel a little weak, we might pray, "Lord, strengthen me to do Your will." Abraham was not like this. He didn't ask the Lord to strengthen his body. He just laughed at himself, thinking, "Will a child be born to a man one hundred years old? And will Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" (Gen. 17:17). He wouldn't dare to accuse God of making fun of him. He didn't have the assurance to say, "God, You will fulfill what You have spoken." Neither could he say, "I am going to leave You. Please don't trouble me anymore." He only said, "Oh that Ishmael might live before You!" (v. 18). How conflicted Abraham was!

Due to his interaction with God over many years, Abraham was confident of God's supply and desire. However, when God told him that He is the all-bountiful God before whom he should walk and be blameless, Abraham found it hard to believe that he could be blameless. Yet God's words made him hopeful. Did he stop following the Lord since His words seemed so incredible? No, he just fell upon his face and laughed

with a lot of feeling. Perhaps he thought, "O Lord, if only You had come ten years earlier!" Or he may have thought, "God, do You know what You are talking about?" or "O God, do not speak like this. I cannot take it." At this point, Abraham had lost all confidence in his own ability. On the one hand, he was weak; on the other, God is rich. On the one hand, he found it hard to believe God could give Sarah and him a baby, on the other, he was confident of the all-bountiful God's supply. How wonderful was his experience!

The Reality of Faith

We need the Lord's mercy that we would be brought to the end of ourselves so that we can only bow down before the Lord and laugh. We can only know ourselves in the light of His life. We must allow the Lord's life to work on us, to lead us, and to bring us into deeper experiences of Him. We only need God Himself. May the Lord have mercy on us so that we are not able to give up on the Lord or try to accomplish on our own what He has committed to us. We dare not say we can or cannot do it. We can only bow down and sigh, "I need Your mercy, Lord." We cannot believe, but we cannot leave, either. This is the reality of faith.

The reality of faith is not, "I know God can do it," nor, "Hallelujah, I am walking the way of the Lord." The reality of faith is the result of God working on us to the point that we, like Abraham, consider ourselves as good as dead (Rom. 4:19). Although we are as good as dead, we have God's promise. Although we have His promise, we don't have the assurance. Although we don't have the assurance, we can trust. Although we can trust, we cannot believe. Although we cannot believe, we cannot give up on the Lord. We are completely exposed to God and begin to know ourselves and our real situation. However, if we still have a lot of plans, ways, and considerations, and if we still spend a lot of time asking for God's blessing on our Christian work, we have not reached this point yet. We must

come to the place where we can say, "I have nothing. It is Your mercy I am here. It seems that there is no way for Your promise to be fulfilled. But because of Your mercy I cannot leave You." Then the Lord may have a way with us.

The church needs those who have this kind of life. Not many have come to the point that the work of God in them has caused them to know themselves. We need to know ourselves to the extent that we can only laugh, saying, "O God, I cannot leave You. Although Your calling seems too high for me, Your promise seems impossible with me, and Your leading unattainable to me, I dare not say that I cannot. If You don't want Ishmael, I have no way. I know who I am, and I know who You are. Although I cannot believe, I trust You to accomplish everything through me." Although we may find it hard to believe what God says, yet we cannot forsake His calling. If this is our experience, we will be useful to the Lord.

A Mature Coworker of God

Genesis 18 tells us a precious story that is related Abraham's nephew Lot. At that time Lot lived in Sodom, the city of sin. The Lord and two of His angels appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre (vv. 1-2). When Abraham saw them, he invited them to rest and prepared food for them. The two angels left, but Abraham continued to stand before God. God told him, "The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is indeed great, and their sin is exceedingly grave. I will go down now, and see if they have done entirely according to its outcry" (vv. 20-21). Abraham knew that God wanted him to intercede for Lot, so he persisted by asking, "Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will You indeed sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous who are in it?" "Suppose forty are found there?" "Suppose thirty are found there?" "Suppose twenty are found there?" "Suppose ten are found there?" (vv. 24-32). In each instance, God agreed with Abraham. This interaction between Abraham and God demonstrated that Abraham had come to

know God. He knew that God wanted to spare righteous Lot and wanted him to intercede on Lot's behalf.

Those who know God, as Abraham did, are one with God to such an extent that they are able to cooperate with Him to accomplish His will. It seems that Abraham had been gained by God and that God had been gained by Abraham. Abraham lived according to God's leading, and God listened to his intercession. God and Abraham were one, and God's desire was fulfilled. The fact that God was able to tell Abraham, "Walk before Me, and be blameless," shows that Abraham manifested the gaining of God. Not only did God lead him, but he led God as well—God had worked on him to the extent that he could initiate an intercession to fulfill God's will.

Most of us are not as mature as Abraham was here. At best, we live according to God's leading. However, the Bible shows us a higher experience. Although it is true that Abraham had been led by the Lord, he had matured to the point that he saw the Lord's need and cooperated with Him to fulfill it. The Lord's need isn't accomplished by His leading alone but by those who are matured in life to take the initiative to fulfill His work.

How shallow our serving is compared to that of Abraham! Our serving may not even have the leading of God. Abraham went beyond this. He cooperated with God, and God cooperated with him. He was a true coworker of God. We need to pray to the Lord and ask for the grace so that we could grow to become His coworker. When God moves a little, we would know what He wants. We would be one with the Lord, and our capacity enlarged to the extent that we do what God does. Then we will fully enter into God's burden. We know what God desires to do, and we co-labor with Him in His work.

Weak Yet Blameless

Being blameless doesn't mean never making mistakes. A blameless man also fails. Like Abraham, he may repeat the

same mistake. When Abraham went down to Egypt, he allowed Pharaoh to take his wife (Gen. 12:9–20). Later, he failed in the same way, allowing Abimelech to take his wife (20:1–18). God prevented Sarah from being harmed and protected her both times. Abraham's experience shows us that those who are blameless are not without weakness. They may have severe weaknesses, yet they are able to overcome their failures and weaknesses. Those who are spiritually mature realize they are blameless in the eyes of God.

God had completely shut up all the wombs of the house of Abimelech, and Abraham prayed for them so that they bore children (20:17–18). He overcame his weakness and prayed for others. In fact, Abraham overcame to the point that he even went beyond his own experience. He was childless, yet he was able to pray for others to have children. Those who are young in the Lord can only give others what they have experienced. However, Abraham was able to bless Abimelech with something beyond his experience. Those who are blameless can overcome their own weaknesses and bless others with something they don't have.

Those who are spiritual and blameless before the Lord may be weak, yet they are able to bless others with spiritual blessings. Their faith is so great that they don't look at their own weakness. Even though they know themselves, they see what God sees, do what God does, and want what God wants. They are one with the Lord. If we don't have Abraham's faith to overcome our own weaknesses, we cannot bless others. Abraham was able to bless others while he was still in limitation and weaknesss.

Fearing God

God told Abraham, "Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering" (Gen. 22:2). Abraham obeyed God. However, when he was about to slay Isaac on the altar, the angel of the Lord said, "Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that

you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me" (v. 12).

Abraham had come to the realization that he had to obey what God said. He had to follow God's leading, whatever the consequences—God would bear all the responsibility. Abraham took Isaac to Moriah to offer him as a sacrifice. Can you imagine how Abraham felt when he took the knife and was ready to sacrifice his only son? At that time, both his eyes and thoughts must have been blurry. It seems a sword pierced his own heart. He might have asked, "God, is this the end of Your appearing to me? Is this the end of Your work on me? Is this the end of Your blessing on me?" However, he feared God and dared not refuse Him (v. 12). He knew he had to follow the Lord. It was needless to say anything more.

Why did Abraham offer Isaac? The angel said, "Now I know that you fear God" (22:12). Because Abraham feared God to the uttermost, he could not but offer Isaac. Apart from his fear of God, he would never be willing to kill his own son. Because of God's promise concerning Isaac, Abraham expected that Isaac would be raised from the dead (Heb. 11:17–19). However, he wasn't offering up his son just to see him raised from the dead. His feeling was that he had to do it simply because God said so. He had gained God to the extent that he dared not refuse God. God said offer, so he offered no matter how hard it was. He submitted to the Lord and trusted that He would raise Isaac from the dead.

Though Abraham was weak, he feared God to the uttermost. If we want to know how spiritual we are, we must check how much we fear God. Those who have no experience of God are not afraid of Him. Spiritual growth results in fearing God. The more we grow, the more we fear God. The younger we are spiritually, the less we fear God. Fearing God doesn't mean we tremble in terror before Him. It means that we fear despising, depriving, or disobeying Him. Whatever God says, we do. Wherever God leads us, we follow.

This experience is so deep. It goes beyond our understanding. We hope to work for God and be useful in His hand, and in fact, the Lord may use us. However, if we are to be used by the Lord, we must fear God and be willing to give up our Isaac, the fruit of our work. We are to have nothing but God. Even the best gift God gives us will have to be offered as a sacrifice.

Why didn't Abraham argue with God? Why didn't he bargain with Him like he did for Lot (Gen. 18:23–33)? Why didn't he beg God? Why was he so simple, offering Isaac just like that? It was because he knew God. God's working on him and leading him made him realize that only God Himself is the portion of the called ones. Eventually he had nothing left but the God who called him. Abraham could have said, "It seems that I have wasted my whole life. All the experiences of one hundred years seem to be in vain. However, Lord I thank You. You have appeared to me so many times and given me so many experiences. Now I fear You, I worship You, and I love You. I know You are God." The experience of the called ones is that they only gain God Himself.

If we truly fear Him, we are blessed. If we don't fear Him, we haven't yet gained Him. Our gaining of God is manifested in four ways: we know ourselves, we are one with God to accomplish His desire, we overcome our weakness in faith, and we fear God to the uttermost.

The Result of Gaining God

At Moriah, Abraham dared not disobey God, for he had been brought to the place that he had no one but God. He was in God's hand and trusted Him completely. He wanted one thing more than anything else—God Himself. When God called Abraham to leave Ur, He said, "Leave your country and your relatives, and come into the land that I will show you" (Acts 7:3). At that time he was to leave everything and have no one but God. By the time he offered Isaac, taking the knife to slay him, he had no one but God. He put everything behind him. At that moment, he might have recalled how God called him out of Ur and Haran and all the hardships he experienced along the way.

God's promise of a seed had been fulfilled in Isaac, but now it seemed even this was in vain. He could only follow God's demand and offer back to God what God had given him.

God's desire is that we have nothing but Himself. When Abraham was about to offer up Isaac, he was heartbroken. God had appeared to him and led him to this point. But now, it seemed that all His promises were gone. All His blessings were lost. All He had said was in vain. Abraham had nothing now but God. He had no choice but to believe in God and obey Him. All his experiences—victory and failure, strength and weakness, honor and dishonor—were now gone. Now he was going to take the knife and slay Isaac, through whom all God's promises were to be fulfilled. His life had come to an end. He would follow God regardless of the cost, since all things are from Him.

This is the way God has appointed for us—the way of death. This way leads us to have nothing but God Himself as our portion. We will experience a lot of excitement, overcoming, light, and also temptations, weaknesses, and trials. These experiences leave us with nothing but God. May we be like Paul, who said, "I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ" (Phil. 3:8). At this point we will tell Him, "Lord, I have no one but You. Even what You promised and the result of Your work on me is in Your hand. I have no one but You. I have lost all the works I have done, all the praise, and all the glory. Even the fulfillment of Your desire in me seems to be gone. I have nothing. Lord, I praise You. Now I know that You are God." We need the Lord's mercy that we would faithfully follow Him to the place where we have only God as our portion.

11

The Spirit Gains a Bride for Christ

"Take a wife for my son Isaac"

Abraham wanted a wife for his son Isaac, but he didn't want Isaac to marry a Canaanite woman. He said to his old servant, "I will make you swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and the God of earth, that you shall not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I live, but you will go to my country and to my relatives, and take a wife for my son Isaac" (Gen. 24:3–4).

In the persons of Abraham, Isaac, and the old servant, we see the work of the triune God: God the Father (Abraham) desires a wife for God the Son; God the Son (Isaac) is waiting for the church as His the bride (Rebekah); God the Spirit (the old servant) follows the command of the Father to gain a bride for the Son.

We the called ones are the bride the Father desires for His Son (Eph. 5:22–32). The Father sent the Spirit to the Gentile world to find His Son a wife. It is not a coincidence that we are saved. The Spirit sought us, found us, and brought us back to be the bride of Christ.

This old servant, possibly Eliezer, asked Abraham, "Suppose the woman is not willing to follow me to this land; should I take your son back to the land from where you came?" (Gen. 24:5). Abraham answered, "If the woman is not willing to follow you, then you will be free from this my oath" (v. 8). The old servant was not responsible for the woman to follow him. The Holy Spirit

cannot be responsible for those whose heart is hardened (Rom. 2:4–5). The good news of Jesus Christ is only for whosoever is willing to receive it (Rom. 10:11–13, 16). The old servant took ten camels laden with the riches of his master and went to the city of Nahor in Mesopotamia.

Waiting and Praying

When he reached his destination, the old servant stood by a well and waited for God's working. The Holy Spirit doesn't do things Himself. He waits for God to move and cooperates with Him (John 16:13–14). As the servant waited by the well of water, he prayed, "May it be that the girl to whom I say, 'Please let down your jar so that I may drink,' and who answers, 'Drink, and I will water your camels also'—may she be the one whom You have appointed for Your servant Isaac" (Gen. 24:14).

This prayer seems unreasonable. Only Rebekah, who was chosen by God, would do this kind of thing. We who respond to the gospel all do something seemingly unreasonable. We believe that Jesus died, resurrected, and ascended for us. We believe that His blood cleanses all our sins and that He dispenses His life into us. The word of the gospel is a stumbling block and foolishness to those who do not believe, but to us who believe it is the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:18–25).

Amazingly enough, Rebekah came, gave water to the old servant, and then drew water for the camels. As he drank, he gazed at her to know whether the Lord had made his journey successful or not. In the same way, the Spirit found us. He came and called us, which led to our being gained.

The Spirit's Testimony

After Rebekah finished watering the camels, the old servant brought out a golden ring and two golden bracelets for her and asked, "Whose daughter are you?" (Gen. 24:23). She replied, "I

am the daughter of Bethuel the son of Milcah, whom she bore to Nahor" (v. 24).

Rebekah brought the servant to her family's home where he met her brother, Laban, and her father, Bethuel. Then the old servant had a wonderful testimony. He testified for Abraham, representing God the Father, and for Isaac, representing Christ the Son. The Holy Spirit doesn't testify for Himself but for the Father and the Son (John 15:26; 16:13–14). The old servant told them about Abraham, saying, "The Lord has greatly blessed my master, so that he has become rich; and He has given him flocks and herds, and silver and gold, and servants and maids, and camels and donkeys" (Gen. 24:35). Abraham was like God who has all the riches in heaven and on earth. All the riches are in the house of our Father. Whenever the Holy Spirit testifies, He shows us God's riches. How rich, precious, and glorious is our God! The Spirit shows us that our God is unsearchably rich (Eph. 3:8).

The Holy Spirit never testifies for Himself. In the same way, we should not testify for ourselves. It would not have helped for the servant to say, "I am Abraham's steward. Without me, Abraham cannot handle his properties." Likewise, there is nothing attractive about our boasting of our Christian work. The Holy Spirit only testifies of the Father and the Son and attracts us to follow the Lord. Our testimony should be the same.

The old servant not only testified of Abraham but also of Isaac, saying, "Sarah my master's wife bore a son to my master in her old age, and he has given him all that he has" (Gen. 24:36). God loves His Son, His only begotten Son. All the riches of the Father are the riches of the Son (John 16:15). He is God and He has given everything to His Son (John 3:35). All the riches belong to our Lord.

Before we were saved, we may have had some knowledge of God as the Creator (Rom. 1:19–20) but very little knowledge of Christ. Then the Holy Spirit testified of the greatness of God and unveiled to us the Lord Jesus, the beloved Son of God. All the riches of God belong to Him. The more the Spirit speaks to us concerning the Son, the more attractive and valuable He becomes to us. Eventually we have eyes for no one but the Lord.

He is enough for us. Who else do we need? To outsiders, it may seem pathetic that we only have the Lord without any future in the world, not even in the religious world. To us, however, the Lord is enough, for in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily (Col. 2:9).

The Holy Spirit not only testifies of God so that we may leave everything and follow Him but also tells us how wonderful the Lord Jesus is. The more we listen to the Spirit, the more wonderful the Lord becomes to us. The Holy Spirit testifies of the Lord. He reminds us again and again that God loves His Son and that all the fullness of the Godhead dwells in Him. The Son has received everything from the Father, and He also receives us as His Rebekah.

