

Blessed Beyond Measure

Debra Griffin Mitchell

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Dedication

For the Christian women who have blessed my life: If I try to name all of you, I'll leave someone out, but you know who you are and how much I love you. God has indeed been gracious in bringing us together.

Acknowledgements

Many people helped me write this book. More than fifty women filled out and returned the blessing survey and shared personal stories of heartache comforted by the blessings of God and the encouragement of families and Christian friends. Thank you. I didn't quote all of you, but I was blessed by your stories of faith and love. Thanks to all of you who allowed me to quote your comments.

Thanks also to the Wednesday night ladies' class at West Dyersburg church of Christ. You heard some of the lessons in this book in the rough draft stage, and your comments and encouragement helped to shape the final version.

I appreciate Jane McWhorter for writing the foreword. Your example as a Christian writer has always inspired me. Thanks also to J.C. and Betty Choate for publishing this book.

Thanks to my husband Loy for patiently reading and kindly correcting the manuscript. Two years ago on September 4, you and I were married. We bring blessings to each other daily in this new time in our lives, and I thank God that he brought us together.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture references are from the New King James Version, 1992, Thomas Nelson Company.

Foreword

Quite some time ago, I received a survey from Debra about the blessings in the lives of Christian women. I felt honored to have been selected to be part of her study. Now that I have read her material on this subject, I am even more excited!

Being unaware of our many blessings in life is probably one of our greatest shortcomings. Through this book, Debra helps us stop and count our spiritual treasures. To be perfectly honest, I had never before studied this subject in such great detail. I feel that other women will also grow spiritually because of this study.

Blessed Beyond Measure is intended for those women who want to delve into the meat of God's Word. Debra has the unusual ability to merge her scholarly approach with everyday language and down-to-earth examples. I was especially impressed with her chapter on the blessing of submission.

The reader will leave this study more acutely aware of the blessings that surround everyone each day. All of us are indebted to Debra for investing her time in preparing this spiritual feast for us.

Jane McWhorter
June 2005

Publisher's Statement

Betty and I have known Loy Mitchell and his work in Zimbabwe for many years. We have been happy to publish two of his books of sermons, making his Biblical knowledge and experience available to the brotherhood. Now we are blessed to get to know his wife, Debra, and to be able to print her new book, **Blessed Beyond Measure**. Did someone mention being blessed? What a subject to write about!

How blessed all of us are. As Debra points out, we seldom stop to count the many things that God does for us on a day-to-day basis. I am happy she has written this book, and I pray that it will be used by many people, becoming an inspiring study for numerous ladies' Bible classes in our country and all over the world.

Debra, we are thankful for you and for your good work, and we look forward to other books that will follow. May God bless you and Loy for your writings and for your mission efforts to spread the cause of Christ.

J. C. Choate

July 15, 2006

Introduction

For a long time, I've felt that many of us, even Christians, take our blessings for granted. As Americans, we are abundantly blessed with freedom, opportunities, and material possessions. Even the poorest American is richer than most people in Third World countries because even the poorest can find help from government agencies or charitable organizations. We Americans are blessed beyond measure just because we are citizens of a country that tries to protect our basic rights and provide opportunities for growth and achievement.

As Christians, we are blessed beyond measure not only materially but also spiritually, for we have *"every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ"* (Ephesians 1:3). Because Christ dwells in our hearts, because God *"is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think"* (Ephesians 3:20), and because we are citizens of heaven (Philippians 3:20), we should be the happiest and most grateful people on earth.

But are we? Do we take our blessings for granted? Do we even realize the extent of the blessings that God pours out for us? I wonder.

As part of my research for this book, I conducted a survey about blessings among Christian women. I wanted to see how others felt about the blessings in their lives. I listed 54 blessings including the material (money, food), the spiritual (salvation, grace), the roles we play (being a daughter, marriage), and the less obvious things that might be called blessings in disguise (submission, suffering). I also left space for listing other blessings. I asked respondents to circle 10 blessings in no particular order. Then I asked four questions:

1. What does the word "blessing" mean to you?
2. Which blessing sustains you most in difficult times and why?
3. Describe an experience that made you realize how blessed you are.
4. Describe an experience that didn't appear to be a blessing at first but turned out to be a blessing in the long run.

The response was wonderful. I handed out about 50 copies of the sur-

vey at West Dyersburg church of Christ, my home congregation, and sent another 50 to friends in other congregations. Some people then shared the survey with their friends, so I'm not sure how many women actually read it — maybe 125 or so. I received 55 completed surveys.

Some women just circled 10 blessings without answering the essay questions; others wrote three or four pages describing experiences in their lives that led to blessings. Naturally, I was blessed by reading their stories. In the course of this book, I will share some of the numerical results of the survey — how many women chose which blessings. I will also discuss specific blessings from the list. But the results of the survey also led me to study blessings that I had not considered in my original outline. For example, one woman listed “giving” as a blessing, so I included it in Chapter 6, “The Blessing of Giving”.

By writing this book, I have become more aware of the countless blessings God provides for his children and more grateful for God's constant care and generosity. My prayer is that you will grow in gratitude and joy as you study about God's blessings. As you study, I think you will want to share the gospel of Jesus the Christ with everyone around you so they can enjoy these blessings also. Truly, Christians are blessed beyond measure.

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Blessed Beyond Measure

Debra Griffin Mitchell

Chapter 1

What Is a Blessing?

What is a blessing? Most of the women who answered this question on the survey defined blessing as “a gift from God”, “God’s favor”, or “an undeserved gift from God”. Two defined it as “something that makes me happy”.

One woman wrote, “A blessing is anything that is given to me or anything that happens to me that draws me closer to Christ”. Another stated, “Blessing means everything God bestows on me in my everyday life from the breath I take each day to my wonderful husband and children as well as the necessities to make it through each day”. All who responded seemed well aware of their boundless blessings from God.

Common Expressions

Before we study specific blessings, we’ll look at the way our society uses the words “blessing”, “bless”, and “blessed”. Let’s find out what those words mean to us in America.

Here are some expressions that I’m sure you’ve heard before:

- Bless you (after a sneeze)
- Bless your heart
- Bless my soul
- God love her
- Say the blessing
- Bless the food
- Bless the hands that prepared this food
- Bless this food to the nourishment of our bodies
- A blessing in disguise
- She, he, or it has been a blessing in my life

- A blessed event
- Count your blessings
- Showers of blessing
- God bless America
- God bless you and keep you

How many of these are in the Bible or are derived from a situation in the Bible? Of course, the concept of blessing anyone or anything comes from the Bible, but are any of these phrases actually quotations from Scripture?

Why do we say, “Bless you” when someone sneezes? Some say it’s a way of wishing the person good health, which is literally what “gesundheit” means in German. Then there are various stories about how the practice of blessing someone who sneezed got started. In the sixth century, people thought sneezing was the way the body expelled evil, so they congratulated or blessed the person who sneezed.

Another story says that people thought the soul escaped through the mouth when a person sneezed. So they blessed him to keep evil spirits from entering the body until the soul could return. During the Middle Ages, when the Black Plague was prevalent, someone decided that sneezing was a sign that the person would die from the plague, so the Roman Catholic Church decreed that everyone who sneezed should receive a blessing to ensure he or she would go to heaven after death.

Now I think we’re beyond believing that a soul or an evil spirit is expelled by a sneeze. So why do we still say, “Bless you” today? It’s really a little like a prayer; we’re wishing or praying for good health.

What about the next one: “Bless your heart”? One commentary I read said this could be derived from the description of David as a man after God’s own heart. So, “blessing someone’s heart” is asking that the heart be made like God’s heart.

I couldn’t find anything about the origin of “bless my soul” or “God love her”, but I’m guessing they are similar to the others — just praying or asking for God’s favor for someone.

The next four have to do with praying before a meal or about food. Are there any biblical examples of that? Jesus gives us an example in Matthew 6:11: *“Give us this day our daily bread”*. In Matthew 14:19, Jesus blessed the bread when he fed the 5,000, and in Matthew 26:26, Jesus blessed the bread at the last supper. “Blessing food” then is really a way of acknowledging that God gave us the food and that we thank him or praise him for his gift.

“A blessing in disguise” is an unexpected blessing, maybe even something that seems bad or at least unwanted, but it turns out for our good. Romans 8:28 tells us that all things work together for good to those who love God. So maybe sometimes we don’t recognize all our blessings.

A person who is a blessing in your life may be someone who has helped you through the tough times; someone who taught you about God or salvation; someone whose example is so Christ-like that she makes you want to be a better Christian; or someone who is a delight to have for a friend. Numerous people in the Bible fit that description.

Jesus, obviously, blessed the lives of many people who were sick in body and soul. The prophets and kings touched lives; ordinary people lived faithful lives and blessed those around them; Christians prayed for the disciples when they were in prison. We can all live in ways that bless the lives of family and friends.

“A blessed event” is used in old movies to refer to the birth of a baby.

“Count your blessings” and “showers of blessing” are both found in songs, but “showers of blessing” is also in the Bible — Ezekiel 34:26: *“I will make them and the places all around My hill a blessing; and I will cause showers to come down in their season; there shall be showers of blessing”*.

This verse is included in a description of God caring for his people by providing David as the shepherd who will care for the sheep. In his commentary on Ezekiel, Denny Petrillo states that the “most reasonable explanation” of *“My servant David”* in verse 23 is a reference to Christ.¹ Jesus described himself as *“the Good Shepherd”* in John 10, and he is linked to David in Matthew 22:41-45. Paul tells us that every spiritual blessing is in Christ (Ephesians 3:1), so “showers of blessing” is a good way to pic-

ture the abundant flow of good gifts poured out on those who belong to Jesus the Christ.

What do we mean when we say, “God bless America”? This statement is used in a song, but even by itself, it is a prayer; we’re asking God’s blessing, favor, and guidance on our country. God blessed the nation of Israel; he also used other nations in history to work his will. Historians speculate that Jesus came to earth when the Romans ruled the world because they had developed a system of roads, transportation, trade, and common language that would help the apostles spread the gospel.

“God bless you and keep you” is a song using Numbers 6:24-26. It is the blessing God told Aaron to speak to the children of Israel: *“The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make His face shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace”*. Verse 27 emphasizes that this blessing was God’s way of putting his name on the children of Israel.

From these few common phrases, we can see that blessings are interwoven into our lives and our relationships with God and with each other in special ways. Sometimes we take our blessings for granted; we recite these expressions without thinking about what they mean, or we complain about what we don’t have instead of being thankful for what we do have. We’ll be talking about blessings from different angles in this study, including events in our lives that may not seem like blessings on the surface.

Definitions and Examples

We have considered ways we use the words “bless”, “blessed”, and “blessing” in today’s world. Now let’s consider how these words are used in the Bible. In the Old Testament, there is one Hebrew word translated “bless” or “blessed”. It is “barak”, which literally means, “to bend the knee, congratulate, or praise”. When applied to God, as in “They blessed God”, it means that they praised or adored God”. When applied to people, as in “God blessed them”, it means that God provided a benefit.

The first instance of blessing recorded in the Bible occurs in Genesis 1 and 2. God announces three blessings. The first is in Genesis 1:20-23:

*"Then God said, 'Let the waters abound with an abundance of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the face of the firmament of the heavens'. So God created great sea creatures and every living thing that moves, with which the waters abounded, according to their kind, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. And God **blessed** them, saying, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply in the earth'."* (emphasis added)

Isn't it interesting that God blessed fish and creatures in the sea and birds of the air? The second blessing is for Adam and Eve in Genesis 1:27,28:

*"So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. Then God **blessed** them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth'"* (emphasis added).

The next few verses tell us that God provided plants and seeds for their food; then he pronounced his work "very good".

The third blessing is in Genesis 2:1-3:

*"Thus the heavens and earth, and all the host of them, were finished. And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Then God **blessed** the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God created and made"* (emphasis added).

How do these blessings reflect the meaning of the word "barak"? Since God is the speaker, he is providing benefits for those he blesses. He is setting in motion patterns and cycles that we see all around us today — the cycle of renewal in the seasons and among animals as well as people, the need to rest after work, the setting aside of time for different activities.

I see four benefits for Adam and Eve — and all of us, too — in these blessings:

- food
- the ability to reproduce
- the responsibility to take care of creation
- the opportunity for worship

Food, children, work, and worship — all are necessary for human life. Without food, children, and work, humanity would have become extinct long ago. Without worshipping God, humanity quickly becomes no better than the animals.

The first three sustain us physically; the fourth sustains us spiritually. The blessings also suggest a reciprocal agreement. God wants a relationship with his creation. He wants us to acknowledge and praise him not only for what he gives us but also for who he is. Some criticize God because he expects praise and adoration, but they fail to recognize that God doesn't need our praise the way we need his blessings. But because he is the Creator, God deserves our praise. Yet we are the ones who benefit by growing spiritually as we maintain a relationship of love and adoration with God.

Discussion Questions

1. Notice how often you say, “Bless you” or similar phrases. What do they mean?
2. How can such phrases open the door to talk with people about Jesus?
3. God blessed creation three times in Genesis 1 and 2. How do those blessings still apply to us today?

Chapter 2

Blessing and Cursing

From the beginning, God set in motion the physical and spiritual blessings necessary to sustain us. He always intended mankind to benefit from his gifts and to enjoy life on earth while living in relationship with the Creator. That was the plan.

Blessing and Cursing

When Satan tempted Eve, she and Adam broke that relationship by disobeying the one rule God had given them, and they all added a new word to their vocabulary: curse.

The Old Testament has three Hebrew words for “curse”. In Genesis 3, it means, “bitterly curse” and carries the concept of judgment for wrongdoing.

First, God curses the serpent, recognizing the enmity or hatred between God and Satan that Jesus would later overcome with his own blood. Then God curses Eve with pain in childbirth and submission to her husband. God turns to Adam, cursing the ground he must till to produce food. This curse is not work, but difficult work, with obstacles like thorns and thistles.

Finally, God expels Adam and Eve from the Garden to prevent them from eating of the tree of life and becoming immortal. Their exile also represents the worst part of the curse — the spiritual part — separation from God because of their sin. They would no longer walk and talk with God in the cool of the day (Genesis 3:8).

Throughout the Old Testament, there are cycles of blessing and cursing as God continually reaches out to people and they alternately accept and then reject him. Examples include the Flood, the Tower of Babel, the blessing of Abram, and the habitual disobedience of the children of Israel.

New Testament Examples

In the New Testament, there are three words translated “bless” or “blessing”.

- **Makarios:** supremely blest, fortunate, happy; used in the Beatitudes.

- **Eulogeo:** thanks or praise, fine or eloquent speech, speak well of, benediction; used in Matthew 14:19 when breaking bread and in Luke 1:28 when the angel tells Mary she will be the mother of Jesus. The verse says, *“Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women”*. (From this verse, the Roman Catholic Church developed the idea of worshipping Mary, since “blessed” can mean “praised”. But I don’t think that’s the intended meaning here. The angel means that everyone will speak well of Mary because God chose her).

- **Energes:** confer a benefit on; see Galatians 3:8,9:

“And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, “In you all the nations shall be blessed”. So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham.

This verse means that all who obey Jesus, the seed of Abraham, receive the benefits found in a relationship with him. Ephesians 1:3 says, *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ”*. We might read this verse as “praise God for Jesus who speaks well of us in heaven and provides all spiritual benefits for us”.

In Mark 14:61, the high priest asks Jesus if he is the *“the Christ, the Son of the Blessed”*, using the word “blessed” to replace God’s name because the Jews didn’t speak his name aloud.

In summary, “bless”, “blessed”, and “blessing” refer to four general types of benefits or favors:

1. God blesses his people by providing for their needs and beyond, often including prosperity and protection. His blessings are both physical and spiritual.

2. People bless God by acknowledging him as the giver of all good gifts, praising, thanking, and adoring him.
3. People bless each other. In the Old Testament, the nations living near Abraham respected him because they knew God was with him. They were blessed by his presence. Fathers blessed sons, handing down the promised blessing given to Abraham from God. In the New Testament, we read of asking blessings for other people, such as interceding for the sick or those in distress. We also learn from Jesus that we are to bless our enemies and not curse them.
4. The obedient are blessed by salvation. Psalm 116:13 says, *"I will take up the cup of salvation, and call upon the name of the Lord"*. This is a reference to a tradition during Jewish feasts, particularly Passover. The host of the feast would take a cup of wine and "bless God", thanking him for deliverance from Egypt, requesting continued mercy, and asking for the arrival of the Messiah.

A Covenant with God

As God's chosen people, the Israelites were in a covenant relationship. What does that mean?

God always intended to have an intimate, personal relationship with his creation. But because God is who he is — holy, perfect, all-knowing, and all-powerful — the relationship always had limits or boundaries. In the Garden of Eden, the boundary was clear: Don't eat or even touch the fruit of the tree of good and evil. When Adam and Eve sinned, the relationship between God and man became much more limited, but God promised that one day the relationship would be restored so man would have the opportunity to choose knowing God and obeying him.

God repeats that promise throughout the Old Testament with his covenants. A covenant is a formal agreement between two parties with assigned obligations for each. The Bible contains many examples of covenants between people and between political units:

- Laban and Jacob, Genesis 31:44-54
- David and Jonathan, 1 Samuel 19:3; 23:18

- Abraham and the Amorites, Genesis 14:13
- Abraham and Abimelech, Genesis 21:22,23
- Abner and David, 2 Samuel 3:12,13,21
- David and the people, 2 Samuel 5:3
- Solomon and Hiram, 1 Kings 5:26
- Husband and wife, Malachi 2:14

These covenants ensured mutual benefits for the parties involved.

Sometimes covenants were made between greater and lesser powers. The greater power demanded loyalty in exchange for protecting the lesser power. An example occurs in Joshua 9 between Israel and the Gibeonites.

Obviously, a covenant between God and man is a serious agreement between a greater power who has everything to give and a lesser power who has only his obedience and worship to give. A covenant with God should not be treated lightly. To emphasize the serious nature of the covenant, God stated it in terms of blessing and cursing.

Ceremonial Blessing and Cursing

God established the covenant with the Israelites while they were in the wilderness after they left Egypt. He gave them the Ten Commandments, the basis of the Law, which they promised to obey. In Deuteronomy 27-30, God describes a ceremonial event of blessing and cursing that the Israelites are to perform after they enter the land of Canaan. But before God ratifies the covenant by this ceremony, the Israelites demonstrate their lack of loyalty.

Imagine that you can travel through time and witness the scenes between God and the Israelites. Imagine that you are an Israelite under age 20, camped at the base of Mt. Sinai exactly three months after you left the slavery of Egypt.

The scene begins in Exodus 19:1-6. Through Moses, God announces that he will establish his covenant with his children, the Israelites, in verses 5-6:

“Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel.”

You can read the next few chapters for the details of Moses receiving the Law and teaching the people how they should live and the feasts they should keep. In Exodus 24:3, after Moses tells them *“the Words of the Lord”*, all the people answer with one voice: *“All the words which the Lord has said, we will do”*. Moses builds an altar and offers sacrifices and reads from the Book of the Law; the people again announce their agreement to this covenant in verse 7: *“All that the Lord has said we will do, and be obedient”*.

Now we all know that soon after this scene, many of the people disobeyed the first commandment given in Exodus 20:3, *“You shall have no other gods before Me”*. They made and worshiped a golden calf, and they were punished, but God continued to operate under the covenant and promised to take the Israelites to the land of Canaan.

A few months later, in Numbers 13, the Israelites are waiting for the 12 spies to return from their mission into Canaan. (Remember, you are there as a teen-ager or younger). They’ve been gone for 40 days. When they finally return, they bring a cluster of grapes so big that it has to be carried on a pole by two men. The spies tell stories of a land flowing with milk and honey but peopled by giants living in strong, walled cities. Yet in Numbers 13:30, Caleb says, *“Let us go up at once and take possession, for we are well able to overcome it”*.

So they break camp and march into Canaan, right? Wrong. The people — your parents, mostly, since you are under age 20 and not allowed to say much — the people begin to cry and complain, *“If only we had died in the land of Egypt! Or if only we had died in this wilderness! Why has the Lord brought us to this land to fall by the sword, that our wives and children should become victims? Would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?”* (Numbers 14:2,3). They even say they should choose a leader to take them back.

Joshua and Caleb try to turn the people from their rebellion, but the people want to stone them. God becomes so angry at their lack of faith that he wants to destroy them completely as a nation, but Moses intercedes. Instead, God declares that they would wander in the wilderness for 40 years — a year for each day the spies were in Canaan — and no one age 20 or above would enter the land. Everyone who complained would die without entering the land, and of the spies who had seen the land, only Joshua and Caleb would live to enter.

Now turn to Deuteronomy 27 and fast-forward your time machine by forty years — do you feel yourself aging? The old people who complained have died and you, the younger generation, are waiting to enter the Promised Land at last. Moses won't be going with you because he sinned by striking the rock to produce water when God told him to speak to it. So he gives instructions for a covenant ceremony to be performed when the people enter the land of Canaan. This ceremony is a renewal or ratification of the covenant at Mt. Sinai. Chapters 27-30 describe the altar, the twelve pillars of stone on which the Law is to be written, and the blessing and cursing that will result, depending on how you behave yourselves.

The ceremony described here actually takes place sometime later, after the Israelites conquered Jericho and Ai, two cities in Canaan. It is recorded in Joshua 8:30-35. Imagine the scene. The people gather in a huge valley between Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerizim about 20 miles west of the Jordan River and 40 miles north of Jerusalem. Representatives from all 12 tribes stand on each mountain to pronounce the curses and blessings. Historians say that this land is a natural amphitheater; the people would have had no trouble hearing speeches shouted from the mountains.

The basic curses are listed first in Deuteronomy 27:15-26. There are 12; the first 11 are specific examples based somewhat on the Ten Commandments; the last one in verse 26 says, "*Cursed is the one who does not confirm all the words of this Law*", referring to the entire Law of Moses, not just to the book of Deuteronomy. After each curse is pronounced, the people say "Amen" to state their understanding and agreement.

The passage in Deuteronomy 28:1-14 states the blessing phase. The

blessings don't reference specific laws but rather declare that if they obey the Lord, the people of Israel will be placed above all nations on earth and will prosper and succeed in everything they do — in the city and country, in health and family, in wealth, in food, in overcoming enemies, and in their spiritual relationship with God, established as “*a holy people to Himself*” (verse 9). In short, they will be blessed beyond measure, beyond anything they could ask for or imagine or desire.

But verse 15 starts again with the curses and continues through chapter 29, becoming a prophecy of what will happen to Israel as a nation if they don't obey. They will be humiliated by their enemies and carried into captivity; they will suffer famine and disease and even descend to the most despicable acts of inhuman behavior such as cannibalism. They will be scattered among other nations and will no longer be a nation belonging to God.

Then chapter 30 offers hope for the disobedient:

“Now it shall come to pass, when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the Lord your God drives you, and you return to the Lord your God and obey His voice, according to all that I command you today, you and your children, with all your heart and with all your soul, that the Lord your God will bring you back from captivity, and have compassion on you, and gather you again from all the nations where the Lord your God scattered you ... And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live” (Deuteronomy 30:1-3,6).

God knew that no matter how loudly the people shouted, “Amen”, to the reading of the Law, they would rebel and disobey over and over again throughout the centuries. But from the beginning, he had a plan to restore those who would repent and obey.

Look at Deuteronomy 30:9-16:

“The Lord your God will make you abound in all the work of your hand, in the fruit of your body, in the increase of your live-

stock, and in the produce of your land for good. For the Lord will again rejoice over you for good as He rejoiced over your fathers, if you obey the voice of the Lord to keep His commandments and His statutes which are written in this Book of the Law, and if you turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. For this commandment which I command you today is not too mysterious for you, nor is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will ascend into heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?'

"But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it. See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil, in that I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments, His statutes, and His judgments, that you may live and multiply; and the Lord your God will bless you in the land which you go to possess."

Moses ends this section with verses 19-20:

"I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live; that you may love the Lord your God, that you may obey His voice, and that you may cling to Him, for He is your life and the length of your days; and that you may dwell in the land which the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give them."

The Blessing Covenant for Today

Now that's an interesting Old Testament story, and it's sad to know that the Israelites didn't keep the covenant and suffered those curses, but what does it mean for you and me as Christians today? We aren't under the Old Testament; we don't have to worry about animal sacrifices and rules of ceremonial cleanliness and keeping the Sabbath. How does the covenant scene relate to us, and what does it have to do with my bless-

ings? In Matthew 22:36-40, a lawyer tried to test Jesus by asking a tricky question:

“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

Jesus connects the old covenant with a new covenant, found in him. The new covenant provides the blessing of freedom from sin described in John 8:31-36:

“Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, “If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” They answered Him, “We are Abraham’s descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How can You say, ‘You will be made free’?” Jesus answered them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever. Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed.”

In the new covenant, the relationship between God and man is restored to Garden-of-Eden purity. Through Jesus, we can enter God’s presence once more.

“The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life and that they may have it more abundantly” (John 10:10).

“... I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” (John 14:6).

In Jesus, the promised seed of Abraham, all who believe and obey find their inheritance of blessings and escape the curses of sin.

“Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”), that the blessing of Abraham might come upon

the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” (Galatians 3:13; Deuteronomy 21:23).

“For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Galatians 3:26-29).

The Israelites were very proud of their status as the descendants of Abraham, and they were proud of the Book of the Law given from God through Moses. By the time Jesus began his ministry, national pride had become a stumbling block, an obstacle that prevented many from recognizing Jesus as the Messiah.

Today we have a much greater understanding of God’s eternal plan; we can look at the Old and New Testaments and see the connections. The Israelites broke the covenant made on Mt. Sinai and renewed at Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerizim. Through Jesus, God established a new covenant that would include anyone and everyone who would accept it — Jews and Gentiles. We accept the covenant to obey God when we are baptized into Christ; it is a serious, lifelong commitment to faith. In Christ, we then receive all blessings. Outside of Christ, we may enjoy the general blessings God has provided through the creation of life, but in the long run, we will know only the curses of living in sin.

Discussion Questions

1. The Israelites accepted God's blessings as part of their covenant with him. They promised to obey God, but they often broke that promise. What was the result when they disobeyed God?
2. Although we have no obligation to keep the Law of Moses, how do the principles described in Deuteronomy 30:9-16 apply to Christians?
3. In Romans 10:4-10, Paul quotes Deuteronomy 30:12-14. How do these verses fit the context of the letter to the Roman Christians?
4. Today some groups teach that God wants his people, Christians, to be rich in money and material possessions. If you are not rich, they say, then you are not living in a right relationship with God. Is there any truth in this idea?

Chapter 3

The Blessings of God's Love

What Kind of Love?

Love is a popular but often misunderstood topic. In our society, we usually think of love as a strong emotion, and it certainly is. But we sometimes have some rather odd applications of the concept of love. Movies often portray the romantic, fairy-tale kind of love. Popular songs and advertisements equate love and sex. The religious world often goes to extremes, either teaching that because God loves us, we can do or be or act anyway we want to, without condemnation, or teaching that we have to earn God's love. But when we get personal and talk to individuals, we usually discover that even if we can't define it or agree on its meaning, everyone needs love. Everyone wants to love and be loved.

First, just think about your own personal experiences with loving others and being loved. Pause for a few moments and remember someone who loved you more than anyone else you ever knew. Maybe you had a devoted mother who always gave of herself to ensure your happiness and security, or a doting father who could never stay mad at you no matter what you did. Maybe you had a brother or sister whose shared memories sustain you to this day or a husband who placed your needs and dreams before his own. Maybe you knew a child who delighted in your presence or cherished a friend who saw you at your worst and loved you anyway.

Close your eyes and remember someone who loved you more than you ever expected or deserved to be loved.

Remember the deep joy you experienced, the warmth and peace and contentment you felt just because that person existed in your world. Go ahead; rejoice in the memory of that special love. Hear the laughter once more, the comforting word. Bask in the acceptance, the understanding, and the bliss of love freely given.

