

On Growing Old Gracefully

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A Rambling, Ambling Preamble

(You must read this to understand the rest of the book.)

In my “expert” opinion, the first thirty-five years constitute young age. The years from thirty-six to fifty-nine I call middle age, and sixty to 100 or more is undoubtedly old age. The latest age at which you should start preparing for old age is forty-five, give or take a year. This of course does not refer to financial preparation, which should begin as soon in life as possible. I definitely am not qualified to speak to that subject, but I don’t guarantee not to mention it at all.

There are many aspects to this matter of growing old gracefully. Many of them pertain to the spiritual side of life. It is these issues that we want to confront. If you are thirty-six or older, you should start getting ready for that final phase of life. Ideally the youth in his early twenties should begin all aspects of this preparation, but I know of no young person who can hold still long enough to listen. They seem to think they will never grow old. Well, they had better hope they do because the only way to avoid growing old is to die young. Isn’t it a pity that we strive to live – for what? So that we may grow old – and we don’t want to get old! But it will come and you had better prepare for it.

I myself am well into the old age phase of life and, according to my own timetable, I have been in the phase for twenty-two years. I have been there for so long that it has now become a way of life. Therefore, as a teacher-writer, unless I have been living these past twenty-two years in vain, I should have somewhat to offer on the subject of growing old gracefully.

There is one thing long life has taught me: What you are in your younger days you are very likely to be when you get old, and to a greater degree. We have all known some crotchety old people, individuals who look at life through mean-colored glasses. Pity them. They have lost touch with reality. Pity them, but don’t give up on them. There is some little hope that the leopard will yet change its spots. It will take divine intervention, but the entire life of the believer is a matter of divine intervention. (Please read

chapter two, “Realistic Spiritual Expectations,” under the heading, “Be Gracious and Forgiving.”)

In their twisted thoughts the whole world is against these cranky individuals. But we should learn a lesson in negative from them. As we have said, the passage of time will exacerbate many of the more negative traits we have as younger people. If we are tightwads when we are young, we become positively miserly as old people. If we are rather surly as youths, we are apt to be snarling monsters when we get old. We will be decrepit monsters who have lost the ability to physically hurt anyone, but we will still be cross old geezers to all who have to come into contact with us. Do you really want that?

I need only to study the lives of people I have seen for these many years. I don’t need a textbook or a teacher to observe some facts. Some of the lessons are very valuable. For example, if you are kind and gentle in the dewy days of youth, you will more than likely be even nicer as the dew changes to hoarfrost and the blasts of winter descend on you.

Much of what we will deal with in this discourse can apply to any saint from eighteen to the end of life. We will deliberately focus on the elderly because so often they feel they are out of the loop. They feel isolated as a group and as individuals. We cannot say that society totally disregards the elderly, as witnessed by the various programs tailored to their needs. But there is still the tendency to view the older person as a relic, if you will, out of a past life. They are quasi-dinosaurs that have outlived their time and are wandering aimlessly in a new world to which they are poorly suited. They are not in touch with today’s mainstream flow of life.

In this treatise we reject any such perceptions. Even we who are physically debilitated by the encroachment of old age can be spiritual stalwarts and examples of godly living to the younger members of society. To be candid, however, there are too many older individuals who do give up on trying to keep up with today’s rat race. But that is the point: In this discourse we are not patting you on your fanny and telling you to become a part of any hectic rat race. The rat race is the world of commerce and the jostling for

selfish attainments and a step-on-your-brother's-back-to-get-ahead attitude. This is NOT a symposium on natural attainments except as they affect our spiritual welfare.

There is no reason other than senility or similar old-age afflictions that we older people cannot be spiritually productive just because we are older. The Scripture advises us, "They shall still bring forth fruit in old age; they shall be fat and flourishing..." (Psa. 92.14) Even when we are in a nursing home we can be fruitful. What is the fruit of the Spirit? It consists of "love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law." (Gal. 5.22) And we might add there is no age limit against such. We will deal with this idea of being fruitful later in our discussion.

We need also to dispel the myth that old age automatically means diminished joy and a lessening of peace. Diminished joy and a lessening of peace come from the stresses of life, and these are not peculiar to old age; you had stresses when you were young. So there is no reason they should panic you now. You know more about God; you have experienced more of His grace and power in your life. Rather than having less joy and peace, you should have more. You know what God can do. You know how He operates and that when He makes you wait for deliverance from a particular test, it is for your good and His glory. We have to conclude that old age should bring with it more peace and joy. Increased knowledge and an upsurge in the wisdom that "comes from above" also come with old age and they bring with them a deepening sense of security and divine love. You know from teaching and experience that you are not alone.

Why should I be lonely
When I've Jesus only
To be my Companion
And unfailing Guide?
Why should I be weary
Or my path seem dreary
When He's walking
By my side?

Chapter One

Entering Life's Upper Ranks

So — now you are sixty! You've probably looked forward to this for the past few years. No, certainly not as a kid eagerly waits for Christmas. But, like most other milestones in your life, you have seen it coming. Your expectation was neither morbid nor gleeful. You knew it was coming as surely as death and taxes – if death didn't catch up with you first. (That was a rather sick joke. Please, excuse it!) Well, this is your time to experience the ups and downs, the emotional trauma, the humdrumness and the joys (yes, there are definitely joys) that go with this new territory.

You don't really feel any different now than when you were fifty, fifty-six or fifty-seven. But a subtle difference has been taking place in you over the years. It is called aging. You don't instantaneously become old when you hit this milestone. You have steadily been aging since you were twenty-eight although you may not feel it. (At one time twenty-eight was thought to be the age at which a person's physical prowess peaked. This was the opinion held many years ago and scientists, if they go according to form, have probably changed their minds since then. But the principle is still the same: we peak relatively early and from there it is a downhill slide.) As we grow older our bodies go into decline. With some people the decline is barely noticeable, whether external or internal; and it is long drawn out. With others it is more rapid. But with all persons, old age will inevitably catch up with them if they live long enough.

Whether your decline is slow or fast, there's no doubt about it: you are now a certified senior citizen! Like it or not, you have arrived! How should you behave, talk, think, dress in this new setting? More or less as you always have. I say "more or less" because any improper or unwise ways of behavior, talk, thought or attire should always be corrected at any age. But you

don't have to suddenly be a dowdy dresser if you were formerly immaculate, and please, please, you unmarried men, avoid being a womanizer! (You might have a heart attack!) Now I am not saying that if you are single you can't be romantically interested in someone who strikes your fancy. But chasing after every warm body wearing Chanel #5 is a poor fit for an old man. We have to remember that there are some things that do not fit the category of being a respectable senior citizen.

I know, I know – you refuse to conform to some individual's idea of what an older person should be like. That's understandable, but for your own sake remember that there have always been certain mores or customs of society that are very difficult to buck. Yet you can do it if your hide is thick enough to withstand all the barbs and arrows of an outraged society. The choice is yours. Can you stand the heat? If not, get out of the kitchen, my friend. Get out of the heat of meaningless nonconformity and conform to the rest of society. My attitude is this: There are enough ways in which the Christian has to go against today's society, so why add to your burden unnecessarily?

Just about everyone has a few thoughts or mannerisms that he will hold to despite the opinions of the "average" man. I can understand that; I have more than my share of them. I have enough for you and me and your brother Tom. But we should not try to differ with prevailing thoughts or custom just to be "independent" thinkers. If you are independent, be independent; don't strain after it. A person looks rather stupid when he claws and scratches for a show of independence. That only indicates how conscious he is of the opinions of others – and that he does care about what they think of him.