Growing by the Spirit's Testimony

If we live in the Spirit, He will always reveal something more of Christ for us to experience. We don't just enjoy living in the Spirit and having the joy of the Spirit. The more we live in the Spirit, the more we experience something higher. We feel that the Lord is new and so wonderful! The evidence that we are following the Lord is that the Lord is fresh and different to us all the time.

The more the Spirit testifies of Christ to us, the more we grow. If we want to know if we are growing in the Lord, we shouldn't look at our activities but compare our revelation and experience of Christ to what we had six months ago. In the beginning our growth seemed fast. Later, it was not as outwardly evident, yet our knowledge of the Lord should always be fresh. It is not enough that we bring people to Christ and raise them up. We should always ask, "Is the Spirit testifying Christ to me and leading me? Is the Lord in me different?" If we feel the Lord is more valuable than before, we are on the right track. Though we may not feel much excitement, the Lord within us seems more valuable, exalted, abundant, powerful, and attractive. The Lord never changes, yet to us He seems different because we

have more revelation and knowledge of Him. When this is our experience, we know we are on the right way.

We may think that the way to grow is simple—just read the Bible and pray every day. It depends. We need to ask ourselves: Is the Spirit revealing more of the Lord to me? Is the Spirit testifying of Christ to me that I may know Him in a fresh way? Am I being brought closer to the Lord? If the answers are positive, we are growing. If not, we are short of the work of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is always ready to testify of the Father and the Son. The old servant testified of the great riches of Abraham and the position of Isaac as the inheritor of all that his father has. The Spirit's testimony is the most precious thing when we follow the Lord. If our focus is our Christian work, we will one day lose heart when the zeal is gone. The Lord Jesus is most precious. He is unsearchable. The more Christ is revealed to us by the Holy Spirit, the more precious He becomes to us. We feel He is so lovely and valuable.

Attracted to Follow

Rebekah had never met Isaac, yet she was willing to leave everything to follow once she heard the servant's testimony. To us this sounds crazy. No woman would consent to marry a man unknown to her based on the word of a third party. Yet Rebekah said, "I will go" (Gen. 24:58)!

It is the same with us. The Holy Spirit testifies to us of the riches of the Lord, and we are attracted to Him. We should not laugh at Rebekah since we are just like her. Even though we have never seen Jesus, we are able to believe He caused the blind to receive their sight, the lame to walk, the lepers to be cleansed, the deaf to hear, and the dead to be raised (Luke 7:22). We don't know how the Lord resurrected and ascended but we are willing to give our life to Him, leaving everything for Him. Do we do this because we have studied and considered thoroughly until we are clear? No. It is because the Holy Spirit reveals the Lord to us, and we are attracted by His preciousness. It is just

as Peter writes: "Though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory" (1 Pet. 1:8). We don't know why and where we will go. We don't know what kind glory we will have. Yet somehow we are so attracted, and we just want to follow Him.

After the servant testified of his master Abraham and of Isaac, Rebekah's father and brother said, "Here is Rebekah before you, take her and go, and let her be the wife of your master's son" (Gen. 24:51). The next morning, the servant wanted to leave with Rebekah right away (v. 54), but Rebekah's mother and brother wanted her to remain for another ten days. When they asked Rebekah what she would do, she said she would go (v. 58).

To young people, it may seem reasonable to wait before following the Lord. Why should they waste their youth on Him? They have a bright future. They may think they should first finish college, start a career, and have a family before following the Lord, but the Holy Spirit will urge them not to wait. When the Spirit calls, He wants us to respond immediately. He is strict with us. He doesn't want the love of the world to hold us back. When the Lord Jesus asked some to follow Him, they made excuses: "But he said, 'Lord, permit me first to go and bury my father.' But He said to him, 'Allow the dead to bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim everywhere the kingdom of God.' Another also said, 'I will follow You, Lord; but first permit me to say good-bye to those at home.' But Jesus said to him, 'No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God'" (Luke 9:59–62).

It is surprising that Rebekah followed the servant immediately with no further consideration. We would expect her to ask, "What does Isaac look like? How old is he?" When we touch the Lord, we shouldn't consider whether He is worthy of our following Him. Once we are attracted to Him, all the considerations are gone.

This is God's mercy! Others may think we are foolish for giving our lives to the Lord, but we would say, "I am willing to give everything to gain the best!" We give ourselves to the Lord

because the Holy Spirit has revealed Him to us. He has shown us how rich Christ is and how worthy He is. When we see this, spontaneously we "count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ" (Phil. 3:8).

As we follow the Lord, people may be hard on us or misunderstand us. We may have a lot of difficulties, but these cannot prevent us from following. The Holy Spirit testifies to us of Christ until we are ready to drop everything for Him, saying, "I want to follow You. Let no one stop me!" How wonderful is the work of the Holy Spirit! He keeps testifying of the Lord and draws us to run after Him!

The End of the Journey

Rebekah went with the servant to meet Isaac in the land of Canaan. Isaac was waiting for his bride. While he was meditating in a field, Rebekah and the old servant arrived. When Rebekah saw Isaac, she sprang off the camel and covered herself with her veil. Isaac brought her into the tent of Sarah his mother and loved her. So Isaac was comforted.

Isaac brought Rebekah to the tent of Sarah, his mother. Sarah signifies the promise of God (Gal. 4:22–23), the grace of God. When we (Rebekah) meet the Lord (Isaac) at the end of this age of grace, it will be the end of our journey. When we see Him face to face, all the promises (Sarah) will be over, having been fulfilled. When this reality comes, the promise no longer remains. At that time, the Lord will bring us into the tent of promise and love us. We will be in the glory of God in complete union with the Lord. He will love us, and He will be comforted.

This is the way of blessing. God had a plan and commissioned the Spirit. The Holy Spirit testifies and attracts us until we follow Him to the Lord. Praise the Lord! We will be brought into the glory of God and into complete union with the Lord. We will have the union of love in eternity, and the Lord will be comforted.

The Position and Living of Isaac Abraham gave all that he had to Isaac

The first experience of the called ones is the experience of Abraham, which is to know God as our unique source, way, and portion. The second experience of the called ones is the experience of Isaac, Isaac was Abraham's son and heir. In him we see how the called ones inherit all the Father's riches in Christ the Son.

Abraham essentially received no inheritance. Regarding the promised seed, God had him offer up his only son on Moriah. Regarding the promised land, Abraham never received it. In fact, he had to bow before the sons of Heth to obtain a small plot of land to bury his wife. How discouraging! If our experience were only that of Abraham—if God only called us and worked on us our life would be too hard. Therefore, God not only gives us the experience of Abraham but also that of Isaac. We inherit all the riches in the Son (Rom. 8:16-17; Gal. 3:29), and we are blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places (Eph. 1:3) so that we may joyfully walk the way of the Lord. God the Father is the source and strips us of everything but Himself. We have only Him. This is the experience of Abraham. We are also in the Son and inherit all the divine riches. This is the experience of Isaac.

The Center of God's Plan

The first significant point about Isaac is that he was the

center of God's plan. Regarding Isaac, God told Abraham, "I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant" (Gen. 17:19). God's plan was to bless all the nations of the earth through Abraham's seed, that is, through Isaac (22:18). God would do nothing apart from Isaac, Abraham's seed and heir. We also, as sons of Abraham (Gal. 3:7) and heirs according to promise (v. 29), are now the center of God's plan. God may do many things, but we are His focus. He is watching us and desires to gain us. We were set apart from our mothers' womb (Gal. 1:15). In His mercy He called us and has become our daily supply and strength. Praise Him! We are the center of His plan and He will fulfill His glorious will through us. Our weaknesses, failures, faults, and even our strengths mean nothing in His glorious will. God has a great work—His eternal plan. The glory and hope in His plan surround us and make our weaknesses irrelevant.

Parents don't give up on their children just because of weaknesses. For instance, many children love to chew bubble gum. Parents may realize the downsides of bubble gum—it decays teeth, sticks to furniture, and gets in hair. However in the eyes of these parents, gum is only a minor weakness in comparison to their plan for their children's future. Children are the center and focus of the family. Parents are always considering how to raise their children and how to make them flourish. The weaknesses of the children become irrelevant in the grand scheme of their parents' plan for them.

Like Isaac, we are the center of God's plan. Did Isaac have weaknesses? Yes, but he was still the center of God's will. In God's will, He doesn't give us up because of our weaknesses and failures. Instead, He continually deposits Himself into us so that we can manifest Him. Compared to His will, our victories, failures, strengths, weaknesses, ups, and downs mean nothing. Those who don't know the will of God feel their weaknesses and failures all the time and may even be paralyzed by them. However, those who know the will of God are not distracted by them.

If we lose our temper, we should immediately go to the Lord rather than dwell on it. If we are ashamed of ourselves, we should return to the Lord as soon as possible. We shouldn't waste our time feeling sorry for ourselves since our Lord is so rich. Those who pity themselves and enjoy the feeling of weakness will have a weak conscience and open the door to Satan's accusations. When we fail, we should simply claim the cleansing blood of the Lord and tell Him, "Lord, I come to You."

We should use our time to pursue the Lord and enjoy Him. We should partake of Christ and allow Him to impart His life into us. We need not dwell on our weaknesses, saying, "I didn't overcome today. I am so weak." These are useless words. We must remember that we are the center of God's plan. He is focusing on us to fulfill His desire, and it is our joy to cooperate with Him. This is the first thing the called heirs of God should know.

Consecrated to God

The second significant point about Isaac is that he was consecrated to God starting from the time his father offered him as a sacrifice. Even though Isaac was not entirely clear what was happening (Gen. 22:7), from that day he was consecrated to God. The New Testament tells us, "For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; and He died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf" (2 Cor. 5:14–15). We died in Christ when He offered Himself on the cross. We were consecrated to God from that day. By faith, our position before God is one of consecration. We stand on the position of consecration, allowing God to work on us. When we declare our consecration to God, we are acting on faith, believing what Christ has already done.

What is the significance of consecration? Before we gave ourselves to God, we had our own rights. From the time we declared our consecration to God, however, we surrendered those rights to Him. Before our consecration, we were our own boss, but after our consecration, God became our boss. Our position changed. In one sense, God has always been our boss,

just as the potter has right over the clay (Rom. 9:21). However, our consecration is a declaration by faith that we are willing to cooperate with God.

We don't need to be afraid if we feel we cannot consecrate ourselves. If we say, "I want to consecrate but I cannot," it shows the Potter is working on the clay. We should simply go to the Lord and tell Him we are weak. If we are struggling with our consecration, it shows that God has been working on us for some time. We have to stand on the position of consecration and present ourselves to God.

Our position in Christ has always been a position of consecration. God leads us to follow Him, and gradually we come to see that we have already been offered to God in Christ. We should say, "Lord, I praise You. I didn't know I was already consecrated to You. I didn't know I had already given everything to You." It is His doing that we can present our bodies "a living and holy sacrifice" (Rom. 12:1).

Inheriting All That the Father Had

The third significant point concerning Isaac is that he inherited everything that his father had (Gen. 24:36). When Abraham's servant sought a bride for Isaac, he told Rebekah's father, "The Lord has greatly blessed my master, so that he has become rich; and He has given him flocks and herds, and silver and gold, and servants and maids, and camels and donkeys. Now Sarah my master's wife bore a son to my master in her old age, and he has given him all that he has" (Gen 24:35–36). Abraham remarried after the death of Sarah and had additional sons, but he only gave them gifts and sent them away from his son Isaac (25:6). "Abraham gave all that he had to Isaac" (v. 5).

The New Testament tells us that as believers, we are "Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise" (Gal. 3:29). We have received the Spirit as the pledge, or foretaste, of our inheritance (Eph. 1:14). Christ inherited all from the Father (John 16:15), and we are His fellow heirs (Rom. 8:16–17). The

Spirit receives of the Son and reveals to us all that we have inherited in Christ (John 16:14).

Just as Isaac lived in Canaan and enjoyed all his father's riches that he would inherit, today we enjoy the unsearchable riches of Christ in the Spirit. The pledge of the Spirit which we enjoy today is a foretaste of what we will enjoy in full as our inheritance in eternity.

After we have been saved for a period of time, we can testify that all our experiences, whether sweet or bitter, are used by the Spirit to bring us into our inheritance. Our enjoyment of our inheritance comes from our experience. The Spirit is always ready to reveal to us all that we have inherited in Christ for our enjoyment. Our experience and enjoyment of our inheritance comes by means of revelation. The more revelation we have, the more we enjoy our inheritance. The more revelation we receive, the more riches we have.

To inherit is to be joined to the Lord and live in the Spirit's revelation. Some believers confuse their inheritance with success in Christian service. They look to be promoted and appreciated by others, which may only puff them up. They are like slippery fish which no one can catch and only bring headaches to others. They need someone to shake them and wake them up. We just don't know what to do with such slippery fish. They waste their time and hinder the Lord's work. They are distracted from their inheritance, and they distract others also. Such slippery serving is the scariest. Those who live in the enjoyment of their inheritance may not be as manifest in their service, but they have been enriched with the Spirit's revelation and in their experience of Christ.

Living in the Good Land

"Now Isaac had come from going to Beer-lahai-roi; for he was living in the Negev. Isaac went out to meditate in the field toward evening" (Gen. 24:62–63). Isaac was living in the land of Canaan—the Negev was a pasture land in the southern part of

Canaan. It was a good land since it was a land "of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing forth in valleys and hills; a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey; a land where you will eat food without scarcity, in which you will not lack anything; a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills you can dig copper" (Deut. 8:7–9). All of this was in the land of Canaan where Isaac dwelt. When we are saved, God brings us into Christ as our good land to experience Him in all these aspects.

Once we have been consecrated to God and are designated as His heirs, God brings us into the riches of Christ as our good land. All these riches are ours. Whatever we need, we have in Christ. If we are dry, there are fountains and springs. If we need the work of the cross, there is wheat. If we need the power of resurrection, there is barley. If we need life, there are vines. No matter what we need, we can find it in Christ. He is so rich and is everything we need. We don't need anything other than Him. Praise the Lord for the good land in our spirit today! If we partake of Him in our spirit, His riches will become our reality and experience.

Preserved By God

Isaac often made mistakes, but God wouldn't let him go. I am afraid he only did two things right in his life. First, because Rebekah was barren, Isaac prayed for her and she conceived (Gen. 25:21). Second, when God appeared to him, he built an altar and pitched his tent there (26:24–25). Besides these two things, it seems he didn't understand the will of God. He went here and there and made mistakes, three of which were serious. His first mistake was his thought of going to Egypt because of the famine. God stopped him, saying, "Do not go down to Egypt; stay in the land of which I shall tell you" (Gen. 26:2). He went to Gerar instead. God saved him from going to Egypt, which represents the world.

Isaac's second mistake was lying to the men of Gerar, saying

that Rebekah was his sister. Without God's protection, Rebekah could have been joined to another man. Since Rebekah was so beautiful, it was surprising that Abimelech, the king of Gerar, didn't marry her. On the contrary, he reproached Isaac, saying, "Certainly she is your wife! How then did you say, 'She is my sister'?" (v. 9). God's preserving power is amazing. While Isaac dwelt in Gerar, he "sowed in that land and reaped in the same year a hundredfold" (v. 12). This was God's preserving. Later, he dug four wells which, by God's preserving power, all had water (vv. 19–22, 25). God always had flowing water ready for him. Although Isaac wasn't clear, he still lived in God's preserving power and blessing.

Isaac's third and biggest mistake was his trying to bless Esau. While the twins were still in their mother's womb, God had prophesied that the older should serve the younger (25:23). If Isaac had blessed Esau, the older twin, God's prophecy and will would have been made void. Even in his blessing he wanted to bless the wrong person. God intervened, and the blessing came to the younger son. Though Isaac made mistake after mistake, God protected him, corrected him, and blessed him in order to fulfill His will.

God's Protecting Hand

We are held by God's protecting hand. Jesus said, "I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand" (John 10:28–29). Even we, with all our mistakes, cannot snatch ourselves out of God's hand. We need not be afraid that our mistakes could be severe enough to cause Him to drop us. In fact, God is able to turn our mistakes into something good for us, as Paul says, "God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28). We may not realize what is going on, but we receive

God's blessing all the time, even when we make mistakes. God keeps on blessing us with His riches. We should know the secret: we can never leave God's hand.

Isaac wasn't clear about God's care for him. When he was reproached by Abimelech for lying about his wife, he should have recognized God's protecting hand, built an altar to renew his consecration, and thanked God for His protection. But he didn't. When he reaped a hundredfold, he again should have recognized God's hand and offered to God. However, he still didn't do it. He couldn't see God's hand until God appeared to him at Beersheba, saying, "I am the God of your father Abraham; do not fear, for I am with you. I will bless you, and multiply your descendants, for the sake of My servant Abraham.' So he built an altar there and called upon the name of the Lord, and pitched his tent there; and there Isaac's servants dug a well" (Gen. 26:23–25). At this time, he began to understand that he was in God's hand.