Now multiply that feeling by infinity, and you will begin to imagine the smallest fraction of the love God has for you.

Expand that positive experience of love and imagine what the world would be like if we all realized that God loves us and wants us to know his love and respond to it.

Too often, we emphasize the emotional side of love and neglect the commitment side. We paint love with hearts and flowers and forget that sometimes it requires hard work to maintain a relationship. Emotions are good; God gave them to us. But when we base our decisions merely on how we feel, we can expect disappointment.

God's love, however, is more than just an emotion, more than an ideal or an attitude or even an action. "God is love", said the beloved apostle John. Love is the very essence of God's being, the core of his personality. All his other qualities — power, majesty, mercy, grace, justice, knowledge, holiness, wisdom — all are refined by his overwhelming, unimaginable, perfect love. God *decides* to love us, even when we don't deserve it. Even when he doesn't feel like it.

Because of God's Love

Because of his great love, God used his power to create Adam and Eve, knowing they would sin. He allows the generations to continue on this earth, though every day thousands reject him. Because of love,

- God accepts our feeble worship of his matchless majesty.
- God extends mercy to his children.
- God provides the grace to reunite sinners with holiness.
- God promises justice for the wicked.
- God reveals himself through the Word.
- God makes his holiness attainable through Christ.
- God opens our minds and hearts to his wisdom.

"God is love" (1 John 4:8).

"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son..." (John 3:16).

"...that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able

to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height — to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Ephesians 3:17-20).

Do you see the common thread running through these verses? God loves us far more than we can comprehend or appreciate as we should. He loves us in spite of our response, not because of it.

The love of God is so vast, so encompassing, that it is almost unfathomable for us with our limited human vision and our imagination bruised by disappointment.

Almost. But we can experience it. How? The song “Jesus Loves Me, This I Know” tells us one way: “For the Bible tells me so”.

God’s Love Revealed in Scripture

We can see God’s love in the rich treasure chest of the Bible as God opens his arms, time after time, and entreats his wayward children to come home.

- He blesses faithful Abraham and forgives him when he lies and when he laughs.
- He protects the shepherd-king David when he sings and when he fights the Philistines; he forgives David when he commits adultery and murder.
- He comforts Elijah though this mighty prophet gives in to doubts and fears after God triumphs over the prophets of Baal.
- He places a baby in a manger to become the Savior on a cross.

Throughout the Bible, God demonstrates his love by answering prayers, providing guidance, and finally sending Christ as “*the brightness of His glory and the express image of his person*” (Hebrews 1:3). In other words, God embodied his infinite love in a finite form that we could understand — a human being.

In Christ we see love taken off the shelf of idealism and put into everyday use. He fed the hungry, healed the sick, taught the gospel to the

poor, rebuked the hypocrites, and patiently revealed God's word to his disciples. He did all these things out of love, without sinning, modeling for us the kind of life God wants us to live.

Many followed him; some turned away. But Jesus continued to love, regardless of the response he received. Read the story of the rich young ruler in Mark 10:17-23. He told Jesus that he had kept the Law from his youth. Look at verse 21 and notice the description of Jesus' non-verbal response before he speaks: "*Then Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him...*" (emphasis added).

Did Jesus love him because he had kept the Law? Because he asked what he should do to inherit eternal life? Because he was rich? Because he knew the young man would not accept the call to follow Jesus?

All of the above. And none of the above. Jesus loved the rich young ruler because it is the nature of Jesus to love. He knew the man's heart, of course. He knew all his struggles and secret sins and pride. He knew he wanted eternal life, but he didn't want it enough to sacrifice his riches. And Jesus knew the man would go away "*sorrowful*".

Jesus did not love him with a permissive, feel-good love. He loved him enough to answer his question truthfully. The rich young man wanted approval for his diligence in keeping the Law of Moses. Jesus loved him for his earnest effort; he could have patted him on the back and said, "Well done; keep up the good work". Such a comment would have polished the young man's self-image to a high gloss, but it wouldn't have given him eternal life. "*One thing you lack,*" said Jesus. Jesus loved the rich young ruler with an honest, demanding love.

Just like he loves us — not because of who we are or what we do but in spite of it. Not for what we can give him but for what he can give us. Jesus the Man embodies God, who is love.

"Yes, but ..." I know what you're thinking. "Of course I can see God's love in the miraculous revelation of the Bible. But that was long ago and far away. How do I see or feel or experience God's love today in a time and culture that seems intent on destroying goodness and replacing it with evil? How does God show his love for me, right now?"

The World Still Turns

You're still here, aren't you?

Someone has said that the birth of a baby is God's way of saying the world should continue. I suggest that our continued presence on earth, as individuals, as the race of human beings, and as members of Christ's church, is God's way of saying he loves us so much that he wants to give us every opportunity to live and love and serve him, to bring more sinners home to the kingdom, and to enjoy the bounty of blessings that are the constant expression of his love.

If it were up to me, I think I would have thrown up my hands in disgust and called for Judgment Day a long, long time ago. Maybe while Nero was lighting his garden with human, Christian torches. Or when men began to paint the church with the brush of human doctrines like infant baptism, works salvation, and a hierarchy of priests headed by a man who declared himself infallible. Or maybe during the Spanish Inquisition, when the so-called church preached conversion by torture and death.

The rule of Hitler might have moved me to such anger and despair that I would have ordered the trumpet blast before that evil man slaughtered six million Jews and dared to call himself a Christian. And I'm quite sure that on September 11, 2001, I couldn't have allowed airplanes hijacked by hate-filled men to crash into buildings at the whim of a warped zealot.

But that's just me. Thank God, he doesn't leave the big decisions up to me.

Because in spite of all human efforts to distort, disdain, or destroy God's plan for his creation, he continues to plead, to bless, to — well — to love us.

Our continued presence on earth suggests the following message from God:

“Look around you. Look at the suffering, the pain, the evil. This is what you become without my love. This is what happens when you run away from me and shun my commandments and try to make it on your

own. But it's not what I intended for you. I intended love and abundant life and joy. Come back to me. Come back to my love. I'm waiting for you."

The world still turns. We're still here. And so is God. He waits patiently for the human race to recognize and accept the full measure of his love.

God's Love Revealed in Life

God knows that the concept of the Creator waiting in love for his created beings to come out of the coma of evil and live in the light is too big for most of us to comprehend. We need to see God's love on a smaller scale, in everyday events that we can recognize immediately and savor in memory when temptation or fear or pain knocks on the door. We want something concrete and personal that can't be denied.

It's here. God's love is all around us in thousands of actions and words and beautiful moments.

"Where?"

When we're having a bad day, when we're not feeling loved or loving, when we forget life's glories and tragedies as we struggle with boredom, irritation, frustration, loneliness, or a dozen other niggling, mundane problems, we may not see God's love clearly.

But it's here, all around us.

Marriage

Have you ever met your husband's eyes casually, not expecting anything special, and seen an expression so tender and loving that you could hardly breathe? For a moment, you felt like a heroine in a romance novel, only better, because you were swept away by a sudden, sure conviction: "My husband loves me. No matter what problems we have, no matter how much we disagree, I know he loves me".

After five, ten, twenty, or fifty years of marriage, we may take for granted the precious love that binds husband and wife as one. We may think more about the little irritations or the big arguments scattered across

the years of daily living. But when your husband becomes ill and the doctor says, "I'm sorry, there's nothing more we can do", you may see your marriage in a different light. And when he goes home to heaven before you, the memory that will first haunt and then comfort the most is the memory of the love you saw when he looked at you or held your hand or said, in words or deeds, "I love you".

Twenty-two women listed "marriage" among their ten favorite blessings on the survey. Dana Helton commented on the "hills and valleys" of marriage, but she concluded, "the greatest blessing God gave us in regard to marriage was the command to marry for life. The joys, pleasures, satisfaction, and fulfillment in marriage come largely as a direct result of the commitment".

If you have now or once had a loving husband, then you have been blessed with the love of God expressed in the covenant of marriage that he ordained in the Garden of Eden, before sin led to polygamy, adultery, and divorce. *"Therefore shall a man leave his father and mother, and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh"*, said Adam in Genesis 2:24. Have you ever wondered how Adam knew the concept of leaving his parents to take a wife? Could it be that he already understood the love of God his Father and realized that marriage would be another level of love?

God intended marriage to be a relationship of love, a reflection of his love and companionship. He repeats this image again and again throughout the Bible as he compares his love for the Israelites and then for the church to the marriage covenant. When Israel practiced idolatry, God warned through the prophet Jeremiah that they had forsaken him and *"committed adultery"* (Jeremiah 5:7). Jesus spoke of the *"adulterous generation"* in Matthew 12:39 and Mark 8:38. In Ephesians 5:25, Paul commanded husbands to love their wives *"just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her"*, and in Revelation, Jesus is the bridegroom with the church as his bride (Revelation 22).

God's love serves as a template or pattern for marriage. Many marriages fail to meet this high standard, but that doesn't change the ideal.

Children

"Children are a heritage of the Lord", declared the Psalmist (Psalm

127:3). Twenty-five women included “children” on their blessing list, and fifteen included “grandchildren”.

When I held my son for the first time, I was overwhelmed with a new dimension of love that I had never even imagined. I had read the many Bible references to God as our Father, as the loving, patient, and forgiving parent, but I couldn’t grasp the implications of parental love until I had a child. I remember thinking, “God loves me, his child, the way I love this little baby, only more so”.

Years later, after the usual ups and downs of rearing children, God reminded me of that kind of consuming love once more when the grandchildren arrived. (The only grandchild ever born who is more beautiful than mine is, of course, yours!) Those innocent eyes and sweet smiles touch us in unusual ways as the layers of love multiply. Yet God loves his children even more deeply than we love ours.

And when our children break our hearts — and they will at least once — we still love them, just as God still loves us when we stray or rebel. In fact, watching our children suffer the consequences of bad choices like drugs or pre-marital sex or wasted opportunities may be the moment of epiphany — the moment we realize how much God really, *really* loves us. As we weep over our children in their pain, we may say, “Is this how you felt, Lord, when I turned away from your teaching? When I defied you and followed my own willful path?”

We are made in God’s image. We have an eternal, spiritual nature that reflects God’s spirit, but we also have a temporary, physical nature. We usually think of our emotions as part of the physical nature because they can lead to sin, yet Jesus expressed emotion often, even anger, and did not sin. God understands our strong emotions because he made them a part of the spiritual nature.

For example, God knows how a broken heart feels. In 1 Samuel 8, when the elders of Israel ask Samuel for a king, the old prophet is upset, but he takes their request to God. No doubt the request hurt Samuel’s feelings; he had served God by serving the people all his life, but now that he was old, they wanted a king to lead them, “*like other nations have*”.

So Samuel prays. And God tells him to give the people a king. Then

there's a sentence that we sometimes overlook: "*For they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me, that I should not reign over them*" (1 Samuel 8:7). The word translated "*reject*" is very strong; it means, "to abhor, despise, loathe, or cast off". The Israelites broke God's heart by rejecting him in favor of a human king.

Matthew 23:37-39 records the lament of Jesus over the apostasy of Jerusalem. He longed to love and protect Jerusalem, "*as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings*", but the people rejected him.

Have you ever felt rejected? Have you ever loved someone who not only didn't love you in return but also trampled on your love? Rejection can break your heart.

If you've suffered rejection by your children, God knows how you feel. And when you can move past your own suffering and realize how God suffers over you, how Jesus suffered physically and spiritually for your sin and mine, you will know a new dimension of God's love. You will be blessed indeed.

Family and Friends

Not everyone experiences God's love through the blessing of marriage and children, but everyone has family and friends with the potential to demonstrate God's love by their lives. Forty-three women circled "family" on the blessing list, and twenty-four circled "friendship".

After my first husband died, I sometimes felt that God was far away, but he was only as far as the friends who took care of me during the first dark months of grief. In the process of learning to be single again, I relied every day on my family, my church family, and my friends. In their compassion, I found God's comfort. Their prayers lifted me to the very presence of God. Because of their companionship, I was seldom lonely.

Remember your "best friend" in sixth grade or high school? She was the one who understood when no one else seemed to care. The two of you went everywhere together and talked for hours on the phone. Perhaps you even promised to be "best friends forever".

In marriage, your husband may be your best friend, and that's a blessing. You may have "couple friends" who understand the stresses and joys

of marriage as no one else can. You may treasure a relationship with a beloved sister or cousin. Those relationships are blessings, too. But if you are single, you are blessed with the opportunity to develop many strong friendships on different levels. Friends from work or other areas of life outside of church may give you the opportunity to share your faith. Friends within the church may become your spiritual family because you connect through the system of love and faith that a strong church provides.

Tamara Meyer Bransgrove, a Christian in her thirties, wrote the following comments about being single:

“Most girls dream of getting married and having children. That was my dream. When I didn’t meet someone in college or since then in my career, I kept trusting that one day my dream would come true. Then a few years ago, a close study of 1 Corinthians 7 revealed that we each have our own gift from God and “each one should retain the place in life that God has called him”. Paul also tells us that an unmarried person can be concerned about the Lord’s affairs instead of the world’s affairs. I’m not sure I’ll ever master that, but God has given me the strength to be single. Some people can’t be single, just as some can’t be married. I have many single friends who provide a network of support for me and for all of us together. One day God may bless me with marriage, but right now, being single is a blessing.”

Within the intricate emotional fabric of relationships among family and friends, God has woven strands of his divine love. Is someone kind when you are ill? Jesus felt compassion for the crowds who longed for healing. Has someone wept with you in shared grief? Jesus wept with Mary and Martha when Lazarus lay in the tomb. Has someone listened to your fears and doubts? Through Jesus, we take everything to God in prayer.

The name “Christian” implies that we should be like Christ to each other and to the world. God demonstrates his love through those who obey and follow his son. I encourage you to look for God’s love in the Christians around you.

“The Greatest of These Is Love”

Without love, nothing else matters. Our good deeds are empty if they are not done with love. Our gifts and talents are wasted if we do not use them with love. The church is just a social club unless the members love God and each other. A marriage without love is just a legal contract, easily and carelessly dissolved. And children who grow up without love become broken, bitter adults unless they discover and accept love.

Love informs every attribute and action of God, from creation to the cross, from the cross to this present moment when you and I acknowledge our need and desire for him by living in his love. God is the source and culmination of love, the only source that can satisfy our longing for communion and completeness.

We all long for the kind of love Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 13: patient, meek, selfless, true, hopeful, enduring, unflinching. We spend our lives looking for it, often in the wrong places, and when we find it, even briefly, we understand why Paul called it “*the greatest*” of God’s gifts. It is the part of God’s eternal nature that we can experience while still bound by mortality, for love transcends time and space.

C.S. Lewis said that “God is outside and above the Time-line... All the days are ‘Now’ for him”. We understand that concept in a limited way because we accept the Scripture that tells us, “*One day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day*” (2 Peter 3:8). But we are so enslaved to time that grasping the idea of something or someone existing outside its boundaries is almost impossible.

But we can grasp the concept of love. We know how wonderful it is, how fulfilling and joyful and necessary to our lives. And so, because his nature is love and because he made us in his image, God reveals himself through infinite, eternal, complete love.

Sometimes we only see the shadow, the brief emotion that may be quenched by cruelty. But the will of love, the essence that emanates from God through Jesus, through the Word, through all the people who wear the name of Christ, defines us and gives us purpose. It is, indeed, the greatest blessing, and the source of all other blessings.

The Blessings

Earlier we mentioned that God demonstrates his love for us through our families. So let's summarize the blessings found in marriage and family. We know that God intended man and woman to have a special relationship. Genesis 2:18-25 tells us that God made Adam first and then created woman as his "helper". In the Hebrew, that word means "counterpart" or "mate".

Below is the introduction from a wedding ceremony in the Church of England dated from the early 1800's.

"Dearly Beloved, we are gathered here in the sight of God and in the face of this congregation to join this couple in holy matrimony, which is an honorable estate ordained by God in the time of man's innocency and which represents the mystical union between Christ and his church. It is not to be entered into lightly or wantonly to satisfy man's carnal lusts, but reverently, discreetly, advisedly, soberly, and in the fear of God, considering the causes for which it was ordained. First it was ordained for the procreation of children. Second, as a remedy against sin, to avoid fornication, and third for the mutual society, help, and comfort that the one ought to have of the other both in prosperity and adversity."

Is that a good summary of the purposes of marriage? I think so. What are the blessings found in marriage?

1. Husband and wife share a unique, intimate relationship — the idea of two people becoming one not only physically but also one in purpose and faith and action. In a Christian marriage, the love of God and devotion to his church are part of the husband and wife relationship. In addition, that relationship should be different from any other human relationship we have — with children, friends, or other family members. We should be able to tell our husbands the secret fears and joys that we don't share with anyone else. Love that probably begins with physical and emotional attraction should grow and deepen as we decide day-by-day and year-by-year to love our husbands in spite of their faults and failures — much as God loves us.

2. In this intimate marriage relationship, we should receive the blessings of support, understanding, comfort in sorrow, security of a home, and the beauty of sex with the one man who loves us even on a bad hair day, even when we're sick or grumpy. (By the way, like most rules God has given us, having sex within marriage has both physical and emotional benefits. AIDS and other sexually-transmitted diseases would not be epidemic if married people practiced monogamy and single people practiced abstinence). Besides the risk of disease, so-called casual sex with many partners can never satisfy the emotional need found in married sex because casual sex has no emotional bond.
3. The sense of family — having children, caring for extended family, establishing a home built on God's design — is another blessing of marriage. Someone said, "Home is the place that, if you go there, they have to let you in." When the world is giving you a hard time, when you've had a bad day at work, when you're hurting from grief or self-doubt or fear, the knowledge that you can go home is a great comfort. Traveling is fun, but coming home is always satisfying. Just as God instilled in us a desire to know him, he also instilled the desire for home — the heavenly home — the perfect home — where we will be safe and happy for eternity.

Our families and homes here on earth become a reflection, though sometimes a dim reflection, of the home we long for in heaven. God's love should serve as the pattern for marriage and the Christian home. Even when marriages fail and families have problems, that element of God's love is there, reminding us to strive for the ideal.

Discussion Questions

1. "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." How else do you know God's love expressed through Jesus?
2. Review the following Scriptures and write down the emotion described in each.
 - Genesis 1:31
 - Genesis 6:6,8
 - Genesis 18:32
 - 1 Samuel 8:7,8
 - Hosea 11:1-9
 - Mark 1:10,11
 - Mark 1:40,41
 - Luke 8:22-25
 - Luke 22:42-44
3. Why is it important to understand that God expresses emotions? How reliable are our feelings when it comes to making important decisions?
4. How can we as Christians demonstrate God's love to each other and to non-Christians?
5. Describe a time in your life when you became more aware of God's love for you.
6. Make a list of the blessings you experience in marriage, family, and friendships.

Encouraging Words

“God’s love sustains me because I know He will help me through the difficult times. My husband’s love also sustains me; I need his physical arms to hold me and make me feel better.” — Erma Humphrey

“God’s *love is always, always* reliable and consistent in a world of unreliability and inconsistency.” — Nancy Bennie

“Knowing my God and Savior loves me sustains me. There have been times when I felt I was worth *nothing* to most people. Knowing I am worth the life of someone (Jesus) helped me to go on living.” — Beverly Glidewell

“The blessing of God’s love sustains me most during difficult times because it is then, in the midst of adversity and heartache, that He does something to let me know He cares. When I feel sad, lonely, uneasy, unsure, or even hopeless, I think of just how much God loved me to send His only begotten son to die that I might live, and that more abundantly. I think about the song, *When He was on the Cross, I was on His Mind*, and I ask myself, ‘What manner of love is this that a man would lay down his life for his friend?’ I stand in even greater awe when I realize that with all of my insufficiencies, He — God — loves me still.” — Jewel Austin-Houston

Chapter 4

The Blessings of Submission

Nobody listed submission as a blessing on the blessing survey. Nobody. That's probably because nobody wants to submit! From the two-year-old with forbidden candy in hand to the 95-year-old grandma who doesn't want to go to a nursing home, no one wants to be told what she can or cannot do.

Time travel, again. Just for a minute, you are 10-years old. Your mother/father/big sister/big brother/teacher has just told you to do something you don't want to do. You obey grudgingly, but under your breath, you are muttering and complaining. Complete this sentence: "When I grow up, I'll only do what _____" or "When I grow up, no one can tell me _____". Children want to be adults so they can enjoy complete freedom; they think being grown up means doing whatever they want to do.

Here in the Real World

As adults, we know better. In the real world, every one of us, from the two-year old to the grandma, submits to someone to some degree, every single day. We don't always submit willingly, and certainly not always cheerfully, but we all submit to someone or something. Somebody has to be the boss — and even the boss has a boss. Somebody has to set the rules in the family, but even the parents have to follow rules. And whether we like it or not, God has commanded Christian women to be submissive to him and to their husbands.

"Submission" is a dirty word in our society. Talk about submission in a group of non-Christians — and even in some Christian groups — and you'll get a lot of eye-rolls and head-shakes. Someone will tell you to wake up and live in the twenty-first century — the age of the liberated woman, the career woman, the self-made, self-sufficient, superwoman who can have it all. Women can be doctors, lawyers, and CEOs; they are not limited as in times past to being "just a housewife". They can rule the world.

Those women who do choose to submit to their husbands, even though they may work outside the home, or those who choose to stay home with their children, are often pitied as downtrodden, unenlightened doormats who suffer a type of spousal abuse that should cause outrage and rebellion.

God's Intentions

The submissive wife as a victim is not what God intended when he talked about submission in the Bible. He never intended for women to be doormats or slaves or property. Centuries of sin created the atmosphere for the mistreatment of women that in the last century many women fought to overcome.

How did Jesus treat women? He healed them as he healed men. He taught them as he taught men. He respected them as he respected men. When Jesus established the church, he actually liberated women by giving them equal access to God; salvation is not limited to men. Through the teaching of the apostles, Jesus reinstated God's original plan by describing the specific roles for men and women in marriage and in the church.

Both Peter and Paul explain these roles, and both state that the wife is to be in subjection or submission to the husband in marriage. Study the following passages of Scripture:

- 1 Peter 3:1-7
- Ephesians 5:21-33
- Colossians 3:18,19
- 1 Corinthians 7
- Titus 2:4-5
- 1 Timothy 3:4,5

The Meaning of Submission

The word translated as subjection or submission in these passages is "hypotasso". It means "be submissive", "be subject to", "be subordinate

to”. It always means to submit to a person in authority. When I say “always”, I don’t just mean in the Bible; throughout Greek literature, this word is always used to show a one-directional relationship, as in person A submits to the authority of person B. It never means “mutual submission”.³ Some Christian women believe that when Paul writes in Ephesians 5:21 to “*submit to one another out of reverence to Christ*”, he means that husbands and wives should mutually submit to one another.

However, neither the word nor the context supports that idea. If we read the entire passage, we see that Christians should submit to one another as the church submits to Christ, but wives are specifically told to accept their husbands as authorities and submit to them. If Paul had meant “mutual submission”, he would have had to follow the “wives submit” sentence with a “husbands submit” sentence. Instead, he tells husbands how to be the kind of authority they should be — “*love your wives as Christ loves the church*”.

So there is no way to avoid it, ladies; the Bible clearly teaches that wives must submit to their husbands.

Why then do we fight this command so hard? Why do some Christian women fail to submit or submit only half-heartedly or resentfully? Why do so many find no blessing in submission?

1. First, all humans, men and women, are basically self-centered and selfish. We want to do things our way. We have to learn to be unselfish — to give in — to submit to authority. What happens to people who never learn to submit to authority? At the least, they are usually unhappy; at the most, they may end up in trouble or even in jail. What happens when people rebel against the laws of society? Chaos. Society collapses.
2. Our society and culture tell us that submission to a husband is bad. We have rights! We don’t have to have a man to take care of us or tell us what to do. Society will either ridicule or pity the submissive wife. So it’s hard to be submissive when other women are telling us that it’s unnecessary or even wrong.
3. We see many abuses. Some men use the teaching about submission to be dictators and rule their wives with cruelty and arrogance instead

of love. The church has often failed to teach the husband's role as a loving authority who respects and protects the wife, emphasizing instead the command for wives to submit. Notice that none of these passages tells the husband to *force* his wife to submit; the command is for the woman to obey, not the man to impose. When we see abuses, we naturally feel the situation is unfair and perhaps even harmful to women.

4. We fail to understand the purpose and ultimately the blessing of submission. We tend to accept the world's definition of submission instead of God's definition. When we try to obey God without understanding or at least accepting that God's way is best, we may be obedient but also resentful.

What Submission Is NOT

Now let's look at what submission is NOT. Then we can better understand God's plan. Christian marital submission as described in the Bible does not mean that

- The wife is inferior
- The wife is to be passive or surrender all independent thought
- The husband is to stifle a wife's creativity, gifts, or individuality
- The wife is to do everything the husband demands or that the husband is to oppress the wife
- The wife is to enable the husband's sin or irresponsibility
- The wife is to live with a psychologically dangerous or abusive man
- The husband is the absolute authority. (Only Christ has absolute authority.)⁴

How do we know that these things are not included in God's plan for submission? Because if any of them are, then submission contradicts other biblical principles such as love, justice, fairness, kindness, and compassion.⁵ God does not suspend his essential principles to enforce an unfair command. He has a reason for everything he asks us to do.

If a husband is caught up in a sinful lifestyle, the submissive wife

must in love and kindness confront and bring him out of that sin; she can't stand back and hide behind "I'm a submissive wife". If a wife is not submissive, her husband should not try to force her to submit. He should love her sacrificially and pray she will learn to obey God by submitting.

God's Plan for Marriage

A good marriage — a Christian marriage — has physical and spiritual unity. Very soon after Creation, God established the foundation of unity in marriage: the bond between one man and one woman who become one flesh (Genesis 2:24). The husband and wife have different roles in marriage, but the submissive role of the wife is no less important than the leadership role of the husband. Alexander Strauch summarizes the unity that God intended for marriage in this way:

To achieve the reality of this one-flesh relationship, the husband is to selflessly lead and care for his wife in the way that Christ leads and cares for the Church, and the wife is to submit to and support her husband's leadership in the same way that the Church submits to and supports Christ's leadership. Although husband and wife have different roles in the marriage relationship, they both promote the interests, fulfillment, and well-being of the other.⁶

We cannot deny the clear teaching of 1 Peter 3:1-7; women are to submit to their husbands, and husbands are to respect and honor their wives. Women should emphasize "*the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit*" rather than their physical appearance. But after Peter discusses submission to governments and other authorities in chapter 2, and after he explains the role of the submissive wife, he summarizes the attitude of submission that should characterize all Christians:

"Finally, all of you be of one mind, having compassion for one another; love as brothers, be tenderhearted, courteous; not returning evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, blessing, knowing that you were called to this, that you may inherit a blessing" (1 Peter 3:8,9).

Notice that submission to one another causes us to bless others and in

return to inherit a blessing. We must all submit to God and to the authorities he has designated if we are to experience the blessings he has prepared for us as his children.

Accepting the Concept of Submission

How then do we as Christian women reconcile our desire to go our own way with God's command to submit? How do we accept the concept of submission as a way of life?

First, we must remember that this command to submit is not given just to women. We have not been singled out to become slaves to dictators. The Bible teaches about submission with many examples. Even Christ submitted to God's will and died on the cross, though he prayed three times that the cup might pass (Matthew 26:37-44).

Romans 13:1-3 instructs everyone to submit to the government. Servants are to submit to masters according to Titus 2:5; today we often apply that to the employer/employee relationship. Ephesians 5:24 commands the church to submit to Christ, and 1 Corinthians 16:15,16 reminds Christians to submit to their spiritual leaders. And that's not all. James 4:7 tells us as believers to *"submit to God"*.