For instance, if you see a vigilante mob preparing to hang a man merely for wearing the wrong color tie, you should refuse to be a part of such a sin against God and humanity. That's very good. But you don't have to shout, "Here I am, over here! I'm different from you guys – I don't hang innocent people like you do." They may end up hanging you from the nearest street light,

just for being stupidly different. You will then be only a dead dim-witted independent...without even a martyr's halo glowing over your deceased head. Martyrs are different, but they are not stupid.

But, aside from how you should act, talk, etc., in this new milieu, you are apt to experience emotions that were not common to you in your younger years. Two emotions that some older people undergo are 1) the feeling of being isolated or alone in an unfamiliar world; and 2) the futility of the repetitions of life. Let's consider them here:

1 Being Alone in an Unfamiliar World

Growing old is great for the spiritually well adjusted person, but it does pose a problem as the person gets older and more and more of his friends and relatives drop away from this mortal sphere. The time comes when he is very close to being bereft of all his older friends and relatives. This can cause something akin to panic. The sense of isolation can be overwhelming if no steps are taken to prevent it.

To avoid this pothole in what can otherwise be the truly "golden age" of life, as the person grows older he should make an effort to develop more friendships with those who are younger than he. He should also refrain from isolating himself behind the barrier of years as though the years held some sort of secret to which no one else could be privy. There is no magic to years of themselves. The only enchantment in a plurality of years is in what the individual makes of those years.

The accumulating years hold no secret power of making one wiser, more intelligent or more personable. If we are not careful, the accumulating years can do just the opposite. Our wisdom can dissipate, our intellect deteriorate and our personalities become withdrawn and insular. Of course, these things can happen through no fault of the aging person. Alzheimer's and senility often take their toll and there is not much we can do about it. But the point is this: for the person who is blessed not to be afflicted with these twin terrors,

advancing years yield only those benefits that we extract from them. Not many positive things automatically flow into our lives as we get older; we have to get off our duffs and reach for them. They are automatically available for the senior citizen, but he must make the effort to pick this available delectable fruit off the vine. It won't fall into his lap as he sits doing nothing.

Get up—hobble if you must—and stretch for the mellow fruit of your later years!

2. “Life Is a Vain Exercise”

If the older person does grow in wisdom and understanding, it is possible that he will view life as a meaningless repetition of acts that will bore him to death – and this could be literal as well as figurative. The writer of Ecclesiastes hit to the heart of the matter, although not to its resolution, in Eccl 1:2-11 (NRSV). For emphasis on the seeming vanity of life I have included the full text on the subject below. Please read it carefully to get the complete impression of what the writer (Solomon) felt:

{2} Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. {3} What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun? {4} A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. {5} The sun rises and the sun goes down, and hurries to the place where it rises. {6} The wind blows to the south, and goes around to the north; round and round goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns. {7} All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they continue to flow. {8} All things are wearisome; more than one can express; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, or the ear filled with hearing. {9} What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun. {10} Is there a thing of which it is said, "See, this is new"? It has already been, in the ages before us. {11} The people of long ago are not

remembered, nor will there be any remembrance of people yet to come by those who come after them."

This paints a gloomy picture of life as a futile effort that avails nothing. But before you get carried away with these doleful pronouncements, remember that the writer (Solomon) had deliberately gone about to experience every phase of life. He wanted to get as much experience as he could and then to sum it all up. There was a divine purpose to this unusual pursuit. God wanted Solomon to show all men after him the futility of living life without a God-given goal.

At one point Solomon said, "Come now, I will make a test of pleasure; enjoy yourself.' But again, this also was vanity." Please read Eccl. 2.1-11, preferably in the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), which uses modern day English and is easier to understand. But these passages are also understandable in the KJV when read carefully. They show all that the writer of Ecclesiastes had deliberately experienced in order to fathom the meaning of life.

Solomon stuck his finger into a lot of pies. He

- Plunged himself into mirth and wine
- Built houses
- Planted vineyards and gardens
- Built reservoirs of water
- Owned many slaves
- Had great herds of cattle and flocks of sheep
- Assembled a choir
- Possessed many wives and concubines
- Ruled over Israel, the greatest kingdom of his time

In short, Solomon did whatever he felt inclined to do. As king he had the wealth and the human resources to do this. He wrote,

"I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my work, and this was the reward for all my labor."

But he came to the dismal end of trying to satisfy the longing in him by any carnal means. He finally gave up trying to make sense out of life *by life* and said in dismay,

“Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun.”

In the last chapter of Ecclesiastes the writer draws some further conclusions. After he has tasted of all the good and bad and the ups and downs of life, he stabs to the heart of the matter. In the first verse of the last chapter he draws a semi-conclusion:

“Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them...”

To understand the rest of this passage you have to go to the Amplified Bible (AMP) or a version similar to it. The NIV and NRSV are not up to the task here because the literal translation is very obscure. Reading the remainder of the twelfth chapter in the AMP, you can see that the writer paints a very uninviting picture of advanced old age. He has a purpose in presenting such a dreary view of old age. Again I say that I believe it was God’s purpose for the writer to experience the various aspects of life that he did so that he could warn those who came after him that life does not consist just in sensual pleasures nor is it only a pursuit of worldly excellence.

The last two verses of chapter twelve sum it up with finality:

"Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. {14} For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil." (Eccl 12:13-14)

It is an irony that the more knowledge and wisdom you acquire, the more you tend to feel that life is really a vain existence. It is a world of going around in circles, of doing the

same things over and over until you die of sheer boredom. It is probable that you will feel, as you advance in years and wisdom and knowledge, the sheer futility of living, but that is just a lie the devil would like to foist on you. He wants to make you ineffectual as a worker in the Kingdom of God.

The same wisdom that causes you to see the vanity of life without God should open your eyes to the opportunities for living *with* God. The opportunities are there in the many individuals who need you whether they know you or not. You are their connection to heaven. You are their lifeline, the barrier between them and destruction. Your witness to them (if you know them) and your prayers for them (if you only know *of* them) are THE connection they need.

But there is more to prayer than just saying words. You have to pray the “effectual, fervent prayer of the righteous person” for these needy people. And if you pray believing, your prayers will be very effectual. They will indeed pull down strongholds and cast down everything that exalts itself against God. The prayer of faith is a powerful weapon.

I also want to remind you that God expects us at every age of life to be fruitful. The Word of God proclaims (Psa 92:14 KJV): “They shall still bring forth fruit in old age; they shall be fat and flourishing [‘fresh and green’-NIV]...” The fruit, once again, is “love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.” (Gal. 5.22) Meditate on these qualities. If you abound in this fruit, you will exude a righteous savor that the whole world – and your needy brother or sister – cannot fail to sense.

Chapter Two

Realistic Spiritual Expectations for the Older Person

Some Possible Situations

For older saints the avenues of worship and service and devotion to God are generally the same as for those who are younger. The only limits are those imposed by the ability to reason and the ability to move about as freely as they once did. But the good news is that even when we are impaired physically, that does not have to stop our spiritual progress. God imposes no age limits. Our bodies and minds may do so at times, but we can be limited only by the will of God for us at any time and our own lack of desire. If God wants you at ninety-five to do a particular work, nothing, *nothing* in this world can stop you if you believe and make the effort.

All right. Now you want to know, What about those who are senile or have Alzheimer's or some other age-related affliction? This I know and can confirm it by my own experience: God will let nothing stop you from doing all His will no matter what your age and physical condition. First, let's deal with things we can't control, like the deterioration of mental faculties and physical condition. At age eighty-two I have had to face not just this possibility, but, to some extent, the reality. I don't like the prospect that this condition may eventually tear down my body and befog my mind, but I don't fear it.