It is not easy to know we are in God's hand. If we apply for a job and get hired, we may think it is because we are so capable. We don't know God's hand. If we aren't hired, we may complain. We don't recognize God's hand here either. If we know God's blessing hand and have revelation, we can say, like James George Deck,

Yet in Thy love such depths I see, My soul o'erflows with praise; Contents itself while, Lord, to Thee My joyful song I raise. (Martin, no. 110)

We should be able to say, "I am in God's hand. I am blessed. God will never leave me." No matter how much we plan and work toward our own goals, God will have His way. It is better to be like Isaac who didn't scheme but obeyed God. He will surely cause us to receive all the riches of our divine inheritance. As we follow Him, we will come to know that we are blessed by God and held in His protecting hand. We may not be clear about where to go or what to do, but we know that we are blessed of God.

Mercy Free and Never Failing

If we are young in the Lord, "revelation," "vision," and "bearing the cross" may just be terms without reality. This is because we don't yet have many experiences in the church life. We haven't had much opportunity to suffer for the Lord and to know how weak we are. However, if we keep loving the Lord and the church, the Lord will work in us. Eventually we will see that, like Isaac, the Lord intends for us to be in the center of His plan. He chose us, and we are consecrated to Him. We are the heirs of all of our Father's riches. The Lord faithfully leads us forward. We can see His love from the beginning to the end, as one hymnist writes,

God's compassion is my story,
Is my boasting all the day;
Mercy free and never failing
Moves my will, directs my way.
God so loved us, God so loved us,
That His only Son He gave. (Martin, no. 15)

It is all His mercy that we have any revelation or vision. We have nothing to boast of in following the Lord. We come to Him "just as I am, without one plea" (Martin, no. 478). We can't claim credit for anything.

When the Lord comes back, we will have to tell Him, "Lord, I marvel at Your wisdom and Your work in me. I never imagined, even in my wildest dreams, that You would lead me this way. My dream was so inferior to what You have done. You placed me in the center of Your will. You consecrated me to Yourself. You gave me all the divine riches. It was Your 'mercy free and never failing' that led me, protected me, and blessed me."

This is the way we walk. In one way, it is very difficult, since we have to leave everything behind. In another way, it is quite easy since God is our way and our portion. We don't have to walk by ourselves. With each demand there is a rich

and full of supply (2 Cor. 12:9). The way and the portion will become more and more "an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison" (4:17). The Lord Himself will become our inheritance!

Digging Again the Wells

"Then Isaac dug again the wells of water which had been dug in the days of his father Abraham, for the Philistines had stopped them up after the death of Abraham" (Gen. 26:18). Digging again the wells signifies our continual need to deal with our flesh and natural life. Wells must be dug again and again to get rid of the mud. The problem is not with the spring—the Lord is always flowing (Psa. 36:9). It is our flesh and natural life that has to be dealt with so that Christ may flow in our spirit. The more we dig, the more Christ flows in us.

We must be diligent and dig every day. We don't know when our well will be stopped. The world we live in is full of mud which can easily stop up our well. To be rid of the mud once and for all, we would have to leave the world. Since we can't do that, the mud will keep on coming. The secret to keeping the living water flowing is to dig out the mud all the time. When the flow of life within is blocked, we have to go back to our spirit and to the Word to pray, to fellowship, and to call upon the name of the Lord in order to deal with our flesh, our natural life, and the world.

We should not dream that one day when we pray, the Spirit will be poured out on us, and we will be glorious forever. There is no such thing in this life. Young believers may enjoy the flow of life long after they have been saved. Even so, they must learn to dig. Though the water is constantly flowing in our spirit, sometimes we don't sense it. When this happens, we must dig to get rid of the mud within us. We must dig out whatever hinders our experience of the Spirit's flow.

A Life of the Altar and Tent

After the Lord appeared to Isaac in Beersheba, Isaac "built an altar there and called upon the name of the Lord, and pitched his tent there" (Gen. 26:25). One who has met God can only live a life of the altar and tent. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were patterns of the called ones. Abraham dwelt "in tents with Isaac and Jacob...for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Heb. 11:9–10).

The altar and tent go together. Those who have met God and offered themselves to Him live a life of the altar and tent. Like Abraham, they look for "the city which has foundations." A consecrated person lives for God's testimony and the benefit of the church. Such a life is not settled. It is a wandering life. However, it is too easy for us to settle down. We prefer living in a house instead of a tent. After Christian workers have some success, they may become comfortable and so fixed that even God cannot move them.

When we serve the church, we offer the portion we have received from the Lord. Just because we have helped new believers grow in the Lord, however, does not make them our possession. No one belongs to us. When we think that a work, a church, or a group is our asset, we are in danger of becoming settled and of no longer living a life of the altar and tent.

We should desire to live a life of the altar and tent, always ready to move with the Lord. If the Lord is leading us to move and we are unable to follow, we will wither and lose the buoyancy of life. We will become restricted in our ability to supply the church. The Lord will become limited in what He can do through us. We should pray for the Lord's mercy that we would not become so attached to things that we become immovable. The Lord may lead us to another state, country, or continent. We should be broad minded and tell the Lord, "I live for You. I consecrate myself to You. I don't have my own choice. I will go wherever You lead me. If it is Your will, I follow." This is a life of the altar and tent.

Living such an unsettled life is certainly hard. Not knowing when the Lord may lead us elsewhere is difficult. However, if we are living a life of the altar and tent, when the Lord leads us to move, we will be able to follow. We should be very simple before the Lord, living only for Him, allowing Him to work on us so that our portion may benefit the church, regardless where He sends us. If the Lord sends us and the church is benefited, whether we receive glory or dishonor, good report or evil report should make no difference to us (2 Cor. 6:8).

As soon as we begin to love the Lord, we should pray that we would live a life of the tent. When people ask about our future plans, we should only answer, "I don't know." If the Lord says go, we are willing to go. If He says stay, we are willing to stay. If He says to go abroad, we are willing to do so. As those serving the Lord, we should never become settled. However, when we begin to view a work as our own possession and when we begin to view those we serve as our assets, we have given up the life of the tent and have become settled. This is shameful! We shouldn't use people for our own ministry or work. No! Our ministry is for the church; the church is not for our ministry. Christian workers are for the church; the church is not for the workers (1 Cor. 3:22). A life of the tent means that we don't seek anything for ourselves. It makes us pure and clean. Because we are not settled, we cannot gain anything for ourselves.

We all should pray, "Lord, I not only desire an altar to consecrate myself to You, but also a tent. I am willing to live a life of the tent. I don't know my future. I want You to lead me. I don't want to be rooted and settled in one place. I want to follow You closely. I will go where You lead. Give me a heart to serve You and Your church wherever You place me." When we live a life of the tent, our vision will be broadened, and the Lord will commit more to us. We need God's mercy so that, like Isaac, we may live a life of the altar and the tent.

13

The Selfish and Prevailing Natural Man

Jacob, the supplanter

As those called by the Lord, there are three parts to our experience. The first part is the experience of Abraham—knowing God the Father as our source. Like Abraham, we see God and follow Him. We know God as our way and portion, so we give ourselves to Him. The second part is the experience of Isaac—inheriting all the riches in God the Son. Like Isaac, we are supplied with all the Father's riches. The third part is the experience of Jacob—being broken and constituted with God by the Spirit.

Even if we have the experience of Abraham and Isaac, we may not have the experience of Jacob—having God constituted into us. We may still be wild, natural, stubborn, crooked, proud, and selfish, just like Jacob before he was constituted. No one is an exception before God. Our difference is only a matter of degrees. Some may seem gentle, soft spoken, and timid, but those who really know them realize how difficult they are. We all are Jacobs in the eyes of God. We may know God is our way and our portion, and we may enjoy our inheritance in the Son, but if we never experience the breaking and constituting of God the Spirit, it will be impossible for us to mature spiritually. God constitutes Himself into us through His breaking.

The Breaking and Constitution of the Spirit

We may be really capable and useful in the hands of the Lord, but we are all typical Jacobs. We have our own ways to gain what God wants us to gain. We have ways to protect ourselves and to manifest ourselves. How we need God's work and constitution so that we may be molded into His image!

Jacob's history is very interesting, but if we read it from God's point of view, we will be surprised how awful he was and his need for the Spirit's breaking and constitution. We will worship Him, saying "O God, how amazing it is that a fallen man like Jacob, who was not worthy of You, could become Your Israel" (Gen. 32:28).

God's Calling

God chose Jacob and set him apart from his mother's womb (Rom. 9:10–13). When he struggled with his brother Esau within their mother, God said to Rebekah, "Two nations are in your womb...and the older shall serve the younger" (25:23). This is God's calling, which will never change. No matter how crafty, selfish, and stubborn Jacob was, no matter how much he resisted God, God gained him and made him into a glorious Israel. God's calling and promise can never change.

Having No Desire for God

God not only calls but also has boundless grace. Only God could be so gracious to Jacob. Jacob never wanted God but just the things God could give him. He wanted the birthright, so he struggled in his mother's womb and held his brother's heel (Gen. 25:24–26; 27:36). Then he sold red stew to his brother Esau for the birthright (25:29–34) and tricked his father into blessing him instead of Esau (27:1–29). We would never dream that someone pursuing things from God would

behave like this. A person can seem spiritual yet have no desire for God.

When Jacob ran away from home and arrived at Bethel, God appeared to him for the first time in a dream. Perhaps God felt Jacob was so awful that He couldn't speak to him face to face as He did with Abraham. In his dream, Jacob saw a ladder connecting heaven and earth. God was in heaven above the ladder, and Jacob was on the earth. In his dream, God blessed him with the land, the seed, and His presence (28:13-15). When Jacob woke up, he said, "This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven" (v. 17). He set up a pillar and poured oil on top of it (v. 18). However, in his prayer he forgot all about the land and the seed. He only thought about himself, saying, "If God will be with me and will keep me on this journey that I take, and will give me food to eat and garments to wear, and I return to my father's house in safety, then the Lord will be my God" (vv. 20-21). His following of God was conditional. He would believe in God only if He did according to his request. He didn't want God; he wanted the things of God. He wasn't like his father and grandfather who desired God.

Aren't we like Jacob? None of us starts out spiritual. Like Jacob, who held his brother's heel at birth, bought the birthright with stew, and tricked his father for the blessing, perhaps we are still struggling to be first. Like Jacob at Bethel, perhaps we selfishly seek things from God rather than God Himself. If so, we haven't seen God yet. We may only be shouting spiritual slogans without having touched the Lord.

Forgetting God

Jacob was selfish and crafty. After he left Bethel, he arrived at his uncle Laban's house and didn't think about God for the next twenty years. He didn't know it was God who sent Rachel to meet him. He forgot he was blessed. He focused on gathering riches and building up his own family. For twenty years he

schemed. For twenty years he forgot God. Only when Laban's countenance was no longer favorable toward him did he began to seek God. He testified of his life during this period: "By day the heat consumed me and the frost by night, and my sleep fled from my eyes" (Gen. 31:40). A life without God is a life of agony.

Laban did not have an easy time either. Neither he nor Jacob were joined to God while scheming against each other. Though Jacob was smart, Laban was able to change his wages ten times (v. 41). Though Laban was crafty, he lost his two daughters, his daughters' female servants, his grandchildren, and his flocks to Jacob. Crafty men meet crafty men. When a man is not joined to God, what will he gain?

God's Breaking and Boundless Grace

When Jacob fled from Laban, he was met by the angels of God and called that place Mahanaim (32:1). He learned that his brother Esau was coming to meet him with an army of four hundred men (v. 6). Here he had a little progression in that he prayed to God for protection from his brother (vv. 9–12). However, he didn't fully trust in God—he divided his people into two camps (v. 7–8) and tried to appease Esau with lots of presents (vv. 13–21). Jacob was truly Jacob! We worship God that such a person could become Israel. God's calling is irrevocable. His grace is boundless. He uses our weaknesses and failures to manifest His faithfulness. Through His breaking and grace, God can mold such people into the image of His Son.

Our experience is like Jacob's. The Lord's blessing on us and His leading of us are beyond anything we could have expected. Though we are unworthy, fallen, selfish, stubborn, crooked sinners, yet we can live before Him, and He still works on us. We can only praise Him. How amazing it is that we can experience His calling and His boundless grace.

The breaking and constituting work of God the Spirit is based on this calling and boundless grace. Otherwise, we would be finished. Without God's calling and grace, no one can love God or follow Him purely. We can only love God, follow Him, and be like Him because of the continuous work of the Spirit.

The more we experience the Spirit's breaking work, the more God constitutes Himself into us. Peter writes, "After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you" (1 Pet. 5:10). We cannot walk the way of the Lord without experiencing the Holy Spirit's breaking. Even in the world, those who are successful must go through struggling and hardship. Those who suffer in the Lord become strong and useful in His hands. Praise the Lord that He will never let go of us! He will keep working on us, causing us to grow and mature.

Selfish by Nature

Jacob gives a clear picture of a selfish natural man. Such a person is for himself not only in his dealings with man but also in his dealings with God. Even before Jacob was born, he selfishly grasped his brother's heel, struggling to be first. Due to this, he was given the name Jacob, which means heel-holder or supplanter (Gen. 25:26; 27:36). After he was born, he was for himself in his father's home, when he worked for Laban, and as he returned to the land of Canaan. He gradually stopped thinking about himself only after wrestling with God at Peniel (Gen. 32:24–31).

Supplanting for the Birthright

If asked why he struggled with Esau in his mother's womb, Jacob would have said, "It was for me! I was struggling to get the birthright." Since Jacob was unsuccessful in being born first, he probably thought everyday about how to gain the birthright. He knew he had to have it in order to gain God's blessing and his father's riches. Eventually he found the secret. Each time Esau

came back from hunting, he was faint from hunger. Therefore Jacob made red lentil stew and refused to give any to Esau until he gave him the birthright (Gen. 25:29–34). Once Esau agreed, Jacob obtained the right to his father's earthly possessions and God's heavenly promise.

Supplanting for the Blessing

Later, with his mother Rebekah's assistance, Jacob supplanted Esau for their father Isaac's blessing. When Rebekah told Jacob her scheme to fool Isaac into blessing him instead of Esau, he said, "I will be as a deceiver in [my father's] sight, and I will bring upon myself a curse and not a blessing" (Gen. 27:12). He was thinking about himself. He didn't consider his brother. He only cared about himself being cursed if his father found out. But Rebekah said to him, "Your curse be on me" (v. 13). He found this acceptable since the curse would be on his mother and the blessing would be on him. He was so selfish that he didn't think at all about Esau, his mother, his father, or how they might react. He was a selfish man. Because Esau was plotting to kill him, Jacob was forced to flee, and Rebekah never saw him again. It was many years before Jacob returned to his father's home, and by then, Rebekah had already died.

As a child, Jacob might not have known the spiritual blessings promised by God to his grandfather and father. No doubt Abraham told Isaac how God appeared to him and blessed him, and then Isaac told Esau and Jacob. As Jacob listened to all the stories, he would have looked at Esau and licked his lips, hoping all the blessings would somehow bypass Esau and become his. He knew the birthright was related to God's blessing and promise and to the inheritance of his father's riches. He was excited about the possibility of becoming a great nation and having "seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore" (Gen. 22:17).

This is a picture of us. Though we have consecrated ourselves to the Lord, we are still for ourselves. We need to ask the Lord

to grant us a pure heart and to deal with us so that we would no longer be for ourselves. Why are there so many unhealthy things in the church life? Why are there so many factions and divisions among God's children? Why do people fight for recognition in their Christian service? It is all because of self. May the Lord have mercy and enlighten us.

A Selfish Schemer

When Jacob fled to his uncle Laban, he was still for himself. He wept when he met his cousin Rachel. It seemed he had suffered a lot. After Jacob had been with them for a month, Laban said to him, "Because you are my relative, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?" (Gen. 29:15). Jacob told him, "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel" (v. 18). A smart, scheming man met a smart, scheming man. A strong-willed man met a strong-willed man. God arranged everything.

Because of Laban's scheming, Jacob ended up serving fourteen years to get Rachel. In fact, Jacob served Laban for a total of twenty years. He was squeezed and cheated by Laban, who changed his wages ten times (31:38–41). He suffered by day and by night. In this situation, he still built up his own household and schemed to accumulate flocks for himself. He was indeed a man for self. He never thought that as a consequence of his actions he would have to flee again, just as he did from Esau. The heart of a selfish man is insensitive, his ears are dull, and his eyes dim (Isa. 6:10).