Next, keep in mind that the relationships among these groups differ. We submit to the government so we can live in peace in an orderly society. When people refuse to submit to the authority of law, chaos results. Society collapses. So we support the government by submitting to its laws. But we don't have a love relationship with the government.

We submit to our employer to get the job done and receive a paycheck, but we don't have a love relationship with the employer.

But when we talk about Christians submitting to God, wives submitting to husbands, and Christians submitting to one another, the standard is raised. We're dealing with love relationships. We submit to God not only because he commands it but also because we love him. The same should be true of marriage. Two people become one in marriage; they combine the leading and submitting roles in one loving, purposeful relationship. One lovingly leads and the other lovingly follows and supports. Brothers and sisters in Christ respect and love one another, so they submit by putting others first.

From the time of the Garden of Eden, the wife's role was to affirm and support the husband's leadership. This is not a passive role — the wife is not a doormat or an inferior being. Her role is active; it requires skill, love, wisdom, strength, and insight. The two work together; marriage should not be a competition to see who can be the boss!

I know we are talking about ideals. I know it's not easy to be a submissive wife, even if your husband is doing his best to be a Christ-like leader. But isn't the entire Christian walk a pursuit of the ideal — the perfection of Christ? Why should marriage be any different?

Deciding to Submit to God

The key to submission in marriage or any situation is to submit fully to God first. Then everything else will follow. And submission to God is not a new command; it's all through the Bible. Let's look at just one example in Joshua 3:7-17. The season is harvest time. The Jordan River is at flood stage. The Promised Land lies on the other side of the raging river. No doubt the people wondered how they would cross. No doubt they were a little nervous.

God tells Joshua to instruct the priests to walk into the Jordan, carrying the ark of the covenant, and stand still. Verse 13 says, *"...as soon as the soles of the feet of the priests who bear the ark of the Lord, the Lord of all the earth, shall rest in the waters of the Jordan, that the waters... shall be cut off, the waters that come down from upstream, and they shall stand as a heap."* Then the priests stood in the middle of the river, while all the children of Israel crossed **on dry ground**.

They crossed on dry ground, but first the priests had to get their feet wet. First they had to submit; then they received the blessing. And don't miss the significance of the fact that the first people who had to submit were the religious leaders; then the rest of the people followed.

What about us today? At what point in our lives do we first submit to God? When do we decide to submit? Surely the most obvious act of submission is baptism. Romans 6:2-4 talks about being buried with Christ in baptism and rising to walk in a new life. Second Corinthians 5:17 promises, *"If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"* (NIV).

And that's it, right? After baptism, we are fully in submission to God and don't have to think about it any more. Think again. In Luke 9:23, Jesus said, "*If any man desires to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross **daily**, and follow me*" (emphasis added).

We might think that the verse above means we daily bear the burdens and heartaches of this life. You may have heard someone say, "My husband's an alcoholic, and that's just the cross I have to bear". No, that's a problem, but it's not the cross. That's a difficult situation, but it's not the cross. The cross stands for death. When Jesus carried the cross, he carried the instrument of his painful, agonizing death.

So how do we "take up our death" and carry it "daily", "following Jesus"?

We do it by deciding every day to submit to God and die to self. *Every day* we make the choice to submit to God until it becomes ingrained, until we automatically do the thing that pleases God instead of ourselves.

A simple example is church attendance. On most Sundays, we see the same people at church. Sometimes there are visitors; sometimes members are sick or traveling and can't come. But on most Sundays, we see the same crowd. They didn't have to decide to come to church; they came to church because it's Sunday and that's what they do on Sunday. That's a good habit born of choices made years ago to submit to God.

Then there's Monday. How will the people who come to church every Sunday behave on Monday? Will they spread gossip or submit to God and choose kind words instead? Will they scream at their children or submit to God and teach them with love instead? Will they lie or submit to God and take the consequences of a difficult truth? Will they argue with their husbands or submit as God has commanded?

If we submit to God consciously, obediently, then submitting to the man we loved enough to marry should get easier with time and practice.

Deciding to Submit to Your Husband

How do Christian women submit to their husbands?

First, they submit to God. Yes, I know I said this in the previous section, but until you submit to God, you're not likely to be successful submitting to your husband. You must *decide* to be submissive. If you wait until you *feel like submitting*, you'll never do it, because submitting requires a decision.

Second, the Golden Rule applies to husbands and wives. Express to your husband the same kind of love you want him to express to you. I don't mean that you should buy him flowers because you would like him to buy you flowers. Instead, do something for him that he likes. Practice the same kind of respect and consideration you want to receive from him.

Third, don't tell. Ask.

Don't order. Ask.

Don't yell. Speak quietly. Do you like it when someone yells at you? Neither does your husband.

Fourth, build him up. Express confidence in his decisions. Don't roll your eyes. Don't say, "I told you so" when he's wrong. Help him to be right by supporting him.

Fifth, pray for your husband. Lift him up to God in your private prayer time. Realize that his responsibility to love you as Christ loved the church is greater than your responsibility to submit. A man once told me that he thought it would be easier to die defending his wife from an attacker than it is to live every day loving her as Christ loved the church. Christian men do feel their responsibility to be Christian husbands; they just don't always succeed.

Sixth, if you and your husband don't have a daily devotional time for Bible reading and prayer, ask your husband to help you establish this habit. Ideally, the two of you should set aside time at the beginning of the day to read Scripture and pray with your children, but if that doesn't work with your schedules, choose another time.

Don't say you don't have time; nobody does. But we all make time for the things we really want to do. Can't we make time to spend with our husbands in the study of God's word?

Finally, seventh, practice Titus 2:3-5. Love your husband, love your

children, make a home, be sensible, be kind and submit to your husband's authority. Choose it every day until it becomes the thing you do without thinking.

The Blessings in Submission

I promised to tell you the blessings found in submission. I was married for nearly 29 years, and I tried to submit to my husband. I didn't always succeed, but I tried, and Bill often told me that he appreciated my support and encouragement in the decisions he made. I didn't always see the blessings in submission, and I must admit that it's easier to teach submission from the single woman's point of view! After four years of widowhood, I married again, and I am rediscovering both the difficulties and the blessings of being a submissive wife.

Yes, there are blessings. When we submit to God through Christ, we receive all spiritual blessings that are found in Christ (Ephesians 1:3). We receive the blessing of God's approval for our obedience. We receive grace as we humbly submit, according to James 4:6-8,10: *"But He gives more grace. Therefore He says: 'God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.' Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and he will draw near to you... Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up."*

In Psalm 37:4, we learn, *"Delight yourself also in the Lord, and He shall give you the desires of your heart."* Does that mean we get everything we desire? No, but if we delight in the Lord, the desires of the heart will be good, and God grants good things for his children.

What are the blessings we receive when we submit to our husbands?

1. Again, we receive the approval of God for obeying his command. We also receive the approval of the husband if he is a Christian trying to follow God.
2. The husband may be won to Christ and receive salvation. This is the teaching in 1 Peter 3 for the woman whose husband is not a Christian. But perhaps it could have a broader meaning. If your husband isn't being the kind of husband he should be, yet you submit as you should, your example may win him over; you may help him become a better husband.

3. We may receive the blessing of less responsibility. I really am a better follower than I am a leader. I don't like to be in charge. As a widow, I missed my husband's guidance; I missed having him here to bear the greater responsibility of the big decisions. There were many times in our life together that I was glad not to have the final say or to carry the burden of the final decision. When we submit, we allow the husband *to be the husband* instead of trying to do his job for him, and we experience a certain amount of freedom from responsibility. (I realize that may be a left-handed blessing based on my personality.)
4. Finally, we receive the blessing of unity in marriage, the one-flesh concept of God's original plan in Genesis 2:28,29 — bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh, one flesh, one purpose — unity. Paul echoes it in Ephesians 5:31 and continues in verse 32 with a remarkable statement: "*This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church*". Just as family love, particularly the parents' love for the child, is or at least should be a reflection of the way God loves us, the husband/wife union in marriage is or should be a reflection of the relationship between Christ and the church. He is the loving, sacrificial head of the church, the bridegroom, and the church is his loving, supportive, submissive bride.

The song, "How Beautiful" contains this line: "How beautiful the radiant bride who waits for her groom with his light in her eyes." Such is a marriage when the partners try to follow God's plan — the husband leading, the wife submitting, for a common, unified purpose. And even if you're not there — even if you're not close — you'll be a better wife for trying.

The best blessings don't fall into our laps like apples from a tree. Though we can't earn them any more than we can earn salvation, we can't fully enjoy these blessings unless we are in a right relationship with God. If we want good apples, we must take care of the tree. If we want blessings, we must obey God, and obedience, by definition, means submitting to his will.

Discussion Questions

1. Briefly describe God's instructions about the roles of the husband and wife both before and after Adam and Eve sinned. See Genesis 1:27,28; 2:18-24; 3:14-21.
2. Summarize the teaching on the roles of the husband and wife or men and women in these New Testament passages:
 - 1 Peter 3:1-7
 - Ephesians 5:21-33
 - Colossians 3:18,19
 - 1 Corinthians 7
 - Titus 2:4,5
 - 1 Timothy 3:4,5
3. Why do we as Christians find it so difficult to submit to God?
4. In general, do you think women in the church submit to their husbands? I often hear men at church say things like, "I just do what my wife tells me" or "You'll have to ask my wife; I don't know what she wants me to do". How much of that kind of talk is joking, how much is courtesy, and how much is a reflection of worldly attitudes that promote dominance by women?
5. Describe a time in your life when you surrendered your will to God's will concerning a major decision or a situation beyond your control. What was the result of your submission to God?
6. Do you and your husband discuss the roles each of you play? Why or why not?

Encouraging Words

The following poem has been attributed to an anonymous Confederate soldier; I couldn't find any other reference to an author. The poem suggests that we receive from God what we need, even when we don't know that we need it. The essence of submission is giving God the control.

I asked God for strength,
 that I might achieve.
I was made weak,
 that I might learn humbly to obey.

I asked for help,
 that I do greater things.
I was given infirmity,
 that I might do better things.

I asked for riches,
 that I might be happy.
I was given poverty,
 that I might be wise.

I asked for all things,
 that I might enjoy life.
I was given life,
 that I might enjoy all things.

I got nothing that I asked for,
 but everything I had hoped for.
Despite myself,
 my prayers were answered.
I am, among all men,
 most richly blessed.

Chapter 5

The Blessings of the Lord's Supper

Every Sunday when the church comes together to worship God, we participate in a fellowship, a shared faith. We celebrate and express that faith in various ways during our service: we sing, we study the Bible, we give, we pray for the sick and for the church and for wisdom and forgiveness. We also take the Lord's Supper or the communion. We do these things because we follow the example set by the first-century church as described in the Bible.

In every service, I usually experience a blessing from this fellowship — this shared faith expressed in worship to our God. In this chapter, we will focus on the Lord's Supper and the blessings found in observing this feast every week.

Come Together to Break Bread

The Lord's Supper is or should be a focal point for worship. The emblems of the bread and the fruit of the vine represent the body and blood of Christ sacrificed for our salvation. In effect, we are remembering the Lord's death, acknowledging our need for the sacrifice, and looking forward to his return.

We know from Acts 20:7 that the early Christians met on the first day of the week "*to break bread*". Following their example, we also observe the Lord's Supper every Sunday. When I was a child, I had friends who talked about a communion service on Easter or Christmas, or maybe once a month. I thought that made it more special — to have a big ceremony on a special day seemed to set the communion apart as an important event.

Now I think that, as usual, God knew what he was doing when he established it as a weekly observance. He knew how easily we forget. The early Christians eagerly awaited Christ's return, so they approached each Sunday as if it might be the last time they would eat and drink in

remembrance of their Lord. Today, with nearly 2,000 years (and counting) between the resurrection and the return of Jesus, perhaps we are less eager. Perhaps we take for granted this beautiful memorial feast. If so, then we are at fault. As Christians, we must not let it become ordinary even though it is a part of our weekly routine.

We need the reminder. We need to renew our minds. The world crowds us, trying to squeeze us into its mold, as Paul warned in Romans 12:2: *“And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God”*. The world clamors to persuade us that its tawdry pleasures are important, but the Lord’s Supper brings us back to the most important event in history.

By requiring participation in the Lord’s Supper so regularly, God reminds us, “Start every week with your eyes on the cross; remember the Garden; remember the pain and the blood and the love. Then let that memory shape your week; be grateful for God’s gift and share it with others. And when Saturday comes and your feet are dragging because your burden is heavy, look to Sunday for the courage and faith to go on, knowing you are free from the burden of sin because of that death on the cross”.

Instituting the Lord’s Supper

What does the Bible teach about the Lord’s Supper? There are five key passages: Matthew 26:17-30 (26-29); Mark 14:12-26 (20-25); Luke 22:7-23 (14-20); 1 Corinthians 10:14-22 (14-18); and 1 Corinthians 11:23-34 (23-26). A sixth passage, John 6, is not specifically about the Lord’s Supper, but it describes a principle that connects to the memorial feast. We will begin with the gospel accounts.

“And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, ‘Take, eat; this is My body.’ Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins. But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father’s kingdom.’” (Matthew 26:26-29).

Jesus blesses or gives thanks for the bread and the wine. These emblems were part of the Passover meal, but Jesus adds new meaning to them by calling them his body and his blood. He establishes them as symbols of the new covenant sealed with blood for the forgiveness of sins. Mark's words are almost identical to Matthew's:

"And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them and said, 'Take, eat; this is My body.' Then He took the cup, and when he had given thanks, He gave it to them, and they all drank from it. And He said to them, 'This is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many. Assuredly, I say to you, I will no longer drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.'" (Mark 14:22-25).

Luke's account is slightly different:

"When the hour had come, He sat down, and the twelve apostles with Him. Then He said to them, 'With fervent desire, I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I say to you, I will no longer eat of it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.'" Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and said, 'Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I say to you, I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.'" (Luke 22:14-18).

This cup was the first of several cups used in the Passover ritual; it was not the beginning of the new ceremony described in the next verses.⁷

"And He took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, 'This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me.' Likewise He also took the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you.'" (Luke 22:19,20).

The reference to a covenant of blood echoes Exodus 24:7,8:

"Then he (Moses) took the book of the covenant and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, 'All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient!' So Moses took the blood and sprinkled it on the people, and said, 'Behold the blood

of the covenant, which the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words.'"

Without blood, there is no sacrifice. Jesus instituted the memorial feast to remind us that he is the perfect sacrifice for our sins.

“Washed in the Blood of the Lamb”

In 1878, E.A. Hoffman wrote the words and music for “Have You Been to Jesus?” We often sang this song as an invitation when I was a child. Back then, I wasn’t fond of the first words in the chorus: “Are you washed in the blood/In the soul-cleansing blood of the Lamb?” Being washed in blood did not sound appealing, and anyway, how could blood make a person clean? But as I learned more about Jesus, I understood the importance of the cleansing power of Christ’s blood.

We contact the blood of Christ — the blood of the new covenant — at least three times. Baptism is our first point of contact; we are baptized into his death (Romans 6:3). In Acts 22:16, Ananias told Paul to wash away his sins in baptism. But baptism is just the beginning.

When we take the Lord’s Supper, we participate in the new covenant and contact his cleansing blood again. This is not to suggest that the grape juice we drink each Sunday has any magical qualities to remove sin any more than the baptismal waters do. By contacting the blood through communion, I mean we are reminded that it took the blood of Christ to cleanse our sins.

Jesus said, *“Do this in remembrance of me.”* How dramatic it must have been for the apostles to commune with the Lord through this feast after Pentecost, remembering the terrible events of the Garden of Gethsemane, the betrayal, the trials, and the cross. How earnestly they must have taught the first converts to honor the Lord’s Supper, knowing that many of those baptized on Pentecost had shouted *“Crucify him!”* just a few weeks before. We cannot — dare not — take the bread and fruit of the vine casually, for we are eating the body and drinking the blood of our Lord.

In addition to the connection through communion, 1 John 1:6,7 states, *“If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie*

and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and **the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin**" (emphasis added). These verses highlight our third point of contact with the blood of Christ. We focus on the cleansing power of the blood as we walk in the light with Jesus.

Honoring the "Cup of Blessing"

First Corinthians 10:14-22 deals with a problem related to communion that technically we don't have today in America. Corinth was a city with many idols. When idol worshippers became Christians, many also continued to worship idols and to eat food offered to idols. Paul compares this behavior to the way they should be taking communion, beginning in verse 14-18:

"Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. I speak as to wise men; judge for yourselves what I say. The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread. Observe Israel after the flesh; Are not those who eat of the sacrifices partakers of the altar?"

Paul's point was that participating in the ceremony celebrating the sacrifice was also a participation in the sacrifice; Israel offered animal sacrifices and then ate of the sacrifice; therefore, eating food offered to idols was a participation in the sacrifice to idols. Today we aren't faced with buying food that may have been offered to idols, but the point remains that eating the Lord's Supper is a participation in Christ's death because we partake of his sacrifice.

The "cup of blessing" refers to the way Jesus blessed the fruit of the vine when he instituted the memorial feast.⁸ As we read in the gospel accounts, Jesus gave thanks for (blessed) the bread and fruit of the vine, but he also consecrated them as a way of bestowing benefits or blessings on those who participated properly.

First Corinthians 11:23-26 echoes Matthew and Mark. Then Paul goes on to warn that taking the communion is serious; we must use dis-

cernment. Taking communion “*in an unworthy manner*” means taking it without recognizing that the emblems represent the body and blood of Christ as his sacrifice for us.

The Blessings of Communion

What are the blessings we receive when we take communion?

1. We remember the suffering that Christ endured as he became sin for us. Those who lead our thoughts during communion often paint word pictures of the pain and agony Jesus suffered. After I saw the movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, his suffering became more real to me. The graphic depiction of Jesus in the garden, Jesus abused by soldiers and scribes, Jesus under the whip, and Jesus on the cross were embedded in my memory. When I took the Lord’s Supper the next Sunday, I felt like I had been at the scene of the cross, and I could remember his suffering. Why is that a blessing? If we remember how he suffered, we will be truly grateful for the forgiveness we receive because of his sacrifice.
2. We are blessed by participating in his blood, reminding us to die each day to sin.
3. We are blessed by the fellowship — communion — with Christ and with each other as we express our faith every Sunday and encourage one another to follow the Lord.
4. We are blessed by the spiritual nourishment we receive from Christ. Jesus talked about the concept of spiritual nourishment in John 6. Let’s explore this blessing in more detail.

Literal Food and Spiritual Food

The sixth chapter of John does not describe the Lord’s Supper; it describes a contrast between literal food and spiritual food. It follows a pattern of actions and reactions between Jesus and the crowds that followed him and between Jesus and his disciples. Jesus describes his role as the source of spiritual food or nourishment for the soul, but his listeners don’t understand. They interpret his teaching literally. Verses 2-14 tell

the familiar story of the first action, the feeding of the 5,000, with five barley loaves and two small fish.

John notes that this event occurs *"near the Passover"*. This was during Christ's second year of ministry when he was probably at the height of his popularity with the crowds. Reading through verse 14, we see that Jesus gives thanks for the food and the disciples distribute it. Everyone had enough and there were 12 baskets of leftovers

What was the reaction? Verse 14: *"Then those men, when they had seen the sign that Jesus did, said, 'This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world.'"* Because of this reaction from the crowd, Jesus takes another action: *"Therefore when Jesus perceived that they were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king, He departed again to the mountain by Himself alone"*.

The disciples get into a boat and set out across the sea to Capernaum. Jesus later joins them by walking on the stormy sea (verses 16-21). The next day, the people follow and seek Jesus in Capernaum, though they don't know how he got there (verses 22-25).

Verse 26 begins what is called the "Bread of Life" discourse by Jesus. He is well aware that the people are seeking him because he fed them. Remember that in this time, most people — especially the poor people who probably made up the majority of the crowds who followed Jesus — most people really did live on daily bread, without the assurance that they would have a meal the next day. That's hard for me to imagine. I have enough food in my cabinets and my freezer to survive without going to the grocery store for a month, as long as I don't get picky about what I want to eat. But many people who followed Jesus were not so blessed.

Jesus felt compassion for those who were hungry, but he also knew that they needed spiritual food as much or more than they needed physical food. So he took this opportunity to teach them about the importance of spiritual nourishment.

"Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you, for on Him the Father, God, has set His seal.' Therefore they said to Him, 'What shall we do, so that we may work the works of

God?' Jesus answered and said to them, 'This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent'' (verses 27,28).

The people then ask for a sign, so that they will know they can believe Jesus. And just in case he doesn't understand what they want, they suggest something in verse 31: *"Our fathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat'"*.

Now at this point, the people are clearly asking for literal food: "Feed us every day the way Moses fed our fathers in the wilderness with manna". They want security; they want a Messiah who would restore their place of favor with God and allow them to live in prosperity. They echo their request in verse 34: *"Lord, give us this bread always"*. They want literal loaves of bread like they had seen the day before.

Jesus answers their request in verse 35, but not as they expect: *"I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst"*. This echoes Matthew 5:6, *"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied"*, which is clearly talking about spiritual food. He then explains that he has come down from heaven by the will of God to bring eternal life to all who will believe in him (verses 36-40).

What is the reaction? The Jews ignore everything he says about the will of God and grumble about his claim:

"Therefore the Jews were grumbling about Him, because He said, 'I am the bread that came down out of heaven.' They were saying, 'Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does He now say, 'I have come down out of heaven'?"' (verse 41).

They focus on Jesus the man and miss Jesus the Son of God. But Jesus continues with His spiritual teaching in verses 47-51.

"Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes has everlasting life. I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and are dead. This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread,

he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world.”

Can't you just imagine the reaction of the Jews? They argue about how Jesus could give them his flesh to eat; they are still thinking about literal food. They had to be horrified at the prospect. Genesis 9:4 clearly teaches that they were not to eat flesh with blood in it, and other passages forbid them from even touching a dead body. Jesus knows that his words are shocking, but he continues,

“Then Jesus said to them, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For My flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him’” (verses 53-56).

“A Hard Saying”

Even the disciples found this a difficult teaching. After all, it sounds like Jesus is talking about his body and blood as literal food and drink. As early as 110 A.D., many people believed that communion was the literal flesh and blood of Jesus. Early Christians were accused of cannibalism because they claimed to eat the flesh of their god. By 150 A.D., Christian writers suggested that the literal bread and wine miraculously becomes literal flesh and blood as the Christian eats it, though it still looks like ordinary bread and wine. This became the doctrine of transubstantiation in the Catholic Church.

In addition, some people believed that merely taking communion was a free ticket to heaven, because Jesus said we must eat his flesh and drink his blood to have eternal life. That's one reason that Catholics call the priest to administer last rites when someone is dying — to ensure his passage to heaven regardless of how he has lived his life.

Man's Interpretation

Today there are generally six interpretations on eating and drinking “the body and the blood”:

1. Suspension: Partaking of the bread and wine was not intended to be a perpetual ordinance or ceremony; this is the belief of the Quakers and the Salvation Army.
2. Symbolism: The bread and wine are symbolic of the body and blood of Christ, and by partaking of the elements, the believer commemorates the sacrificial death of Christ; this belief is held by several denominations, including most Baptists.
3. Spiritual presence: The body and blood of Jesus are received in a spiritual manner by faith without actually taking the elements; this view is held by many denominations, including Methodists and Presbyterians.
4. Consubstantiation: The belief that the body and blood of Jesus Christ are mysteriously and supernaturally (but not literally) united with the bread and wine; this view is held by Lutherans.
5. Pious Silence: The belief that the bread and wine become the real Body and Blood of Christ in a way that is beyond mortal understanding and it can't be explained; this view is held by Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox churches.
6. Transubstantiation: The belief that after the literal bread and wine are consecrated by the priest, the body and blood of Jesus are really, truly, and substantially in the elements, though the participant cannot see the change; this is Roman Catholic doctrine.⁹

Of these six beliefs, the one closest to the Scripture is number 2, symbolism. The Bible clearly teaches that communion is a memorial feast intended to *remind us of the sacrifice Christ made for us*, and that we are saved by obeying Christ, not by taking communion.

Words of Life

So what point was Jesus making by talking about eating his body and blood? What did he want the disciples to understand? The answer is in verses 61-63:

“When Jesus knew in Himself that his disciples complained

about this, He said to them, 'Does this offend you? What then if you should see the Son of Man ascend where He was before? It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life.'"

Jesus was talking about spiritual matters in literal terms. "Stop worrying about literal food for the body and seek spiritual food", he said. Food sustains our bodies; if we stop eating, we will die physically. In the same way, our souls need spiritual food; we need to stay close to God to keep our souls alive eternally. Jesus is to the soul what bread is to the body — nourishment.

Though many disciples turned away from Jesus after this teaching, the twelve did not. So Jesus said to the twelve, "*Do you also want to go away?*" (verse 67). By faith, Peter spoke for the group: "*Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. Also we have come to believe and know that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God*" (verses 68,69). I don't think Peter understood the teaching any more than the others did at that time, but he trusted Jesus, even when the teaching was difficult.

How does this apply to our participation in the Lord's Supper today? Like the Jews, we are literal people who sometimes miss spiritual teaching. Like Peter, we sometimes have to trust Jesus without understanding everything. Taking communion blesses our lives by reminding us of our need for spiritual nourishment and its source. Eating a bite of communion bread and taking a sip of grape juice provides little physical nourishment, but it should fill us spiritually with a connection to Christ, an awareness that we can't live eternally unless his words live in us now, unless we feed on him spiritually every single day. In explanation of John 6, Frank Pack states,

"To eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood is not something repeated, as it would be if the reference were primarily to the Lord's Supper. Instead it means to appropriate Jesus Christ through obedient faith, and to receive the benefits of his atonement. It seems clear from reading this entire section that Jesus was emphasizing that the believer found his entire life in Jesus Christ, the bread of life."¹⁰

The communion reminds us that we must hunger and thirst for righteousness, and we satisfy that hunger when we “eat and drink Christ” daily. Matthew Henry, a commentator on the Bible, says “Our bodies could better live without food than our souls without Christ”.¹¹ He suggests four ways to nourish our souls spiritually:

1. Develop an appetite for spiritual nourishment from Christ; hunger and thirst after righteousness.
2. Apply Christ’s teachings to our daily lives.
3. Delight in Christ. I’m good at delighting in physical food, but I need to delight more in spiritual food.
4. Depend on Christ as the source of spiritual nourishment.¹² To do this, I suggest spending extra time reading the gospel accounts and absorbing the way Christ lived. Paul said, “Imitate me as I imitate Christ”. We can’t imitate what we don’t know.

May we never take the Lord’s Supper for granted. May it always remind us of his sacrifice and our dependence on him for every blessing.

Discussion Questions

1. When you take the Lord's Supper, how do you focus your mind on the sacrifice Jesus made?
2. Some people read the descriptions of the Lord's Supper in the gospels and 1 Corinthians during communion. What other passages of Scripture are appropriate for meditation during the communion service?
3. Review the various interpretations of communion and compare them with the Scripture. Why do you think men have distorted the memorial service?
4. Read John 6:57. How do we "feed on" Jesus today?
5. What is the ultimate blessing of "feeding" on "the Bread of Life"?

Encouraging Words

One winter Sunday in church, I was brooding about a number of family problems that had troubled me for several months. I felt overwhelmed and very sorry for myself. Why did I have to suffer so much? Why was everything going wrong?

As the song leader announced the song before the Lord's Supper, I tried to focus on worship. The song was, "At the Cross", which begins, "Alas, and did my Savior bleed, and did my Sovereign die?"

As I sang, I suddenly felt an unusually strong awareness of the pain and suffering involved in Christ's sacrifice on the cross. I thought about how much he gave up for me and for everyone, and how selfish I was to moan about my relatively small emotional distress. I was dwelling on how much it hurts to give and give and then be rejected, yet Jesus gave his lifeblood for those who rejected him.