My primary reason for disliking the prospect is the strain it would impose on my wife. I would not be as concerned otherwise. And even then, I have a firm faith in God that He knows what He is doing. When and if the mental fog should fully envelope my mind, why then, I must assume that my day will be ended despite my continuing to exist. In God's sight I will have finished my course. If, for any reason, He should

suffer me to live well beyond my ability to think clearly, well – He still knows what He is doing. Has God not said,

“Even to your old age and gray hairs I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you.”? (Isaiah 46.4)

The point is this: We have to live every day as it comes and not borrow trouble from the future.

“Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.” (Matthew 6:34)

IF you are walking close to the Lord; and **IF** you are always striving to fulfill His will, He will move heaven and earth to see that you can fulfill His will in you and through you. When His will is fully accomplished concerning you, He will then take you home.

That is perhaps a simplistic way of looking at it. There may be problems for your loved ones of how to take care of you if you cannot take care of yourself. There is the possibility that you will have to end up in a nursing home, and so forth and so forth. But do what you can now in the way of natural preparation. If, at this time of life, there is no more natural preparation you can make, then give your all to the Savior, trust Him and put your future in His hands. As humans living under the curse of sin (even those who are saved), we will have to deal with life’s problems and inconveniences as they come. He has always brought us through difficult situations before; He will do the same now. There may be unsavory moments in the process, but, once again, He has always brought us through whatever occurs.

At this stage of my life it would take all the fingers on one hand to count all the things that are wrong with me physically, but I can see where God is helping me to do those small things He wants me to do. There are many losses of memory at just the

wrong time; there are days when just sitting in this chair at my desk is a chore. There are blank spaces in my thought continuum where I have to wait to get reoriented.

But the main factor is that I am willing to do all that God wants me to do and I know He is able to help me do just that. I will not be through until God says I am through, and when that day comes, I want to go home. No, I don't know what tomorrow holds for me, but all my tomorrows are in His hands. I may be a physical wreck, but my spirit is well and alive. Why? Because God is good and He is faithful to those who trust in Him. After all, I am a child of the King.

God Does Not Always Choose to Deliver

Now let's look more closely at the possibility that God may not always choose to deliver us from certain problems of old age. He has that prerogative at any period of our lives. In our wishful thinking we say, "God did so-and-so for John Jones and so He has to do it for me. God is no respecter of persons!" Talk about hasty conclusions! If you will just study your Bible you will see that God acted on behalf of His trusting saints in various ways. For one saint in a particular situation God would deliver in a certain way. For another in the same predicament, He would not. Don't you dare try to make God fit your faulty misconceptions of Him. Take God's deliverances for any one believer as a testimony to God's power and goodness, not that He has to deliver you in the same way. He will certainly deliver you, but in His own way and time.

You are unique, meaning that there is only one of you in the whole history of mankind. He deals with you in a unique way, a way that is according to His master plan for you. There are yet more purging and purifying that you have to accept even in this late stage of life. You are not perfect, and as long as you are not, God will let some of your troubles ride herd on you in order to perfect you. Don't look at yourself as being too old to change. If God says, "Change!" you can change. You'd better believe it or your life will be a dreary, dreary thing.

Two paragraphs above I quoted that old bugaboo of the miracle seekers: God does not always choose to deliver, at least not in the way we expect deliverance. You have to face up to the fact that there are certain irksome conditions that are a part of your everyday life solely because you are a child of God. They are a necessary component of your reaping, molding and purging. If you are not aware of this, you certainly have a right to petition God for their removal. But once God tells you to cease your wailing, it does no further good to cry to God for deliverance. Submit to the will of God and accept your lot.

There are some situations that, if God should decide to resolve them for you, He would have to take you, as His trusting saint, through another situation similar to it. Trials by fire are the only means of purging out the old sinful dross. It is also what you can expect as part of your reaping of sinful seed sown in the past. Paul tells us, “Some men's sins are open beforehand, going before to judgment; and some men they follow after.” (1 Tim 5:24) In connection with that scripture Peter informs us,

“Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf. {17} [Because] the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God...” (1 Pet 4:16-17)

This indicates that the saints shall be judged first and, coupled with what Paul said, the judgment is an ongoing thing, that is, in this life. We are the “some men” whose sins are “open beforehand, going before to judgment.” We are being judged now for our sins, past and present. There will be no punitive judgment in the afterlife for those who believe in Christ. How could there be when God has raptured them and set His final seal of approval on them? If you wonder why, in your waning years, you have to endure adversities of various kinds, lay your hand on your mouth. Don't complain too loudly. It is the mercy of God that allows you to do your reaping in this life, and “in mercy.” Hosea advised the backslidden nation of Israel (Hosea 10:12), “ Sow to yourselves in righteousness, reap in mercy [steadfast love – NRSV]...”

After we have spent the former part of our lives in sowing seeds of iniquity, we will necessarily reap the bad harvest. If we have begun to sow good seed after our conversion, we will still reap the bad harvest, but we will reap in mercy. We will be spared its full consequences. As an added bonus God will count us to be suffering for His name when we submit to our lot. I believe that some of Paul's persecutions were the result of his having persecuted the Church before his conversion on Damascus Road. But it was grace that caused God to reckon a converted, consecrated Paul to be suffering the same persecutions for Christ's sake.

I am taking it out of context, but I fervently echo Paul's cry (2 Cor 9:15), "Thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift"!

Know That God Is with You at All Times

In the midst of the trial that God will not quickly eliminate you have to **know** that God is with you at all times. Every believer has those moments when God seems to have taken a sabbatical, when He is nowhere to be found. If you have been a Christian for any length of time, you are well aware of this fact of life. I will tell you my fellow oldsters what I preach to everyone who will listen: When you don't feel the presence of God, when you don't sense His nearness to you, you have to know with your mind (not your emotions) that God is with you and in you. It is not a knowledge born of the emotions; it is strictly intellectual. You know it although you don't feel it.

This is basic Christianity, Christianity 101, if you will. It is basic, but it definitely is not always easy to act on. When you are used to feeling the presence of God, being bereft of that sense of divine nearness can be traumatic, especially when you are suddenly thrust into any type of stressful situation. I can illustrate what I mean by telling you about a brief but very trying situation I recently went through:

One morning shortly after my wife had left the house, I became violently ill. The moderate tremors, to which I was accustomed, increased; I had lost my equilibrium and was very nauseous. I literally had to crawl to the bathroom to throw up

and on the way I toppled over like a kid's toy dog once or twice despite being on my hands and knees, down close to the floor. I was sick, sick, sick.

When I got to the bathroom, I sat on the floor (I couldn't even kneel without reeling) and cradled the toilet bowl as though it were a long lost friend and threw up with abandon. I held on to that lowly toilet bowl for dear life. (It's interesting how the person or the object you would disdain in your untroubled days may turn out to be a virtual lifesaver in your desperate hours.)

From that bad state I very quickly I crossed over into the dreaded Bermuda Triangle of all upchuckers: the "dry heaves." The dry heaves occurs when there is not enough food in the body to throw up but the body refuses to acknowledge the fact and stubbornly continues to rack itself, attempting to get rid of what is not there. I desperately needed food in my stomach even though it might come right back up. At least the misery of the dry heaves would be over. But I had to be faithful to my post by the toilet, and even if I had dared leave, I would not have been able to fix anything to eat. The extreme tremors and the falling would have prevented any such efforts.