Dealing with Esau

Jacob was still for self as he traveled back home after leaving Laban. He had schemed and worked so hard to accumulate flocks, but in the end he realized that it was God's doing and God's blessing on him (Gen. 31:9, 12). Yet when he heard that

Esau was coming with four hundred men, he began scheming again to preserve himself, his family, and his possessions instead of relying on God to protect him. He divided his family into groups (32:7), sent presents to appease Esau (vv. 13–15), and bowed down to the ground seven times until he came near his brother (33:3). Finally, Esau ran to meet him and embraced and kissed him. Jacob told his brother, "I see your face as one sees the face of God" (v. 10). He saw that God's hand must have been at work, and his natural efforts to preserve himself were unnecessary. No matter how selfish Jacob was, God's hand was still on him. He was enlightened and saw God's face in this experience. This selfish man had some transformation. Though we all, like Jacob, are for ourselves, there is hope for us since God will never let us go.

The Prevailing Natural Man

When Jacob wrestled with God at Peniel, God said to him, "You have striven with God and with men and have prevailed" (Gen. 32:28). This natural man prevailed against both God and men. Men didn't know what to do with him, and it seems God didn't either. A natural man always finds a way for himself. When Laban tricked Jacob and changed his wages ten times, Jacob got away with his daughters, children, and flocks. When Laban pursued them, Jacob argued with Laban and even rebuked him. Eventually Laban could do nothing but say, "The daughters are my daughters, and the children are my children, and the flocks are my flocks, and all that you see is mine" (31:43). Laban didn't know what to do with him. Jacob prevailed against his father, his brother, and his uncle. He had struggled with God and with men and had prevailed.

A prevailing man doesn't exalt God but sees himself equal to God. God appeared to Jacob at Bethel and spoke to him. Jacob answered, "If God will be with me and will keep me on this journey that I take...of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You" (28:20, 22). Jacob was not afraid of God.

He didn't think God was the Most High. He thought he was equal to God. Therefore, he dared to bargain with God—if You do this for me, I will do that for You.

When we are natural, like Jacob, we see ourselves equal to God. Just because we kneel down and pray to God doesn't mean we are submissive to Him. In fact, the way we pray often causes God to groan within us. God has demands on us and we have demands on Him, too. We don't fear God. We don't think He is the Most High, the glorious, fearful, and purposeful God. We think God is like our boss and we have a business relationship with Him: "If You give me peace, I will read the Bible. If You give me joy, I will testify of You to others. If You won't be with me, I will go to the movies." Some touch the Lord, but after two days, they no longer sense His presence. They begin to complain, "Lord, it is Your turn to come to me." They don't know God's authority. They feel they are like God. Before we are transformed, God cannot even prevail against us. In Peniel Jacob wrestled with God the whole night. Even after God touched the socket of his thigh, making him limp, Jacob still said, "I will not let You go unless You bless me" (32:26). He forgot his father had given him God's blessing (28:3–4). He forgot God had already blessed him at Bethel (vv. 13-15). He only knew he couldn't let go of this opportunity to be blessed. He wouldn't let go of God until God blessed him by changing his name to Israel. This was Jacob.

Away from God

A natural man has no personal relationship with God. Jacob didn't have a relationship with God until he wrestled with him at Peniel. He had listened to stories of how his grandfather left Ur and Haran and came to Shechem, Bethel, and Hebron. He knew how God had appeared to both his father and grandfather and had blessed them. He must have heard many stories which caused him to value the birthright and the blessings. He knew a lot, but he himself had no relationship with God. God was

God and Jacob was Jacob.

Sometimes we may fall to the same situation without knowing it. We have a lot of spiritual knowledge yet lack a personal relationship with God. We may have a lot of spiritual activities but these may replace God. Some are so concerned with their church's attendance that this replaces God. Some are so consumed with the young people's work that they have no concern for God. He is not as important as their work. O how we need the Lord's mercy!

Jacob had no personal relationship with God. He liked to have spiritual things, but he didn't pursue God. His experience with God was limited. We also may be zealous Jacobs. We may pray eloquently but only have the joy of praying without seeing God. We may live in a religious realm, loving Christian work, reading the Bible, and preaching the gospel, yet all the while be far away from God.

Jacob's main problem was that he was away from God. He had many precious experiences but without God Himself. As a result, his heart was insensitive, his ears were dull, and his eyes were dim. He was not clear about God or the things of God. Though he waved the banner of God, he didn't have a direct, clear, and sweet relationship with God. He wandered in the spiritual world but didn't realize that the root of spirituality is God Himself.

We need God's mercy. We all are Jacobs. We are for self. In our natural man, we are selfish, struggling to prevail against God and men. We trust in the gifts, blessings, experiences, and talents that God gives us, but we don't trust in God Himself. We don't rely on Him. We must ask ourselves, do I have the presence of the Lord today? Has the Lord unveiled Himself to me? Has the Lord begun to transform me into His image? May the Lord open our eyes so that we see who we are and pursue Him.

The Principles of the Spirit's Working on N Spirit's Working on Men

"You have striven with God and with men and have prevailed"

A Turning Point

When Jacob was a child, he must have heard stories about his father's and grandfather's experiences with God. Jacob himself, however, had no relationship with God. He sought after the things of God, even lying and scheming to gain the birthright, but he never sought God Himself. At Bethel, he had his first experience with God, who appeared to him in a dream and said, "Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land" (Gen. 28:15). But Jacob answered, "If God will be with me and will keep me on this journey that I take...then the Lord will be my God" (28:20–21). Jacob bargained with God. What he said shows he didn't treat the Lord as his God, even when he met Him. However, this was a turning point in his experience of God. Though he didn't yet have a direct relationship with God, through this experience at Bethel, he at least gained firsthand knowledge that God was real.

We all need such a turning point in our lives. Without this, we only know about God but not God Himself. We must turn from the things of God to God Himself. We should tell the Lord from the beginning, "I don't want to be preoccupied with Christian works and miss having a living relationship with You. May my works all issue from You."

Jacob Becoming Israel

Jacob was terrible. He took advantage of his brother, buying the birthright from him with red stew, and together with his mother, he cheated his father to get his blessing. He was crafty. When Jacob saw his brother in a weak state after returning from hunting, he took advantage of him. Do not think only Jacob sells red stew. We sell it, too. All Christians have times of weakness. At such times, instead of covering our brothers, the Jacob in us may try to take advantage of the situation to improve our own standing at their expense. If we serve apart from God, we will fall into situations like this.

Many times in our serving we cheat others to get our way. For example, a group of Christians serving together may not agree on some issue. Instead of praying and having fellowship together, the different sides may try to recruit others in their group to side with them. This is in the principle of Jacob joining his mother to cheat his father. All who love the Lord have done something like this.

This is the kind of man God the Spirit works on. When God looks at us, He sees a Jacob who does things without God. We have our own ways and God allows us to use them. Meanwhile, He is working on us to transform us into Israel.

The Principles of the Work of God the Spirit

There are four principles related to the work of the Spirit. The first is that when God the Spirit works on us, He upholds us by His promise, blessing, and presence; the second is God's preserving power; the third is God's arrangement in our environment; and the fourth is that our prevailing over God and men causes us to know ourselves.

Upheld by God's Promise, Blessing, and Presence

When the Lord appeared to Jacob in a dream at Bethel, He

said, "I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie, I will give it to you and to your descendants. Your descendants will also be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you" (Gen. 28:13–15). When Jacob woke up from this dream, he said, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it" (v. 16). As God began to work on Jacob, He gave him His promise, blessing, and presence to uphold him through the coming trials.

The way God works is surprising. We expect God to punish us when we make a mistake. However, we don't realize that when He disciplines, He comes to us with His promise and blessing. His presence has nothing to do with whether we are good or evil, crafty or simple. In spite of who we are or what we have done, He wants to freely give us His promise, blessing, and presence. When the Lord works on us, "He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness" (Heb. 12:10). Without God's promise, blessing, and presence, none of us would be able to endure God's work on us. We would collapse or try to escape.

We all have character flaws and weaknesses. We are a disappointment not only to others but even to ourselves. Only God doesn't give up on us. God sees our flaws, yet He still loves us and grants us His promise, blessing, and presence. When He disciplines us, He also empowers us. This is why Christians can even be joyful in the midst of trials. We are able to stand because we have His promise, blessing, and presence. Even in difficult environments, when we walk on the way of God, we experience these three all the time.

God's Preserving Power

Jacob was a schemer who experienced many difficulties, and

God preserved him through them all. After he had worked for his uncle Laban for many years, they made an agreement that all the striped, speckled, and spotted of the flock would belong to Jacob. He then placed wooden rods before the eyes of the flock when they were breeding, and God caused them to bring forth young that were striped, speckled, and spotted (Gen. 30:37–43; 31:11–12). In this way, Jacob took away the flocks that belonged to Laban. Laban and his sons were so mad that they chased after him when he fled. But God preserved him. Even Laban admitted, "It is in my power to do you harm, but the God of your father spoke to me last night, saying, 'Be careful not to speak either good or bad to Jacob'" (31:29). This is God's preserving power. He preserved Jacob in spite of his scheming.

When we follow the Lord, we all are Jacobs. We may afflict others through our scheming to such an extent that they become angry with us. Yet God preserves us. None of us can be confident of loving God, remaining strong, and standing firm to the end. The only assurance we have of following the Lord faithfully is God's preserving power. We may scheme, plan, and hope, but eventually it is only God's hand that preserves. Though He works in our environment, allowing us to go through hardship, difficulties, and affliction, His hand preserves us and keeps us safe. Praise Him!

God's Arrangement in Our Environment

Jacob at first depended on his physical strength to struggle with Esau in his mother's womb, but Esau came forth first. Then he used his intelligence to cheat his brother and father. After this, God arranged for him to be with Laban who was just as smart as Jacob. He knew Jacob was in love with his daughter Rachel, so he made Jacob serve him fourteen years for his daughters and six years for the flock. Jacob described his life during these twenty years, saying, "By day the heat consumed me and the frost by night, and my sleep fled from my eyes" (Gen. 31:40).

If we think we are strong, God will have someone just as

strong to be with us. If we think we are smart, God will arrange someone just as smart to be with us. God arranges everyone and everything just for us. He will give us a good companion in order to mold the Jacob in us into Israel. If we prefer this way, our companion will prefer that way. It has nothing to do with right or wrong. It has everything to do with us. If we want to preach the gospel, our companion will want to read the Bible together. We can never agree. Such companions make each other suffer. This is God's wonderful arrangement!

Jacob needed not only Laban but also Laban's two daughters, Rachel and Leah. Rachel he loved and Leah he didn't (Gen. 29:18, 31), yet they both made him suffer. God had mercy on him and arranged everyone and everything just for him. God makes such arrangements for us also. We should not complain. We should thank the Lord for those He has placed us with. He always has the best arrangement for us in order to mold us into the image of His Son (Rom. 8:28–29).

May we all have spiritual insight so that, rather than complaining, we appreciate God's blessing and arrangement. What He arranges for us will cause us to lose all our natural self-assurance, boasting, and pride so that we may be transformed from Jacob into Israel.

Knowing Ourselves by Prevailing

When we are first saved, God isn't as strict with us. Sometimes He even indulges us. However, we shouldn't think He will never discipline us. His indulgence is the beginning of His discipline. Some are gifted in preaching and God gives them a lot of opportunities to preach. Others are good at shepherding new believers, and God sends many to them. The day comes, however, when they are no longer satisfied with their prevailing preaching or shepherding. They are forced to go before the Lord and wrestle with Him. This was Jacob's experience at Peniel—he prevailed over God but came out limping (Gen. 32:28, 31). In the same way, God allows us to prevail at first. Through our

prevailing, we begin to realize that our natural man must come to an end and that pursuing spiritual activities can be vain. The more we prevail, the more we know we are weak and incapable. We are nothing and the Lord is everything.

These are the principles of the work of God the Spirit. The Spirit's work is accompanied by God's promise and blessing. When the Spirit is working, we enjoy God's presence. God's almighty hand preserves us. In order for the Spirit to work in us, God arranges everything in our environment that we may be conformed to the image of His Son. God allows us to prevail so that we may know ourselves and focus on God rather than spiritual activity. We are the work of God. He makes all things work together for good that He may mold us into the image of His Son.

God's wisdom is boundless and His work surpasses all our expectations. When He looks at us, He sees beyond our success or failure, strength or weakness. He doesn't hold a whip in His hand, ready to punish us. He has His plan and desire for us. His leading takes us far beyond what we could hope for. He allows us to strive with Him and prevail so that we may know ourselves. It seems at first that He obeys our desires and complies with our will. When we have a need, He hurries to meet it. It seems that He can never prevail over us. We must thank Him that He is so grand. He allows us to prevail in our pursuing and serving so that we may know ourselves. But eventually He brings us to the place where He overcomes and we willingly submit to Him. His seeming weakness causes us to bow before Him.

We cannot but say, "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to Him again? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen" (Rom. 11:33–36). When we see the Lord again, we can only say, "I am not worthy, Lord. I am only here because of the work of Your Spirit in me!"

The Turning Point of the Spirit's Work He touched the socket

He touched the socket of Jacob's thigh

Our natural ability is limited. Eventually, it comes to an end. Only when it reaches its limit do we have a turning point—the experience of Peniel.

Returning to God's Purpose

The Bible tells us that Jacob "became exceedingly prosperous, and had large flocks and female and male servants and camels and donkeys" (Gen. 30:43). Jacob had run away from home and used his natural ability to become rich at Laban's expense. He knew God but didn't trust in Him. He was far from God. Yet when he used his natural ability to gain his wealth, God blessed him.

At this point, "Jacob heard the words of Laban's sons, saying, 'Jacob has taken away all that was our father's, and from what belonged to our father he has made all this wealth.' Jacob saw the attitude of Laban, and behold, it was not friendly toward him as formerly. Then the Lord said to Jacob, 'Return to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I will be with you....I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar, where you made a vow to Me; now arise, leave this land, and return to the land of your birth" (31:1-3, 13).

While Jacob was enjoying all his riches, God spoke to him to

bring him back to the Promised Land. Jacob now realized that while he might forget about God, God would never forget him. When God appeared to him, he knew his wealth was vain and that only God and His purpose were valuable. God would never forget the vow he made before Him at Bethel.

Once God begins to work on us, He will never quit (Phil. 1:6). We may think that when God deals with us, He would always scourge us, punish us, and strip us. No. God is much greater. He often allows us to gain what we desire. But when we get what we want, He shows us that all our natural desires are vain. What we really need is to be brought into His eternal will.

Two Camps

Jacob heeded God's word and left Laban to return to the land of his fathers. As he did so, the angels of God met him. When Jacob saw them he said, "This is God's camp" (Gen. 32:2). He called the name of that place Mahanaim, which means two camps (Brown, p. 334). By this time, Jacob had grown out of the stage of bargaining with God. He realized that not only were the angels of God with him, but also God Himself was, and He would continue to be with him as his protection. Though he knew the God who protected him was powerful, he still didn't trust Him or completely rely on Him. He felt he had to do something to help God. Therefore he said there were two camps: one was God's and the other was his. God was in the heavens and he was on the earth. God was his protection and he was God's help.

Jacob remembered Esau's temper when he supplanted Esau's blessing. It was because of Esau's threat on his life that he had run away to Laban. Now as he was returning, he could not but worry and fear. He tried his best to solve his problem. He sent messengers to Esau, calling him lord. When the messengers returned they said, "We came to your brother Esau, and furthermore he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him" (Gen. 32:6). It was obvious to Jacob that Esau

meant to kill him. Yet rather than trust God, he still had his way to deal with the situation. His natural ability hadn't come to an end. He divided the people, the flocks, the herds, and the camels into two camps. He said, "If Esau comes to the one company and attacks it, then the company which is left will escape" (v. 8). Then he sent Esau great presents to appease him.

Mahanaim—two camps—referred to God's camp and Jacob's camp. Now Jacob divided what he had into two camps and so produced another Mahanaim. It is amazing that a man who met God, knew God and obeyed God still didn't trust God!

Sometimes when we rely on our natural ability, we share Jacob's view of two camps without realizing it. Though we know God, His leading, and His protection, this does not seem to be enough. We feel we have to do something to help God. We think God needs our assistance. God works from the heavens, and we work on the earth. We know God is present, but we don't trust Him. Although we know God protects us and has a camp, we would rather rely upon our natural ability, our own way, and our own camp. As long as we rely on our natural abilities, we won't rely on God. As long as we have our ways, we don't need God's way.