I felt ashamed and humbled; I couldn't sing because of the tears. As I took the bread and fruit of the vine, I realized that when we suffer, when we are rejected by those who should love us, that's when we have the chance to be like Jesus. That's when we either give up and wallow in self-pity or give in and submit to God, as Jesus did.

— Name withheld by request

Chapter 6

The Blessings of Giving

One person who responded to the survey named “giving” as a blessing. I was pleased because too often, we think of giving as a duty rather than a blessing. When the preacher stands up and says, “Today’s lesson is on giving”, most of us immediately think of money. We may assume he’s going to ask us to increase our weekly contribution or to give for a special project. We may even moan inwardly, “Oh no, not another lesson on giving! I know I’m supposed to give, and I’m already giving as much as I can!”

Suddenly, the pew becomes uncomfortable; we squirm; we check our watches. Consciously or unconsciously, we harden our hearts and hide our checkbooks.

Sometimes the preacher tempers his plea with the idea that we can give other things besides money — our time, our advice, our compassion — and certainly those things are often more valuable than money. Yet we resist in these areas as well. “I’m too busy to do more” or “I don’t know how to visit; I never know what to say to people who are sick or grieving or troubled”.

The Blessing of Receiving

How ironic that we resist the command to give, but we all like to receive! We appreciate the get well or sympathy card in the mail; we are pleased when someone visits or brings food if we are sick. We are grateful for encouraging words and friendly greetings. We all benefit from the conveniences of a nice meeting house: heat in the winter and air conditioning in the summer, good lighting, restrooms, and padded pews. We’re thankful for interesting classroom material and songbooks. We wouldn’t have any of these things if people didn’t give of their time and money.

Travel back in time to your childhood. What’s the very best material gift you ever received? Maybe a toy you really, really wanted but didn’t

expect to get at Christmas? A special birthday gift or a puppy or kitten? How did that gift make you feel? Special? Loved? We all like to receive gifts.

Now think about the very best non-material gift you ever received, as a child or an adult. Did someone give you a second chance? Did someone love you when you didn't deserve love? Did someone teach you about salvation? Did someone forgive you or encourage you? Whatever the gift, we all recognize and welcome the blessing that comes with receiving something we really want or need.

Giving and Receiving

In the Bible, giving and receiving are two sides of the same coin; they cannot be separated. In the Old Testament, God blessed those who gave as he commanded. Abel made the appropriate sacrifice and received God's respect (Genesis 4:4). Abraham obeyed God, even to the point of raising his knife to sacrifice Isaac, the son of promise. In turn, God blessed not only Abraham but also all nations through his seed (Genesis 22:9-18).

When David made a sacrifice to remove the plague from Israel, he gave fifty shekels of silver for the threshing floor and the oxen because he would not "... offer burnt offerings to the Lord my God with that which costs me nothing" (2 Samuel 24:24,25).

Each generation of the nation of Israel had to learn that blessings from God were directly related to the gift of obedience to God. Consider these verses:

"Will a man rob God? Yet you have robbed Me! But you say, 'In what way have we robbed You?' In tithes and offerings. You are cursed with a curse, for you have robbed Me, even this whole nation. Bring all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in My house, and try Me now in this," says the Lord of hosts, 'If I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you such blessing that there will not be room enough to receive it'" (Malachi 3:8-10).

God loves to bless his children. "Try me", he says. "Give as I com-

mand, and you'll receive more than you can imagine". But he wants us to understand that receiving his blessings is only part of the equation.

The Better Blessing

The New Testament teaches more about giving than about any other topic. We know we are to give each Sunday as we are prospered (1 Corinthians 16:2); we are to give cheerfully (2 Corinthians 9:7); we are to minister to people in need (James 1:27).

Perhaps the most startling statement about giving is found in Acts 20:32-35, at the end of Paul's farewell to the Ephesian elders:

"So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified. I have coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. Yes, you yourselves know that these hands have provided for my necessities, and for those who were with me. I have shown you in every way, by laboring like this, that you must support the weak. And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'" (emphasis added).¹³

What? Paul, are you saying I receive a greater blessing by giving a gift than by receiving a gift? How can that be? What blessings come from giving?

Travel back in time once more. Think back to a time in your life when you received a blessing because you gave a gift. What kind of blessings did you receive? The joy of knowing you helped someone in need? The delight in a child's eyes as he received a special gift? The satisfaction that you were obeying God?

There are many ways we give and receive gifts of money, time, or self, and there are many blessings to be found on both sides of the process. Most of us clearly recognize the joy of receiving. The Scriptures also tell us about the blessings found in giving.

First, turn to 2 Corinthians 8:1-5:

"Moreover, brethren, we make known to you the grace of God

bestowed on the churches of Macedonia: that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded in the riches of their liberality. For I bear witness that according to their ability, yes, and beyond their ability, they were freely willing, imploring us with much urgency that we would receive the gift and the fellowship of the ministering to the saints. And not only as we had hoped, but they first gave themselves to the Lord, and then to us by the will of God.

Do you see the paradox here, the combination of contradictory ideas that result in truth? The Macedonian churches were suffering “*a great trial of affliction*”. In this trial, they had both abundant joy and deep poverty. Joy and poverty are not words that we usually use in the same sentence; how can they exist together? Yet together they produced an abundance of rich liberality. The NIV states that “*their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.*”

Specifically, they gave according to their ability — and beyond. The Macedonians implored or pleaded for the privilege of sharing what they could not really afford to give. In a sense, they gave “beyond measure”.

How were the Macedonians able to give so liberally even though they were poor? They gave themselves first to the Lord and to his work. They started with heart surgery. They cut out selfishness and greed, recognizing that all they had came from God, and so they gave themselves and their possessions back to God. Then they were able to help Paul spread the gospel.

Paul tells the Corinthians that he urged Titus to “complete this grace” in them, that they would also “*abound in this grace*” as they abounded in faith, speech, knowledge, diligence, and love (verses 6,7). We usually think of grace as unmerited favor from God, but grace can also refer to a gift or virtue. God “bestowed” or “gave” the grace of giving to the churches of Macedonia.

Did he remove their free will and force their generosity? No. They received the grace or ability to give generously as a result of their selfless dedication to God. They followed the example of Jesus as described in verse 9: “*For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though*

He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich”.

The blessing of giving ourselves to God is that we become more like Jesus, who gave *“his life a ransom for many”* (Matthew 20:28). When Jesus sent the disciples out to heal and teach in Matthew 10:7,8, he told them, *“Freely you received, freely give”*. When we give our hearts to God, he will give us the grace to become generous.

Every day in the mail, we receive requests for contributions for many worthy causes: American Heart Association, Cancer Society, March of Dimes, Diabetes Association, Alzheimer’s Association, Veteran’s Hospital, Paralyzed Veterans, and many other health or civic organizations. Then there are pleas from brotherhood organizations, Christian colleges and children’s homes, and missionaries. Once I kept all the mail requests I got in one week; I had 17.

We also receive requests in our local congregation for help beyond our weekly contribution: the food pantry for local benevolence, clothes for a family who had a house fire, disaster relief, hunger relief, special needs of sponsored missionaries, special projects for the youth group, and so on. I can understand how we might come to feel that giving is a duty rather than an opportunity, a commandment rather than a privilege. We are bombarded with requests, and sometimes we feel resentful or guilty because we can’t seem to give enough.

Of course, we have to make choices. But whatever we decide to do, let us first be sure that we have given the most important gift; let us be sure we have given ourselves to God and his work. Then we will find it much easier to give our time and money to help others.

Cheerful Giving

If we give generously but grudgingly, out of duty rather than grace, our gift is tainted. The gift may still bless others by meeting their needs, but we lose the blessing for ourselves. We lose the growth toward God, who gives to us *“every good and perfect gift”* (James 1:17).

“But this I say: He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully; for

God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work (2 Corinthians 9:6-8).

Again we see a paradox in the way we sow and reap. The tighter we hold onto the things God has given us, the smaller our harvest will be. The more we give, the more we will receive. God loves us all the time, but he especially loves us when we give cheerfully, because then he begins to see himself in us — we begin to give as he gives. He provides for our needs and then some. Why does he send “abundance” and not just “sufficiency”? He wants us to share.

Paul describes another blessing of giving in verses 10 and 11; he asks God to “*increase the fruits of your righteousness*” for those who give. When we give our money to spread the gospel or feed orphans or supply study materials for the poor, we receive a harvest of righteousness — the knowledge that our gift, however small, helped someone come to God. We may not be able to travel to foreign lands to teach the gospel, but we can share in the teaching by supporting those who do. Liberality in giving enriches us.

Two Kinds of Riches

As children, my friends and I sometimes played the “If I had a million dollars” game. We made a list of all the things we would do or buy if we had a million dollars: new bikes for everyone, a trip to Disneyland, a lifetime supply of candy and gum, an unlimited shopping spree at the toy store. Sometimes even as adults, we speculate about all the good we could do if we were only “rich”. By “rich”, we usually mean “more than we need to pay the bills”, and a million dollars is still a nice, round number to fuel the daydream. Of course, as Christian adults, we start our list with a healthy contribution to the church!

But deep down, we know that God has already given us much more than we need or deserve. Especially in the United States, we are blessed materially far beyond the basics of food, shelter, and clothing. Millions of people in Third World countries survive on one meal a day and sleep on the floor of a tiny shack or out in the open, even in winter. If we are

wise, we thank God for our riches and heed the warnings in the Bible about their fleeting nature. Proverbs 23:5 reminds us that *“riches certainly make themselves wings; they fly away like an eagle toward heaven.”*

Paul gives Timothy stern instructions to pass on to rich people:

“Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy. Let them do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share, storing up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life “ (1 Timothy 6:17-19).

It is a blessing to have money; it is a greater blessing to depend on God instead of our money. When we hoard our money, we become slaves to it. We depend on it even though we know it can be lost at any moment — we can lose the job, the bank can fail, the market can crash. Yet if we depend on God, we can share our money, knowing God will supply what we need. And every time we share our wealth, we add to our treasure in heaven.

We also know that there are riches we hope to attain that are far more valuable than money. In a recent issue of *The Voice of Truth International*, Marilyn M. Peeples states, “If I had only two requests I would ask God to grant me these two gifts: (1) I want to be rich and (2) I want to be dead”.¹⁴ She explains that she wants to be rich in good works and dead to sin. What wonderful goals for us as Christians! We become rich in good works by giving, sharing, and ministering to those all around us.

Extreme Giving

Jesus demonstrated the ultimate attitude of giving. He who was God became a man, lived as a servant, and died as a sacrificial lamb for the sins of the world. No matter how generous we are, we can never match that extreme gift of love.

But there are other examples in the Bible of extreme giving. One is found in chapters one and two of 1 Samuel. Hannah, Elkanah’s wife, was barren, a shameful condition for a Jewish woman. Hannah grieved

because she had no child; no doubt she felt that God was punishing her for something, for that was a common belief in those days.

Her anguish was compounded because Elkanah took a second wife, Penninah, who had sons and daughters. Blessed with children, Penninah provoked Hannah, increasing her misery. I can imagine the snide remarks and the not-so-subtle references to poor Hannah's plight: "Count yourself lucky that you don't have stretch marks from bearing children, dear Hannah." Or, "You don't know what it's like to take care of these babies all day." Or, "Elkanah may give you a double portion of the offering, but he loves me because I give him sons."

We don't know how long Hannah suffered Penninah's torture as well as her own self-inflicted doubts and fears, but finally she had enough. She made a decision to take her problem to the Lord. No doubt she had prayed before; no doubt she had wept before. But this time was different. She went to the tabernacle and unleashed all her pain: "*And she was in bitterness of soul, and prayed to the Lord and wept in anguish*" (1 Samuel 1:10).

Then Hannah made a vow to God: She promised that if God would give her a son, she would give him up to God's service all the days of his life. She would turn him over to the priests at the tabernacle, relinquishing her right to hold him and teach him and watch him grow. Ultimately, she was willing to sacrifice the very object of her desire, the gift she asked God to provide.

Hannah did not make this vow lightly. Even after she made it, she continued her prayer in such silent anguish that Eli, the priest, thought she was drunk. When she explained herself, she said, "*I have poured out my soul before the Lord ... [speaking] out of the abundance of my complaint and grief ...*" (verses 15,16). Eli must have been amazed at her sincerity. He sent her away in peace, suggesting that God would grant her petition, and Hannah left: "*So the woman went her way and ate, and her face was no longer sad*" (verse 18). Obviously, she believed God would give her a son.

And he did. When Samuel was born and weaned, Hannah fulfilled her vow and turned him over to Eli. Can you imagine how hard it was to

let him go? Was her grief greater than the joy she felt when he was born? She prayed and rejoiced after she told him good-bye.

Hannah practiced extreme giving. She gave everything to God, even the child she wanted so much. But she couldn't out-give God; he blessed her with three more sons and two daughters! The Bible doesn't record how these children lived their lives, but we do know that Samuel, the child given to God, blessed all of Israel with his faith and dedication. He served as priest, prophet, judge, and king-maker in the formative years of Israel's growth as a nation. From Hannah's pain and shame came great faith, and from her faith came a mighty man of God.

Today, we can still give our children to God, and we should. We don't leave them to be reared by priests, but we as the holy, royal priesthood of Christ (1 Peter 2:5,9) should rear our children to serve God. We should stress the importance of being Christians in every aspect of life, not just on Sundays and Wednesdays. We should encourage them to be preachers, elders, deacons, song leaders, missionaries, and most of all, servants. Like Hannah, we should give our children back to God, for he only loaned them to us in the first place.

Blessed by Giving

The blessings of giving never end, and the good news is that we don't need a million dollars to invest in giving. While visiting my grandchildren last year, I noticed that they enjoyed the little gifts I brought, but they also enjoyed giving to me. My little grand-girl, Faith, who was not quite three at that time, was very eager to share with me. She shared her bed so I'd have a place to sleep. She shared her fruit loops so I didn't get hungry. She shared her laughter and her kisses.

My big grand-girl, Iris, who was not quite ten, shared her secrets and her advice for decisions I was making in my life — and it was pretty good advice, too. I was richly blessed by their gifts and inspired to give to others. Let us all become more like children who are learning to share, and we will receive the blessings God built into the grace of giving.

Discussion Questions

1. Why do we as Christians often resent being asked to give money to the church? How can we change this attitude?
2. Which is harder to give, time or money?
3. What can we do or say to ensure that our children will become cheerful, liberal givers for the Lord?
4. Besides Hannah, can you name other Bible characters, particularly women, who practiced extreme giving?
5. Name the blessings you have experienced from giving.

Encouraging Words

“About three weeks after my husband Hugh died, my brother Earl called me for help. Our brother J.E. had fallen and had a head injury. He had surgery to remove one quarter of his brain. The doctors said he wouldn’t live. Earl and I cared for him in a nursing home for eight and a half years. Not only did he live, he became one of the most outstanding Bible scholars I have ever known. I didn’t have time to feel sorry for myself over losing Hugh; I had to help my brothers. Caring for J.E. during that eight and a half years was, I believe, the most wonderful blessing of my life. It took my mind off self and let me serve others.” — Ruth Hailey

“When my husband was in the hospital, we had no way to pay our bills. Our sisters and brothers from church were there with open arms and understanding hearts, ready to help any way they could. It’s a blessing to know all you have to do is ask and God’s family is ready to assist.” — Name not given

“After going on a medical mission trip to Jamaica and seeing the deplorable conditions in which people lived and raised their children, I realized how blessed I was. What had not seemed like much before the trip suddenly seemed like a wealth of blessing when I returned. I have so much, and I don’t want to take it for granted.” — Susan House

“When I was eleven, my parents looked around at the boys in our home community (where everybody knew our name) and decided that was not where I needed to mature. They pulled up deep roots and moved to Paragould, Ark., where they put me in Crowley’s Ridge Academy. That’s where Christian teachers helped to mold my beliefs. That’s where I met Harrell, now my husband. Those two selfless people changed my life and blessed me beyond measure.” — Alice Austin

Chapter 7

The Blessings of Suffering

I was surprised that three women listed “suffering” as a blessing when they responded to the survey. Many more described experiences that might be called “blessings in disguise” or “delayed blessings” because the benefit was only recognized long after the experience. When bad things happen in our lives — illness, job loss, problems with rebellious children, loss of a loved one, divorce, or other stressful situations — we are often too caught up in coping with the problem to look for anything good in it. We are more likely to wonder why we are suffering.

No one likes to suffer; I don’t even want a paper cut, much less a debilitating illness or a major family problem that causes sleepless nights. I don’t view suffering as a blessing; I doubt that many of us would ever ask God to bless us with suffering as we ask him to bless us with love or protection or even patience. But suffering is inevitable among humans, and it can be a source of blessing. We all have problems that lead to some degree of suffering. So perhaps we should ask God to help us discover the delayed blessings disguised by suffering.

Why Do We Suffer?

Before we look for those blessings, however, we should briefly address the cause of human suffering.¹⁵ Often after a tragedy like the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001, or the terrible loss of life in the tsunami on December 26, 2004, people will say, “Where was God? Why did he allow such horrible things to happen?” Even Christians may doubt God’s love when they suffer from cancer or the loss of a child. “Why me, Lord? I’ve been faithful; how could you let this happen to me?”

The short answer to these heart-wrenching questions is not very comforting: Sin is the underlying cause of suffering. That *does not* mean that the victims of tragedy or cancer or any other affliction are being punished for their specific sins. It does mean that sin leads to misery, either for the sinner or for someone in the scope of the sinner’s influence. A person may

never touch a drop of liquor, but she may suffer from the sin of drunkenness when a drunk driver causes an accident. Children don't cause divorce, but they certainly suffer if their parents decide to end the marriage.

When we visited congregations of the Lord's church in Zimbabwe, we were blessed to travel with a medical doctor named Maurice Callan from Rotan, Texas. He presented lessons about AIDS, which is rampant in most Third World countries. He explained the ways that AIDS is spread and taught that abstinence before marriage and faithfulness to one's spouse after marriage provide the best protection against contracting the disease. "If you get malaria," he said, "it's not because you sinned. But if you get AIDS, somebody sinned." His lesson served as a model for preachers who are reaching out to lost souls.

When I taught high school English, I saw many young people who suffered or caused suffering because they made bad choices. One year I hung a banner above the chalkboard; it read, "Every Action Has A Consequence". I wanted my students to think before they acted, and we sometimes talked about examples of bad choices that lead to suffering. Drinking alcohol can lead to addiction, illness, and even death. Pre-marital sex can result in disease or pregnancy. Cruel words and unkind actions may destroy a person's self-esteem. Sin is in the world, and it causes destruction and misery.

Another View

However, we can't always trace the cause of suffering back to a particular sin. In the Bible, the Jews tried to do this, but sometimes it didn't work. A good example is found in John 9. Jesus met a man who had been born blind. The disciples asked, "*Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?*" (verse 2). Jesus answered in verse 3: "*Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him.*"

The lesson here is not that God caused the man to be born blind; the lesson is that Jesus gave him sight in order to glorify God. He took a tragic situation and produced a blessing — several blessings, in fact. The blind man was blessed to receive his sight; he and those who witnessed

the miracle were blessed with belief in Jesus, and the critical Pharisees were blessed with teaching that could save their souls (though they apparently refused to accept that teaching). Another example is found in John 11 when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead to glorify God (John 11:4).

Are we willing to allow God to use our suffering for his glory? Are we willing to remain faithful, even when we suffer, so that we can eventually find a blessing? A tragedy may lead to triumph; a lesson learned from heartache may help us ease another's pain. When we are deep in our suffering, we may not be able to see over the edge of the pit, but Jesus promised that he would always be with us; as Christians we lean on that promise (Matthew 28:20; John 14:3,4; John 15:4,5,10).

The Relativity Blessing

Have you ever dreaded something — worried about it, stewed about it for days — and then had it turn out to be nothing to worry about? Relative to the worry, the reality was trivial. It's a matter of perspective. I may feel sorry for myself because of a health concern or a family problem, but if I look around, I can probably find a dozen people whose problems are much worse than mine. My material conditions — money, work, or the increasing cost of living — in particular seem inconsequential compared to the average state of deprivation in Zimbabwe. Relative to most of the world, I am still blessed beyond measure even on my very worst day. I realize, of course, that suffering never *feels* relative or inconsequential to the person who is enduring it. If I'm hurting physically or emotionally, I just want to feel better.

But the Bible teaches us to develop a heavenly viewpoint about suffering: *"For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us"* (Romans 8:18). Paul compared his suffering here on earth to the glory waiting for him in heaven and found that there is no comparison. Relative to the reward of heaven, present problems are insignificant.

Paul elaborates on this theme in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18:

"Therefore do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For

our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal."

Keep in mind the kind of suffering Paul is referring to as "light affliction". He isn't talking about just the chronic aches and pains and worries of daily life; he is referring to persecution, physical torture, and mental anguish. Turn a few pages in your Bible and read examples of Paul's suffering in 2 Corinthians 11:24-28. Yet with all he had suffered for the cause of Christ, Paul focused on the things that can't be seen — glorious, eternal things that will outshine any pain suffered in the flesh. And in the midst of our suffering, God will bless us with inward renewal day by day.

The God of All Comfort

Have you ever received advice about how to rear your children from someone who doesn't have children? Has a single woman ever told you how you should confront your husband about his bad habits? You probably don't appreciate criticism or instruction from someone who hasn't experienced the situation. But when a mother of five well-behaved children offers wise counsel, you know she understands how you feel. When a couple celebrates fifty years of Christian marriage, you know you can trust that wife's example and advice.

As we have seen in other passages, Paul knew about suffering. He found his comfort in God and in turn comforted others who suffered similar afflictions. Let's look at 2 Corinthians 1:3,4,8-10:

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God... For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of our trouble which came to us in Asia: that we were burdened beyond measure, above strength, so that we despaired even of life. Yes, we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead, who delivered

us from so great a death, and does now deliver us; in whom we trust that He will still deliver us."

This passage highlights two blessings that come from suffering. First, the person who has suffered a particular affliction is the best person to offer comfort to others in similar circumstances. Your experience prepares you to bless other people. Are you a widow? Then you know that a woman grieving the loss of her husband may need a shoulder to cry on and a sympathetic ear more than words of advice. You know that grief doesn't have an expiration date.

Did you struggle to control a rebellious teen-ager? Then you are the person who can encourage someone with the same problem. Your suffering makes you an expert in at least one field. Paul says that the "*God of all comfort*" comforted him so that he could share that comfort with others. Instead of allowing our suffering to make us bitter, we must let it make us compassionate.

The second blessing has to do with admitting our need for God. Paul tells us that we may suffer more than we can bear alone; then we must depend on God to help us bear the pain. His experiences in Asia were more than he could handle; he had accepted "*the sentence of death*". Yet he knew that if he died, God had the power to raise him from the dead. He trusted that God would deliver him, even if he died.

In my darkest days of grief after I lost my first husband, my most frequent prayer was, "I can't do this. I can't make it alone". But each day, God gave me the strength to go on. He comforted me in many ways — through my children, my family, and my Christian friends; through the Bible, particularly the Psalms; through the solid assurance of the hope of heaven — until I began to see that I was not entirely alone after all. Eventually, God blessed me with a second husband who not only loves me but also understands how it feels to lose a mate.

The realization that God is steadfast and faithful when our world falls apart is a great blessing, and it is a blessing we can best appreciate through suffering. He will deliver us.

God's Providence

Much of the ability to weather an emotional storm and find peace afterward depends on the depth of our faith in God's providence. Deep down, we know that God is in charge and that he has our best interests in mind. We want and need to trust that God is working in our lives to achieve a higher purpose than we can see through tear-dimmed eyes.

Romans 8:28-39 affirms these statements. The passage begins with a verse you probably know by heart: *"And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose"* (8:28).

This is a bittersweet verse. Deep in the pit of suffering — illness, grief, fear, rejection, pain, impending death — it sometimes sounds like a sugar-coated answer spouted by someone who hasn't suffered. We don't want to hear about good coming from the suffering; we want to avoid the suffering! How can pain or grief work for good? (Notice it doesn't say that all things *are* good but that all things work together *for* good). Only when we come out on the other side of the suffering can we see the good that comes from the experience. Only then can we see the truth of this verse.

And the truth is, God is in charge. Providential care is for *"those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose"*. Providential care takes *"all things"* and makes them *"work together for good"*.

God's Plan

What is that good? Does it mean that everything works out the way we want it? No. Read verses 29 and 30:

"For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these he also glorified."

Paul is describing "the good" that God wants for us: our eternal salvation. It is God's plan that those who believe and obey Jesus will

become like Jesus; conforming to his image, and so will be saved. God will use even our suffering, or maybe especially our suffering, to draw us closer to that image.

To become like Jesus — that is our goal. We want to attain the goal, yet we resist the things that would accomplish it. Jesus lived a sinless life, setting an example for us. Perhaps we think that was easy for him, since he was both God and man. But even Jesus had to learn obedience the hard way. Hebrews 5:8 says, “...*though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered.*”

I find this verse very comforting; Jesus learned to obey the same way I do, by suffering. What did he suffer? I think of the soul-wrenching night of prayer in the garden of Gethsemane, the humiliating trials, the agony of the Roman scourging, and the excruciating pain on the cross. But before those examples of extreme suffering, Jesus experienced the same kinds of suffering that we experience: the frustration of working with people who didn't understand him or his vision; the rejection of family and followers; loneliness; weariness; attacks from jealous opponents; endless demands from the crowds; and all the temptations that still exist today.

God's Love

What is God's motivation? Why does he want us to be saved? The answer is in Romans 8:31,32: “*What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?*” God is motivated by love. He is on our side in the battle between good and evil. He loved us enough to sacrifice his own son to give us the opportunity for salvation. In “*all things*”, he works for our ultimate good.

Jesus the Christ died, but he rose again and now sits at the right hand of God interceding for us (verses 34,35). Nothing listed in verses 35-39 can separate us from the love of God in Jesus — not even the worst suffering we may endure.

The most radical, amazing blessing that results from suffering is the blessed union with our Lord. We are most like Jesus when we suffer.

Painful Blessings

The blessings gained from suffering are sometimes hard to recognize because they are mixed with pain. Years may pass before we see the full effect of how God has worked all things for our good. At first, we may not even realize that we are becoming more compassionate, more dependent on God, and more eager for heaven. As always, God knows what is best for us.

When I need God's comfort, I often turn to hymns, always finding at least one that expresses my feelings. Hymns of praise and prayer combine the human longing for relief from suffering and the consolation of God's faithfulness. At a recent church service, we sang "How Firm A Foundation", and this version contained a verse I hadn't heard before. The verse summarizes the chapter about blessings from suffering.

When through the deep waters I cause thee to go,
The rivers of sorrow shall not overflow;
For I will be with thee thy troubles to bless,
And sanctify to thee thy deepest distress.

Discussion Questions

1. Blessings discovered from suffering tend to be individualized; what I might count as a blessing might make someone else shake her head and wonder, "How can you call that a blessing?" Consider the following situations and discuss possible blessings that might come from them:
 - a. The death of an elderly person
 - b. The loss of a husband's job
 - c. A child suspended from school for drug use
 - d. Persecution for preaching about Jesus
 - e. Poverty and hunger in Third World countries
2. Based on Paul's letters to the Corinthians and the Philippians, what was his attitude toward the suffering he had endured?
3. Discuss the consequences of sins such as drunkenness, sexual immorality, lying, gossip, hatred, jealousy, and stealing. How are people who don't commit these sins still hurt by them?
4. All humans are vulnerable to some degree of suffering. How are Christians better equipped to deal with suffering than non-Christians?
5. What can we do to develop a heavenly view of our earthly suffering?

Encouraging Words

The survey about blessings included this request: Describe an experience that didn't appear to be a blessing at first but turned out to be a blessing in the long run. Here are six answers that I found especially encouraging.