I sprawled/sat there and heaved and prayed to the Lord that He would cause my wife to come home so that she could give me something, anything, to eat. She sometimes comes home during the day. My prayers, uttered heavenward, came collapsing around my ears. God, it seemed, had not heard. I prayed once and she didn't come. Again I prayed. Again there was no wifely appearance. I was like Paul: "For this thing I besought the Lord thrice..." God did not answer. He did not even deign to speak to me as he did to Paul, not even to tell me, "My grace is sufficient for thee." God simply was not there. I did not sense Him in any way. I felt alone and as helpless as a kitten facing a pack of snarling Dobermans closing in for the kill.

Then I remembered my oft-reiterated stout words of days past when I wasn't hurting and the blessings of heaven were upon me: "When you don't feel the presence of God, you just

have to know in your mind that He is with you and in you.” Yeh, that was really the brave guy when he wasn’t feeling so violently ill!

I must admit, the question (thank God it was not a complaint) flashed in my mind, “Where is my God?” Although I was not thinking clearly at the time, I was able to reject that foolish question. I took the stout words spoken in yesterday’s calm and threw them back in my own wretched face. “He’s right here,” I told me, trying to be patient with the child I had become. “Where else could He be? I don’t feel any quickening of the Spirit, but that’s not what I live by. I live by the Word of God and He has said that He will never leave me alone. So – I am NOT alone.” (John 14.16)

Of course these were not articulate words; they were merely thoughts flickering through a disjointed mind. But they were good thoughts and I held onto the promise of God. (I realized later that this was in itself the grace of God supporting me. I didn’t have the sense of reasoning at the time to formulate those good concepts.) It carried me through my mini-crisis without my feeling His presence, without an inner thrill, without anything but that Word. That is all any of us need. But we certainly need all of that when the exuberance has gone and the hours and days are long and dreary and God has apparently left us alone.

As you can see, God brought me out, not quickly but slowly. It doesn’t matter how: God brought me out. Looking back, I have to say in all honesty this was a short-lived test. God has brought me through some tests for a much longer time, but this one consumed my world for the brief time it harassed me. For a few short hours I was completely miserable!

“Where is your God,” Satan will ask derisively. “You’ve served Him all these years for absolutely nothing. Curse God and die and get out of your misery!” Don’t listen to Satan. Don’t hearken to your fears. God is there and He always will be there. I know:

“I’ve trusted and tested and tried it,
and I **know** God’s promise is true.”

When raging winds and turbulent seas have demolished your luxury craft of comfort and convenience, of wealth and health, you can ride out the storm in a sturdy lifeboat labeled “I will not leave you comfortless...” (John 14.18) Stay with the lifeboat. Don’t jump overboard in your panic. You will perish outside of that indestructible craft.

Let God Lead You

As you stay with God in spite of turbulent conditions around you, He will be there at all times to lead you and to keep you. You may be a veteran disciple of Christ and your experience may be great, but you are still a child when it comes to knowing what steps to take and when to take them and where. You haven’t the faintest clue as to what tomorrow holds; you cannot know what God’s will is for you at any particular moment and many dangers are constantly surrounding you. Some you can see, but many are hidden.

Do you recall reading in Revelation 12.3-4 about the great dragon that was waiting to devour the woman’s child as soon as it was born? Let’s take it out of context here and say that from the moment of your birth to the moment of your death this dragon has been zealously trying to swallow you alive. Only the grace and power of God keeps him at bay. It’s a fact of life: there never will come a time when you will not need God’s protection and guidance for your life.

Perhaps you at this moment are faced with a two- or threefold fork in your pathway and God has not yet shown you which fork to take. What should you do? First, let’s see what we can expect God to do. There are at least three things God could do. 1) He could seal off all but one of the paths, leaving you with but one to take; 2) He could cause circumstances to make you take the one path He wants you to pursue; or 3) He could temporarily leave you as you are: confused and apprehensive.

If it's the last action (or inaction), what should you do? God is possibly trying your faith and hoping that you will grow by the experience. But if you have to make a choice soon and you can't stand there in uncertainty the rest of your life, you should pray (as I imagine you have already been doing). Having done that, you should really believe that God will direct your steps. As you continue to pray, you then will make a choice, confident that the will of God will be done.

Has He not always before brought you through your muddles, even when you had hastily made the wrong choice? Has He not always delivered? Why should He quit delivering you and directing your way now? You are HERE and ALIVE both spiritually and naturally, so God has surely brought you thus far.

If you want Him to continue to lead you in this trackless wilderness, there are two things, in addition to praying, that are required of you: 1) You must be sure not to act from panic or frustration, and 2) be sure you trust Him fully and then deliberately make your move. Do it in faith. Your biggest hurdle is in not having faith that God will do His part. Remember that you have no one else who can help you. All other creatures are vain, ignorant people like you, people who don't know enough to place one little step after another without someone wiser and stronger than they to take them by the hand and gently show them the way.

You simply have to trust God. If it is nothing else, this walk with God is a walk of faith. He cannot and will not deliver if you fail to believe Him. Make your move; God will be there directing you. You, like the majority of us, are only one of a vast number of "little people" who daily and moment-by-moment need the Spirit of God to direct them not only in their personal affairs, but in their worship of and service to God.

'Little People' Doing the Will of God

Sometimes we fail to realize that the laymen of the body of Christ are a vast majority of that select group of people. Laypersons include many of us old-timers. Not only are we laypersons; we are a group that is often relegated to an inferior position by the younger “jet set” because that is the way society in general looks at us. But I want you to be like me: There is no such thing as being too old to do the will of God. There are no retirees in this vast company called the Church of Christ. When we are too debilitated in our bodies to be physically active in the Church, we can still produce the fruit of righteousness and be witnesses as long as God sees fit to keep us here, even in a bedridden state.

I remember when I was a teenager there was a member of our church who was confined to her bed. I don't know how long she had been in that state. It was a good number of years. I can't even recall what her illness was, but it was chronic and it was serious for all those years. Sis. Holliday (I believe that was her name) was a saint of great faith. If my memory is correct, she was often in pain. But she held on to her faith and to her God.

Two or three times over the years Sis. Holliday was able to attend a worship service, which was a cause for great rejoicing. Everybody knew of Sis. Holliday and her tenacious faith and her seemingly unfailing pleasant disposition. Her name was often called out in prayer; her faith referred to in sermons. This woman, despite the troubles falling over her like a cataract, was an inspiration to all who visited her. Those who went to encourage her came away encouraged by her. When she eventually died, as we all must, it was not a defeat. It was a triumph of faith over insurmountable odds. “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.” (Psa 116:15)

Are you yet asking what you can do when you can't get around anymore? You still want to know how you can be useful if you are bedridden? Take a leaf from the life story of this poor widow. She gave herself wholly to God and He used her in His own way, the way He deemed to be right. “Go thou and do

likewise.” You don’t have to be great in the eyes of men. Just be sure you are great in the sight of God.

The little people of the Church and the great personages need each other. Together they are effectively magnifying the name of Jesus and making their joint influence felt in a world that so desperately needs the “savor of Christ.”

No doubt the so-called great men of the Bible and of our present-day Church make the big, dramatic moves that impress their peers and bring a startled world to attention. That’s as it should be; God is working and when He flexes His mighty arm it often sends out shock waves, sometimes throughout the world.