A Spiritual Turning Point

God doesn't restrain us from using our ways. He allows us to use our own ways and methods until they come to an end. Do you have your ways when you follow the Lord? Use your ways. Do you have talents? Use your talents. Do you like to work for God? Go ahead and work. Are you gifted in speaking? Use your gift to speak. Like Jacob, when we eventually come to the end of all these things, we will reach a spiritual turning point. At this time, we will realize how much we need such a turning point. Without the Lord, we can do nothing, even when we use all our ways and talents. After Jacob tried everything he could think of, he was still anxious and worried. The whole situation became a heavy weight on his heart. He had come

to the end of all his talents and strength. Therefore he had the experience of Peniel.

Even if we are saved, are consecrated, love the Lord, and give everything to Him, God cannot touch us deeply as long as we still have our own ways. Our problem is that we have our own ways. The Holy Spirit will lead us to this turning point. God will arrange our environment so that eventually we lose all confidence in our own natural wisdom, ways, talents, and abilities. God may even allow a thorn in our flesh to make us weak (2 Cor. 12:7). The weakness in our flesh will make us uncertain of ourselves so that we cannot but rely on the Lord, live by faith, and drop all the things we trusted before. Every time our self-confidence begins to rise up, the thorn reminds not to rely on our abilities and talents but to rely on Him. This thorn helps us to know ourselves. God's dealing brings us into a new realm.

Wrestling with God at Peniel

"Now [Jacob] arose that same night and took his two wives and his two maids and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream. And he sent across whatever he had. Then Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he touched the socket of his thigh; so the socket of Jacob's thigh was dislocated while he wrestled with him...and he was limping on his thigh" (Gen. 32:22–25, 31).

Jacob didn't foresee this wrestling experience but God did. God knew Jacob had exhausted all his abilities. He knew that this was the right time. When Jacob had exhausted all his own efforts at self-preservation, God came to wrestle with him.

God wrestles with us like He wrestled with Jacob. This wrestling deals with the basic problem of our growth in life. He wrestles with us and touches the socket of our natural strength so that it is dislocated. Afterward, we limp whenever we try to walk by our own strength.

"Then [God] said, 'Let me go, for the dawn is breaking.' But [Jacob] said, 'I will not let you go unless you bless me.' So he said to him, 'What is your name?' And he said, 'Jacob.' He said, 'Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel; for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed.' Then Jacob asked him and said, 'Please tell me your name.' But he said, 'Why is it that you ask my name?' And he blessed him there. So Jacob named the place Peniel, for he said, 'I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved'" (Gen. 32:26–30). The experience of wrestling with God at Peniel was the turning point in Jacob's life. After Peniel Jacob, the grasping supplanter, became Israel, the prince of God.

We should desire this experience so that our natural ability may be brought to an end. We are full of our own ways and plans. We don't trust God. We rely on our abilities, our talents, and the things that God has given us. We look to Him but trust ourselves. May God raise up all the right environments for our natural abilities to come to an end. Only after we have tried everything and still feel weak and unable will we realize that without God's mercy we cannot go forward.

We shouldn't be satisfied with our current situation. We should expect Him to touch us so that we limp and dare not use our own strength, ways, and abilities. After God wrestles with us and we see Him face to face, we will have our turning point, our experience of Peniel. From then on, we cannot but trust Him.

Today we are not like Jacob—we cannot physically see God face to face and wrestle with Him until He touches our thigh—but we may learn from the spiritual principle of his experience at Peniel. God will touch the strongest part of our natural ability—what we are best at and surest about, what we boast in and are proud of, and what we have faith in more than God. Spontaneously, our natural ability is diminished. We may still try to use our own ways, wisdom, talents, and gifts, but we find ourselves limping. We try to walk fast but are not able. We can only limp. This is the experience of Peniel.

The Principle of the Experience of Peniel

Only God can give us the experience of Peniel. It is not something we can produce, nor do we need to seek after it. Sooner or later, God will give it to us.

The principle of this experience is our enlightenment, whether inwardly by the Lord's presence or outwardly through our environment. We may experience both at the same time, one at a time, or even one many times. But no matter how we receive it, real enlightenment will bring us to a turning point. It will break us thoroughly so that we begin to limp, and we will become Israel, the prince of God.

Thorough Enlightening

We often repent and confess our sins without actually coming to God. Paul, in the light of God, felt that he was the foremost of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15). However, even if we would tell the Lord, "I am the foremost of sinners," we don't actually hate or despise ourselves. We love ourselves too much to stand with God in condemning this "foremost of sinners." Though we repent and pray, we have no idea how God much condemns sin and how we should be condemned.

One day the Lord will come to meet us and thoroughly enlighten us. It may be while we are praying or spending time with Him in the Word. It may be when we have used up all our natural ability or when the environment is so difficult that we feel we can do nothing but come to the Lord. The light in His presence is so intense that we want to crawl into a hole and hide. In this light, we don't even know how to repent. Even as we kneel before the Lord, we dare not lift up our eyes to heaven. We can only bow down before Him. We wish we could shrink so small that God could not see us. Yet we feel His light and know He is there. At this moment, we cry, repent, confess, and feel remorse. Although we have loved the Lord, served Him, pursued Him, and were zealous for Him, it now seems we haven't even known

God all these years. We were not pure and simple, and it seems even our love was fake. We feel God should have smitten us long ago. Why does He still allow us to bow before Him?

This experience of thorough enlightenment should cause us to judge, condemn, and despise ourselves. Although the Lord has not yet returned, we can experience a foretaste of seeing Him face to face. Although Christ has not yet set up His judgment seat, we can experience a foretaste of being in the light of His judgment. The Lord's light pierces us and exposes whatever we have been hiding from Him. We cannot escape.

At this time, we feel, "Lord, I am worthy of nothing but death. If I still have breath in me, it is Your mercy. That a sinner like me can bow before You, pray to You, and receive Your enlightenment is Your great unspeakable mercy!"

Judging Self in the Light

Under this thorough enlightenment, we not only know we are sinners but we also hate ourselves as sinners. We not only know our talents, gifts, and abilities are useless, but also abhor them. We not only know our plans and ways are unreliable, but we also despise them. We feel our life is meaningless. Why didn't we die and leave the world before this?

This is the time God brings us to another realm. We can tell God from the depths of our heart, "I surrender to You completely, even though there is nothing in me that can stand before You or please You. There is nothing in me to be appreciated. I am rotten from within to without."

This becomes a turning point in our experience. We put aside our self-confidence, hidden pride, and whatever we thought we could boast of before God. We tell the Lord, "I am nothing but a dead dog. If only there were a hole for me to hide in. I live only because of Your mercy. From now on I can only rely on You. O Lord, I owe You my breath. As long as I breathe, I live for You."

At this point we know we cannot bargain with God or make any demands on Him. We realize how base and useless we are. Though we consecrate ourselves to the Lord, we have no confidence that our consecration is reliable. Though we say we love God, we fear our love is false. We know we never really loved God before. We never fully entrusted ourselves to Him. For many years we only performed before God. When we are enlightened like this, we can only look to the Lord for mercy.

Israel, the Prince of God

God wrestled with Jacob at Peniel and touched his thigh, the source of his natural strength. From this time, Jacob limped. It was only after this that God changed his name to Israel, the prince of God. Only those who have this experience of Peniel can become a prince of God.

We cannot mature before God without this experience. Without the enlightening before the Lord and through our environment, we cannot know ourselves and thoroughly surrender to the Lord. Those who have encountered God at Peniel can now serve with others, impart life, know God's authority, and manifest God on a higher plane. The church needs many who have the experience of Peniel.

The Result of the Experience of Peniel

As a result of Jacob's experience of wrestling with God at Peniel, he began to know God in a fuller way. He began to see God's plan, God's work, and the value that God placed on him. This affected his living—he began to live a life of the altar and tent.

Knowing God

After Peniel, Jacob had a different feeling toward God. Previously he knew God as the One who gave him grace, blessed him in every situation, and could be bargained with: "If God

will be with me and will keep me on this journey that I take, and will give me food to eat and garments to wear, and I return to my father's house in safety, then the Lord will be my God" (Gen. 28:20–21). Now he feared God. He began to know Him as the Lord of life. Though he might harden his heart and forget his consecration, he knew God would keep working on him according His plan. Jacob called the name of this place Peniel, for, he said, "I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved" (32:30). His knowledge of God advanced.

Seeing God's Plan and Work

As Jacob looked back on all his past experiences, he must have realized that all the situations he passed through were used by God to work on him. God's plan included him as Israel, the prince of God. This plan needed to be fulfilled through him. He couldn't be foolish anymore. He feared God because of the value God placed on him.

We need the Lord's mercy so that we may clearly see God's plan, His work on us, and the value He has placed on us. Once we see this, we can no longer act or walk as we wish. We will walk in His restriction. We will no longer consider our preferences but will focus on the fulfillment of His plan.

Beginning a Life of the Altar and Tent

"Now Jacob came safely to the city of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan, when he came from Paddan-aram, and camped before the city. He bought the piece of land where he had pitched his tent from the hand of the sons of Hamor, Shechem's father, for one hundred pieces of money. Then he erected there an altar" (Gen. 33:18–20). God's further work on Jacob caused him to live a life of the tent and to build an altar. Though Jacob had sacrificed to God before (31:54), this was the first time he built an altar to Him. The tent showed that he

knew he was a sojourner in the world and didn't belong to it. The altar showed that his roots were in God, not in the earth. This gave him stability.

God needs people like this. On the one hand, Jacob knew he belonged to God and was restricted by Him, as represented by the altar. On the other hand, he was not bound by the earth but was free to move about as God directed, as represented by the tent. We shouldn't restrict the Lord to a small place or a fixed form. We don't belong to a work or a region, nor do they belong to us. We should simply give ourselves to the Lord and go where He leads. Wherever He sends us, we build an altar to Him there. May the Spirit have unrestricted freedom in us to do as He wills.

The Result of the Work of the Spirit

Israel bowed in worship

God's Work of Breaking

God's work on us includes breaking. He does this by depriving us of everything other than Himself. If we are fast, God will arrange for us to be with a slow person. If we are stubborn, we will meet someone even more stubborn. If we are zealous, we will meet someone who doesn't like our zealousness. This is how God breaks us. Through the people and things in our environment, we are restricted and forced to turn to God.

When we read about Jacob, we cannot help but praise the Lord. The able, talented, crafty Jacob experienced such practical breaking. While still in the womb, he struggled to be the firstborn, but Esau was too strong. He craftily stole the blessing of the birthright, but he was almost killed afterward. He escaped to the home of Laban, his uncle, but Laban was as crafty and smart as he was. God arranged for Isaac, Rebekah, Esau, and Laban to be with him. God afflicted him through these persons. His life was evil (Gen. 47:9, NKJV), but because of his hardship, he had a turning point and came to know himself so that eventually he was subdued by God and pursued Him with a pure heart.

God uses our environment to deprive us of everything other than Himself. Such deprivation seems unreasonable. We feel we don't deserve it. It comes upon us unexpectedly. It seems God doesn't care about our feeling but only for His will. He is the potter and it seems He works on us as though we are clay without any feeling. He molds us according to His will. He is also like a blacksmith, and we are the iron He puts into the furnace. He puts us through pressing, crushing, and affliction. He puts us through shame and causes us to suffer dishonor, loathing, and misunderstanding. He deprives us of our abilities, our calculating, our hopes, and everything we depend on. He allows us to rise up and then allows us to fall. He leads us forward, but in the process He brings us to our end. All this is that we may mature, having nothing but Himself.

Those who have experienced such deprivation arrive at a most wonderful condition: It is easy for them to release their spirit, shed their tears, and manifest love. They are so understanding, sympathetic, and kind. They don't trust themselves but rely on God completely. They are not whole; they are broken. They are of high value to God and are useful vessels to Him.

After Peniel, Jacob matured through his experience of God's deprivation in three incidents. These put him to shame and scarred him in very deep ways. Whenever he saw these scars, he was reminded that God's hand remained upon him.

Jacob's Experience of Shechem

The first scarring incident was in Shechem. He was a stranger among the people of that city, having recently arrived there. Then his daughter Dinah was defiled by a man of Shechem, and two of his sons, Simeon and Levi, slew all the men of the city and brought the fear of great trouble on Jacob (Gen. 34). Jacob reacted, telling his two sons, "You have brought trouble on me by making me odious among the inhabitants of the land,...they will gather together against me and attack me and I will be destroyed, I and my household" (34:30).

Although Jacob had the experience of Peniel, he still loved himself. Therefore, his reaction was to worry about himself and his possessions: "trouble on me," "making me odious," "against me," "attack me," "I will be destroyed, I and my household." He thought of nothing but himself. He was self-centered and cared only for his self-preservation. If he hadn't had the experience of Peniel, he would have devised schemes to protect himself. However, now with the experiences of God's breaking, he could do nothing but turn to God and rely upon Him. His desire for people's respect was exposed when he became odious to them, and his worry and fear for himself and his household exposed his love of self. God wanted Jacob to live just for Him. The first incident of breaking came to Jacob through his children.

Jacob's Experience of Bethel

After Jacob's experience of Shechem, God called him, saying, "Arise, go up to Bethel and live there, and make an altar there to God" (Gen. 35:1). Bethel means the house of God.

Only after our love of self has been exposed can we see the house of God. At this point, we no longer care about ourselves but God. We, like Jacob, are no longer for "my household" but for the house of God, Bethel. Jacob's view was expanded. He realized God didn't want him alone but a corporate testimony in the land of promise (vv. 11–12).

As Jacob left Bethel, God kept working on him. As Rachel began to give birth, she "suffered severe labor" and died (vv. 16–18). The one Jacob loved most died while giving birth to his youngest son, Benjamin. Whenever Jacob saw Benjamin, he was reminded of his beloved Rachel. No doubt, this pain in his heart made him unsure in his emotion. He didn't know what he could and couldn't love. He could only say one thing with certainty: "Lord, I have none but You!"

One of our biggest problems is our natural love. We are selective in our love. With our whole heart, we love those we like, but it is so hard for us to love those we don't like. Having touched the source of love and being joined to God's will, we

can even love those we once found unlovable. Once our emotion has been touched by God, we can love without restrictions.

The Experience of the Tower of Eder

After Rachel passed away and was buried, "Israel journeyed on and pitched his tent beyond the tower of Eder. It came about while Israel was dwelling in that land, that Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father's concubine, and Israel heard of it" (Gen. 35:21–22). When his sons wiped out all the men of Shechem, Jacob was angry and worried. It is surprising that this time, when his oldest son lay with his concubine, he didn't say or do anything. The Bible only tells us, "Israel heard of it." Jacob had been softened by his past experiences. He must have known that God had allowed this incident to happen to him. He could only surrender to God. He dared not think or react. He depended on God moment by moment. He had lost confidence and had no assurance in himself. He depended completely on God's grace and mercy.

Jacob had a wonderful turn. A crafty, capable, selfish person became so pliable in God's hand. God's depriving and breaking made him a useful vessel.

This is a sober matter. No one can be useful to the Lord without His deprivation. Our natural thought is not, "I am for the Lord," but, "The Lord is for me." We want to go to a good university. We want a good church life. We want a good marriage. We want a good career to glorify the Lord. We want to do a good work for God. However, God's interest is not in a good work but in us. He wants to gain us. He wants us to become vessels as "heirs according to the hope of eternal life" (Titus 3:7). Life is produced from our experience of the cross. Only when death operates in us will the abundant life be manifested (2 Cor. 4:11–12).

Because many today are not willing to experience the work of the cross in their lives, their experience of God is limited. We need to tell Him, "O Lord, I am willing to experience the deeper work of the cross so that Your will can be done in me."

The Experience of Hebron

After these incidents, Jacob dwelt in Hebron where Abraham and Isaac had dwelt before (Gen. 35:27). The name Hebron implies fellowship. After Jacob's experiences of breaking and deprivation, he could live in and treasure the fellowship of life. His feelings were no longer important to him. Neither were his schemes. His only concern was the fellowship of life. We worship the Lord for this.

The Result of the Work of God the Spirit

In Abraham, we see God the Father is our unique source and portion. In Isaac, we see God the Son in whom we inherit all the riches. Now in Jacob, we see the work of God the Spirit who grants us many experiences to break, shape, and mold us. Those who have been broken are able to serve with others and be built up in the church.

The reality of the church is the Spirit, and the content of the church is Christ. If we want to be effective, we must go through the Spirit's work of depriving and breaking. Only those who have been deprived by God are pure and can be used in God's work. Those who have not been deprived remain in their old self. Although their self might be good, they cannot be of use in God's work since God is objective to them. They may talk about God, but they don't know Him in reality. Job was like this. Even God said he was an upright man. He told Satan, "Have you considered My servant Job? For there is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, fearing God and turning away from evil" (Job 1:8). However, after he passed through all the sufferings, he said, "I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear; but now

my eye sees You; therefore I retract, and I repent in dust and ashes" (42:5-6).