"Without a doubt, I now realize that our tragic automobile accident in 1970 has turned out to be a blessing. In fact, it was a turning point in our lives. Because of that event we learned to rely more upon God. We became more deeply aware of how much our friends and family mean to us. We also learned there is no promise of tomorrow; things that are important to us should not be postponed.

"Prior to the accident I had written the rough copy of *She Hath Done What She Could* after a pilot study with our ladies' class at Green's Lake Road in Chattanooga. Like so many of us, I had filed it in the 'Someday' file. During those long months of recovery by the fireside, Don urged me to get that manuscript out and do something with it. Because I was now fully aware that there is no promise of tomorrow, I decided to take his advice.

"My right hand was in a cast for months and then in therapy for several more months before I could use it normally. Consequently, I retyped that book with my left hand. It was mailed with the prayer that it would be published if it could be of use in the kingdom. The dedication reads, "Lovingly dedicated to use in His service from a heart overflowing with love and gratitude for the gift of life". It was accepted and that was the beginning of my writing.

"Often someone will bring a well-worn copy of one of my books to be autographed at some ladies' event. Frequently they remark, "You have no idea how much your words meant to me during a difficult time in my life". During those moments I offer a silent prayer of thankfulness for the turn of events that prompted me on the road to writing, and I wonder what would have happened if I had left that first book in the 'Someday' file." — Jane McWhorter

“When I found out I was going to be a grandmother, I didn’t see how anything good was going to come from that! My son and his girlfriend weren’t married and hadn’t really known each other very long. I was just sick about the whole thing. But God was working on my heart, and maybe this child was a way for Him to get my attention like nothing else would. Through some special people, my husband, some books and other things, God has shown me how much He wants to be involved in my daily life. I truly believe He loves me and wants a relationship with me. He has given me strength where I didn’t think I had any; He has given me peace when I felt like I was being turned inside out; He has given me love — and also opened my eyes to the love that was all around me that I never appreciated or returned.” — Beverly Schneck

“I was engaged to a young man I thought I loved very much. It became apparent that his lifestyle was not conducive to the type of marriage I envisioned. I was devastated as the engagement ended. Later I did meet someone who has been a wonderful husband, father, grandfather, son-in-law, and a dear friend to me.” — Zoe McGough

“I was devastated when my husband left for Vietnam one week after we married. We had dated all through high school, and this separation seemed to be the most tragic, unfair thing that I’d been forced to face in my young life. I could see no good in the situation. However, upon his return, Johnny was baptized. He had attended church with me for years, though he had been raised in a denomination, and all my pleading and pushing had not influenced him. But being away from me and doing much soul-searching made him want to be very sure of his salvation. This certainly ranks as one of the top blessings of my life.” — Carolyn Rea

“When we moved away from my family, I was so unhappy and upset about it and thought hardly anything could be worse. I can now look back and see how it has made my husband and me more dependent on each other. Together we have a bond that no

one else can share. We have been through so much and been there for each other in difficult times. Without other family members around, we had only each other to go to, and I am thankful for that blessing.

“Being on our own has also given us the opportunity to grow closer to our church family. My family is very large, and none of them are Christians. If we lived near them, I’d be tempted to miss church activities and attend family gatherings instead. I’d be tempted to listen to worldly advice from my mom and sister, who thinks being a submissive Christian wife equals oppression. Instead, we often have fellowship with church members who encourage me in my Christian walk. I invite newcomers and new Christians over for dinner, and I make friends with the college-age girls and phone other women who may just need to talk.

“Sometimes I wish we lived near my family so that I could try to influence them for good, but I know God has placed me where I am for a reason. Everyday I understand His providence more. What a blessing the Lord has bestowed on me! I pray that I continue to appreciate it and use it to the glory of His Kingdom.” — Name withheld by request

“Recently my husband Albert had cancer of the stomach and the surgeon removed his entire stomach. He was in the hospital 50 days. While staying with him, I watched him try to teach his surgeon about the Lord. At this point, the surgeon promised to attend the church of Christ before Albert’s six-month checkup. A great friendship has developed, and the surgeon has the opportunity to learn the truth.” — Frances Gardner

Chapter 8

The Blessings of Bearing Spiritual Fruit

When we count our blessings, we usually think first of the people whom we love: parents, sisters, brothers, husbands, children, and friends. Then we automatically include material blessings such as food, shelter, clothing, and a job. In addition, we are thankful for the fellowship of the church and the privilege of living in a free country so we can worship God without harassment. All of these blessings are precious.

As Christians, we are being remade — transformed — into the image of Christ (Romans 12:2; Philippians 2:5). Our lives should reflect the life that Jesus lived while he was among us. We “*put on Christ*” in baptism (Galatians 3:27), and we wear him as the “*armor of light*” (Romans 13:12), casting off the works of darkness and living in the light. We live in a relationship with the Lord.

“I Am the Vine”

Jesus described another image to explain this relationship to his disciples shortly before he was tried and crucified:

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine; you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing” (John 15:1-5).

These five verses are at the heart of an intense, emotional episode in the last hours of the life of Jesus. I encourage you to read John 13-17 at

one sitting, thinking about his last lessons, his last prayers before death came to claim him in the form of Roman soldiers and a kiss of betrayal. In chapter 13, Jesus eats the Passover feast with his 12 apostles. He washes their feet, showing his servanthood in a dramatic way. He predicts the betrayal of Judas and the denial of Peter. In chapter 14, he comforts his friends, knowing they will soon be overcome with fear and grief.

Jesus continues to teach the disciples in chapter 15, using a familiar illustration to explain that his death would not end their relationship; it would only elevate it to a new level. *“I am the vine,”* he said. *“You are the branches. Abide in me, and I will abide in you. And you will bear much fruit.”*

Have you ever seen grapevines laden with fruit? No doubt Jesus and his disciples had walked past many vineyards in their travels. They understood the relationship of the vine, its branches, and its fruit. The gardener supports the vines with a framework so the branches won't break as the fruit grows heavy. If the branches break free from the vine, they wither before the grapes can draw enough nourishment to mature. They must remain connected in order to bear fruit.

In the same way, Christians must remain connected to Christ so they can bear spiritual fruit. We must remain in relationship with Jesus. As a branch abides in the vine or trunk of a plant or tree, drawing nourishment from it, we abide in Christ, drawing spiritual nourishment from him.

Notice that Jesus didn't say, “If you feel close to God, you are abiding”, or “Abide in me when it is convenient or in times of trouble”. He said, “Abide in me and I in you.” Guy N. Woods, an expert in the Greek language, says that a better translation is, “Abide in me; see to it also that I abide in you”. Jesus never forces his presence on anyone. We must choose to abide in him and let him abide in us.

Bearing Fruit

When we make that choice, we will bear fruit. Now some people think that bearing fruit means converting people to Christ. Certainly we are to seek and save the lost. Evangelism is the point of our ministry, but it's not specifically what Jesus is talking about here. The language doesn't sup-

port that reading. If Jesus is the vine and the disciples are the branches, then Jesus would have said, “branches will bear more branches”.

I believe Jesus was telling his disciples that by abiding in him, they would grow the fruit of the Spirit in their lives. Just as an apple tree will naturally bear apples, so Christians will naturally bear the fruit of the Spirit if they are abiding in Christ. In Matthew 7:15-20, Jesus warns against false prophets by saying a good tree bears good fruit and a bad tree bears bad fruit. We recognize people by the fruit they bear, by their actions.

Paul lists the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22,23: *“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law.”* Notice the singular nature of the sentence structure: *“fruit ... is”*. The nine attitudes are all part of one fruit, growing from one source — the vine, Jesus Christ. Imagine a cluster of grapes rather than a bowl of mixed fruit.

Paul contrasted these lovely attitudes with the works of the flesh in Galatians 5:19-21. As we turn away from those sins and cultivate our connection to Jesus, we will be blessed with an abundant harvest of spiritual fruit. As you consider each attitude individually, you will no doubt recognize which ones are the strongest in your life.

Love

“Love” is listed first, perhaps because by its nature it includes most of the other attitudes. Jesus told his disciples, *“... love one another as I have loved you”*. How did Jesus love? He loved by choice, by attitude, and most of all by action, meeting physical needs by healing and feeding, emotional needs by comforting, and spiritual needs by teaching God’s word and providing salvation. Jesus loved all kinds of people, regardless of their race or occupation or level of income. He loved his friends enough to teach them, scold them, praise them, and die for them. He loved his enemies enough to seek forgiveness for their cruelty. Through his unity with God, he could love completely, and by abiding in Christ, we share that unity and love.

The word translated as “love” in Galatians 5 means a charitable and

benevolent love, a love by an act of will, not by physical attraction or self-ish motives. It is the agape love that God demonstrates toward us by sending Jesus to die for our sins.

We have already noted in an earlier chapter that God blesses us because he loves us. As recipients of love, everything we do or say in the name of Jesus should spring from love. Because God blesses us with love, we bless others with the same kind of love.

But it isn't always easy. Sometimes the people we love are not very loveable. Husbands are not always thoughtful and romantic. Children are sometimes cranky and disobedient. Parents grow old and ill and demanding. Friends may betray us. Sometimes we can't say, "I love you" with starry eyes and smiling lips. Sometimes we say, "I love you" with tears and broken hearts.

When I don't feel very loving toward others, I try to remember two things: I'm not always loveable, either, but God loves me anyway. How dreary life would be without the blessing of love! Thirty women listed love as one of their top ten blessings.

Joy

Eight women listed joy as a favorite blessing. The word translated "joy" in Galatians 5 can also include "cheerfulness, calm delight, or gladness". It is similar to the word "rejoice" that Paul uses so frequently in Philippians.

Today many people are consumed with seeking happiness, which they often associate with getting more money or a better job or a bigger house. Their happiness depends on circumstances or people around them. This is not the same thing as joy, which is a blessing from God. Philippians 4:4 tells us to "*rejoice in the Lord always*", and James 1:2,3 tells us to consider it pure joy when we face trials. Nehemiah 8:10 says, "*for the joy of the Lord is your strength.*"

Based on these Scriptures, I see that this joy — this calm delight and gladness — is not tied to material possessions or emotional highs but instead to my relationship with God through Christ. I am joyful as I enter God's presence to worship; I can feel joyful contentment regardless of

money or mood or trial because it is connected with knowing I belong to God. Everything beautiful, from a sunset to a baby's innocence, fills me with joy because it reminds me of God.

Peace

The word "peace" here means "oneness, quietness, and rest". One of the definitions in the dictionary is "an undisturbed state of mind". Nine women listed peace as a blessing. We can think of many applications for this word. A mother with several small children often longs for a little peace and quiet; a soldier on the battlefield longs for the war to end; a woman who has lost her husband or child longs for a peaceful end to the stress of grief. Like joy, I associate peace with contentment; if I am running after things I can't have or don't need, I will not feel peaceful.

But the blessing of peace runs much deeper than a calm feeling. Colossians 2:19-23 describes our sad situation when we were the enemies of God because of our sins, but now in Jesus, God has "*made peace through the blood of His cross*". What greater blessing than to be at peace with God! Peace begins with baptism, for only when our sins are forgiven can we be reconciled to God. Peace grows as we draw nearer to God and become less involved with worldly things.

The Hebrew writer says, "*Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy*" (Hebrews 12:14). Getting along with others is the outward sign of inward peace and holiness. As Christians, we still have to deal with grouchy secretaries and bosses, rude salesclerks, and gossipy neighbors. How we react to others reflects our relationship with God. As we imitate Christ, we will develop a peaceful attitude.

Longsuffering

"Longsuffering" is the literal meaning of the word we sometimes translate as "patience". It suggests more than waiting without complaining; it is an attitude closely related to peace, a calmness of spirit in the face of adversity or insult. I tend to apply the concept of patience to the everyday irritations like waiting in line at the checkout counter or telling a child to clean up his room for the umpteenth time. I apply longsuffering to the

bigger issues of life: coping with a long-term illness or waiting and praying for a loved one to return to the Lord.

But the underlying blessing is the same — the sense of calm endurance as we wait on the Lord. We tend to become impatient when we think God is not answering our prayers, forgetting that “no” and “wait” are valid answers. God’s timetable, though not the same as ours, is always right. Sometimes the evil forces in the world appear to be winning, but that is what Satan wants us to think. He wants us to give up and turn from God in despair. Instead, we must wait patiently, knowing that God has already conquered evil.

Chapter 2 of 1 Peter instructs us in the ways of longsuffering as we deal with all kinds of people around us. It is commendable, says Peter, to suffer wrong in a patient manner (verses 19,20). Verse 21 is especially strong, reminding us to imitate Jesus: *“For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps”*.

The interesting word here is *“example”*. It is the only time in the New Testament that this particular Greek word appears. It means “a writing copy for imitation”. Grade school classrooms used to have alphabet charts posted above the chalkboard with beautiful samples of each letter written in perfect cursive style. Arrows followed each curve to show the students how to form the letters, and the same writing copy appeared in workbooks. Students learned to write cursive by copying each letter over and over on a lined tablet.

Jesus is our writing copy, our example that we must follow. At first, our efforts will be crude, like a child’s first letters in cursive, but the more we practice being like Jesus, the more natural and personal our actions will become. God will bless us with the ability to suffer long as we abide in Christ.

Only three women listed patience as a blessing. One night in ladies’ class, someone said, “I never pray for patience, because I’m afraid God will send me problems to help me develop patience, and I have enough of those already!” The class responded that the problems would come anyway, so we should ask God to bless us with patience to deal with them.

Kindness

The next quality is “kindness”, which can be translated as “gentleness”, “usefulness”, and “moral excellence in character”. It is the essence of the Golden Rule, of giving people what they need instead of what they deserve. The English word “kindness” includes the idea of sympathy, good nature, and affection. Twelve women listed kindness as a blessing, and I’m sure we all appreciate the kind words and deeds that others express to us.

In our increasingly rude and cynical society, people may respond to kindness with impatience or even suspicion. They can’t believe someone would hold the door or give up a place in line without wanting something in return. A few years ago, in response to the idea of “random acts of violence”, someone started a campaign for “random acts of kindness”. People made an extra effort to be kind. In 1995, a group formed a non-profit organization called The Random Acts of Kindness Foundation as “a resource for people committed to spreading kindness”.¹⁶

As Christians, we shouldn’t need an organization to encourage us in acts of kindness. Like the virtuous wife of Proverbs 31, “*the law of kindness*” should be on our tongues (verse 26). Like Jesus, we should feed the hungry out of kindness and compassion. Psalm 117 praises God for his “merciful kindness” that blesses us daily. As we receive, so should we give, practicing kindness regularly and teaching our children to be kind, so that kindness becomes a habit.

Goodness

The next quality is goodness. Have you ever kissed your child good-bye and cautioned her to “be good”? You meant that she should behave herself and mind the grown-up in charge while you are gone. “I will”, promises the child, and you depart, knowing full well that the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.

Jesus said that only God is good (Matthew 19:17), but like Paul, we share in God’s goodness or righteousness because we are in Christ (Philippians 3:9). Throughout the Bible, good and evil are symbolized by light and darkness. In the New Testament, Jesus is described as the light

that shines in the darkness, but the darkness does not understand him (John 1). We are to live as children of light, naturally bearing the fruit of light — goodness, righteousness, and truth (Ephesians 5:8,9). Goodness shines light on evil deeds and exposes them but does not participate in them.

We live in a society that tolerates and even promotes evil as freedom of choice — abortion, homosexuality, pornography, drug and alcohol abuse, corruption in government, lying, and adultery. Sometimes it's not enough to be good individually. We must stand up for good, or no one will know what we believe. God blesses us with the courage and strength to “be good” in the purest sense of the word.

Faithfulness

The next quality, faithfulness, is inseparable from Christianity. You cannot be a Christian without faith. Hebrews 11:6 says, *“Without faith it is impossible to please God.”* You cannot maintain a relationship with God unless you strive to be faithful. As a bride and groom take the vow of faithfulness to one another, so the Christian promises sacred allegiance to God alone.

God's faithfulness is the foundation of man's faithfulness. God can be trusted to keep his promises. He is faithful in the sense of being constant and dependable, the only unchanging element in a world full of changes. We, on the other hand, wander and stray, seeking idols of pleasure and selfishness. We get caught up in worldly pursuits like careers and money and fame, forgetting that everything we have comes from God. If our faithfulness depends on other people or material possessions or successful ventures, it will weaken and disappear when confronted with betrayal and loss. If we are faithful in church attendance only when we like the preacher or the programs, we are unfaithful to God.

Worldly people may try to make us break faith with God. Philosophers may say, “God is dead” or “God never existed”. Humanists say, “We don't need God; humans are smart enough to solve our own problems; look at all the advances in science and medicine”. Socialists say that religion is a crutch for the weak.

These attacks on our faithfulness are powerful, and we don't always

have the answers. When we are suffering, it's hard to look beyond the current pain and think about God's overall plan and his infinite mercy. But the Christian who is abiding in Christ will grow in faithfulness. That doesn't mean she will never have doubts or weak moments; as humans we will always face temptations. But God is faithful. The more I trust God, the more I am able to trust him.

Seventeen women listed faith among their best blessings. God will increase our faith as we abide in Christ, and the greater our faith, the greater our ability to remain faithful.

Gentleness

"Gentleness", also translated as "meekness", includes the idea of humility. Because of God's great power and fierce anger when confronted with evil, we may not think of gentleness as a characteristic of God's personality. Yet when he passed by Elijah on the mountain, he chose the form of a gentle whisper.

Jesus described himself as meek and lowly, and Paul reminded the Thessalonians that he had been gentle among them, like a mother caring for her children. Gentleness does not equal weakness, though that's what Satan would have us to believe. The same Jesus who called himself meek drove the money-changer from the temple and endured terrible pain on the cross.

A gentle, meek attitude is a great strength that is available to us when we abide in Christ.

Proverbs 15:1 reminds us that "*a soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger*". Have you ever had someone yell at you or accuse you falsely of wrongdoing? Did you yell back? No one enjoys being criticized or scolded, but responding gently accomplishes more than getting angry or pouting.

What if you are the one who must criticize or reprove? When you correct your children, gentle but firm discipline sets a better example and is more effective than screaming and threatening. An employee will respond more positively to constructive criticism than to blame or censure.

Gentleness is also associated with beauty. A gentle spirit radiates loveliness that can't be created by cosmetics. First Peter 3:4 talks about a woman's gentle, quiet spirit as a source of beauty that God appreciates.

I long for the blessing of gentleness, both in my own actions and the actions of others. I appreciate the soft word and the gentle pat on the back when I've been bruised by the harshness of the world.

Self-control

The last attitude listed as a fruit of the Spirit is "self-control". It suggests moderation, a controlling of passions and habits in a world that constantly bombards us with the temptation to gratify every desire immediately. Yet lack of self-control is not a new development of our contemporary society. Remember the Israelites and the Golden Calf? We wonder how people who walked through the Red Sea on dry land could turn away from God so soon. Later, Judges 17:6 tells us, "*In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes*". Have you ever justified something you wanted to do by saying, "It feels right"? Sometimes the things that seem right to us may not be right in God's eyes.

When I taught high school in the seventies, more than one teen-ager said to me, "I'll drink (or smoke or have sex) if I want to. It's not hurting you, so why should you care?" It's easy to convince ourselves that our actions are not hurting anyone else.

But sometimes our temptations for self-gratification are less obvious. Habitual overeating, excessive shopping, and obsession with personal appearance are examples of good things that become sinful when carried to an extreme. We become slaves to whatever we allow to master us (2 Peter 2:19). We may shake our heads, wondering how the Israelites could have forsaken God for a golden calf, but what idols have we built in our hearts through a lack of self-control?

Jesus is our example of self-control, as he is for all of these attitudes in the fruit of the Spirit. When he was tempted in the wilderness, Jesus resisted and overcame by the power of God's word and prayer. But he faced temptation on many other occasions. His own brothers ridiculed

him and suggested that he perform more miracles so he could become a public figure (John 7:1-5). The crowds of followers hailed him as king when he entered Jerusalem the week before the crucifixion; he may have been tempted to use his power to set up an earthly kingdom and bypass the cross — maybe even some of the disciples thought that's what he should do. And on the cross, when the mockers laughed at his so-called inability to save himself, how much easier it would have been for him to come down with legions of angels to destroy his enemies.

But because Jesus submitted to the will of God, he controlled himself. He did not use his power for earthly gain or glory, but only to glorify God and confirm the word. His prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane was not only *"take this cup away from Me"* but also *"not My will but Yours be done"*, which is the ultimate statement of self-control. When we abide in Christ, we will receive the blessing of self-control.

Blessed by Abiding

Growing the fruit of the Spirit in our lives is a process that begins with our decision to follow Christ and continues with our daily effort to remain connected to him. We cannot do it alone; the branch that breaks off from the vine cannot produce fruit, and the Christian who separates herself from Christ can never know the blessings of the fruit of the Spirit.

May God grant you the blessings named in Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3:14-21:

"For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height — to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen".

Discussion Questions

1. We must stay connected to Jesus in order to bear Spiritual fruit. How do we maintain the relationship?
2. The nine attitudes that make up the fruit of the Spirit are all positive qualities that Jesus demonstrated in his life. God blesses us with these qualities as we abide in Christ and become more like him. Which ones are the hardest for you to maintain consistently? Why?
3. How does God's agape love differ from the world's idea of love?
4. Consider the following proverbs from different countries. What do they tell you about the importance of kindness?
 - a. "A kind word never broke anyone's mouth" (Irish).
 - b. "Do good and care not to whom" (Italian).
 - c. "One kind word can warm three winter months" (Japanese).
 - d. "One can pay back the loan of gold, but one lies forever in debt to those who are kind" (Malaysian).
5. How do you think Jesus was able to practice self-control in the face of constant opportunities to use his power for himself?

Encouraging Words

“I had been in an abusive marriage for 13 years and finally decided to leave. My dad, an alcoholic in his 80’s, went with me. We stayed with my brother for a while and then moved to Niles, Michigan, hoping for a fresh start.

“I had no job and not much money, so I agreed to live in a burned-out house and fix it up in exchange for two months’ rent. Otherwise, we were living on prayer. I had been a Christian for 25 years, so I looked up the address for the church and went alone one Sunday morning.

“I was feeling pretty low. I didn’t know anyone. I sat down beside an older woman. I was fighting tears, and soon I began to tell her my troubles. A couple sitting behind us heard my story. The woman put her hand on my shoulder and said, “Would you like a job?” They did janitorial work for several banks and said I could work for them.

“When I left church that day, I felt much better. I had a job, and I had met people who became good Christian friends. My dad obeyed the gospel when he was 90. God provided the love and support I needed and gave me the strength to go on.” — Name withheld by request

“My mother came to live with us in 1991 when her mental health deteriorated to the point that it did not seem safe for her to live alone. Clyde, my husband, was very receptive to the idea when I approached him about it. Although we were doing something beneficial for her, it turned out to be a blessing in disguise for us. There were many very trying times, but Clyde was so patient and kind to her. He picked her up several times when she fell, helped her up and down from her chair innumerable times, humored her, and never complained. His sense of humor helped us through many a trying situation. I learned to appreciate him more, and I learned to be more patient and compassionate in those nearly six years.

“I also learned about the consequences of Alzheimer’s disease, which gives me a greater understanding of what other people are going through in similar situations. Then Mother was in the nursing home for four and a half years, and my compassion for her in her helpless condition continued to increase. I think of 2 Corinthians 1:3,4. God comforts us so we can comfort other people. God blesses us as we learn through our experiences so we may be a blessing to others in similar circumstances.” — Hazel Manley

Chapter 9

The Blessings of the Bible

It's Oscar season. Glamorous movie stars dressed (or semi-dressed) in expensive gowns and glittering jewels lean possessively on the arms of their handsome, famous escorts as they parade along the red carpet through crowds of semi-hysterical fans. Cameras flash, reporters wave microphones as they clamor for spontaneous interviews, and everyone sighs with envy. Oh, to be rich and beautiful and famous! Oh, to *know* someone who is rich and beautiful and famous!

Our society is obsessed with celebrities. Supermarket tabloids highlight every Hollywood scandal, and television talk shows thrive on celebrity guest appearances. Nearly every newscast carries a story about celebrity causes or activities, and programs like *American Idol* and *The Bachelor* draw record audiences. Sports heroes and rock stars appeal to our children, often setting examples for immoral behavior and immodest dress that are hard to combat. Yet our fascination with celebrities continues.

How ironic that we express so much admiration and hero worship for people whose values are usually far removed from God's standards. How disappointing when we forget that their fame is fleeting, their good looks diminish with age, and their money soon evaporates. In fact, in a world of attractive but temporary idols, perhaps nothing else is as temporary as fame.

What if, instead of spending hours following the escapades of celebrities, what if we focused our time and energy on Bible study? What if our heroines and heroes were people like Ruth, Esther, Mary, Dorcas, Lydia, Samuel, David, Luke, Peter, and Paul? Though these people were just as human as modern day celebrities, and though they also sinned, one major difference makes them worthy of our admiration: They put God first in their lives.

And what if by turning off the television and opening the Bible with

our families, we came to know God? Would there be any blessing in that? Thirty women listed the Bible as one of their top ten blessings, and I would certainly include it on my list. The Bible is a blessing because it is our most direct and concrete link to God. God reveals himself to us, the Creator shows the created beings who he is and what he expects, in the pages of the Bible. As we study, we will discover boundless blessings. We'll consider only a few in this chapter.

Better Than the Rich and Famous

I can read movie magazines and watch celebrity talk shows and learn about rich and famous people, but I'll probably never be friends with Julia Roberts or meet Sean Connery. I can also read the Bible and listen to sermon after sermon to learn *about* God, yet still not know him.

But I can know God, if I'm willing to seek him. In one very important way, God is more approachable than any celebrity on the planet: Julia and Sean have no interest in me, but God *wants* me to know him. And God wants you to know him.

Hard to believe, isn't it? Why would the all-powerful, all-knowing God of the universe want us to know him? Why would he reveal himself to us, the created beings? He wants a relationship with us because he created us in his image; we are in him and of him and cannot fully live unless we are living in relationship with him. Listen to Paul's lesson to the Athenians, who loved to hear "new things":

"God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. Nor is He worshiped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things. And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their pre-appointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also His offspring'" (Acts 17:24-28; emphasis added).

An Instruction Manual

My first husband and I once spent a fun-filled eight hours assembling an entertainment center. If we hadn't had instructions, the thing would still be spread out on the floor in 102 pieces. In fact, almost everything on sale today, from prescription medicine to DVD players, from a battery-operated toothbrush to a lawnmower, comes with instructions, warnings, and disclaimers. Some how-to guides are incomprehensible; others are insulting in their simplicity. But if you want your new toy to operate correctly, you'd better read the instructions.

Of course, some people never read instructions. They muddle through, assembling the new appliance/toy/tool and then scratching their heads about what to do with the left over pieces. Some women merely glance at a recipe and then create a culinary masterpiece that somehow even looks like the soufflé/cake/pie pictured in the magazine. But most of us do much better when we read the instructions.

Why should life in general be any different? God created human beings and then gave them instructions about how to live. As long as they followed God's rules, people flourished, enjoying God's favor; but every time they ignored the rules, they found themselves in a spiritual wilderness, asking God, "Why don't you help us?"

We need instructions about how to live our lives. Jeremiah 10:23 states, "*O Lord, I know the way of man is not in himself; it is not in man who walks to direct his own steps.*" If we don't know how to direct our steps, then who does?

"I have made the earth, and created man on it. I — My hands — stretched out the heavens, and all their host I have commanded. I have raised him up in righteousness, and I will direct all his ways..." says the Lord of hosts (Isaiah 45:12,13).

Who better to instruct the created beings than the Creator? Yet from the beginning, we have chosen repeatedly to ignore God's rules. Like willful children who ignore warnings from parents, we close our eyes and ears to God our Father when we fail to study the Bible.