But this great body of Christians could not function without the “little people” praying and fasting and filling their own individual niches in the economy of God. There are many small tasks that have to be performed each day in helping others to make it through that day. Someone has to pray for the thousands of problems and burdens the individual children of God face on a daily basis. The problems and burdens are spread throughout the body of believers and include the great men of God as well as the unknown Christian toiling on a farm in Kansas – or that frail old person quietly sitting in her rocking chair in a retirement home. Or a poor widow trusting God through all her pain and distresses.

The great men such as Billy Graham with their vast operations have to operate in large metropolitan areas because of the huge expenses incurred in their operations. It is not a money-making scheme with those who are sincere; it is simply a meeting of expenses. And God blesses them and will continue to do so – as long as the farmer in Kansas, the frail old person in a retirement home and the poor widow and other unsung faithful believers in other places continue to pray for them. We will get our reward one day; and don’t forget that virtue is its own reward. This means that in this life doing good (doing the will of God) is reward enough for the child of God to continue doing good to the end of his mortal tenure.

What I have said about the Billy Grahams holds true for the entire Church: The Church will thrive as long as the little men and women faithfully pray and fast and do the individual tasks that God assigns to them. There are many examples in the Bible of unknown men and women fulfilling their unnoticed roles, roles that are greatly needed for the work of the Kingdom of God to forge ahead until Christ returns to catch away all His faithful saints.

Below you may read the stories of two unheralded individuals mentioned in the Bible:

2 Kings 5.1-14

An Israelite Handmaiden

Naaman was a captain of the Syrian army. He was a mighty, much-honored warrior, but he had one glaring blemish that negated all of his acclaim: He was a leper. In Israel he would have been an outcast, shunned by society and it could not have been much better in Syria despite his courage and valor. Leprosy was a disease dreaded throughout the world of that time.

Israel had turned away from their God and He let them fall into the hands of their various enemies. The Syrians had made a raid on one of the tribes of Israel and among their captives was a maiden whom Naaman took to be a handmaid for his wife. The maiden of course noticed Naaman's condition and she said in an offhand remark to her mistress, "Would God my lord were with the prophet that is in Samaria! for he would recover him of his leprosy."

When his wife told him what the maiden had said, Naaman lost no time in seeking out the man of God (Elisha) in order to be healed.

The upshot of it all was that God healed Naaman because a young unnamed Israelite maiden had witnessed for her God in the land of her captivity. Naaman from then on became a worshiper of Jehovah.

Acts 9.36-41

Tabitha

Tabitha lived in Joppa and was known among the saints of that city for her many good deeds. According to the Scripture, "...this woman was full of good works and almsdeeds which she did." And that is really the point of the story here. It is not that she died and Peter raised her to life again, but that God recognized her faithfulness and brought her back to life to carry on her needed works of charity among the people.

Tabitha didn't have her place among the apostles or even alongside the other leaders of the Church such as James and Jude and Luke. She was merely a "little" saint who was faithful in what God gave her to do: she helped others to the best of her ability and her works were rewarded.

I am trying to show you by the stories above that God looks on the little people with their little tasks and judges them according to what they have, not what they don't have. Let's imagine this scenario:

You are starving and have barely been able to scrounge up the price of a good meal. The money for the meal is all you have in your wallet. A man dying of hunger stands mute and impoverished before you. You say, "No, I can't help him as that would leave me completely broke. I myself would soon die." That same day the man dies because you did not reach a helping hand out to him and give him at least a portion of your "nothing."

How do you think God sees this? Does He agree that you couldn't afford to give because you also were starving? No, no, no. We are expected to give whatever we have, much or little – even if we are old and impoverished -- of our material or spiritual resources to those who are in need. I am sure God will not buy the excuse that you were poor yourself and just a meal or two away from starvation. He demands that you and I give out

of our limited resources, even out of our apparent lack, to our needy fellow creatures.

The widow in Mark 12.41-44 caught Jesus' attention when she threw her last two mites (small copper coins – NIV) into the Temple treasury. The mite was worth less than our penny today. While others were casting in large amounts out of their wealth, this poor widow put approximately two cents into the treasury and caught the Lord's attention! She was one insignificant poor widow among the thousands more important than her in Israel, but she caught the Lord's attention.

I don't need to elaborate; the lesson is there clear and simple: You give what you have. The logical conclusion is this: No matter how lowly you may be in the society of men, God demands as much of you as He does of the great personages among us: He wants all that you have. We need to quit making excuses based on age or poverty. Of course, if you have nothing except a willing mind to give, "... it is accepted according to that a man hath, and not according to that he hath not." (2 Corinthians 8:12) God will bless your desire to give.

You are very important. The saints who are least esteemed in the world are essential cogs in the machinery of the Kingdom. Your prayers and giving and carrying out the small chores are vital to the operation of the Kingdom of God. Don't stand around idle while there is so much that you can do. Contribute what least input you can to the fulfillment of God's will on Earth.

There Is Yet Higher Ground to Attain

There is so much ground ahead to be possessed and when I view it, I can't be content with where I am. Oh yes, God has no doubt blessed me to be moderately fruitful, but I'm not content with my likeness to Christ, not with the effectiveness of my ministry, nor with my spiritual progress. Don't get me wrong; I *AM* content with Jesus Christ. I just am not content with *me*. I feel that something is lacking that should be in place.

But I know what it is, and I thank God from the depths of my heart for what He is doing. He is stirring me to greater dedication and consecration. He is prodding me to look into my life and see where I am unconsciously holding something back that belongs to Him. Consequently I have looked and inquired diligently of **me** – *what are you keeping from the Lord?* and at this point I have discovered one item that I will not name. I have given it up to Christ...and I am still discontented with myself. If there is more that I am unconsciously withholding from Him, I want Him to reveal it to me.

The children of God need to probe deep within themselves, trying to ferret out the “little foxes that spoil the vine.” We are still so very far from the perfect likeness of our Lord. He has thrilled us with what He has done for us and it should give us a greater longing for more of the same. “As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God.” (Psa 42:1) It is a paradox: If we earnestly seek to quench this thirst, there will never be a time in this life when we have had enough of Christ satisfying the thirst. You will be satisfied, but at the same time you will not be content with merely being satisfied. You will reason this way: If what little I have experienced of God is so thrilling, why not get more of Him? Believe me, that is the sort of attitude and yearning He wants us to have

Lord, we have surely heard of showers of blessings you are bestowing here and there. We are not envious except in a righteous way: We want you to bless us too. But we are not praying just for a few drops; let the showers fall into our upturned parched faces and let us be like the ground in the Scripture (Hebrews 6:7):

“For the earth which drinketh in the rain that cometh oft upon it, and bringeth forth herbs meet for them by whom it is dressed, receiveth blessing from God.”

But what is the blessing we are so avidly seeking? I can’t agree that it is in a shout and a dance. Such things are good, but

so immaterial in the long run. A strong emotional quickening, along with other richer means of grace such as being recipients of preaching, teaching and communion with God, is not what this particular scripture means by “blessing.” The emotional quickening, the preaching, teaching, communion with God and other like items comprise the rain that comes often on the earth (us the worshipers). The herbs we should bring forth are the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5.22, 23). The blessing is in – well, I think it is in just what God is doing with me now: stirring me and shaking me out of the old rut. It is in a more effective personal ministry. It is in doing His will fully. That beats an ecstatic dance any day. And God is even now prodding you to the same end with these words. He wants us all to move on.

When I first got to what is now this rut in my pathway it was a blessed place, fresh and new. But now it has gradually slipped away from the fresh and new into a deep groove into which my wheels have slipped. It’s because I have dallied too long in this place of blessing. If I don’t push ahead vigorously, I will be futilely spinning my wheels, and that’s not what God wants. He wants me to move forward and upward, away from things as they are, up and away from the lowland.