Five Manifestations of the Matured Life

The result of the work of the Spirit brings in the maturity of life. A matured life has five manifestations: being simple, being incapable, trusting God, being one with Him, and bowing before Him for His work.

Being Simple

The Spirit's work on Jacob made him very simple. Inwardly, he was full of God's wisdom, but outwardly, he was simple. It seems he was easily cheated. A complicated man doesn't believe others easily. A man who cheats others suspects that others are trying to cheat him also. A complicated man thinks everyone else is also complicated. Only a simple man takes others at their word.

Late in Jacob's life, his sons sold Joseph into slavery in Egypt. They stained Joseph's coat of many colors with goat's blood and brought it to Jacob, saying, "We found this; please examine it to see whether it is your son's tunic or not" (Gen. 37:32). Jacob was clever and should have suspected it was the blood of a goat, but he believed them and cried out, "It is my son's tunic. A wild beast has devoured him; Joseph has surely been torn to pieces!" (v. 33). When I read this, I feel like weeping for Jacob. An old man who had experienced God his whole life lost his beloved son. With his loss, he could do nothing but cry, "Joseph has surely been torn to pieces!" It seems he lost his intelligence and abilities. The younger Jacob would have recognized from their countenance that his sons were cheating him. It was not that his sons were good actors but that he had become simple.

We should be simple in the church life. God will work on us until we become simple. The building up of the church is through those who are simple, living in the spirit. We don't start out simple. That is why there are all kinds of complaints in the church life: "He doesn't care about me"; "She doesn't like me"; "Are they talking about me?" How do we know God has worked on us? We have only to ask ourselves whether we are simple or not. If we are simple, our word will be simple yet powerful. A broken man is a simple man. The more we are broken, the simpler we become. Complicated people read more into what is said than what was meant. If they hear someone talk about some problem similar to something they have done, they assume the speaker is aiming at them. It could be that the Spirit is enlightening them, and they should take it to the Lord. It could also be nothing more than their overly sensitive reaction—they heard something the speaker didn't say. People are not simple.

If we are not simple, we will not open ourselves to other believers. Simple people easily open to others. Because we are not simple, we may not speak as the Spirit leads for fear of what others may think. We have lost our "simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ" (2 Cor. 11:3). Such complication shows that the Lord has not yet finished His work in us. John the Baptist was a simple man. He didn't speak for himself. He rebuked people without considering the danger of how others might react. We shouldn't be so complicated. Complicated people are always protecting themselves. God desires us to be simple and live by the Spirit (Gal. 5:25). If we simply live by the Spirit, we are able to love others and supply others. If everyone is simple, the church is easily built up.

The first manifestation of the Spirit's work on us is that we become simple. We become like children, yet we are full of the riches of God (Matt. 18:3). When people are with us, they don't get the impression we feel superior but that we are pure and lovely like a child. They will be attracted and see the Lord through us.

Being Incapable

The result of God's work on Jacob made him incapable, not trusting himself. He no longer had his own opinions and ways. There was famine in the land, and Jacob sent his ten older sons to Egypt to buy grain. While they were there, they met the ruler of Egypt, not realizing that he was Joseph, their brother. Joseph demanded that they bring their youngest brother, Benjamin, the next time they came to Egypt. When Jacob heard this, he didn't know what to do. He said, "My son shall not go down with you; for his brother is dead, and he alone is left. If harm should befall him on the journey you are taking, then you will bring my gray hair down to Sheol in sorrow" (Gen. 42:38).

If it were the younger Jacob, he would have known what to do. He would have just sent a young servant pretending to be Benjamin. The ruler of Egypt wouldn't know it wasn't his son as long as everyone told him, "This is our brother." Wasn't it easy to solve this problem? However, Jacob had lost his ability to scheme. He could do nothing but worry. How incapable he was!

We shouldn't be so capable. Do not say, "This is not right. That is right. Just do this and the problem is solved." It is better for us to be incapable, trusting all to the Lord. Even if the arrangement is wrong, it will be an opportunity for us to bear the cross. In this way we will be much blessed.

Once when there were problems in the church, one older brother I knew said, "You just wait and see the Lord's doing." Who can do better than the Lord? But our thought might be, "Wait and see? The church is collapsing. How can we wait? Won't it be undone while we are waiting?" We need the Lord's mercy so that we can wait. It is a pity that our patience cannot stand the test. Without even realizing it, we rely on ourselves.

We are too capable. In our serving we have too many ways and schemes. We have ideas and plans for events to add people to the church. We need the Lord's mercy that we may gain people for Christ by caring for them individually in love. We don't need to be concerned about titles, positions, or success based on numbers. We shouldn't have the smell of work. Too often, even our prayer is full of works. After we are done working on people, we work on God, hoping He will bring us success through our prayer. So even our prayer becomes a way. If we pray like this, there won't be any enjoyment or sweet fellowship with the Lord. He won't be able to deal with us or work on us. Those who love to work think they are so capable. Paul was not like this. He said, "Indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead" (2 Cor. 1:9). Those who know they are incapable can only trust the Lord and remain close to Him. They enjoy the Lord and allow Him to flow through them. This is very normal to them. They spontaneously care for people and love the church.

Once God has worked on us, we seemingly become incapable when we encounter difficulties. It seems we are not able to solve the problem or finish the work. However, we are not really incapable, for as the Lord told Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9). Like Paul, we respond, "Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me....for when I am weak, then I am strong" (vv. 9–10). This is real strength. It is when we feel we are incapable that we manifest the great power of Christ. This power is not from us. May the Lord save us from our abilities so that we may manifest the great power of Christ.

Trusting God

After Joseph revealed himself to his brothers, he sent this word to Jacob, their father: "God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. You shall live in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children and your flocks and your herds and all that you have" (Gen. 45:9–10). God had told Jacob that the land of Canaan which He promised to his grandfather and father

would be his and his seed's after him (35:12). Therefore he was afraid to leave the land to go down to Egypt. God appeared to him and said, "Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you a great nation there. I will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also surely bring you up again; and Joseph will close your eyes" (46:3–4). Once this word of God came to him, he went to Egypt peacefully. The first time God spoke to him and gave him a promise, Jacob bargained with Him because he didn't believe in Him or trust His word (28:13–15; 20–22). Now God's word was prevailing and powerful to him. He didn't bargain with God anymore. Because he feared God, he had real trust in Him.

Because we feel we are capable, we don't trust God or fear Him. We use our own ways to serve the Lord. We would rather trust our ability than God. We don't have the overcoming experience because we don't trust God. Even though we are short of God's appearing, we want to be manifest. We must believe that God is able. He is able to mold us the way He wants as long as we allow Him to work on us. The more we allow God to work on us, the more He is able to do.

Being One with God

When Jacob appeared before Pharaoh in Egypt, he was one with God and manifested His glory. What a contrast this is from when Jacob fled to Laban when he was younger. Both Pharaoh and Laban saved Jacob's life when he left the land of promise. With Laban, Jacob blessed himself at Laban's expense. Now in Egypt, he blessed Pharaoh (47:10). He became a man giving blessings. He was the representative and manifestation of God. It is amazing that Pharaoh received his blessing. Though Jacob was only a stranger in Pharaoh's land, he dared to bless Pharaoh, and Pharaoh accepted this blessing.

Pharaoh seemingly lacked nothing and didn't need the blessing of this refugee. Pharaoh was willing to accept this blessing only because Jacob was filled with God and one with Him. When Pharaoh asked, "How many years have you lived?" Jacob answered, "The years of my sojourning are one hundred and thirty; few and unpleasant have been the years of my life, nor have they attained the years that my fathers lived during the days of their sojourning" (47:8–9). When we see the Lord we will say the same: "O Lord, few and unpleasant have been the years of my life. They were in Your hand." Only those who are one with the Lord are able to say this. Paul said, "I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come" (2 Tim. 4:6). His was a suffering life from the time he became one with God. May the Lord never let us go! May the years of our life be full of God's work of grace! May we grow and mature and be one with the Lord!

Bowing before God for His Work

"Israel bowed in worship at the head of the bed" (Gen. 47:31). By this time, Jacob was so mature that he bowed himself before God for all His work in and through him. Many praise the Lord and give thanks for His blessings. However, few bow in appreciation for all God's work in them. Jacob bowed in worship as he looked back on his life full of divinely arranged experiences. He also bowed himself for God's work in the future as he blessed Joseph's two sons (Heb. 11:21). It was God who arranged for him to be a twin with Esau. It was God who permitted him to be crafty. It was God who brought him to Laban. It was God who met him at Peniel. It was God who brought him to Shechem, Bethel, and Hebron. It was God who allowed Joseph to be sold. It was also God who brought him to Egypt. When Jacob recalled his life, he could not but worship God. Then he blessed his twelve sons (Gen. 49). All his words came true and none fell to the ground. Jacob knew the meaning of the past and he knew the future of his children.

At this time he was not only one with God but also worshipped Him for all His work on him, for he now knew why God had taken him through all his trials, sufferings, grief, happiness, and joys. He was on the earth, yet he was one with the heavenly God. He had gone beyond Abraham, who only had the promises of God. He had gone beyond Isaac, who inherited all the riches of his father. He was so transcendent, though he walked the earth. He was one with God for His will in both the past and future, and he bowed himself before God for His work. This is more excellent than praise. Praise is with words, but bowing is without words. As he was about to go to the Lord and recalled his life, he just bowed before Him. This was a matured man. His worship was full of fragrance. God had gained what He desired in him. We should worship God for this Israel.

We should not despise the cross. When we see the Lord, I hope we don't boast in our labor but bow down before Him, worshiping Him for His sovereignty in arranging everything in our lives. At that time, it will be clear why He created, what His desire for man was, why man fell, and how all things have worked together for our full salvation. All of this displays God's great wisdom. May we give ourselves to Him and allow the cross to deepen its work within us that He would be satisfied.

Experiencing the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob

He is the God of the living

From Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, we have seen that God works on His people. Now we will see further how we can experience God by cooperating with Him, allowing Him to carry out His desire in us.

When Jesus told the Sadducees that God is the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, He said, "He is not the God of the dead but of the living" (Mark 12:27; Luke 20:38). For us to experience God and be brought into the maturity of life, we must be spiritually living. The dead don't have God; only the living do. God is not the God of the dead but of the living. Our experience of God's leading is based on whether or not we are living. The more life we have, the more real He is to us, the more He can work on us, and the more He can carry out His will in us. The more we are living, the more He becomes our God. God's way and God's work in us are based on our being living. This is the foundation of our experience of God. The foundation is not doctrine, law, creed, or religion. Only a living person can experience God, be worked on by Him, and be brought to maturity.

Our experience of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is based on the fact that He is not the God of the dead but of the living. Through these three fathers, we can see what it means to be living.

Abraham—The Work of the Father

Abraham is the first picture that shows us what it means to be living. Like Abraham, we should cherish God's appearing and live by faith.

Having No One but God

God was Abraham's unique portion and way. If we desire to live before God and experience Him, we must know from the beginning that we have no one and nothing but God. Even pursuing the experience of God instead of God Himself may cheat us, bringing us into experiences without the real God. We should desire no one but God Himself and long for nothing but Him. The Psalmist said, "Whom have I in heaven but You? And besides You, I desire nothing on earth" (Psa. 73:25). When we received the Lord, He gave us the desire to gain Him. This is true of all who are newly saved. They love God above all else. Later, they fall because their eyes turn from God to other things.

For example, a young man who just touched the Lord loves Him and gives himself to Him. He desires no one but the Lord. He is asked to serve the children. He has no thought of positions in the church but just loves the Lord and the children he serves. Eventually, he is asked to be coordinator over the other teachers. At this time, he begins to love something more than the Lord—being a coordinator. Now he loves the Lord but also loves his position. His love for something other than God causes him to leave his initial purity.

If we remain pure in our love for the Lord, we will grow more quickly. Those who love their work and position will not grow well. We must invest our talent and work for the Lord, but this should never replace Him. If these things ever become more important than the Lord to us, we have fallen. Our spiritual growth will stop without our even knowing it.

What kind of person we are depends on our heart. Setting

our heart on work makes us work-lovers. Setting our heart on money makes us money-lovers. Setting our heart on education makes us knowledge-lovers. Setting our heart on God makes us God-lovers.

In the process of growing and gaining the Lord, we pass through many things: the bearing of the cross and the experience of sweet joy, being troubled by fellow believers and being excited by Christian works. Those who are growing before the Lord keep their mind set on the Lord through all of these things. Those who set their mind on the spirit are spiritual men. Our mind, which is a major part of our heart, decides who we are.

If our thoughts are continually on our career, this is evidence that we love the world and belong to it. Though we may attend Christian meetings and do Christian work, that is not who we are. Where we set our mind and what occupies our heart determines who we are. We may pretend to be someone we are not, but we cannot change or annul who we really are. Therefore, from the beginning we should exercise to set our mind on the spirit and keep our mind clean and pure (Rom. 8:6). We have no one but the Lord!

God's Appearing

Abraham had God's appearing again and again. Likewise, we who follow the Lord also need God's appearing. Without God's appearing, we will not have spiritual turning points in our lives, though we may still grow. Turning and growing are different. We may keep on growing, but without a spiritual turn, our growth will be slowed. Turning points in our lives come from God's appearing. Turning points change us. God's appearing may come to us through our environment, the Word of God, or the work of the Spirit. The more God appears to us, the more turning points we have.

Without the Lord's appearing, we are like a car with an undersized engine. It can run well on highways but cannot climb steep hills. We not only need to grow but also to have

God's appearing. Each appearing brings us a new turn. We should long for the turning points which come from the Lord's appearing so that we may keep advancing in Him.

Walking by Faith

Abraham is called the father of faith because he "believed in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness" (Gen. 15:6). In the New Testament, faith is defined as "the substantiating of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1, Darby). It is like a man drinking from a cup without seeing it because he has the conviction that it is there. Faith doesn't mean that someday he will have the cup but that, without seeing it, he has it now.

The prophets in the Old Testament foresaw what God would do but didn't experience it. Therefore, their vision was objective and their speaking foretold the future. As New Testament believers, we have the subjective experience in faith of the things we see. Therefore, when we speak, we do not merely convey knowledge. We speak what we have experienced in the spirit. This is faith. Through our present fellowship with the Lord and the fresh work of the Holy Spirit, we know and experience what God is about to do. This is faith, the "substantiating of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

We must allow God to give us the experience of living faith. Faith is not something we ask for but something that comes to us (Rom. 10:17). When it comes, we cannot chase it away. Faith comes because we meet God and touch Him. Faith gives us the assurance that we have the Lord and His promises. To walk the way of the Lord we must have faith. Do we see Christ and the church? Do we see that God will one day make us like Christ? Without the seeing of faith, our walk will be full of doubts. We will wonder, "Is following Christ worth my time and effort?" We will lose our confidence and may even fall. However, if we have God's appearing, we will have the confidence that God is working on us and leading us. He

is molding us into the image of His Son (Rom. 8:29). Faith makes us overcome everything and walk His way.

Belonging to the Lord

Abraham lived by faith, but his nephew Lot lived by following Abraham. When Abraham left Ur, Lot left, too (Gen. 11:31). When Abraham left Haran, Lot left there, too (12:5). Eventually Lot separated from Abraham and moved to Sodom (14:12). Although he was rescued by the angels, his wife became a pillar of salt (19:26). Only those with a living faith have "the substantiating of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1, Darby). Unlike Lot, Abraham could never have moved to Sodom because he was held by his living faith. He belonged to God. It was not Abraham's strong will but his living faith that made him immovable and unshakable. This faith gave Abraham the realization that he belonged to the Lord. He was anchored in God and only moved when God moved.

When we are weak and down, our living faith assures us that we belong to the Lord. This faith makes us immovable. It holds us no matter what our situation is. Without it, we cannot follow the Lord. This living faith spontaneously leads us to pray and beseech the Lord. It protects us even without our knowing it. It causes us to hope beyond hope and not despair in our weakness. If we don't have this living faith, we won't have the experience of the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. We will find ourselves living in Sodom, like Lot, and not anchored in God, like Abraham.

If we desire to walk the way of God, we must have this living faith within us, which allows God to lay hold of us, possess us, seize us, and gain us. He won't let us go. When we are utterly weak, we may cry out, "O Lord, let me go! I want to leave!" At such times, God reminds us that we belong to Him and cannot run from Him. We all need such experiences.

"I am the Lord's! Yes; body, soul, and spirit, / O seal them

irrecoverably Thine" (Martin, no. 250). The writer of this hymn knew the holding power of living faith. Sometimes we lose heart and say, "O Lord, just let go of me. I am too weak and cannot follow You anymore." However, the living faith within us declares, "I am the Lord's!" We are irrecoverably sealed. It is not a matter of being strong or weak, of overcoming or failing, being glorious or shameful. This faith assures us that we belong to the Lord. It will not let us leave Him even when we try. The Lord would remind us that we belong to Him forever. We can never chase Him away, for the calling of God is irrevocable (Rom. 11:29). We belong to Him whether we overcome or fail. A person like this is blessed! This living faith brings us many experiences and will never let us go.