Needing and Wanting

Sometimes what we need and what we want are two different things. I need nutritious food to maintain health, energy, and a reasonable weight. I know what's good for me — fruits and vegetables, chicken and lean meat, whole wheat bread, and minimal amounts of sugar. However, I want chocolate. I need water, but I want sweet tea and sodas. I struggle to make good choices of food because my needs and wants don't always coincide.

But when it comes to choosing an instruction manual for the way I live my life, deep down, I need and want the same thing — a high moral standard that will guide me successfully through this life and into eternity. Psychologists say that children who act out are merely testing the boundaries of parental control. Yes, they want their own way; they often want to do things that are not good for them. But (deep down) they really want to know the limits. They want Mom and Dad to say, “no”, and mean it. Permissive parents who say they love their children too much to discipline them are fooling themselves and hurting their children. Children who have rules know their parents love them enough to protect them from bad choices and dangerous situations.

The same is true for adults, though we don't want to admit it. When we have to make tough decisions, when we aren't sure what to do or how to act, we not only need rules to go by, we want rules to go by. We want a standard, something that tells us, for sure, “This is right. Do it, even if it is hard”, or “This is wrong. Avoid it at all costs”.

The Bible provides that kind of standard. It tells us clearly what is right and what is wrong. It lists the sins we should avoid and describes the positive traits we should develop. The Bible is always true, always consistent, and always applicable to our lives.

If we approach Bible study with the attitude that God is providing what we need and what we want in order to live for him, we will be blessed with understanding. The Bible is our standard, the authority for life, for salvation, for worship, for truth. When my son was five or six, I would talk to him about his behavior in church or with his playmates. If he did something wrong, I would ask him, “Is that what the Bible says?”

He learned well; if he heard his dad or me criticize or complain about something, he would tug on my shirttail and ask, "Is that what the Bible says?"

We could avoid division in the church if we would ask, "What does the Bible say?" and then abide by the answer. Our marriages would be stronger and our homes more stable if husbands and wives would study what the Bible teaches about marriage, divorce, and parenting. We would convert more people to Christ if we asked people to accept what the Bible says about salvation rather than what they think or feel. If we believe the Bible is truly God's word, that it is the standard for all things, and if we want the blessings that result from Bible study, then we must ask, "What does the Bible say?" about every aspect of our lives.

Bible Authority

Why should we accept the Bible as the authority for our lives? Why should we follow a book written centuries ago in a land and culture foreign to us? A thorough reading and study of the Bible will show us the continuity and consistency of God's love for his created beings. Consider a general overview of the way God has communicated with mankind from the beginning of time.

In the Garden of Eden, God spoke to Adam and Eve. Apparently, it was God's habit to spend time with them each day, for after they sinned, they hid from God when they heard "*the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day*" (Genesis 3:8). Later, God also spoke directly to Noah and Abraham, making covenants that governed the relationship between God and man.

The first instance of written instructions from God came in the form of the laws given to Moses and accepted by the Israelites, whom God designated as his chosen people (Deuteronomy 7:6). We often think of the Ten Commandments, inscribed in stone, but there were hundreds of other laws as well. Though the Israelites promised to obey God's words, they habitually failed, dishonoring the covenant by worshipping idols. God spoke to them through prophets such as Samuel, Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. Time and again, the people and their rulers ignored the prophets.

A dramatic example is found in Jeremiah 36. God told Jeremiah to write on a scroll "*all the words that I have spoken to you against Israel, against Judah, and against all the nations*" (verse 2). God hoped that when the people heard his words, they would turn away from evil so he could "*forgive their iniquity and their sin*" (verse 3). Jeremiah employed a scribe, Baruch, to write the words and then read the scroll to the people and to the "*princes*", who "*looked in fear from one to another*" when they heard God's warning (verses 14-16). They promised to tell the king about the scroll.

When King Jehoiakim heard the news, he asked Jehudi to read the scroll aloud. But the king was not impressed; he was not afraid. He took a knife and cut the scroll, throwing each strip into the fire! Given the opportunity to lead his people back to God, Jehoiakim chose instead to reject God's instructions and continue his arrogant, evil behavior. However, at God's command, Jeremiah and Baruch produced another scroll. Jehoiakim's rejection did not change the word of God.

I doubt that any of us would presume to destroy even one page of the Bible. We teach our children to hold the Bible carefully, to turn the pages softly so they don't tear, to listen attentively when we read God's word aloud. I hope we also teach them to obey God's word by first studying and obeying it ourselves. If we don't, we aren't much better than Jehoiakim. When we fail to study the Bible, we not only miss its blessings but also jeopardize our spiritual lives.

The Christian Era

When the prophet John began to preach repentance, Jesus came to him for baptism. As Jesus came up from the water, the Spirit of God descended like a dove, touching Jesus, and a voice from heaven said, "*This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased*" (Matthew 3:16,17). God began to speak to mankind in a new way, through his son. The people who heard the Sermon on the Mount were astonished at the teaching of Jesus; they recognized him as one who had authority (Matthew 7:28,29). Other verses attest to the fact that God gave Jesus authority to speak for him: John 17:1,2; 1 Corinthians 11:3; and Hebrews 1:1,2.

Then in Matthew 28:18-20, we see not only that God gave Jesus all

authority but also that Jesus authorized his disciples to make more disciples, baptize, and teach in his name. In addition, Jesus promised that God would send the Helper, the Holy Spirit, to teach them all things and remind them of all that Jesus had taught them. John 16:13 states that the Holy Spirit would guide the apostles into "all truth". This promise was fulfilled in Acts 2 when the apostles were empowered to preach the gospel. But they didn't just preach.

As the gospel spread and churches sprang up all over the known world, the apostles and other disciples began to write letters. And because their lives were focused on God and his son, their letters focused on that same theme. The Holy Spirit did his job, refreshing their memories, inspiring their zeal and their words. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John wrote the biography of Jesus to four different audiences; Luke also kept a journal of the missionary journeys and noted miracles, acts of persecution, and the phenomenal growth of the early church. Peter, James, John, and Paul wrote letters of encouragement and instruction to individuals and congregations. John recorded his prophetic vision of God's ultimate triumph over evil, and an unnamed author wrote Hebrews to remind Jewish Christians that something better had fulfilled and replaced the old Law — rather, Someone.

Can we trust the authority of the Bible? The first-century Christians did. They accepted the letters as coming from God through men who had been given authority by Jesus. In 2 Corinthians 10:8,9, Paul comments on the response to his letters:

"For even if I should boast somewhat more about our authority, which the Lord gave us for edification and not for your destruction, I shall not be ashamed — lest I seem to terrify you by letters. 'For his letters', they say, 'are weighty and powerful, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible.' Let such a person consider this, that what we are in word by letters when we are absent, such we will also be in deed when we are present."

They found his letters more potent than his speech, but Paul emphasizes that he speaks and writes the same thing — words given for edification by the Lord. Peter notes that Paul's letters, while sometimes difficult

to understand, are still part of the Scriptures (2 Peter 3:14-16). And Peter also states that God has given us *“all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust”* (2 Peter 1:3,4).

God gave Jesus all authority; Jesus gave his disciples authority to teach the gospel; then, guided by the Holy Spirit, the disciples preached and wrote all things that we need in order to know God.¹⁷ Eventually, their letters were compiled as the New Testament and combined with the Old Testament (called by Jesus *“the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms”* in Luke 24:44,45) to form the Bible, our instruction book not only for this life but also for eternal life and salvation.¹⁸

Today we can read God’s words in our own language and study it to our heart’s content. We can bask in the wonderful blessings found in Bible study.

Salvation

As we study the Bible to know God, one of the first things we learn is that God wants us to be his children, citizens of his kingdom. Our souls are made in his image, and we cannot be happy until we live in relationship with our Creator. The problem is sin. The perfect, holy God cannot fellowship with sinners. When Adam and Eve disobeyed God, they lost their place in his kingdom and brought sin and death into the world. Centuries later, God through Isaiah would remind the Israelites that their sins separated them from God (Isaiah 59:1-3). Later still, Paul would write, *“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”* (Romans 3:23). We are lost in our sins and can’t do anything on our own to remove sin and restore the relationship with God.

The Bible has a solution for our sin problem — salvation through the blood of Jesus the Christ, the Son of God. Thirty-three ladies listed salvation as a blessing. Perhaps it is the most fundamental spiritual blessing we receive from Jesus, for without entering into a relationship with God, we can’t know him or experience any other blessing, and we can only enter that relationship through salvation in Jesus. *“I am the way, the truth,*

and the life. No one comes to the father except through Me", said Jesus (John 14:6). The popular teaching that "We're all going to heaven, but we travel different roads" is false; Jesus is the only way to heaven.

The equally popular teaching that a person can "ask Jesus to come into his heart" or can "accept Jesus as a personal savior" is equally false. When Jesus was on trial before Pilate, crowds of Jews shouted, "Crucify him!" A few weeks later, on Pentecost, many of these same people heard the first gospel sermon preached. When they learned that they had called for the death of God's Son, they were guilt-stricken and asked, "*Men and brethren, what shall we do?*" (Acts 2:37). Peter had the answer: "*Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit*" (verse 38). Like the 3,000 people who were baptized that day, and like many others described in the book of Acts, we must obey in order to receive salvation.

The word translated "*salvation*" means "deliverance, preservation, safety", particularly from enemies. David often talked about salvation from the Lord when he was fleeing from Saul and other enemies (2 Samuel 22:1-4; Psalm 18:46; Psalm 13:5). When Zecharias praised God after the birth of his son John, he said, "*And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest; for you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways, to give knowledge of salvation to His people by the remission of their sins, through the tender mercy of our God ...*" (Luke 1:76-78).

Salvation saves us from the terrible enemy, Satan, remitting our sins and bringing us into Christ. We learn about salvation from studying the Bible; it is the only authorized way we can return to God. How grateful we should be for this wonderful blessing.

Forgiveness of Sin

Forgiveness of sin is found in salvation, but thirty-four women named forgiveness as a separate blessing. While salvation begins with the one-time act of baptism, and while our sins are forgiven at that point, most of us realize that we need to seek forgiveness every day of our Christian walk. Though we strive to resist temptation and struggle to be good, we

will still falter and fail occasionally. Satan does not give up when we obey the gospel; in fact, he works even harder to lure us away from salvation.

Genesis 4:6,7 gives us a good word picture to illustrate the lurking nature of sin. Cain and Abel had brought their offerings to God. The Lord respected Abel's offering but not Cain's, and Cain was angry. God questions him and warns him:

"And the Lord said to Cain, 'Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it'."

Can't you just see sin huddled on the doorstep, waiting for the opportunity to come back into our lives after we've been saved? Like Cain, we should rule over it, but we don't always succeed. Thank God that we can seek forgiveness when we stumble.

Forgiveness is a "layered" blessing; just when we begin to take it for granted, God peels back another layer and shows us deeper, richer benefits. First there is the initial joy and relief that we are cleansed from our sin. After my husband Loy mows the lawn on a humid summer day, he can hardly wait to shower and remove the dust and sweat from his body. Imagine your soul covered with the dust and sweat of sin — the filth of lies or sexual immorality, the grit and grime of stealing and cheating, the deep stain of selfishness, and the greasy smudges of guilt. In shame and sorrow, you turn away from your sin (repent), confess Jesus as the Son of God, and wash your sin away in baptism:

"Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:3,4).

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

You rise from the waters of baptism clean and whole — forgiven! You are a new person, free from the filthy stains of sin. What a joyful blessing!

Even though God has forgiven you, the consequences of old sins may still trouble you. Guilt may linger; you may struggle to forgive yourself. I think of Paul, who persecuted the church before his conversion. He even held the coats of the men who stoned Stephen. Did he have a problem forgiving himself? If he did, he overcame it: *“Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus”* (Philippians 3:13,14, emphasis added). A second layer of forgiveness allows you to be free of guilt for things that can’t be changed.

A third layer of forgiveness comes from your new brothers and sisters in Christ. Having been forgiven themselves, they should be eager to accept and encourage the “new you”. They can help you grow through study, prayer, and fellowship. They can help you replace old sinful habits with new spiritual ones. The blessing of Christian friends is part of the salvation/forgiveness package.

You may find that you need to apologize to people that you hurt by your sinful actions. And you may find that they don’t forgive you and don’t believe that you have changed your ways. This layer of forgiveness is extra thick because you may need it for a long time. As you mature spiritually, your lifestyle will provide evidence of your change of heart. Even if those you have wronged never forgive you, let them see that you are truly a new person in Christ, and you will receive a blessing.

Finally, no matter how hard you try to live a sinless life, you will still sin. The book of 1 John says that if we say we don’t sin, then we deceive ourselves and have no truth in us, but if we confess our sins, God forgives us again and again (1:8,9). John also says, *“But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin”* (1:7). Jesus is the light of the world; when we walk in that light — when we try to live as Jesus wants us to live — the layers of forgiveness never run out, as long as we are willing to ask for his cleansing.

Grace

Grace is another blessing closely related to salvation and forgiveness.

"But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life" (Titus 3:4-7).

Sometimes defined as "unmerited favor", grace is also associated with "joy, delight, thanks, good will, and merciful kindness". It is grace that saves us through faith, a gift from God, so that we can't claim salvation by our works (Ephesians 2:8; 2 Timothy 1:9), and it is grace that builds us up and keeps us in Christ (Acts 20:32).

Grace is also a virtue, as discussed in the chapter on giving. When we practice kindness, mercy, gratitude, and benevolence, we reflect God's grace. By grace, God gave us salvation, which we don't deserve. By grace, we demonstrate that same attitude toward other people (2 Corinthians 9:8).

We learn grace from Jesus. Luke described the child Jesus as "*strong in spirit, filled with wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him*" (Luke 2:40), and John speaks of "*the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth*" (John 1:14). God gave us grace through Jesus (1 Corinthians 1:4).

Today we see the grace of God through Jesus whenever we open the Bible and read the gospel accounts. Jesus lived a life of grace; every act of compassion, every healing, every touch and kind word, every teaching exuded the blessing of merciful, undeserved grace.

A lifetime of a hundred years would not be enough to absorb all the beauty and blessing waiting for us in the Bible. The more we study and the deeper we dive into its richness, the more we realize that its spiritual treasures are worth far more than any earthly wealth or fame.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you read the Bible every day? If not, why not? Below are excuses given for not reading the Bible daily. Give a counter argument for each.
 - a. "I don't have time."
 - b. "I can't understand what I read."
 - c. "So much of the Bible is about an old foreign culture. I don't think it applies to our lives today."
 - d. "I've heard Bible stories all my life; I know all the important parts."
 - e. "It's boring."
2. Why do you think our society is so obsessed with celebrities? Is it wrong to be interested in movie stars and sports heroes?
3. Is it possible to be saved without studying the Bible?
4. How are salvation, forgiveness, and grace interrelated? Can you have one without the other?
5. What other blessings have you discovered from Bible study?

Encouraging Words

“The blessing that sustains me most in difficult times is the Bible. It contains the history of the creation and instructions on how to live. It shows us God’s goodness, mercy, and kindness.”
— Name not given

“All blessings are through the grace of God. His grace has sustained me through serious health problems, death of loved ones, and family heartaches. My husband and I have both faced life-threatening situations; we survived by the grace of God and with the support of our spiritual and earthly family and faith.” —
Melba Figgins

“The Bible just amazes me. It tells about God’s love and salvation, but it also has lots of stories about real people. And it doesn’t just tell the positive stories. The best people in the Bible, like Moses and David, still weren’t perfect, but God forgave their sins and still loved them. That gives me hope. The Bible covers every human situation and emotion; I can always find myself in it. Best of all, the Bible tells about Jesus. Without Jesus, life would be pointless.” — Name not given

Chapter 10

The Blessings of Prayer

God communicates with us today through the Bible, but we communicate with him through prayer. Prayer was listed by thirty-five women on the survey as a valuable blessing, second in number only to family. Prayer is essential for Christians who want to maintain a strong, healthy relationship with the Lord. Can you imagine two people having a good relationship if one of them never spoke to the other? Of course not. We know that relationships thrive or die based on the level of good communication.

The Prayers of Jesus

To understand the importance of prayer, study the prayer life of Jesus. I used to wonder why Jesus felt the need to pray. Since he was God-on-earth, didn't he and God already know each other's thoughts and purposes? Yet the Bible records that Jesus prayed often, sometimes for hours at a time. The fact that Jesus was both God and man explains the need for prayer: He had come to earth as a man to fulfill a divine purpose — the salvation of the world — and he couldn't fulfill that purpose without God's help.

A solitary place

The gospel writers record at least three occasions when Jesus prayed alone at great length. One is in Mark 1:35: "*Now in the morning, having risen a long while before daylight, He went out and departed to a solitary place; and there He prayed.*" Jesus withdrew and prayed alone.

Reading the entire chapter may give us some insight into why Jesus prayed for hours when he could have been sleeping. Mark 1 rapidly reviews a period of several weeks or perhaps months in the early ministry of Jesus. We learn of John's "*preparing the way*" sermons, the baptism and temptation of Jesus, and the eventual imprisonment of John. We learn that Jesus began preaching where John left off: "*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel*" (verse 25).

We see Jesus calling his first disciples, Peter, Andrew, James, and John; we see him teaching and healing in the synagogue; we see the amazement of those who heard his authoritative words; and we learn that his fame spread throughout Galilee. When he went to the home of Peter and John, Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law, and then at sundown, "*the whole city [Capernaum] gathered together at the door*" (verse 32). They brought their sick and demon-possessed to Jesus for help, and he healed many.

How late was it when the last person was sent home well? Ten o'clock? Midnight? We don't know. But I doubt that Jesus got much sleep since he went out alone long before daylight to pray. And we don't know what that prayer was about. What we do know is that when Simon and the others found him, they said, "*Everyone is looking for You*", (verses 36,37). Is it me, or was there a hint of rebuke in that statement? Were they wondering, "Why are you out here by yourself? There are more people to heal. You're a very popular man."

I'm speculating, of course. But it seems logical that the disciples would want Jesus to continue the successful ministry of healing from the previous night. However, Jesus had another idea: "*Let us go into the next towns, that I may preach there also, because for this purpose I have come forth*" (verse 38).

Jesus healed people for two reasons: to show compassion and to confirm his authority from God. But he didn't come just to heal physical ailments; he came to preach about the kingdom of God, to "*seek and save the lost*". In those early weeks of ministry, crowds of people accepted him and praised him; before long, there would be talk of making him king. How easy it would have been to let the agenda of the crowd become his own. How easy it would have been to concentrate on performing miracles and enjoy the glory of the praise from those he healed.

Instead, after a few hours of prayer, Jesus moved on to a new place to preach. Yes, he continued to heal, but he focused on preaching (verse 39). He tried to limit the fame that followed the miracles, (verses 40-45), but he became so well known that he could no longer enter the cities openly; he stayed in deserted places, but still the crowds came from every direction (45).

Prayer provides the blessing of focus. In a quiet place by myself, I begin to tell God all about my problems, stresses, and fears. I mention my successes and failures; I speak of what I have done and how much more there is to do; I speak of selfish desires and unselfish needs. And as I pray, the unimportant, petty irritations fall away and I see clearly the things that matter — the need to share the gospel, to show compassion, to trust God — whatever purpose for my life that God puts in my path. By example, Jesus has shown us that we need to spend time alone in prayer to God. Then we can face another day with renewed purpose.

In a time of grief and stress

Another example of Jesus praying in solitude occurs in Mark 6. Again, Mark packs a lot into one chapter. First, Jesus was rejected in *"his own country"*, unable to perform mighty works there because of their unbelief (verses 1-6). Then Jesus sent the twelve apostles out two-by-two; we might think of this mission as the first door-knocking campaign, except that Jesus gave them power to perform miracles (verses 7-13).

Mark interrupts the storyline at this point to relate the death of John. When the apostles returned from their preaching tour, they told Jesus about John's death and about the success of the campaign, *"both what they had done and what they had taught"* (verse 30).

There were so many people coming and going that Jesus and the twelve couldn't even eat, so Jesus suggested they retire to a deserted place to rest (verses 31,32). But the crowds saw them leave and intercepted them when they arrived. Out of compassion, Jesus postponed his quiet time and taught the crowds instead (verse 34). Next, he fed more than 5,000 people with five loaves and two fish, despite the doubts of the apostles, and then finally he sent his friends away in a boat and dismissed the crowd. At last, Jesus had time to pray alone on the mountain (verses 45,46).

A few hours later, perhaps more refreshed by prayer than by sleep, Jesus walked on the stormy sea to join his disciples in their boat. Again, we don't know the nature of that prayer. But consider the events that preceded it: Jesus learned of the death of his cousin, the prophet John; he heard the results of the first preaching campaign by his followers; he tried to escape the crowds, but again they pressed around him, and their needs

were so great that he couldn't refuse them; he fed the crowd despite the doubts of the very men who had just returned from casting out demons and preaching. What a range of emotions for one day!

Jesus, whose heart was so tender that he couldn't leave the sick and needy in distress, must have felt grief when he learned of John's death. He must have marveled that men who could cast out demons would be discouraged at the thought of feeding thousands. When I am caught in the grip of strong emotions, what I want more than anything is time alone in prayer. I want to pour out all my grief and frustration to God. Giving my problems to God in prayer brings the blessing of his comfort and strength. Just admitting to God that I can't control a certain situation or my feelings about it calms my mind and spirit.

Before an important decision

We sometimes forget that at the height of his popularity, Jesus had dozens, maybe even hundreds of disciples who followed him regularly. Some left him when his teaching became too difficult for them to understand, as in John 6:60,66. Some were people who contributed money to his support; others were people whom he had healed (Luke 8:1-3). But Jesus chose certain men for special training, an inner circle of twelve who would sit at his feet and receive intense teaching. One would betray him. One would deny him. One would doubt his resurrection. All would run away when he was arrested.

But after his death, resurrection, and ascension to heaven, eleven of these twelve apostles (plus a replacement) would lead the campaign to fulfill the great commission stated in Matthew 28:18-20. They would leave their homes and families and friends to become penniless, persecuted preachers for the sake of the gospel.

Jesus didn't choose them lightly. He didn't ask for volunteers or cast lots or draw names out of a hat. Instead, he took their names to God in prayer.

"Now it came to pass in those days that He went out to the mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God. And when it was day, He called his disciples to Himself; and from them He chose twelve whom He also named apostles: Simon,

whom He also named Peter, and Andrew his brother; James and John; Philip and Bartholomew; Matthew and Thomas; James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon called the Zealot; Judas the son of James, and Judas Iscariot who also became a traitor” (Luke 6:12-16, emphasis added).

I wonder if he described to God each disciple under consideration. I wonder if he agonized over Judas. Did he mention Peter’s habit of speaking first and thinking afterward? Did he talk about the doubting nature of Thomas? We don’t know. We do know that the decision was so important that he prayed all night before he announced his choices.

Have you ever prayed all night about an important decision? If you have, you may have experienced the blessing of making that decision calmly and being willing to live with the consequences because you have put the situation into God’s hands and know he will work it out in the best way. The disloyal Judas will still betray; the impetuous Peter will learn to speak the oracles of God; the doubting Thomas will develop a rock solid faith. God will work in our hearts as we allow him access. As always, Jesus is our example in all things.

The Lord’s Prayer

Jesus prayed often. He prayed before meals on several occasions; he prayed with his disciples after establishing the Lord’s Supper memorial; he prayed fervently yet submissively in the Garden of Gethsemane. All of these prayers are worthy of our study, but we will look at only one more.

Both Matthew and Luke record what has come to be called the Lord’s Prayer or the Model Prayer. Most of us can recite it. It is an example of the way we should pray; it includes praise, submission, dependence, repentance, and requests; it was not intended to be the only prayer we could use when we speak to God.

Luke 11:1 says that one day the disciples noticed Jesus in prayer. When he finished, they asked him to teach them to pray. He responded with these words:

“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your king-

dom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us day by day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who is indebted to us. And do not lead us into temptation, But deliver us from the evil one" (Luke 11:2-4).

Matthew adds another verse: *"For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen"* (Matthew 6:13). The verses preceding the prayer in Matthew 6 include instructions about a person's attitude during prayer.

I want to look at the words and format of this model from the viewpoint of the blessings found in praying. Let's think about each phrase.

"Our Father in heaven"

How blessed we are to approach the God of the universe as our Father! We can speak freely, as a child speaks to a loving parent, because we know he wants only the best for us. He is in heaven, watching over us and working for our good.

"Hallowed be Your name"

"Hallowed" means "holy". We recognize that God's name is holy, not to be spoken flippantly or crudely. Because he is holy, he has the power to make us holy through the blood of Christ. Certainly that is a blessing we should acknowledge often in prayer.

"Your kingdom come"

We are blessed to be part of God's kingdom, which means we are under his rule, as citizens under a king. Though the kingdom has come in the sense that the church as kingdom already exists, we pray for the perfection of that kingdom in heaven.

"Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven"

We are most blessed when we do the will of God. Too often, we resist submitting to God's will, but Jesus prayed for God's will to be done even when it meant he had to die on the cross. Imagine, if everyone did God's will on earth, then earth would be like heaven.

"Give us day by day our daily bread"

We shouldn't worry about food for tomorrow. We should ask God to

supply our food today, trusting that he knows our needs already. When we learn to depend on God for everything instead of worrying and striving to do everything for ourselves, we will experience a blessing of contentment.

“And forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who is indebted to us”

If we want the blessing of forgiveness, then we have to forgive others. We can't expect God to forgive us when we are holding grudges. When I have trouble forgiving someone, I start praying for him or her. It's difficult to hold a grudge while asking God to help someone, even an enemy.

“And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one”

The word *“temptation”* can mean “a trial” or “proving” as well as “a trial of faith” or “enticement to sin”. God does not tempt us to sin (James 1:13,14). The sense of this phrase in the Lord's Prayer is, “Don't let us be overwhelmed by trials or temptations”, similar to 1 Corinthians 10:13: *“No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it”*.

It is a blessing to know that God will help us escape the temptation to sin or endure the trials and troubles that test our faith. Consider also that the *“way of escape”* may include prayer. We are less likely to sin if we pray about our temptations and ask for God's help to resist them. The best way to achieve deliverance from Satan is found in James 4:7: *“Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you”*.

“For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever”

Matthew adds a final verse, praising God and recognizing his high position. Doesn't it make you feel good to praise someone? Praising God not only blesses him with our gratitude but also blesses us as we consistently recognize his rulership, power, and glory. It is good at times to say a prayer that contains nothing but praise and thanksgiving to God; it is also good to include praise and thanksgiving in every prayer, even (or especially) when we are making requests.

God Understands

One of the greatest blessings of prayer is the assurance that God hears and understands our prayers, even when we don't know what to say. He hears the angry prayer when we lose control and ask, "Why is this happening to me?" He listens to our fears and worries, our pleas and promises to be good, our guilt and shame when we repent, and our weak but persistent gratitude when all we can say is "Thank you" over and over again.

Paul told the Philippians, "*Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God*" (Philippians 4:6). We can pray about everything, from the most trivial, selfish request to situations that affect the entire world. Nothing is too small or too large to take to God in prayer.

God Answers Prayer

In Luke 11, the verses following the prayer give examples that suggest God will answer the prayers of his children. Jesus told the parable of the persistent friend who keeps knocking on his neighbor's door until the man gets up and gives him the bread he needs. He summarized the lesson with these words:

"So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened" (Luke 11:9,10).

Did Jesus mean that if we ask God often enough, he will give us anything and everything we ask for? No. When I think of some of the foolish requests I've made to God over the years, I'm very grateful that God didn't say, "yes" to everything. But Jesus is talking about persistence. Asking, seeking, and knocking suggest the persistence of the man who woke his friend in the middle of the night to ask for bread. His problem was serious; he had unexpected guests and no food to give them. Such a breach of hospitality would cause shame to his family. So he doesn't give up in his quest.