He could have let us all stay where we were, content with our salvation in our latter years and with the “blessings” He routinely bestows on us. But no; God loves us and wants the best for us, and the best for us is in shaking off the lethargy gripping us and stepping up the pace and seeking to follow wherever He leads.

I know what *I* have determined to do. What are *you* going to do with the rain God has sent often upon you? Will you let it be for nothing, or will you bring forth the fruit of righteousness so that God will bless you by drawing you closer to Him and helping you to perfect ALL of His will in you and through you?

Here is one small way for you to move ahead:

Be Gracious and Forgiving

Please, my fellow oldsters, **please** try to have a gracious demeanor at all times. Have a forgiving spirit that has been tempered and mellowed in the heat of adversity and distress. You can never expect to move ahead in Christ if you are so unlike Him that you cannot forgive your fellow men. This is not the time of life to be cranky and upset at every little roadblock chance throws your way. Remember that God is the Master of chance and absolutely nothing arises in your life that He has not already evaluated and determined that it couldn't hurt you.

Be patient with people who you think "should know better." When was the last time you did something that you should have known not to do? You are not perfect nor are your younger colleagues. God has had to be patient, even longsuffering, with all of us.

As I have already said somewhere above in this mélange of thoughts and words that come from my heart, "the passage of time will exacerbate many of the more negative traits we have as younger people." But if you have settled into the rut of being cross and rude with others, there is still hope that you can break that churlish behavior. It won't be easy, but most good things in life do not come to us easily. I am assuming that you are Spirit-filled because you will need the Holy Spirit within you to mellow you even in these late years when by all reason you should be set in your traits whether good or bad.

Move past your tendency to hold a grudge and extend to all others some of the same grace God has extended to you. "Just what is grace?" you ask. Well, it is a word with many definitions, but let's give it a try: We will simply note a few of the many phases of grace without extensive comment on any one phase.

I had written previously in Thoughts of a Layman ("Grace, the Unmerited Favor of God," Thoughts of a Layman, 4/29/01) that grace is

- that quality of God that yearns to hold humankind in His strong arms and comfort and assure them despite

their grossest sins. God could have thrown man's sins back in his face and told him to be damned. He didn't. He threw the sins of those who believe in Him behind His back and forgot them. It's as though these believers had never sinned.

- the divine characteristic surging from the heart (love) of God that ushers in the privileges and rights of the child of God.

You will note that the definitions listed above can both be said to spring from the unmerited favor of God. That is the mother lode from which we mine any specific definitions of grace. When we say of a person that he has the grace of God in His life we usually mean that he or she manifests the grace or favor of God in a particular fashion or fashions.

Grace is also comfort in sorrow; it is encouragement to the discouraged, strength to perform a task, the anointing or special enablement by the Spirit of God to proclaim His Word. We can also say that to have the grace of God in our lives can be to know His forgiveness **and to fully appreciate it**. God's forgiveness is couched in the grace of God, but if we fail to appreciate that forgiveness, no one will see that the grace of God is **upon** our lives.

Grace is fully operative only where there is the presence and awareness of sin and a God-given repentance for sin. Of course grace had to be operative to some degree even before God could offer the individual repentance for his sins. It is evident, as we have indicated, that grace is always present in the lives of men and women as long as they live. It has surrounded the most upright of men and the most terribly wicked from the time of mankind's first sin in the Garden of Eden.

"Awareness of sin" refers to a person who is saved but realizes that sin is all around him (or her), and that he is basically, and without Christ, a sinful creature. When sin made its entrance onto man's stage, grace came to the forefront. "But

where sin abounded, grace did much more abound..." (Rom. 5.20) Before sin there was no need for grace.

Now we have at least a fair idea of what grace is. In the same way that God extended grace and forgiveness to us, we ought to extend to our sinning brother or sister our own grace and forgiveness. It doesn't matter whether it is for sins they have committed directly against God or against us — the whole point is that we should forgive them as we have been forgiven. "But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." (Mat 6:15)

Now I know this next statement does not apply to all who may read this, but it applies to me and to a few of you readers at least. If we would look at some of our past sins with 20/20 vision, we could see where we have erred at times without the least excuse: We knew what we were doing and we pushed our way past conscience and God in our insistence on sinning. (That was a very dangerous thing to do.)

In contrast to our own obstinacy, our brother whom we hold so strictly to the law did not always fully realize what he was doing when he transgressed against the law of God. Or he was suddenly overtaken by a strong temptation. This is no excuse for sin, of course, but look at yourself as I am now probing into my inner self. When I do so, I tremble to think of my former audacity and insolence against my God. If any of you were as I was, how in the name of heaven can we get so "righteously indignant" when we ourselves had not the flimsiest cloak for our own similar sins?

We should fall down on our face and pray for these sinners who were less aware of their sin than we were when we committed our gross infidelities against the Lord Most High. We all need — to the ultimate — the infinite mercy and grace of God.

Forgive me for repeating, but this calls for great emphasis: Now that you know what grace is, channel some of it to your brother or sister who has wronged you. I can't give you some

psychological mumbo-jumbo or whip up a magical potion that will cure you of your grouchy disposition; I can only point you to God and, in my prayers, point God to you. God, who gave you a new spiritual birth some years ago, can remake that grumpy old heart of yours if you will seek Him earnestly for it. I can pray earnestly for you, but you have to make the effort.

You still have the Spirit of God within you: cry out to Him. God awaits the impassioned pleas of His saints, and if they will only cry loud and long to Him, He will hear. He will answer you. He will remake your raspy disposition and give you a loving, gracious and forgiving heart – if you give Him your all and sincerely entreat Him for your new “new birth.” The ball is in your court. What are you going to do with it?

Reach a Helping Hand Out to Others

When you reach what seems to you to be the age of uselessness, don't give in to that way of thinking. It's deadly! As you think, so you will become. As long as God gives you life and the ability to reason, you are always useful to Him. That means you can be useful to others because that is the only way you can serve God. He doesn't need anything; His creatures made in His likeness do. To the best of your ability help other people, young or old, who need spiritual, physical or financial aid.

In the case of older people who are in any sort of need, their children may not be able to step into the breach. Too often the children don't care enough to help. They are busy having a life of their own; how can they sacrifice the time and money to help their parents? But all of that logical reasoning fails to repair the breach in the parents' life. If you can, you have to step into the gap left (or caused?) by this unchristian neglect of one's parents.

Your peers, those of your age bracket, like their young successors, need more than financial help. They need emotional shoring; they need you to give yourself in the process of helping.

I realize that it's possible that you were saved late in life and don't know as much about the Lord as you'd like, but, again by His wondrous grace, God can enable you to discover gold in the depths of your inner being that you never knew you had. So dig deep into those untapped resources and draw from them just what you need to help someone who is floundering.

This is all about walking close to God so that He may direct your steps into the never-ending task of helping others. You will find that the Spirit of God within you will help you do things you didn't think you were capable of doing. Don't limit yourself just to your fellow oldsters. You have gained a wealth of experience and know-how just from knocking around in this life even when you weren't saved, and especially since you have known the Lord. You do not have to pose as some great seer or a wise old counselor – you more than likely are not either one. Just be yourself, your obedient, praying, Bible-studying self, and God will know where to fit you into a situation that merits your involvement.