Isaac—The Work of the Son

Isaac is the second picture showing us what it means to be living. Like Isaac, we stand in our position as heirs in Christ enjoying all the riches of our Father.

Enjoying the Riches from the Father

Abraham gave everything to Isaac (Gen. 24:36). Likewise God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ (Eph. 1:3). Just as everything Isaac received was from his father, so every spiritual blessing we have received is from our heavenly Father. Everything is from God's blessing. We should only pursue the Lord, not spiritual things. All spiritual blessings are in the Lord.

We should pursue and experience God Himself. God shouldn't be only objective to us but also subjective. He should be real to us, not abstract. We should be so certain about our God. We recognize, know, and experience Him. We should have the realization that we are joined to Him in life, just as the branches are joined to the vine (1 Cor. 6:17; John 15:4–5).

Not Being Veiled

It is easy to talk about God without experiencing Him. If this is our case, we are veiled and unable to see the Lord. Pursuing spiritual growth instead of the Lord is one veil. Desiring to be useful apart from the Lord is another veil. This kind of pursuing and desire causes us to leave our standing as inheritors of all the riches of the Father.

In the accomplishing of God's plan, there is only Christ. This Christ is the man God desires. Death, resurrection, ascension, and reigning in glory are all in Him. This Christ is sitting in the heavenly places (Eph. 1:20), yet He is joined to us. At the moment we were saved, God transferred us into the kingdom of Christ (Col. 1:13). Objectively, we are waiting for the Savior, Jesus Christ, to descend from heaven. Subjectively, He is already with us, for He indwells us. We pursue Him that we might grow up into Him in all things (Eph. 4:15). We wait for no one but Him. We should not make spiritual growth or Christian work our goal. Our goal is Christ alone (Phil. 3:8, 14). If we desire anything other than the Lord, we immediately have a veil. This veil will cause us to leave our position as heirs of our Father's riches.

Remaining in Christ

Many Christians struggle in their experience of Christ because they leave their position in Him. Everything we need is in Christ, and it all became ours to experience and enjoy from the time we were saved. Just as Isaac inherited all the riches of his father Abraham, we have inherited all the riches of our heavenly Father in Christ. We thank Him that He has given everything to us without any reservation. He is glorious and He has given us His glory (John 17:22). He is holy and has given us His holiness (Eph. 1:4; Heb. 2:11). He is perfect and has given us His perfection (Matt. 5:48; Heb. 10:14). He is powerful and has given us His power (Col. 1:11). All the riches

are in Christ. We just need to remain in Him to experience what we received at the moment we were saved.

Where is the power we need? It is in Christ. Don't look for power; look for Christ! Where is the wisdom we need? It is in Christ. Don't look for wisdom; look for Christ! Are we weak? We shouldn't care about our weakness but just go to the Lord and partake of Him in spirit. Then we will be strong. Christ has given us all the Father's riches. We only need to remain in our position as heirs.

The normal Christian life is not full of struggle and effort since God has given us a heavenly transcendent position as heirs. When we leave this position, the Christian life seems hard. It seems the Lord is gone. But God never promised us the feeling of His presence. What He promised us is Christ. If we feel things are hard, it is because what we desire is wrong. The secret of being blessed is to enjoy the Lord, in whom are all the riches.

We all fall, but when we do, we shouldn't give up our position as heirs. If we do, we should return immediately. If we keep partaking of Christ by enjoying, pursuing, and treasuring Him, we will grow in life. We should be simple and tell the Lord, "Even when I fail and lose my temper, I want to remain in You. No matter what happens, don't let me leave the position I have in You as an heir of God."

May the Lord have mercy on us that we might see the reality of what it is to be in Christ. Do not think that in Christ we will always have joy and peace. If we preach this kind of gospel to others, they may think that when they don't feel joy and peace, they are no longer in Christ. In fact, once we are regenerated, we are in Christ regardless of how we feel. We shouldn't limit or restrict the Lord based on our feelings. We are in Christ. Even when we feel the Lord is gone, we are still in Christ. Our position will never change. We should declare, "I am in Christ. Whether I feel His presence or not, I am in Him. Whether I am joyful or not, I am still in Him." We should be very simple and dwell in Christ to enjoy all His riches.

Desiring Only Christ

If we compare Isaac's blessing of his two sons to Jacob's blessing of his twelve sons, we find that Isaac's blessing was not as grand. In fact, he gives the impression that he was small. After Isaac blessed Jacob, Esau asked him, "Have you not reserved a blessing for me?" He could only say, "You will break his yoke from your neck" (Gen. 27:30–40). Isaac was not grand. His taste for wild game made him a small person. He enjoyed something other than God. He loved to eat. His taste became his problem. He forgot everything when he smelled the fragrance of his favorite savory dish. He related the blessing to his own enjoyment (v. 4). It seems that he satisfied his own desires in the process of giving a spiritual blessing. He belonged to God, but he also satisfied himself.

Our love and enjoyment of things other than Christ will limit our usefulness to Him. According to one hymn writer,

What e'er thou lovest, man, That too become thou must God, if thou lovest God, Dust, if thou lovest dust. (Martin, no. 348)

In our Christian service, if we pursue a position rather than seek God Himself, we are pursuing dust, and our heart's treasure is something other than Christ (Matt. 6:21). Our life will be consumed with what we desire and hope for. It is better for us to be simple and declare, "O Lord, I want only You. You are my chief enjoyment. I have no future but You. I am here to serve You faithfully. Where will I be? What am I going to do? These are not my concern. I want to remain pure before You."

If we want to enter into the riches of Christ and the reality of our inheritance in Him, our reading of the Bible and spiritual books cannot be merely a hobby for personal pleasure. Reading the Bible and spiritual books is valuable. However, if this becomes our hobby, it may become a substitute for Christ. Jesus told the Bible-reading Jews of His day, "You search the

Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life" (John 5:39–40). We may also have the hobby of working for the Lord. It gives us enjoyment and makes us forget about spending time with the Lord. Some like to preach and others like to listen. If these become merely a hobby, they will bring us away from the Lord and the position we have as heirs in Christ.

Some college students devote themselves to serving the Lord but disappear after they graduate. It seems that all their service was only a hobby which replaced the Lord without them even realizing it. They were busy serving but without the Lord. When their environment changed, they began to consider and calculate. They missed the crucial element of enjoying the Lord and desiring nothing other than Him. In everything that we do, we must be joined to Christ. When we serve, we must be joined to Christ. If Christ doesn't like something, we don't like it either. If He asks us to let something go, we let it go without reluctance. We should desire nothing other than Christ.

Jacob—The Work of the Spirit

Jacob is the third picture showing us what it means to be living. Even after all these experiences of Abraham and Isaac, the "I" is still "I." Like Jacob, we still need the transforming work of the Spirit that we may grow in life.

Knowing Ourselves

Through the work of God the Spirit, we gain a better understanding of who we are. God has placed others around us. Whether we like them or not, their word and attitude are profitable to us. Everyone and everything around us help us to know ourselves. As a result, we cannot but tell the Lord, "I know I am weak and fallen. I am nothing. I trust You to mold

me into Your image. Please let me clearly see who I am so that I may not be self-centered."

Without the work of God the Spirit, we would never know who and where we are. We may think we have everything, can do everything, are beyond our contemporaries, and don't need anyone's help. What we need is the Lord's enlightening. Those who are in light know who they are. If God has mercy on us, He will bring us into His light that we may see who we are. At such a time, we will be like the tax collector who was "even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!'" (Luke 18:13).

Jesus once asked His disciples what they had been discussing. "But they kept silent, for on the way they had discussed with one another which of them was the greatest" (Mark 9:34). They argued who was greater because they don't know who they were. If we know who we are, we can fellowship honestly with a humble spirit (Rom. 12:3). We dare not serve according to our own will or insist on our own ideas or opinions. Those who are conceited don't know themselves. The more we know who we are, the more tender we will be, and the more God will be able to work on us.

The Work of the Cross

The Lord Jesus told His disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me" (Luke 9:23). We should seek the deeper work of the cross. We should not be satisfied, thinking we have already obtained (Phil. 3:12–13). We don't become useful to the Lord merely by praying, preaching, or serving. We also need the deeper work of the cross. Without this experience, no matter how zealously we read the Bible, pray, or pursue the Lord, we will just be sounding brass and clanging cymbals. To become ministers with God's commitment, we must be dealt with by God daily. Oh, may the cross deepen its work within us!

Though we may serve the Lord fervently, nothing we do or

say matters if we are not growing in the Lord. If we are growing and maturing, any verse we turn to will help us, bring us before God, and enlighten us. If we are short of the work of the cross in our experience, we will have many ups and downs, being easily affected by our emotions. We will express ourselves instead of God. We need to submit to the cross and allow God to touch us, work on us, deal with us, and purify us until we are put to death. We don't need more activities, talents, or knowledge. We need is the deeper work of the cross. May the cross complete its work in us!

When the Lord sends us opportunities to experience the cross, we rarely cooperate with Him. Paul came to the Lord regarding the thorn in his flesh, and the Lord told him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9). When the cross comes to us, we should look for the Lord's sufficient grace and cooperate with its work. Then we will become useful vessels in the hand of God.

Living a Life of the Altar and Tent

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were not rooted in one place. If we are like them, we won't feel that those under our care belong to us and that we would never let them go. Don't say, "I belong to this congregation and you belong to that one." In God's eyes, we are all only one church. We must be enlarged. God desires a built-up church (Matt. 16:18; Eph. 2:22). Today the Lord has placed me here and I faithfully serve those I am with. Tomorrow He may lead me somewhere else, and I must be willing to follow. Everywhere the Lord places us is good. We don't belong to any one place, and those we serve don't belong to us. Our one desire should be that, wherever we are, we are for the building up of the church. If we give ourselves like this, it will be easy for us to experience God. If we stay in one place for a long time and always see the same few faces, gradually we may lose sight of the church and God's desire.

God wants us to labor for the building up the church

regardless of where He places us. Today, since the Lord has put us in a specific place with specific believers, we must learn to serve faithfully there, looking to the Lord to receive more burden, leading, and revelation. At the same time, we should have the attitude that He might send us to another place at any time.

Through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, we see what it means to be living. If we want to experience the God of resurrection and His abundant life, we need more work of God the Spirit. We must tell the Lord, "I desire to live a life of the altar and tent. I don't want to settle in one place. I don't want to be bound by my work. Work on me more so that I may experience You more. Your desire is the built-up church. O Lord, I long to have deeper experiences of You."

18 Joseph, the Conclusion of the Experience of Life

"God will surely bring you to the land"

The book of Genesis is a book of life and of the growth in life. The growth in life begins from Genesis 1, where the Spirit moved over the surface of the waters and God's light chased away the darkness, and continues until it reaches its highest point with Joseph. No matter how well we grow, our experience cannot go beyond the description in Genesis. All of our experience of the growth in life will be according to the experience pictured in Genesis. The more we grow, the more we will manifest the abundant life of Joseph. If our experience is limited to Genesis 1, we are still young in life. It is not even enough that we have passed Peniel (Gen. 32) and bear the mark of God's work on us. The work of the cross must result in the manifestation of the abundant life, the life of Joseph. This glorious man shows the conclusion of the growth in life.

A Picture of Christ

Joseph is significant since he had no weakness. Genesis records the weaknesses of Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God didn't hesitate to record their failures. However, there is no record that Joseph ever failed in his one hundred ten years of life. He indeed signified our Lord Jesus, in whom

there was no weakness. We cannot find any failure or blemish with our Lord.

Joseph was the son chosen and treasured by his father Jacob, who loved him dearly and made him a coat of many colors. Joseph was the most excellent one among all of Jacob's sons. Our Lord Jesus is also the most excellent and the choice of our heavenly Father (Matt. 3:17). Joseph's coat was dipped in blood, and the Lord's garment is also dipped in blood (Rev. 19:13). In his day, Joseph was made low, then exalted to a seat of power and became the savior of thousands of people (Gen. 50:20). Our Lord humbled Himself, even going to the cross, and was then exalted by God and given a name above every name (Phil. 2:8–9). Today our Lord saves us all.

The Characteristics of a Mature Believer

In Joseph's life, experience, and work, we see the characteristics of a mature believer. In his life, he served and supplied others, yet was rejected and despised. In experience, he was sold by his brothers, imprisoned by his master, and then exalted to rule Egypt. This resulted in his work of saving the Egyptians and God's people from famine.

The Life of Joseph

Joseph's life was filled with God, but those around him did not recognize this or understand him. Though he selflessly served and supplied others, he suffered rejection. Because Joseph was honest and straightforward with his brothers, he was despised by them. When he faced serious temptation, he was able to overcome and hold fast to God. When he was falsely accused, he remained silent and kept his tongue from evil. These are all characteristics of a mature believer as seen in Joseph's life.

Filled with God but Misunderstood

Joseph's life was filled with God, yet no one recognized it. They all misunderstood. When he was young, God gave him dreams. Joseph dreamed that the sheaves of his brothers bowed down to his sheaf (Gen. 37:7). Then he dreamed that the sun, the moon, and eleven stars bowed down to him (37:9). God was with him all the time. When he was misunderstood by his brothers and sold into slavery in Egypt (37:25–28), God was with him. When he was misunderstood by his master Potiphar and put in jail, God was with him (39:19–21). Although God was behind everything Joseph did, no one understood him. After he interpreted the dream of the chief cupbearer and the chief baker, neither of them understood who he was, and he was still left in jail (40:23). His life was filled with God, but no one understood.

Joseph had God-given dreams, but these made his brothers angry with him. His brothers said, "Here comes this dreamer!" (37:19). Even his father, who loved him dearly, was not pleased. He said, "What is this dream that you have had? Shall I and your mother and your brothers actually come to bow ourselves down before you to the ground?" (37:10). This shows that a matured man filled with God is not easily understood.

Is there anyone in our church life calling us dreamers? "What do you mean you have a vision? It is a dream! What do you mean you have a calling? It is a dream! What do you mean the church life must change? It is a dream!" If God is with us, we can expect to be misunderstood in the church life. It should not surprise us when those who know us well now misunderstand us in the future. Those who love and praise us now may betray us later. As we grow in the Lord, we will find that it is often a lonely way. Though no one understands us and no one sympathizes with us, we are faithful to remain open to the Lord and let His life flow out. Even when we are misunderstood, the Spirit is with us.

Supplying Others Yet Rejected

When Jacob sent Joseph to his brothers who were shepherding the flock in the field, his brothers said, "Here comes this dreamer!" They didn't accept him. When Joseph was brought to Egypt, he was purchased by Potiphar and made the overseer of his house. Joseph supplied Potiphar's household, and he was accepted. But when Potiphar's wife defamed Joseph, Potiphar's attitude toward him changed, and Joseph was put in prison. Once again, Joseph was stripped of everything but God.

As we reach maturity in our growth in life, we can expect to be stripped of everything but Christ. As we serve to supply others, they may not accept us. If our heart is set on our service, we may be discouraged. Our focus should be on the Lord alone. Experienced and matured Christians are willing to risk everything to labor and serve the Lord. Their hearts are set on the Lord, not on their service. This doesn't mean we shouldn't serve. Even if we stay at home and do nothing, we may still be preoccupied by our thoughts of serving rather than focusing on the Lord. We should just spend time with our fellow believers, loving and serving them, yet all the while keeping our heart set on the Lord. Whether others accept us or reject us, we are only responsible to God.

Though Joseph served others selflessly, he suffered rejection many times. He was like the Lord Jesus. Our Lord was full of supply, yet He was rejected and rewarded with death.

We should not focus on whether people accept or reject us. We should supply people whether they appreciate us or not, always giving life and not looking for results. We only care about supplying life. People may misunderstand us, but we still supply them. We are for the work of God, but no work can occupy our hearts. Our focus is our Lord Himself.

Being Honest Yet Despised

Many think Joseph was unwise when he told his brothers

about his dreams. According to their way of thinking, if we have a vision, we should just keep it to ourselves. Why announce it so that it becomes an issue? But was Joseph really unwise? No, even Pharaoh recognized that in him was "a divine spirit" and that there was no one "so discerning and wise" as Joseph (Gen. 41:38–39). He was able to rule Egypt, the kingdom of Pharaoh. He was not foolish but simply honest.

It is easy for us to be a little political in our church life. We just bend one way a little to make this one happy, then we bend another way to make that one happy. Because we want to please everyone, we are not straightforward. We have a vision, yet we don't want to express it. We have some feeling within, but we don't tell anyone.