Then Jesus asks questions: If a son asked for bread, would a father give him a stone? If he asked for a fish, would his father give him a ser-

pent instead? Or a scorpion instead of an egg (Luke 11:11,12)? These examples carry the suggestion of trickery. Surely no loving father would try to trick his hungry child with stones and snakes instead of food.¹⁹ In the same way, God will not deny his children the good things they request.

Notice verse 13: *"If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!"* Jesus is emphasizing a contrast between an earthly father and our heavenly Father, between a reluctant friend and our God who wants to bless us. We might paraphrase verse 13 this way: "If a reluctant friend can be persuaded to grant a petition because of persistence, *how much more* will your heavenly Father, who is ready and willing to bless you, answer your request if you persist!"²⁰ In a parallel passage, Matthew 7:11, the words are, *"give what is good to those who ask Him"*. The reference to the Holy Spirit here is similar to the Spirit's work in the Christian's life as described in Romans 8, not to miraculous gifts.²¹

If we pray persistently, patiently, and whole-heartedly, God will answer by blessing us with what is good. Sometimes "no" or "wait" is better for us than "yes". Paul prayed three times, asking God to remove the thorn in the flesh, but God's answer was, *"My grace is sufficient for you"* (2 Corinthians 12:8). Sometimes the "no" hurts us but blesses others. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed three times in anguish of spirit, *"If it is possible, let this cup pass from Me"*, but the answer was heard in the footsteps of the betrayer and the rattle of a Roman sword (Matthew 26:46,47). Yet the whole world was blessed when Jesus accepted God's answer. God may not grant every request, but he listens and considers what we say in light of his will and our good.

Praying for Others

People often request the prayers of the church when they are sick or troubled. Parents pray constantly for their children, and then for their grandchildren. The Bible tells us to pray for the leaders of our country, for our church leaders, and for each other (1 Timothy 2:1,2; James 5:14,16). When we think of all the people who need prayers on their behalf, we may feel overwhelmed. Keep in mind that we don't have to pray for everyone on the prayer list every time we pray. Though we sing

about the “hour of prayer”, we can pray several short prayers instead of one long one.

To know that Christians are praying for us when we are troubled is a great comfort, but I also receive a blessing when I pray for others. I am reminded of my own weakness and infirmity when I ask God to help someone else. My faith is strengthened as I trust God to answer my prayers on behalf of those who are sick or trapped in sin. Prayer for others is practice in compassion.

Prayer Sustains

I can only imagine the pressure and stress Jesus must have felt as he preached and healed, knowing that every step he took brought him closer to the cross. Perhaps the hours he spent alone in prayer sustained him. Too often today, we use prayer as a last resort and miss the blessing of daily communication with God. The habit of prayer sustains us.

When we take everything to God in prayer, Paul says, “...and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:7). This peace cannot be described or explained or measured; we know it when we experience it as the supreme blessing of prayer.

The first verse of the hymn “Sweet Hour of Prayer” expresses some of the blessings of prayer:

Sweet hour of prayer! Sweet hour of prayer,
That calls me from a world of care,
And bids me at my Father’s throne
Make all my wants and wishes known;
In seasons of distress and grief
My soul has often found relief,
And oft escaped the tempter’s snare,
By thy return, sweet hour of prayer.

Find your hour of prayer every day; you will be blessed.

Discussion Questions

1. What do the following Bible verses teach us about prayer?
 - a. Matthew 6:8
 - b. James 4:2
 - c. John 14:13
 - d. John 15:7
 - e. 1 Thessalonians 5:17
2. In your hectic daily schedule, how can you find time for private prayer as well as family prayer?
3. A popular country song says, "Thank God for Unanswered Prayers". Does God answer all prayers? How do you know when you have an answer?
4. Share a story of a time when God said, "No", and later you were glad.
5. What is the best blessing in prayer for you?

Encouraging Words

“Prayer sustains me. This is my counselor — who I talk to and who gives me peace in all the difficulties I’ve had till now.”
— Joy Vick

“In difficult times — sickness, death, financial problems, family problems — knowing that God is beside us all the way and he will help us get through it sustains me. It’s such a blessing that we can pray to God and pour our hearts out to him. It’s also a blessing to know that God will forgive us if we repent. Knowing that other Christians are praying for us is such a great blessing. When Dale was ill, people would ask what they could do, and all I could think to ask for was prayer. It was the only answer.” — Reba Dial

“Prayer sustains me most in difficult times. I do not have to carry my burdens alone. God is there to help me. I can talk to God and lay my problems at his feet.” — Gay Smith

“Prayer sustains me all the time. I carry on a continual dialogue with the Lord. It gives me comfort and someone to talk to and share my ideas, fears, joys, grief, and doubts with. He doesn’t think less of me because I feel the way I do.” — Cathy Jarrett

Chapter 11

The Blessings of Being Thankful

Have you said “thank you” to anyone today? If we’re not conscious of the need for gratitude, this phrase could fade away along with “please”, “may I help you?” and other courtesies like opening the door for a lady and smiling at strangers. Our society is becoming increasingly rude and disgruntled; some days it seems that everyone I meet is in a bad mood.

But forgetting to thank God for our blessings is the worst kind of rudeness and ingratitude. *“Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning”* (James 1:17). God is the source of all blessings, and he blesses us regardless of our moods; we should acknowledge his gifts with grateful hearts.

Several blessings listed on the survey received only a few votes each, but they are important gifts that we should never take for granted. This chapter summarizes six gifts that I call “Thank you, God” blessings (though I realize we are to be grateful for all blessings): gratitude, wisdom, hope, health, the beauty of nature, and the opportunity to teach about God.

Gratitude

Gratitude means “thankfulness” or “appreciation”. It is a simple but powerful attitude. When we give a gift or do something kind, we like to hear a “thank you”. If we don’t hear it, we may feel slighted. Imagine giving continually without ever hearing a word of gratitude. Would you be discouraged? Upset? Probably. Imagine how God would feel if he continually poured out blessings on his people yet heard only an occasional “thank you”.

David and the other psalmists thanked God in song over and over

again; Jesus offered thanks for the loaves and fishes before he fed the multitudes; Paul frequently thanked God for his fellow Christians. By contrast, when Jesus healed ten lepers in Luke 17, only one, a Samaritan, thanked him. *“Were there not any found who returned to give glory to God except this foreigner?”* (verse 18). Surely, Jesus must have been disappointed by the lack of gratitude in the other nine men. In addition, Paul listed being *“unthankful”* as one of the traits of selfish men in 1 Timothy 3:2, warning Christians to turn away from such people (verse 5). Ingratitude, then, is not just discourteous; it is sinful.

“Thank you” is one of the first phrases we should teach our babies, so they will develop the habit of expressing thanks in social situations. But we must also teach them to be thankful, not just say the words. The best way to teach gratitude is to practice it ourselves. Look for every opportunity to say “thank you”. Say it to salesclerks (even grouchy ones), say it to your husband and children and their friends, say it with a smile in your voice on the phone, and most of all, say it to God. Let your children hear you thanking God frequently — for the food on the table, the beauty of the day, the family, the church, friends, pets, nice weather, a job — anything that blesses your life. Remember, everything good comes from God.

Gratitude blesses the person who receives it, but it also blesses the person who expresses it. First of all, God commands us to give thanks for everything, so when we thank God for our blessings, we are doing his will (1 Thessalonians 5:18). But like love, thanksgiving should be a response of the heart, not just the response to a command. God’s commandments are not empty rules; they provide benefits when we obey them. When we express gratitude, we remember how richly blessed we are.

We appreciate our blessings, and that makes us feel better about God and ourselves. Gratitude also reminds us that we are dependent on God. We may work hard to earn the money to buy the things we need and want, but it is God who gives us the ability and opportunity to work.

“Oh, give thanks to the Lord, for He is good! For His mercy endures forever. Let the redeemed of the Lord say so, Whom He has redeemed from the hand of the enemy...” (Psalm 107:1,2).

Only three women circled gratitude on the survey, but I know there are many more who understand that gratitude is a blessing. We have so many reasons to thank God. Let us consciously practice gratitude every day.

Wisdom

Wisdom is a blessing that we often neglect. James tells us that if we lack wisdom, we should ask God for it, and he will give it liberally (1:5), but we may not think to ask for wisdom until we are faced with a difficult decision. Like gratitude, wisdom must be practiced to be developed.

We could write an entire book just on wisdom, but someone already wrote it — Solomon wrote Proverbs to encourage the search for wisdom. In chapter 3, verses 13 through 18, he describes the value of wisdom, noting that it includes happiness, understanding, and peace. He provides a definition in Proverbs 9:10: *“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.”*

Wisdom can refer to intelligence, knowledge, understanding, skill, discernment, good judgment, and prudence; we sometimes say that wisdom is applied knowledge or the practical use of information. But Paul distinguishes between man’s wisdom and God’s:

“Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you seems to be wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, ‘He catches the wise in their own craftiness’; and again, ‘The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile’.” (1 Corinthians 3:18-20).

It is possible to be wise in the ways of the world yet lack the true wisdom from God. The Greeks considered themselves wise; but to them, the gospel of Christ was foolishness. However, Paul knew that Christ was both the power and wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:23,24).

We seek the blessing of wisdom from God — the ability to discern his will and the strength and courage to obey it. We seek to do works that demonstrate wisdom as described in James 3:13-17:

“Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show

by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic, for where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there. But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy” (emphasis added).

Wisdom from God stems from pure motives, not selfishness or envy. Notice that works done from envy, self-seeking, boasting, and lying spring from a type of wisdom, but it is earthly and evil; it is not from God.

We receive wisdom from God by asking for it. We practice it by doing good works from pure motives. When Paul prayed for the Christians at Ephesus, he asked God to give them:

“The spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places...” (Ephesians 1:17-21).

Today, we have that knowledge by the revelation of Christ in the Bible. As we pray for wisdom and study the Bible, God will bless us.

Hope

The dictionary defines hope as “desire plus expectation; the feeling that what is wanted will happen”. In the Old Testament, “hope” means “expect”, but it can also mean “refuge” or “shelter”. A beautiful passage that expresses hope as refuge is Lamentations 3:22-24:

“Through the Lord’s mercies we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. ‘The Lord is my portion’, says my soul, ‘Therefore I hope in Him!’”

David speaks of hope in God's word as he expects God's protection (Psalm 119:114), and Psalm 71 is a tribute to trust in God, especially verses 14,15: "*But I will hope continually, and will praise You yet more and more. My mouth shall tell of Your righteousness and Your salvation all the day, for I do not know their limits*".

The word translated "*hope*" in the New Testament is similar in meaning: "to expect; to trust". But when it is used as a noun in a religious sense, "*hope*" means "joyful and confident expectation of eternal salvation".²²

When Paul was arrested in Jerusalem and taken before the high priest and the Jewish council, he said he was being judged "*concerning the hope and resurrection of the dead*" (Acts 23:6). He meant that he was in trouble with the Jews because he believed in salvation. When Peter wrote, "*...always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you...*" (1 Peter 3:15), he meant we should be ready to explain our salvation.

And when Paul wrote about the spiritual gifts that would pass away, he included "*confident expectation of salvation*" among those that would remain: "*And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love*" (1 Corinthians 13:13).

By contrast, those without Christ have "no hope" or expectation of salvation; they are "*without God in the world*" (Ephesians 2:12). Even in more casual usage today, when we say a situation is "hopeless", we mean there is no chance for improvement or cure. A person without hope is a person in despair because she has no expectation that things will get better.

As Christians, we are automatically blessed with hope because we are saved. We can deepen that hope by learning to trust God in all areas of life, knowing that he will deliver us. The hymn, "I Know Whom I Have Believed", based on 2 Timothy 1:12, is an affirmation of our hope in Christ Jesus.

Health

"If you have your health, then you have everything." Good health is

a great blessing that we sometimes take for granted until threatened by illness. A bad cold, the flu, or a broken bone reminds us how unpleasant life can be when our activities are limited by poor health. Imagine how much worse it would be for the person with a chronic condition such as constant back pain or a terminal illness such as cancer.

The Bible speaks of both physical and mental health. Jeremiah 8:22 asks, *“Is there no balm in Gilead, is there no physician there? Why then is there no recovery for the health of the daughter of my people?”* Though terms referring to physical health are used, they suggest an image for spiritual healing because the house of Judah had fallen away into idol worship. In 3 John 1,2, John prays for the physical health of Gaius to be as prosperous as his soul.

Even the healthiest person is not immune to disease or accidents, but we can seek the blessing of health by taking care of our physical bodies. The old standard advice to eat right, drink plenty of water, get plenty of sleep, and exercise regularly is still sound. If we abuse our bodies by overeating, drinking alcohol, smoking, or taking drugs, we will be more prone to disease. We should remember that the body of the Christian is the temple of the Holy Spirit; it deserves care and respect (1 Corinthians 6:19).

To keep our souls healthy, we must feed on God’s word, pray, associate with Christians, and discipline our thoughts. We want to bring *“every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ”* (1 Corinthians 10:5). A good lesson plan for right thinking is Philippians 4:8,9:

“Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy — meditate on these things. The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, these do, and the God of peace will be with you.”

Thank God daily for good health, both physical and spiritual.

The Beauty of Nature

“The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His

handiwork. Day unto day utters speech, and night unto night reveals knowledge" (Psalm 19:1,2). David saw God in nature. He heard his voice: *"The voice of the Lord is over the waters; The God of glory thunders; the Lord is over many waters. The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is full of majesty. The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars..."* (Psalm 29:3,4). In Psalm 8, David related man's position in the creation — a little lower than angels.

David the shepherd boy spent many days and nights in the fields. David the would-be king traveled all over the countryside, first as a soldier and then as a fugitive, hiding from King Saul. And everywhere David went, he saw God; he sang his songs of praise and fear and doubt and joy to God, who was always with him.

Centuries later, Paul the apostle wrote to the Roman Christians, telling them that even unrighteous men were without excuse because they could see God in the things he had made (Romans 1:18-21). God revealed himself through creation — through the heavens and oceans and forests — long before he gave the written word to men.

Job also learned about God from creation. When he tried to justify himself to God, he received an answer from the whirlwind, and God questioned Job: *"Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding...Have you commanded the morning since your days began, and caused the dawn to know its place...Where is the way to the dwelling of light?...Have you entered the treasury of snow?"* (Job 38:1,4,12,19,22).

God as Artist

When we look at nature today, we can still see God. In the cycles of the seasons, we learn that God likes order and continuity. The changing seasons match the seasons of human life — new life mirrors birth in spring, the green glory of summer shows us the energy and vitality of youth, the vibrancy of autumn colors and the bounty of harvest sing of maturity and productivity in mid-life, and the dark winter reminds us that someday we, too, will sleep beneath the snow. But then spring returns, reflecting the resurrection of Jesus, and we will also share in that glory someday. Who but God could interweave all the elements of creation so

perfectly at all levels of life? Even the rhythms of sun and moon, light and dark, are our rhythms of work and sleep.

The variety of plant and animal species alone proves that this grand design of life had to have a Designer; it could never have happened by accident. Besides variety, nature shouts that God has a wonderful imagination and a delightful sense of humor. Who but God would think of giraffes and butterflies, koala bears and bright green tree frogs? Fragile orchids and hearty dandelions?

In Zimbabwe, the baobab tree made me wonder what God was thinking when he created it. Baobabs are huge trees, and very old; one near Victoria Falls is said to be over 2,000 years old. But the appearance of a baobab makes it even more intriguing. The trunk is smooth and sits down in the ground like a fence post with no sign of roots. But the branches look like a wild tangle of roots, completely out of place as they sprawl against a backdrop of blue sky. Local legend says that God was tired the day he made the baobab and accidentally planted it upside-down! Tired or not, who but God could make a baobab tree?

Creation tells us that God likes color and light and sparkle. Every sunrise is fresh and original; every sunset is a watercolor masterpiece. Who but God would think of a rainbow to remind us of his promise not to destroy the world by water as he once did? The earth is a canvas splashed with colors of every imaginable hue. God the artist knew his created beings (that's us) would enjoy the beauties of nature.

God as Scientist

The beauties of nature are not just for our enjoyment. They also remind us that God is still in charge. Creation teaches us about interdependence of water and air and earth. The stars, the clouds, the mountains, and the rivers and oceans all have their place in the world panorama. God made man the caretaker of his wonderful world, but sometimes we abuse our power and ruin the beauty. He also gave man the intelligence to use the elements of nature to build homes and cities, grow food, find medicine, and establish civilizations.

However, regardless of the advances in science that promise cloning, cures for disease through stem cell research, and even the reproduction of

organs, man will never be able to duplicate God's ability to create something from nothing. Scientists start with the building blocks that God created from scratch. Scientists mix chemicals and experiment for years to produce something "new". God spoke the world into existence. When I hear about a scientific discovery that simply confirms something in the Bible, I smile, thinking how ignorant and arrogant humans can be. When I see the wonders of God's creation, my faith deepens, thinking how well God knows us and how much he loves us. God the scientist blesses us with everything we need to live.

"If God can do that ..."

Nature also inspires in us something I call the "wonder factor". When I see a majestic mountain or a powerful, tumbling waterfall, I am filled with wonder. I think, "God made that! If God can do that, he can do anything!" The God who renews the earth each spring can renew a sin-stained human soul, making it white as snow. He can take a heart that once lived to plot evil and turn it into a heart of love and good works (1 Corinthians 6:9-11). He can bring goodness from catastrophe and dispel the darkness with his pure light (Job 42:12-17).

Perhaps the best blessing found in nature is the knowledge that we have a God — we belong to a God — who can do anything. As he created the earth, he constantly recreates in us his spirit of faith, hope, and love. Only one person listed nature as a blessing, but we all benefit from its beauties and lessons whenever we open our eyes and ears to receive them.

Teaching Others about God

Only one person listed the opportunity to teach about God as a blessing. I confess I had considered teaching as a command and a privilege, but I hadn't really put it on my list of blessings. With only a little thought, though, I soon discovered at least four blessings that occur when I teach others about God.

First, the person who hears the message is blessed with knowledge that can save her soul and change her life. *"The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repen-*

tance" (2 Peter 3:9). God wants everyone to repent and be saved, but how can they repent unless they are taught? God has given teachers the ability to open the eyes of the lost and bless them with the opportunity of salvation.

Second, the teacher is blessed with the knowledge that she is obeying the commandment of Jesus to share the gospel with the world (Matthew 28:18-20). We are always blessed when we do the will of the Lord. That doesn't mean that everyone who hears the gospel will obey it; we sow the seed, and someone else may water it, but God gives the increase (1 Corinthians 3:6).

Third, the teacher always learns when she teaches. Whether she has worked hours on a lesson for first-graders or for the ladies' class, or whether she is sharing her faith with a neighbor over a cup of coffee, the teacher's knowledge increases when she studies and when she discusses the word of God. Teaching challenges us to grow. As we study even a familiar passage of Scripture, we often discover a new dimension that we hadn't noticed before. In addition, students may ask questions that we can't answer, so we study more to strengthen ourselves as well as our students. And those who hear us teach may even teach us as they share their life experiences and responses to Scripture.

Finally, heaven is blessed when those we have taught obey the gospel. Remember that "bless" can mean "praise" or "thanks" when directed toward God. When Jesus told the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, he commented that there is joy in heaven when one sinner repents (Luke 15:7,10).

Opportunities to teach abound; you don't ever have to stand in front of a group in a classroom in order to teach. In fact, as you live your life and interact with family and friends, you are constantly teaching something.

In addition to classroom or life teaching, there are other methods, but not every method is appropriate for every situation. When we go to Zimbabwe, we travel about 3,000 miles to visit different congregations of the church. We keep a stack of Bible tracts on the dashboard. Whenever we pass pedestrians on the highway, which is frequently since most peo-

ple in Zimbabwe walk everywhere, we throw tracts out the window. People scramble to retrieve them; they love to read. The tracts have a lesson and an address so they can request Bible correspondence courses or get information about the Mutare School of Preaching, and many people have come to the Lord because they read a tract picked up on the side of the road. But don't throw tracts out of the car window in the U.S.A. Most people won't read them, and you might get a fine for littering!

“Thank You, God”

Gratitude, wisdom, hope, health, the beauty of nature, and the opportunity to teach about God are all blessings that should make us stop and thank God every day. We could list dozens of other blessings. When I sent out the survey about blessings, I asked participants to circle only ten items that could be considered blessings. They could also list blessings that I hadn't included, but they still had to limit their list to ten. The most frequent comment I received was, “But I could circle almost all of these. How can I circle just ten?”

When we give thanks to God for our blessings, we don't limit our list. And with every acknowledgment of the constant stream of blessing that pours down from heaven, we realize we can never thank God enough.

Discussion Questions

1. Choose an ordinary day at home or work and take every opportunity you have to say “thank you”. Notice reactions. Also notice how many times others say “thank you” to you. What does the experience tell you about yourself and our society?
2. I described six “thank you, God” blessings in this chapter. Briefly comment on how these items bless you.
 - a. gratitude
 - b. wisdom
 - c. hope
 - d. health
 - e. the beauty of nature
 - f. the opportunity to teach about God
3. Has anyone ever thanked you for teaching a Bible class or telling him or her about God? If the answer is yes, how did it make you feel?
4. Is it possible to find a blessing in having health problems? If so, how?
5. What blessings do you find in nature?

Encouraging Words

Gratitude

“Thank you” is too small —
a dusty pebble, not the diamonds
you deserve. A drop of water,
though I feel a waterfall —
one little leaf in the forest
of my gratitude — one lonely note
in my symphony of praise.

“Thank you” is too small —
too brown and gray when
my heart explodes with rainbows.
But it is all I have to offer:
A thousand times each day
My grateful soul must say,
“Thank you, Lord. Thank you”.
— Debra Mitchell

“There was a time when I felt I was not good enough for anyone or anything. I had only a high school education, and I didn’t have nice clothes. When I met the man who became my husband, my life changed. He had great faith, and he also believed in me. He introduced me to Our Lord. His family accepted me and helped me. I owe them all a great debt, and I am forever grateful.” — Name not given

Chapter 12

The Blessings of Heaven

“Everybody wants to go to heaven, but nobody wants to die!” Seventeen ladies circled heaven on the list of blessings, but only one circled death. As humans, we all have a built-in fear and dread of death. We practice extraordinary measures to prolong life, even when the quality of life may be poor on a ventilator or feeding tube. We endure treatments like radiation and chemotherapy, which are sometimes as painful as the disease we hope to cure. We try strange diets and buy expensive exercise equipment in the struggle to lose weight and stay healthy. Though we know the body is destined to die, we fight to postpone that destiny indefinitely.

Respect for life is not wrong, and neither is a desire to prolong life. Life is a gift from God that we should treasure, preserve, and live to his glory. But for the Christian, life on earth is a prelude, a mere hint, of the wonderful, eternal life in heaven that God has promised to his faithful children. Heaven is a blessing that won't be fulfilled until we die, so Christians should think of death as a door that will open someday to the most perfect blessing we could ever imagine. We often say that someone “loves life”, or “has a zest for life”. Christians should have a zest — an excitement or keen enjoyment — for heaven.

“What’s So Great about Heaven?”

I've actually heard individuals ask, “What’s so great about heaven? Who wants to sit on a cloud playing a harp all the time?” I've heard others say that they aren't really interested in heaven; they just don't like the alternative! Still others think of heaven as a place of beauty and pleasure or a state of happiness individualized to fulfill each person's private dreams. Perhaps you heard the story of the little boy whose dog died. He asked if Rover would go to heaven. Wanting to comfort him, his mother said, “Yes, in doggie heaven, Rover will be young and healthy again. He can chase squirrels to his heart's content”. After a thoughtful moment, the boy said, “I guess doggie heaven must be squirrel hell”.

None of these views of heavens even comes close to the heaven described in the Bible, and I'm sure that the limited human imagination cannot comprehend the true beauty and peace waiting for us in God's great city. We try to picture the streets of gold, the pearly gates, the walls of jasper, the foundations decorated with precious stones (Revelation 21:18-21), but these images are mind-boggling. We think of the mansions Jesus went to prepare for us, imagining something like the Biltmore Estate in Asheville, North Carolina, with its 250 luxurious rooms and its rich gardens covering 8,000 acres.

Yet these earthly images of heavenly places will fade quickly when we see the reality of heaven for ourselves.

The Home of God

We may be eager to see the beauties of heaven, but the residents are more important than the size of the mansions or the golden gleam of the streets. Heaven is the home of God, his dwelling place. Moses instructed the children of Israel to obey God; then they could ask for his blessing: *"Look down from Your holy habitation, from heaven, and bless Your people Israel and the land which You have given us..."* (Deuteronomy 26:15). King Solomon built a temple for God: *"I have surely built You an exalted house, and a place for You to dwell in forever"* (1 Kings 8:13), yet in his wisdom he knew that God was not limited by walls: *"But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain You. How much less this temple which I have built!"* Still he asked God to hear the prayers directed toward the temple: *"Hear in heaven Your dwelling place; and when You hear, forgive"* (8:30). Jesus taught that prayer should be directed to God, *"Our Father in heaven"* (Matthew 6:9).

Jesus is also in heaven. He came to earth from heaven (John 6:38), and he returned to heaven after the resurrection to sit at God's right hand and serve as our High Priest (Mark 16:19; Hebrews 8:1,2). Furthermore, when Jesus comes again, he will come from heaven (2 Thessalonians 1:7).

It is the presence of God and Jesus in heaven that makes it a place of blessing. Heaven is eternal and holy because God and Jesus are eternal and holy (John 1:1,2; Isaiah 57:15). When John saw the vision of heav-

en, he recorded that there was no temple there, because *"the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple"* (Revelation 21:22).

Our Home, Too

Heaven is our home, too. God created us in his image, and we belong in his presence for all eternity. We were separated from him by our sin, but Jesus reconciled us with his blood so that we can someday go home to God. The great blessing of heaven is less about mansions and golden streets; it is more about dwelling in the presence of God. In Isaiah 57:15, mentioned above, God says, *"I dwell in the high and holy place, with him who has a contrite and humble spirit..."* Heaven is filled with light and goodness from God, but because we belong to Jesus, we will live in that light eternally:

"The city had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God illuminated it. The Lamb is its light. And the nations of those who are saved shall walk in its light, and the kings of the earth bring their glory and honor into it" (Revelation 21:23,24).

There will be no night, no darkness, no evil in heaven, for only those whose names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life — those who have obeyed Jesus — will be admitted (21:25-27). Imagine the blessing of being made complete in Christ. We will have no more temptations, for we will be surrounded with goodness.

The prophet Malachi spoke of the day when those who are in Christ would be gathered to God:

"Then those who feared the Lord spoke to one another, and the Lord listened and heard them; So a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear the Lord and who meditate on His name. 'They shall be Mine', says the Lord of hosts, 'On the day that I make them My jewels. And I will spare them as a man spares his own son who serves him'." (Malachi 3:16,17).

Heaven is a place prepared for those who obey God. When the obedient are rewarded, the disobedient will be punished (Matthew 25:34,41; 13:41-43). In heaven, we will be restored to the position God intended for

us from the beginning — in relationship with him, holy and happy, finding rest and peace (Hebrews 4:9).

Free from the Curse

When Adam and Eve sinned, they died spiritually because their sin separated them from God, but they also brought physical death into the world. One of the great joys of heaven is that we will no longer be under the curse of death. In fact, death will be destroyed! (1 Corinthians 15:26). The enemy we now fear and dread will have no more power over us. Though death takes us now, when Christ comes back, we will be resurrected, released from death, and given spiritual bodies that will never die. In a sense, even death becomes a blessing for the Christian, for we won't be changed and made ready for heaven until after we die. In an explanation of his own death and resurrection, Jesus said,

"...unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain. He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (John 12:24,25).