As we have stated, this all depends on your walking close, very close to the Master. You cannot know where He wants to use you or in what way if you are following Him from afar. Remember, “The hoary head is a crown of glory, **if it be found in the way of righteousness.**” (Proverbs 16:31)

You have something to contribute to others no matter how young or how old you may be. I repeat: Dig deep and find resources within you that time and experience and God Himself have placed within you for the time you would need it – not for your own sake alone, but to help others who are crying out for help. Have you ever known a grinding financial crunch? Have you ever been terribly depressed with or without apparent cause? Have you experienced bitter grief and had your emotions frayed to the ragged point of breaking? Evidently God brought you through it all; now it's up to you to give whatever help you can to someone else who is in serious trouble.

Your long life is not something you should hug tightly to your chest as though it were going to break loose from your

grasp at any moment. Give it out to souls who are in any sort of need. Don't say so lamely, "What can I do?" Do SOMETHING! If it's the loss of a family member or some other especially grievous trial of their faith, there may not be much that you can say to really help, but you have to BE THERE, in bodily presence and/or in your prayers. In some way, by some means -- be there for your brother or sister when they are in their furnace of testing.

You are possibly unable to get around much, but don't let that keep you from becoming emotionally involved in the lives of others. Pray. Say a word in passing that comes from your heart. **Pray.** Be there where they can depend on you. **Pray.** We can all do that. Pray... pray... pray... If those arthritic old knees can't bend in a posture of prayer, that is no excuse for you not to pray. Assume a mental posture of prayer and come before God—sitting, kneeling, standing, lying down—earnestly seeking to help your brother out of the emotional, moral or financial pit into which he has fallen. Be there. Fulfill your obligation. Express your love in your actions, even if no one sees but God. It is so very true, "The effectual, fervent prayer of the righteous man (woman) availeth much."

You may have the same problem in your prayer life that I have: poor memory. You know what you ought to pray for and you have every intention of doing so. But sometimes when you actually come before the Lord in prayer, you can't quite remember what it was for which you had promised someone else you would pray. There are two answers to this problem:

1. Use a prayer list. As soon as you can, jot down who it is for whom you should pray. In my case I have found that the name automatically brings back the particular need that requires prayer. However if that too should have a habit of escaping your memory, write it down also. Now this is what really helps me: I do like Hezekiah. I place the list before God when I pray in my secret closet. He doesn't need the list, but the symbolic gesture helps my faith immensely. I spread the needs and burdens of

others out before God and **I know He hears me**. Furthermore, I know He will answer in His own way and in His own time.

There are petitions that I soon can write off because God has answered them. That bolsters my faith. But there are others I have been bringing before God for many months – and I still know that He will answer them.

In some instances I see that the Lord is permitting a period of testing to continue for my sister or brother because she or he needs the testing in order to stay on an even keel. She may be like Paul; it is a means of keeping her humble; or it could be a necessary purging. We all have similar needs at times. But I keep on praying in faith, knowing that God is in the process of answering my prayers, whether the process is long or short.

My cries to God for others or for myself always have implicit in them a submission to the will of God. What good does an answered prayer do if it is contrary to the will of God -- that is, assuming that God would violate His own will in answering?

The second answer to the memory problem is to ask the Lord to cause His Spirit to pray through you. God's memory is not faulty. He never forgets. The Spirit will take over and pray through you whatever is the will of God. He realizes that old age has cut your memory short and the Spirit is more than willing to move in to help you.

"Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. {27} And he that searcheth the hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit, because he maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God." (Rom 8:26-27)

I refer to the people on my prayer list as my "prayer burdens." When I first started my list, the term "prayer burdens" came to mind automatically, yet I soon realized I didn't like it. It seemed to be something imposed on me against my will. But

now I like it; the term is actually very appropriate. These individuals are my burdens although not in an oh-why-did-God-lay-that-on-me way. I gladly accept them, remembering that I too am someone else's prayer burden. That is the way God ordained for the Church to function. I accept these persons as a burden and a responsibility that I would not and cannot do without.

I am only glad that I can be a participant in this wondrous grace. I have said it before in this discussion; I say it again, "Thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift"!

Has Your Sister Fallen?

Do you know of a sister who has fallen? Don't kill her – help her to stand! I have written somewhere in a previous writing that we should not beat our brother or sister on the head with a legal stick. Don't treat her without compassion and hold her so strenuously to the letter of the Scripture. It certainly is not as though we ourselves were perfect. If that were so, I would recommend that the one who is without sin be the first to beat his errant sister or brother. But it is not so; none of us is perfect and we need to be careful how we measure others lest we be measured the same way. We who are older should be especially compassionate for those who have wandered from the straight path of holiness. We know from experience what is in us and how it would master us but for the grace of God.

I do not mean to say that we should ever condone sin. We have to hold our fallen brother to the scriptural standard and then help him to measure up to it. He doesn't need our scorn or exclusion. When a brother has fallen he greatly needs our prayers and words of encouragement in getting him back on track. We ought to surround him with love. Let him feel the warmth of our love and concern. As we did with our sister who had erred, we need to pick him up, brush him off and get him back on his journey to heaven. He has not deliberately forsaken

the right path; he has stumbled while still IN the path and needs someone to help him regain his balance and orientation.

God knows how to discipline any of us when we have gone contrary to His will. It is not up to us as laypersons to mete out punishment. There are times when the local congregation has to administer discipline, but that should be left to the judgment of the pastor. It is not a relevant part of this discussion.

Let's consider another angle to punishment. In Luke 12.57-48 Jesus said,

“...⁴⁷ that servant, which knew his lord's will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. ⁴⁸But he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes.”

Although it seems in this passage that Jesus was talking primarily about those servants who would be in positions of authority, we can nevertheless take a lesson from it. The first part we can readily understand. Whoever sins against his Lord will be beaten for his sins.

The latter part, in which Jesus says that someone who did not know the Lord's will in a particular matter would be beaten with few stripes is more difficult to understand. Why would a person be punished at all when he did not realize he was transgressing his Lord's commandment? His sin was committed in ignorance.

I learned one reason why punishment has to be inflicted on the innocent in such instances by watching a child misbehave one day. The child was throwing a mini-tantrum. My wife and I were the only adults present. She sternly reprimanded him. No success. I intervened and whacked him lightly on his arm. No success. It dawned on me that to get this child to respond correctly, I would have to inflict a minimal amount of pain.

I certainly did not mean to abuse the child, but if he were always left without restraint of some kind, he would be seriously unfit for society at large. He would suffer ultimately if those in

charge were too lenient with him. For his own good he had to be punished despite his not realizing he was doing wrong. It was beneficial to the child and to society. Punishment in such instances makes the innocent know right from wrong. The child had been told more than once by his mother that misbehaving was wrong, but it didn't register without his receiving the due penalty for wrongdoing. A burnt child learns to respect the fire.

The person who has sinned is like the unfortunate child. She has transgressed God's law and it is in the nature of things that a transgression of divine law has to reap the resultant fruit: punishment. If we as unlearned children do not see what sin can bring upon us, we will never learn to respect the law of God. Therefore, as fallible children ourselves who understand the law of sowing and reaping, let's restore our brother or sister who has erred and show her the love of God in action. Let God take care of the reaping. We should pick her up, brush her off and get her back on her journey to heaven. She has not forsaken the right path forever; she has perhaps strayed from it and needs someone to help her resume her heavenward journey.

Perhaps you are the one to help her. Don't turn your back on your fallen brother or sister. **DO SOMETHING!** Pray! Despite your timidity, speak to her. How can you stand idly by while she sinks deeper and deeper into the sins from which she was once rescued? Do you want your sister's blood on your hands? Do you want God to hold you partially responsible for your brother's fate?