In the church life we need both fellowship and obedience. We are useless if we only fellowship but cannot obey. We are also useless if we only obey but do not fellowship. The Bible tells us to "obey your leaders and submit to them" (Heb. 13:17), but that does not mean we should blindly follow others without having fellowship with them if we feel the decision is wrong. This is not real obedience. We need to learn to fellowship, to open up, to be straightforward, and to speak what is on our heart. We must learn to be frank and straightforward with one another. We should not fear offending others to the extent that we dare not speak or do anything. We should speak what is on our heart but not insist. Our portion is to fellowship straightforwardly. The rest is up to the Lord.

When Peter was in Antioch, he and other Jews withdrew from eating with the Gentiles when some came from Jerusalem. Peter feared being despised by those of repute in Jerusalem. Paul strongly rebuked him when he saw his hypocrisy, that he was "not straightforward about the truth of the gospel" (Gal. 2:14). We should learn to be honest. It is easy for us to bend a little for fear of being despised. Like Paul, we should "speak, not as pleasing men, but God who examines our hearts" (1 Thess. 2:4).

If we feel that what we have is from the Lord, we should not fear having fellowship with others concerning it. Perhaps the result of this fellowship won't be what we hoped for, and we are despised. We should still pay the price and speak straightforwardly, having the heart of a martyr: "If I perish, I perish. I only want the Lord's will to be done." Without such a heart, we will bury what the Lord has given us and find a way to escape. The Lord will not be able to fulfill His will or accomplish His desire through us.

Being straightforward is the way of blessing both for us and for the whole church. However, when we are honest, we should be ready to be despised. Joseph was sold after he told his dreams to his brothers. If Jesus hadn't said, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites" (Matt. 23:13), He wouldn't have been put to death. If Jesus had wanted to avoid being despised, He should have let the Pharisees keep their law and tradition while He became the life supply and enjoyment of those who loved Him. However, because He was honest, He was killed by the scribes and Pharisees whom He rebuked. If we are honest people, we should be prepared to be despised.

Being straightforward like this is a matter of life. We should not rebuke others whenever we like or purposely provoke or hurt them. This is not being honest but fleshly. However, if we have something from the Lord, we should not be afraid to speak it. What we say is for others to see light. Yet when we speak with honesty, we should be prepared to be despised.

Being Tempted Yet without Sin

When Joseph was sold into slavery in Egypt, he was purchased by Potiphar, a high official, and eventually became overseer of his house (Gen. 39:1–4). Day after day, Potiphar's wife tried to seduce Joseph, but he never gave in to her. He told her, "My master...has put all that he owns in my charge....He has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great evil and sin against God?" (Gen. 39:8–9). Joseph was so pure and clean. Fornication is the most serious temptation. Though Potiphar's wife tempted

Joseph again and again, he overcame all temptation and held fast before God.

The more mature we are as Christians, the more temptations we will encounter and the more feelings we will have toward temptations. When newly saved Christians overcome an outward temptation, they feel they have overcome sin once for all. As they grow, however, they face more subtle and inward temptations, and their conscience becomes more sensitive. They recognize that their desire to gain a position in the church or seek people's love and praise is a sin against God because it springs from an impure, selfish motive.

Job was perfect (Job 1:1). Because of this, he was tempted and attacked by Satan. Those who are manifested in their church and love the Lord suffer more attacks from Satan. Joseph was tempted in all respects yet there is no record of him sinning. Temptations came and he overcame. It seems there was no temptation at all and sin vanished from him. He lived in the light of life. Joseph is a picture of our Lord, "who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15).

Keeping the Tongue from Evil

The more we grow, the less we speak. Young Christians like to speak a lot even though they have little knowledge. They have little of the Lord's presence, yet they speak like they have seen a great vision of Him. Joseph was different. He spoke little. When Potiphar dealt with him, he said nothing to defend himself. He recognized God's hand and that this was not a matter of right or wrong but of God's sovereignty. He only knew life. If we look at our situations as from God's hand rather than as right or wrong, we will be silent. The more we see things as right or wrong, the more we will speak. When the Lord Jesus was asked, "Are You the King of the Jews?" He only said, "It is as you say" (Matt. 27:11). If we were in His place, we would have said, "Of course I am! Don't you know about the miracles I've performed and the

teachings I've given? They all show I am the Son of God." We would have defended ourselves even before being asked. When someone rebukes us or just gives us an unfriendly look, we complain to anyone who will listen. We cannot tolerate being wronged or misunderstood. We cannot get past right and wrong and recognize God's sovereign hand on us. This is why we have so much to say from morning till evening. We just cannot keep silent as Joseph did.

More than this, Joseph also kept his tongue from evil. Even though his brothers had seriously wronged him by selling him into Egypt, at the end of his life he told them, "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive" (Gen. 50:20). He "comforted them and spoke kindly to them" (v. 21). Unlike Joseph, we not only speak a lot but also speak evil things. We mock, we scorn, and we accuse. Sometimes we say, "That person is good, but...." This "but" is evil. We easily remember people's shortcomings but we rarely appreciate what God is doing in them. We would rather talk about their problems than about how they have experienced God's grace.

Joseph was like our Lord. He was honest. When Jesus saw that the temple had become a place of business, He drove the sheep, the oxen, and the doves out of the temple with a whip (John 2:14–16). He didn't worry about the consequences. However, when people ill-treated Him, He just kept silent. Like Jesus, we should keep our tongue from evil and our lips from speaking deceit (1 Pet. 3:10).

The Experience of Joseph

The characteristics of a mature believer are pictured not only in Joseph's life but also in his experience. He was sold to the Gentiles by his brothers. His was a lonely life, yet he remained faithful to his God. Although he was made low by being put into prison and even forgotten, God exalted him, putting him in charge of all Egypt.

Being Sold by His Brothers

When Joseph was just seventeen years old, his older brothers sold him to some Ishmaelites who then sold him into slavery in Egypt (Gen. 37:1, 28, 36). Similarly, Jesus was sold by one of his own disciples and then turned over to the Gentiles by the Jews. We all like to hear the message of brotherly love. However, in our sinful nature it is so easy for us to sell out our brothers. The more we sell people out, the more we hope to gain. The more we point out others' shortcomings, the better we appear to be. Eventually we will find that the persecution from the world is nothing compared to the persecution from our Christian brothers. Do not think the work of the cross is limited to hardships such as not being accepted into a college, being rebuked by a boss or coworker, or getting sick. The deep work of the cross comes from those we love most and give our lives to. One day we will be sold out by our brothers.

Being Alone Yet Faithful

Joseph stood alone all his life. As a boy, he was hated by his ten older brothers who were jealous of him (Gen. 37:5, 11, 18–20). In Egypt, though he was a slave, he initially experienced prosperity under God's blessing but then was imprisoned (39:2, 20). Joseph was faithful even while in prison. Being in prison was like being put to death. He probably felt that he was completely finished. He could depend on no one and waited for no one but God. Only God could rescue this lonely person who had no one to rely on. He was exalted by God when he was thirty, when he was released from prison and became second only to Pharaoh in all Egypt (41:41, 46). He is a picture of our Lord, who began His earthly ministry when He was thirty (Luke 3:23).

Being alone is related to faithfulness. If we are not alone, we cannot be shown to be faithful. The real test of our faithfulness is not if we can shout "Hallelujah!" with others but if we still

can shout "Hallelujah!" when we are left to stand alone for what God has shown us. When we consecrate ourselves along with many others, our consecration is unproven and not trustworthy. Our faithfulness is proven when we are alone.

Those who are matured and experienced need to pass the test of being faithful when they stand alone. It is easy to be for Christ and His church when everyone around us has the same commitment. However, to be faithful is to still lay hold of the Lord when everyone else forsakes Him and His work. Our love of the church is proven when no one understands our commitment. At such times, our faithfulness is manifested. Faithfulness in a group is not trustworthy. The experience of remaining faithful when we feel we are alone is proof of our faithfulness.

Our Lord was faithful unto death, but "God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power" (Acts 2:24). We also should be faithful unto death. Take Watchman Nee for example. Though he encountered so many unreasonable situations, he remained faithful to the commitment the Lord had given him concerning the church. He had received much revelation and commitment from the Lord. If he felt such a life was a waste and put aside his commitment and revelation from God, he still could have become a famous minister or a popular evangelist. Yet he would have been unfaithful to his vision of the church. Praise the Lord that he remained faithful! He was a living testimony, willing to give up his own ministry for the sake of his vision. He was faithful unto death.

The more matured we are in our Christian life, the less people will understand us and the lonelier we will feel. If we have a clear commitment from the Lord, we shall know what loneliness and faithfulness are. It is not easy to be alone. When we grow to the extent that we always have a direct relationship with God and no one understands, sympathizes, or supports us, yet we remain faithful even unto death, then we are mature believers.

Being Exalted

Joseph was exalted by God. Pharaoh had two dreams and was troubled that no one could interpret them. When he was told that Joseph interpreted dreams, he had him brought to him from prison. Joseph interpreted his dreams, warning him of the coming famine and telling him how to prepare for it. Afterward, Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has informed you of all this, there is no one so discerning and wise as you are. You shall be over my house, and according to your command all my people shall do homage; only in the throne I will be greater than you....See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt" (Gen. 41:39–41). Joseph was exalted by God through interpreting Pharaoh's dreams.

In his exaltation, Joseph is a picture of Christ, who "being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth" (Phil. 2:8–10).

The Work of Joseph

Joseph's life and experience, with all of its riches and glory, was manifested in his work. This work, which characterizes a mature believer, had three aspects: the salvation of the Gentiles, the salvation of all Israel, and the fulfillment of God's will.

Bringing Full Salvation

God exalted Joseph and gave him wisdom so that he knew how to handle the coming seven years of abundance and seven years of famine. As a result, the Egyptians, representing all Gentiles, had food through him. Today, since the Lord Jesus has been exalted, we Gentiles may come to Him and receive the salvation of life. Our Lord is salvation to the Gentiles today and to all Israel at His coming. Paul wrote, "Until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; and so all Israel will be saved" (Rom. 11:25–26). This was the experience of Joseph. On the one hand, he saved the Gentiles. On the other hand, he also saved all Israel (Gen. 45:8–11).

Toward the end of the seven years of famine, Joseph said to the people, "Here is seed for you, and you may sow the land" (Gen. 47:23). At that time, no one had seed but Joseph. This is the manifestation of a mature man—he brings salvation to others. If we are mature, when unbelievers meet us, they meet God's salvation. When believers meet us, their problems are resolved. We become a blessing wherever we go.

Jesus is the true seed (John 12:24), and He will restore all things (Acts 3:21). There will be a day that the Gentiles are saved and all Israel is saved. The whole creation will no longer need to groan because the day of redemption will have come and all things will have been restored (Rom. 8:19–23).

Supplying All the Earth

"When the famine was spread over all the face of the earth, then Joseph opened all the storehouses, and sold to the Egyptians; and the famine was severe in the land of Egypt. The people of all the earth came to Egypt to buy grain from Joseph" (Gen. 41:56–57). Joseph was able to supply all the earth, no matter how great the need.

To the unbelievers, Paul preached "the unfathomable riches of Christ" (Eph. 3:8). For the believers, the Lord is the supply of "grace to help in time of need" (Heb. 4:16). Christ meets all needs of those who come to Him, no matter who they are. Whenever we are hungry, we can come to the Lord for food. He is the rich supply.

Likewise, those matured in the Lord can supply others. We may have many problems, yet when we fellowship with those who are mature in Christ, we leave feeling that there is no problem at all. How we need matured ones to supply grace in time of need!

Supplying in Love

After Jacob died, Joseph's brothers sent a message to him, saying, "Your father charged before he died, saying, 'Thus you shall say to Joseph, "Please forgive, I beg you, the transgression of your brothers and their sin, for they did you wrong." And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father" (Gen. 50:16–17). It is doubtful that Jacob sent this message since Joseph's brothers were quite deceitful. However, Joseph wouldn't abandon them. He wept when he received their message (50:17) because it showed that they didn't know his heart. Though he supplied them and looked after them, they still didn't know his love and his heart. They could not be honest and tried to cheat him. Therefore he wept.

The account continues, "Then his brothers also came and fell down before him and said, 'Behold, we are your servants.' But Joseph said to them, 'Do not be afraid, for am I in God's place? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive. So therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones.' So he comforted them and spoke kindly to them" (50:18–21). We should weep when we read this part. We, like Joseph's brothers, often doubt the love of the Lord. We pray, "O Lord, You helped me before but will You abandon me now? You blessed me before but will You give me up now?" We try to move His heart with our words. The Lord's heart aches when He hears us because we don't understand His heart or realize the extent of His love.

Those who are experienced and matured not only supply life but also touch people with their love. When we are with them, we touch love and feel they are dear and kind. Although they are dignified, there is love flowing from them. They are a source of the life supply in love. May we all love one another so that we do not ask too much of others or easily think they are useless. We should be a source of supply in love. People should touch love and a constant supply when they meet us.

Living to Fulfill God's Will

When Joseph was about to die, he said, "God will surely take care of you and bring you up from this land to the land which He promised on oath to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob" (Gen. 50:24). Then he made the sons of Israel swear that they would carry his bones up out of Egypt (v. 25; Heb. 11:22). Joseph wanted nothing from the world. He only wanted the eternal will of God and to return to the land of promise. Even his death was completely according to God's will. Although he didn't live to see the children of Israel leave Egypt, he had the assurance that God would fulfill His promise to Abraham to bring His people out of Egypt and back to the promised land (Gen. 15:13-16). Eventually when the Israelites did leave Egypt, they took Joseph's bones to the good land of Canaan (Exo. 13:19; Josh. 24:32). Even in his death, Joseph's heart was for God's purpose for His chosen people. We should tell the Lord, "I want to live for Your eternal will. May Your will be done through me." This is the highest peak of the experience of life. May the Lord have mercy on us so that we may be brought unto maturity.

How beautiful is the book of Genesis! It is a description of our experience of the growth in life. We began in a situation that was formless, void, and dark. We progressed as the Spirit of God moved over us and gained us. As we give ourselves to the Lord, He brings us through the experiences of those in Genesis, including Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Eventually, He brings us into the maturity of Joseph for the fulfillment of God's glorious eternal plan.

If we are simply churchgoers who are busy with spiritual things, our knowing of the Lord will be limited. We must

experience Him and walk the way of life, progressing higher and higher, until we are fully matured and able to richly supply life to others. Though we may feel short and ashamed that we have wasted so much time, the Lord is giving us a heart that desires to grow in life. To grow in Him, we need to seek and experience His presence all the time that He might mold us and work on us. We need to know His desire and be filled with Him that we may become a blessing to the church.

We don't know how many tears we will have to shed in this process. Yet like the Lord, we have a joy set before us (Heb. 12:2). What are tears and hardships compared to this? Like Moses, who considered "the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt," we "look away to the reward" (Heb. 11:26). We must pass through death so that we may experience resurrection. May the Lord be merciful to work on us until He is satisfied and His eternal will is fulfilled.

Works Cited

- Brown, F., S. Driver, C. Briggs. *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2001.
- Davis, John D. *Davis Dictionary of the Bible*. Nashville, TN: Royal Publishers, Inc., 1973.
- Gridlestone, R. B. *Gridlestone's Synonyms of the Old Testament*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2000.
- Hitchcock, Roswell D. New and Complete Analysis of the Holy Bible. 1869.
- Easton, Matthew G. *Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. Thomas Nelson, 1897.
- Martin, Del and Richard Yeh, comps. Songs and Hymns of Life. Ann Arbor, MI: Good Land Publishers, 2009.
- Smith, William, F. N. Peloubet and M. A Peloubet, eds. *Smith's Bible Dictionary*, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2000.
- Strong, James. A Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Hebrew Bible. Madison, NJ, 1890.
- Young, Robert. Analytical Concordance to the Bible. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970.

Online Ministry by Titus Chu

MinistryMessages.org is the online archive for the ministry of Titus Chu. This includes audio messages, articles, and books in PDF format, all of which are available as free downloads.

FellowshipJournal.org is an online magazine that features recent sharing by Titus Chu. It also provides brief, daily excerpts from his ministry, as well as news of upcoming events.

"Daily Words for the Christian Life" is an e-letter sent out every Thursday. It features selections from the writings of Titus Chu. To subscribe, visit FellowshipJournal.org/subscribe.

Books by Titus Chu

The books listed below are available in print, Kindle, or iBook format. To purchase them, go to MinistryMessages.org/order. They are also available via Amazon.com and iTunes.

David: After God's Heart

Elijah & Elisha: Living for God's Testimony

Ruth: Growth unto Maturity

Philippians: That I May Gain Christ

A Sketch of Genesis

Two Manners of Life