In 1 Corinthians 15:35-42, Paul refers to this description as he discusses the resurrection to come. In verse 50, Paul states that flesh and blood can't inherit the spiritual kingdom of God. When Jesus comes back, the dead in Christ will be raised incorruptible and the living in Christ will be changed; all will be given new bodies appropriate for heaven.

"So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory. O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?' The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 15:54-57).

We will dwell with God; he will wipe away our tears, and there will be no more death, sorrow, crying, or pain. All things will be made new (Revelation 21:4,5). John also saw a river of the water of life and the tree of life spanning the river, bearing fruit year-round and growing leaves that would heal the nations. He said, *"There will be no more curse, but the*

throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His servants shall serve him" (22:1-3). We will be free to serve God without any pain or suffering. Through all eternity, we will live with God and the saints, completely carefree and happy. What a blessing!

No Longer at Home in the World

When we are content in this world, when we feel secure in our jobs and happy with our families, when we are healthy, we probably don't think about heaven very much. It becomes a vague goal; we want to go there, but not right now, not while everything is so good here. The world we know is more comfortable simply because it is familiar. Heaven sounds attractive, but it is unknown and therefore uncomfortable.

But when we are ill or afraid, when death takes our loved ones and leaves us lonely, when the world seems more evil every day, then we long for the blessings of heaven, and we mourn because heaven seems so far away. Living in the world becomes a burden, and we want relief from sorrow and pain.

Somewhere between these two extremes, we as Christians should find a balance. We should long for heaven yet still be strong and faithful enough to do the work of God while we are in this world. Paul spoke of being "*hard-pressed*" between two desires. He wanted to be with Christ, but he knew he could still help Christians by remaining "*in the flesh*" (Philippians 1:23,24). He looked forward to seeing Jesus, but he felt the pull of duty from the churches needing his counsel and guidance. Yet he concluded with confidence that he would remain in the world as long as he could encourage the Christians (Philippians 1:25,26).

Anticipation plus faith should provide the balance we need. "To anticipate" means "to look forward to or expect". When I was a child, I eagerly anticipated the gifts and candy I would receive at Christmas. I marked off the days on the calendar; I spent hours looking at catalogs and dropping hints to my parents about the toys I wanted; I talked endlessly with friends about the fun we would have once the packages were unwrapped. As the day approached, I could hardly contain my excitement. Nothing could be more wonderful than waking up on Christmas morning to a full stocking and a stack of brightly wrapped boxes with my name on them!

As a child of God, shouldn't I eagerly anticipate the blessings I will receive in heaven? Shouldn't I view the passing days and years with joy instead of dread, with hope instead of fear, as I grow older? Shouldn't I search the Bible for details of heaven as well as lessons for living in this world? Shouldn't I pray to my heavenly Father about how much I'm looking forward to being with him someday and talk to my Christian brothers and sisters about the glory to come? When I realize that heaven is bound to be even more beautiful and delightful than I can comprehend now, how can I contain my excitement? Nothing could be more wonderful than waking up in heaven and "unwrapping" all the blessings God has promised.

Coupled with anticipation, I need faith. We know the definition of faith from Hebrews 11:1: "*Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen*". My hope of heaven is grounded in obedient faith; I trust that God will fulfill all he has promised. I trust that as long as I can be of use in God's vineyard, he will protect and guide me. I trust that my death, whenever it comes, will serve to move me into eternal life. My confidence, like Paul's in **Philippians 1**, is in God's will for me, not in my will.

But at the same time, I know that the world will drag me down if I'm not careful. Satan will bombard me with countless earthly pleasures to distract my mind from heaven. Many of those pleasures may be innocent or even important — the joy of spending time with my family, the praise I receive for a job well done, the creature comforts of hot water, a warm house, and abundant food — but Satan will tempt me to think that they are *more* important than the work God has given me to do. Satan will tempt me to think that earthly rewards are better (and certainly more immediate) than heavenly rewards. He may even tempt me with doubts. "If Jesus were coming back for you, don't you think he would have come by now? Do you really believe all that pie-in-the-sky stuff about eternal life in heaven?" Peter warned against the scoffers who would try to lead Christians astray by doubting God's timetable (1 Peter 3:3-9).

Usually, anticipation is easy to develop. We enjoy anticipation; we enjoy looking forward to a happy day or the fulfillment of a promise. And often, the actual event — the Christmas or birthday or job promotion that we anticipated so eagerly — turns out to be less joyous than we expected.

We don't get the gift we asked for; the birthday just makes us feel older; the job promotion has more drawbacks than benefits.

But I am confident that heaven will far exceed my expectations. God loves to bless his children; he is eager to bless us. Anticipating the blessings of heaven can only increase our joy.

The Blessing of Anticipating Heaven

There is a blessing to be found when we learn to anticipate heaven. It is a complex blessing not easily summarized in a few words. It consists of faith, hope, trust, joy, desire, love, sacrifice, commitment, assurance, and probably a dozen other elements that I have yet to experience. When we first seek this blessing, it is elusive; we catch a glimpse now and then, and then it's gone, like a butterfly that pauses briefly on a flower and then rises on the wind and moves to other fields.

Jesus demonstrated this blessing when he went to the cross to save mankind from sin and ensure for the obedient a place in heaven. Hebrews 12:2 says, "*...looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*" It was the anticipation of the joy of heaven not only for himself but also for all who would be saved that gave him the strength and courage to endure the physical pain and the burden of sin when he was crucified.

A little closer to our day-to-day world, I have seen this blessing in the lives of men and women who have truly surrendered themselves to God; they live to do his will, not their own. They think more about saving souls than saving money. They spend more time praying and reading the Bible than channel surfing. They focus on God first, others second, and themselves last. Heaven is on their minds and in their hearts; it is just as real to them as this earth is to the rest of us.

I've also seen this blessing in the eyes of dying Christians. Betrayed by the frailties of the human body, wracked with pain, and tired of fighting, they still have a light in their eyes. They know they've done all they could do, their faith is complete, and now it is time to go home. They haven't given up on life; they've given in to God, and they wait with quiet but obvious anticipation for him to open the door to heaven.

Finding that Blessing

Maybe you've seen that blessing in the lives of others; maybe you have already experienced it. But there are many who do not know the full blessing of anticipating the joys of heaven. It's the blessing of knowing that we are saved, of confidently living in that knowledge as we go about living in the will of God. No, it's not "once saved, always saved". The book of 1 John clearly tells us that Christians still sin. But John also tells us, "*These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God*" (1 John 5: 13). Writing to people who were already Christians, John assured them that they could recognize their salvation and look forward to eternal life.

Blessed Assurance

So one way to discover the blessing in anticipating heaven is to accept that the obedient child of God *will go to heaven*. Here's a test for you: Someone asks you, "Are you saved?" or "Would you go to heaven if you died tonight?" Do you answer, "I think so" or "I'm trying"? Or do you say, "Yes, I'm saved. I'm going to heaven, not because of works or goodness on my part but because I obeyed my Lord in baptism, and now I walk in his light." When we are confident of our salvation because we know we belong to Christ, we will be blessed as we anticipate heaven.

Longing for God

A second way to discover the joy of anticipating heaven is to develop a desire, a real longing, for God. Even the saved Christian still has to make a conscious effort to remember that God is more important than anyone or anything on earth. More than that, we must remember to seek our spiritual nourishment from God. "*As the deer pants for the water brooks, so pants my soul for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?*" (Psalm 42:1,2). Some ancient texts read, "*When shall I see the face of God?*"

Jesus said, "*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled*" (Matthew 5:6). Do we really hunger and

thirst for God? Do we want to see him face-to-face and live in his presence forever? Do we feel spiritually thirsty and hungry if something prevents us from reading the Bible each day or if something interrupts our prayer time? We won't enjoy the anticipation of heaven if we don't enjoy spending time with God in prayer and Bible study.

Another element of our longing for God is the desire to be with our brothers and sisters in Christ. Do we look forward to worship services not only for the communion with God but also with others who share our faith? Paul longed for the Philippians "*with the affection of Jesus Christ*" (Philippians 1:8). Epaphroditus, the messenger to Paul from the Philippians, longed to see those who had sent him on the mission to aid Paul, and he was distressed because they had heard that he was sick (Philippians 2:25,26). Paul also longed to see the Roman Christians (Romans 1:11).

We should desire to be with fellow Christians, including those who have gone before us. We all have friends and family members that we long to see again in heaven. And the Bible also tells us that we will see the saints of all the ages (Matthew 8:11).

Loving Souls

A third way to find this particular blessing is to develop a greater love for souls. Jesus died for the whole world; he told his disciples to teach the gospel to the whole world. Yet many Christians today are not evangelistic. They don't teach family members and friends about Jesus; they never mention church to co-workers or salesclerks; they've never conducted a Bible study or even invited someone to church; and they certainly have never knocked doors or gone on a mission trip.

Some people have fallen prey to Satan's deception that people who haven't heard the gospel will be saved anyway; some haven't developed the skills needed to teach others. Women in particular may be tempted to do nothing because they can't preach or teach publicly. But all of us have talents, and all of us need to care about lost souls. We should do anything and everything we can to spread the gospel in our hometowns as well as around the world. That may mean contributing money to support a missionary or grading World Bible School lessons or ministering to a

bereaved neighbor. It may mean teaching our own children to love God so they will want to preach and teach when they grow up. Everybody can do something.

Have you ever tried to sell a product you didn't like? It's hard to be sincere, isn't it? Unless we really believe that salvation is found only in Christ and that heaven is a blessing, we'll have difficulty sharing the gospel with others. The more we talk about Jesus, the more we'll anticipate heaven, and we'll want other people to share that blessing. Jesus loved the whole world enough to die on the cross. We should love souls enough to tell them that Jesus died for them.

Becoming Uncomfortable

A fourth way to find the blessing in anticipating heaven is to become uncomfortable. "What? Do you mean I need to wear shoes that hurt my feet or turn the thermostat down to 50 degrees in the middle of an ice storm?" Well, not exactly, but your feet may hurt, and you may get cold.

In the United States of America, we are so blessed in every way, but especially materially, that we don't always see the need for heaven. Our little corner of the world is safe and warm; we have nice homes, plenty of food, and so many luxuries that we think they are necessities. We have everything we need and most of what we want. Unless we are enlightened spiritually, we let heaven become a faraway dream.

Then one day terrorists kill thousands of innocent people or a hurricane or tsunami wipes out entire cities or a war takes the best and brightest young men and women we know. Suddenly, we are shaken, and we reach out to help the victims of disaster. We realize that something bad could happen to us. We notice that the real world, the larger world outside our little corner, is a big, bad, scary place where evil is at work every day.

We discover that while Americans complain about living paycheck-to-paycheck with no surplus for extras, millions of people wake up on the street and hungry every morning with no guarantee of finding food or shelter. While we worry about problems with our government, the economy, and unemployment, we hear news reports about leaders in Third World countries who aggressively and heartlessly oppress and even

slaughter their own people. We see video footage of starving babies and their helpless parents.

How does heaven sound to those who have no hope of comfort in this world? How do Christians who face such hardship maintain their faith in God? I met a woman in Zimbabwe who was expecting her third child. Her family lives on the equivalent of \$125 a month. She said, "I don't pray for money. I pray for daily bread; isn't that what the Bible says to do?" I wonder if she anticipates heaven more than I.

If you want to find out how wonderful it can be to look forward to heaven, step out of your comfortable world and take a good look at the bigger world — the one where children are starving and adults are dying without ever hearing the gospel. Work in a homeless shelter; visit an orphanage; volunteer at a clinic for unwed mothers; go to Africa or India or South America. While you're there, ask someone, "Would you like to go to heaven? It's a wonderful place, and the Bible tells us how to get there."

Citizens of Heaven

"For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself" (Philippians 3:20,21).

We live in a world that runs after sin and pleasure and materialism. We choose to be different, to be saved, and so we are out of place in this temporary home. One day, we'll go to our real home and live in the light and love of God and Jesus for all eternity. But we can enjoy at least one blessing of heaven even while we are still sojourners in the world. We can anticipate its joys and delights while we wait eagerly for Jesus. John 22:20 reads, *"He who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming quickly.' Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus!"*

Amen, and amen!

Discussion Questions

1. When you think of heaven, what is the first blessing that comes to mind?
2. Plan a personal study of heaven. Look up the word “heaven” in a concordance or topical Bible and read all the references. Find all the songs about heaven in a hymnal and sing the ones you know. When you finish the study, write a brief report to yourself entitled, “Why I Want to Go to Heaven”. Keep it in your Bible and read it when you need to be reminded of the blessings of heaven.
3. Hymns often make me think of a subject in a new way. We have a tape called *Glory Road* sung by the Lighthouse Quartet with a song called “The Scars in the Hands of Jesus”, credited to Majijohn Wilkin. In its description of heaven, the chorus says, “And the only thing there that’s been made by man/Are the scars in the hands of Jesus”. As you study about heaven, notice that everything there is made by God — except, of course, those scars.
4. An old hymn sometimes taught as a children’s song is “When He Cometh” by William O. Cushing. It is based on Malachi 3:17. The second verse reads, “*He will gather, He will gather the gems for His kingdom/All the pure ones, all the bright ones, His loved and His own.*” How are Christians like jewels to the Lord?
5. Read Revelation 21-22 for a description of heaven. What aspect is the most appealing to you and why?

Encouraging Words

“Faith in God sustains me. God has promised to be with me at all times, whether in good times or bad times. He has promised a home in heaven, which is the greatest blessing of all. That promise has sustained me in the times of my greatest sorrow — losing my parents. I know that one day we will be reunited.” — Genell Maxwell

“*Every time* I see a home burned or destroyed, a homeless person, a person with a terminal illness, or a person without a job to support his family, I realize how blessed I am. I am also blessed in my marriage, even though we’ve had a lot of problems because of my husband’s illness. But I became a member of the church because I went to church with him, and that’s a great blessing.” — Barbara Tibbs

Chapter 13

A Blessing Workshop

By now, I'm sure you've thought of dozens of blessings that I didn't cover in this book. You may be asking, "Why didn't she write about my favorite blessing?" or "Why didn't she tell my story?"

Now it's your turn; you can finish the book with your blessing list and your story. This chapter is a workshop to help you personalize the lessons and become more aware of your blessings. Teachers, you might plan the last class as a devotional and ask the ladies to share some of their ideas from the assignments that follow. Or consider having a tea or brunch to honor women described in the Hall of Faith your class develops.

First, make a list of the ten blessings you value most. Yes, I know you could list hundreds, and keeping a running record of your blessings is a good exercise in faith. But for the sake of the class you may be attending as you study this book, limit yourself to a top-ten list (although you don't have to list them in order of importance).

My Top Ten Blessings

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.

Now go back and spend a little time thinking about each blessing. Why is each one important to you? How does it work in your life as a blessing? How would you describe each blessing to a friend? In addition to the answers to these questions, find at least one Bible verse that mentions or refers to each blessing. Be prepared to share one or two blessings in your Bible class.

Next, read the following stories written by Christian women. Each one describes someone who is or was important to the writer, someone who blessed her life by the Christian attitudes she demonstrated. This is our Hall of Faith for Christian role models. Perhaps you will find in these stories elements of your mom or aunt or sister or dear friend who blessed you. After you've read them, write your own story about that special woman; then as a class, share your stories to make your own Hall of Faith.

The women described in the Hall of Faith and the women who wrote about them share a common bond and a common love; they are all sisters who love the Lord Jesus Christ. They gave their lives to him and lived for him even when sorrow or illness or fear tried to tempt them. They praised God for his blessings not only in words but also in actions. They are as dear to the Lord as Sarah, Hannah, Ruth, Mary, Dorcas, Lydia, or any other Godly woman named or unnamed in the Bible, just as you are.

Finally, consider keeping a list of your blessings in your Bible, complete with Scripture references. Read it whenever you feel especially blessed; read it when you feel sorry for yourself; read it when you are discouraged. Add to it as God continues to bless you.

I know that you know that Christians are blessed beyond measure. I pray that this brief study has helped you become more aware of your blessings and that you will share the blessing of the gospel at every opportunity.

Hall of Faith

Godly Women

Two women in the church at Borger, Texas, demonstrated Christian attitudes that we should all imitate. My daughter and I have always thought that Oleta Hibbs was a great example of all that an elder's wife should be — soft spoken, well-versed in the Bible, not controversial, sweet-natured, well-groomed, and kind. Her husband Wesley Hibbs was an elder in the church at Borger for many years, and Oleta was a helpmeet to his position in every sense of the word. She combined all her good qualities with a quiet humor and a love for people. Though she has grown older and moved away, I saw a picture of her recently and learned that she is still in service to the church.

Another member of the Borger church made a statement that impressed me. After years of taking care of her elderly mother, Mildred Pennington moved across country to care for her grandchildren while their parents worked. When I remarked that she was still a caregiver, she said, "That is why we are put on earth, to care for each other". I often see evidence of Christians doing just that." — Zoe McGough

Remembering Aunt Laura

Laura Emma Figgins was the oldest of eight children; she grew up in Arkansas. When she was 16, she went to what is now Arkansas State University at Jonesboro and received certification to become a teacher; two years later she graduated from high school with the highest grades in the class, but she wasn't named valedictorian because she hadn't attended regularly. She taught school for five years.

She married my dad's brother, Uncle Glen, and they lived in Caruthersville, Missouri, where I grew up. They were married during the Depression Era when mere survival was an achievement. Aunt Laura had the gift of a great sense of humor, which I believe helped her through many a difficult situation. She was able to laugh at herself.

For as long as I can remember, Aunt Laura has been a part of my life. Over 70 years ago, when I was about four, she and Uncle Glen took me to worship when the church met upstairs above what used to be Sawyer's Drugstore on Fourth and Ward.

Sunday school class material was a three-by-five inch card with a picture and a Bible verse on one side and a Bible story on the other. I was in the card class, which Aunt Laura taught. Years later, she told me she and Uncle Glen hadn't been married very long, and everyone wondered, "Who is that little girl?" I spent many hours at their house when I was a child, and she was always a good influence on me. She was like my second mother. She was also instrumental in my parents becoming Christians.

When their first son, J.W., was a baby, they had a second boy, Buddy Herman, who only lived a few hours. I was at their house when he was born. Losing her infant son was, no doubt, the biggest disappointment of her life. However, they were blessed with two more sons, Jerry and Bobby. She was always so proud of all her boys, and it was her dream that they all have college educations. She worked 17 years at Brown Shoe Company, along with Uncle Glen, to help this dream become a reality. She retired in 1964 after the youngest finished his first degree. (Among the three boys, they earned six degrees.)

Through all those years of struggling, she was a daily, living example of the Jesus she loved and believed in. As I remember, no matter how small the house she and Uncle Glen happened to live in at the time, their home was always open to anyone in need of a place to live. When someone needed help, she was always there. She taught Bible classes for many years. My oldest daughter Elaine still remembers being in her sixth-grade Bible class.

When her parents became older and ill, she and Uncle Glen spent much of their time in Williford, Arkansas, taking care of them. This continued for about ten years until Uncle Glen became ill; then, always the caregiver, she took care of him. She was very independent; after his death in 1982, she continued to live in her house in Caruthersville as long as she could. Later she

lived near son Jerry and his wife Maribeth in Searcy, Arkansas. When her health declined, she lived with Jerry and then spent some time with son Bob and his wife Melba. She had become Naomi; Maribeth and Melba had become Ruth. She, who was always the caregiver, had to become the cared for. When caring for at home was no longer an option, she lived about a year in the nursing home in Martin, Tennessee.

Although much of her life was a struggle, she was rich in love of her God and her family, and she was rich in spiritual blessings. When she passed away in August 2005, we celebrated her life.
— Hazel Manley

My Friend and Sister in Christ

When I grow up spiritually, I want to be like Elma White. Elma was my first friend when I moved to Borger in 1995, and in the nine years I knew her, she never failed to give herself entirely to our friendship. She always walked before me as Christ in the world. I never heard from her lips an unkind word about anyone nor a harsh word nor a complaint.

Even in the last weeks of her long illness, she hesitated to speak to me of pain or discomfort, asking instead, "How are you? Are you happy? What have you been doing? How are Iris and Faith? Does Luke like his new job? Does Kristi like living in Alabama? Tell me all about the wedding." After she met Loy, she said, "I knew when he walked in with that big smile that he is a good man." (As usual, she was right.)

Elma taught me many lessons about being a Christian, but one of the most important was about self-esteem. Elma's self-esteem was not based on her accomplishments in this world. Though she was much beloved as a wife, mother, grandmother, and friend, though listing her good deeds would require an entire ream of paper, and though she had the ability to smile even through pain and sadness, she found her worth in being a Christian. She knew that in the eyes of God she was valuable not because of what she did but because of who owned her soul.

Perhaps more than anyone else I have ever known, Elma succeeded in suppressing self so Christ could live in her. She was a transparent glass through which I saw the beauty of Christ.

Elma's child-like wonder made her a joyful companion. She loved an outing to the Grand Street Tea Room where she and I celebrated our birthdays (and any other occasion we could contrive). We enjoyed the elegant atmosphere and old-fashioned decorations as well as the good food; we liked watching the people come and go; we liked the idea of "having tea". When I last saw Elma in September 2004, we talked about how nice it would be if heaven had a tea room. "I don't know when I'll be back in Borger," I told her, "but someday I'll meet you in the tea room in heaven."

Now she's gone on, and the world feels a bit colder without her. *"In my Father's house are many rooms,"* said Jesus. *"I am going there to prepare a place for you."* Trusting that God's promises are sure, I know that Elma is safe in her new home. I'm quite sure she has found Heaven's Tea Room by now and has reserved it for the day I and her other friends will join her. Meanwhile, I pray I can imitate Elma as she imitated Christ. — Debra Griffin Mitchell

Mom's Legacy

My mom, Donna Mitchell, left me a legacy, an inheritance. No, I didn't get one million dollars or the family mansion. What she left me was priceless. She gave me an example of **Godly womanhood**.

My aunt Charlotte sent me a small packet of letters, creased and dusty, dating from 1958 to 1997. These were letters that Mom had written her and my uncle from the mission field of Zimbabwe. The letters reminded me of how multifaceted Mom was. They revealed a young, homesick, new missionary wife and mom developing through the years into a wise, mature Christian woman who totally submitted to God.

Mom loved to teach women and young girls using the women

of the Bible (Titus 2:3,4). Her lessons were so carefully prepared that I can still read her lessons, from my young years till the month she died, carefully typed and filed. She was like so many of her heroines, and I want to be like her.

Rahab was one of Mom's heroines. Hebrews 11:31 states, *"By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies."* Mom was like Rahab in her quiet willingness to do what was right even if the whole hometown crowd was doing the opposite. Mom was a hospitable woman in times when those she entertained were not accepted by her neighbors. We grew up in Zimbabwe when it was Rhodesia, when whites did not socialize with black people. Mom ignored those customs and opened our home to white, black, and anything in between. There is a great need for boldness in standing for what is right in our world. Mom believed Galatians 3:28: *"...neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free..."* Like Rahab, she quietly led in this area. Rahab saved her whole household by her willingness to take the unpopular and even dangerous road.

When Mom taught about godly submission, she used Sarah as an example. *"For she called her husband Lord, and obeyed him"* (1 Peter 3:1-6). Verse 6 says, *"You are her children, if you do good and do not fear anything that is frightening."* Mom may have felt a special kinship with a woman who left the comforts of home for a land she did not know. She certainly did as Sarah did in respecting and honoring my dad (Ephesians 5:33). Never once did I hear her disparage Dad to others; she praised him and supported him. No wonder he has been able to do so much with that kind of cheering section.

One of Mom's favorite ladies was Abigail. Many do not remember this wise lady, but I love the way she handled a surly husband and an angry David firmly, gracefully, and wisely, saving hundreds of lives with her carefully chosen words and her organized hospitality. Reread this great story in 1 Samuel 25. David told her, *"Blessed be your discretion, and blessed be you,*

who have kept me this day from bloodguilt and from avenging myself with my own hand! For as surely as the Lord the God of Israel lives, who has restrained me from hurting you, unless you had hurried and come to meet me, truly by morning there had not been left to Nabal so much as one male” (25:33-35).

There are so many other lessons that Mom taught me that I would love to share. I just hope we can set this kind of example to our daughters and to the daughters of our congregations. Hebrews 10:24 is one of my favorite passages: *“Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works”*. Mom stirred people up to love and good works by the way she lived and by the way she taught her children and her classes. Even in the hospital, as her physical life ebbed away, she believed in seizing each day and using it for God. Her mantra throughout her illness was Psalm 118:24, *“This is the day that the Lord has made: let us rejoice and be glad in it”*. What better legacy could a mom leave her daughters than the attitudes of joy and submission to God?
— Nancy Wheat

Note: Donna and Loy Mitchell were missionaries in Zimbabwe for 28 years. When they weren't overseas, they served with congregations in Oklahoma, Texas, and Kansas.

My Story

Now it's your turn. Write about a Christian woman who has influenced you and strengthened your faith. Be ready to share the story with the class.

Endnotes

- 1 Denny Petrillo, PH.D., *Ezekiel, Truth for Today Commentary*, (Searcy, Arkansas, Resource Publications), 2004, p. 502.
- 2 About two years passed between the time Tamara filled out the blessing survey and the publication of this book. Since then, God has blessed Tamara with marriage and a wonderful husband.
- 3 Alexander Strauch, *Men and Women Equal Yet Different: A Brief Study of the Biblical Passages on Gender*, (Littleton, Colorado: Lewis and Roth Publishers), 1999, p. 46.
- 4 Strauch, p. 47.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 Strauch, p. 43.
- 7 David L. Roper, *The Life of Christ 2, Supplement, Truth for Today Commentary*, (Searcy, Arkansas: Resource Publications), 2003, pp. 389-90.
- 8 David Lipscomb and J.W. Shepherd, *I Corinthians, The New Testament Commentaries*, (Nashville, Tennessee, Gospel Advocate Co.), 1935, pp. 153-54.
- 9 Eucharist.ms, "Six contrasting views on the 'body and blood'", found on the Web at <http://eucharist.biography.ms>.
- 10 Frank Pack, *The Gospel According to John, Part I, 1:1-10:42*, (Austin, Texas: Sweet Publishing Co., 1975), p.112.
- 11 Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company, n.d., Volume V, p. 948.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 955.
- 13 If you're looking for the place in the Gospels that Paul quotes Jesus, you won't find it. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John did not record those exact words of Jesus. Perhaps Paul heard them from Peter or one of the other apostles, or perhaps the Holy Spirit revealed them

- directly to Paul. At any rate, the words are consistent with other teachings of Jesus such as giving to the poor and feeding the hungry.
- 14 Marilyn M. Peebles, "Rich and Dead", *The Voice of Truth International*, Vol. 46, pp. 60-61.
 - 15 John Clayton, a Christian who was once an atheist, has written an excellent pamphlet called "The Problem of Human Suffering". You can read the text or order it from his Website: <http://www.doesgodexist.org>.
 - 16 "About the Foundation", at <http://www.actsofkindness.org> .
 - 17 Loy S. Mitchell., Scripture sequence from "Basis and Source of Authority", sermon given at Rehobeth church of Christ near Bogota, Tennessee, August 21, 2005.
 - 18 If you are interested in learning about the history of manuscripts and translations of the Bible, a good resource is *How We Got the Bible* by Neil R. Lightfoot.
 - 19 David L. Roper, *The Life of Christ, 2 A Supplement, Truth for Today Commentary*, (Searcy, Arkansas Resource Publications), 2003, p. 84.
 - 20 *Ibid.*, p. 82
 - 21 Leon Morris, Luke, rev. ed., *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), pp. 214-15.
 - 22 Blue Letter Bible, "Dictionary and Word Search for 'elpis (Strong's 1680)". Blue Letter Bible, 1996-2002. September 1, 2005.