Be Wary of Derailments

You have to be wary of anything that might derail you. Your own carnal nature, although "reckoned" to be dead, is only "playing possum." It is tricky and will let you think it is dead while waiting for a chance to ambush you. It will be dead only as long as your faith counts it to be dead. The demise of the carnal nature within you is not a literal fact; it is only a fact reckoned by faith. Any lapse of watchfulness and faith will unfortunately demonstrate that the carnal nature can be resuscitated.

Then there is the devil with which you will have to contend in old age as much as you ever did in your younger years. In addition to attacking you through your own carnal nature, the devil will throw as many roadblocks in your way as God will allow him to do. If you fail to keep your guard up, all sorts of delusional concepts can overcome you at any age. The adversary of souls would like nothing better than to get any of us off on some tangent away from the word and the will of God.

‘Genetic Baggage’

I want to deal briefly here with an issue that could possibly be the cause of spiritual derailment. It is a problem that some saints have whether they are eighteen or eighty. It is not often talked about person-to-person or dealt with in sermons. The issue is “genetic baggage.” In the context of this discourse we can consider genetic baggage to be any inherited trait that can adversely affect our Christian living. It too, like other traits, can affect us more as we age. In looking at this issue I will quote extensively from a pamphlet of mine, “The Black Holes in Life.” (<http://www.lulu.com/content/3908028>) In order to avoid any unnecessary distracting material there will be no further attributions made for any data lifted from the Black Holes writing.

We rarely bring the matter up with our brother who is plagued with his genetic flaws because it is a sensitive, personal matter. Why our ministers do not deal with it in sermons, I am not sure. Too many times the one who is afflicted does not realize his problem. Sometimes he recognizes the problem vaguely and will even casually talk about “what I inherited from my father,” but often he does not have a solid grasp on his problem. He doesn’t have the ability to do so. The flaw is a part of his makeup. It’s a flaw about which he cannot be objective.

We know that God often factors individual temperaments or personalities into what He requires of us. If we look at our whole makeup with a discerning eye, we can see there are positive and negative traits. The negatives we can suppress by

ourselves or by the grace of God, but often they are very stubborn; we may suppress them (and only by the grace of God), but they will not leave us. They are like rebellious children who refuse to be submissive unless their parents bring them before a judge — and do we ever have a Judge to whom we can appeal!

God may not remove the negative genetic traits, even upon our frantic plea. He will help us to deal with them, but He will not get rid of them for us. They constitute our “genetic baggage.” They are not sin, and it is not required that we “kill” them. Nevertheless, for the optimum working of the will of God in and through us we have to suppress them and forge ahead, doggedly doing what we have to do in the completion of our assigned tasks. God leaves the negative traits and disturbing thoughts with us for whatever reason He has in mind.

It is similar to alcoholism or drug addiction, but there is a difference. God can and usually does remove alcoholism or drug addiction upon the person’s turning to God. But often He leaves negative genetic traits entrenched in their victim and He gives the victim grace to operate in spite of them. There is a higher likelihood that God will not change a person’s inherent makeup than there is that He will not take away addictions. Yet, in every instance, **if the victim of this inherited curse can find the capacity to cultivate an intimate acquaintance with God, God will give him grace to live and be what God wants him to be despite the curse.**

I am not attempting to be an authority on such matters. I have no case histories to cite. There is only a lifetime of experience, mine and other’s, to back this thesis.

But before we press further into this quagmire, let’s first recognize that, in infrequent cases, genetic baggage is forced upon us that is not manageable, bearable, nor treatable by less than heroic means. Even with heroic treatment, too often the victim cannot live a so-called normal life. The baggage is inescapably dumped on him and his life is forever blighted by it. An extreme condition like this is not within my purview. Only a trained, Christian counselor should deal with it (the strong

emphasis here being on **Christian** counselor). **Yet, even in such tragic instances, the premise stands, that if the victim can find the ability to trust God (and that is certainly the key), he or she can successfully cope with what would seem to be a fatal genetic flaw.** It is to be hoped that the right counselor will offer this sort of lifeline to his client sinking deeper and deeper in a morass not of the client's making.

Most of the rest of our genetic traits (including the odd quirks and foibles) are not significant in either a positive or negative way, although some are. The genetic baggage we are dealing with in this chapter is definitely not positive nor is it neutral. It is unquestionably negative and can have a strong adverse impact on our lives. Speaking from experience, I believe this genetic baggage tends to factor more into our lives as we grow older. This will happen especially if we withdraw from public life. We then tend to look inward and focus more on our inner turmoil.

What we need here is God. Not the God we speak casually about and talk to only when we have an emergency. We don't need a God we can refer to as "the Man upstairs" – that's trivializing Him. It seems at times that we deliberately try to push God away from us. We really don't feel comfortable with Him. So we refer to Him as being somewhere away from us ("the Man upstairs") or too high for us to be close to. What we need is a down-to-earth, solid, warm, intimate knowledge of this Person we too often view as being too high or unconcerned or whatever. All of us, regardless of age or inherited traits, need a God right at hand, a God with whom we are on very close speaking terms.

All right; we need Him. Now how do we approach Him? We need to have faith in this Friend. It doesn't have to be as big as a mountain to begin with. If we would just use the faith we have, we could go on from there. You believe there is a God; that is fundamental. You believe Christ died for you. That is another toddling step forward. You know His Spirit dwells in you. That is yet another step. The next logical step would be to

assume that, since Jesus died for you and has come back in the form of the Holy Spirit to live in your heart — why surely if He has done such great things for you, He must hear your prayer. What are you waiting for? Go to Him in earnest entreaty for whatever it is you need.

As we have indicated, when you pray, you have to pray with the small amount of faith you have. I am not going to say that you should ask God for miracles. Just ask Him for what is needed. If He sees that a miracle is required to answer your prayer AND if He wills to grant you what you ask for, He will work the miracle. He hasn't lost His power.

We already know that God does not always choose to answer our prayers right away. He makes us wait at times in order to purge us in the fire. At other times what we seek Him for would be detrimental to us. Or it could simply be contrary to what God wants at that time. Whatever the reason, and whenever our petition is not answered immediately, we just have to wait in faith.

I don't want to take away your faith in miracles. God is indeed a miracle-working God. Please hold onto that belief and at the same time give God room to work what He wants to work in your life. Be flexible with God. If you confine Him to any one mold, you will restrict His work in your life.

Too often we sell God short. When He doesn't answer a request in the way and time we dictate, we wonder where is the vaunted power of God. We fail to realize that only three things can hinder God's power: 1) our lack of faith, 2) our lack of full submission to Him, or 3) it may be what we have already considered: It may not be God's time/will to grant us what we want. With regard to item #1, if we don't have the necessary surge of faith, we should fall on our faces in entreaty to God to help us. We all believe in God; we just need more faith.

Then there is the all-important item #2 to consider: **Submission, submission, submission—complete** submission to the will of God. God has an infinite variety of ways in which He

works in the lives of His children, but, however God chooses to work, the individual believer has to surrender to the particular will of God for his life. He can't demand that God work with or through him as God does with Jim or Sue or Betsy.

What God wants to do with you is unique; therefore He works in a unique way with you. Faith for this type of submission is as great in its way as faith for healing or other dramatic miracles. Hanging on to a belief and a trust in God, even when your life seems to be completely without meaning, calls for great faith. But, as we have said, it begins with the faith you already have. Use it to call on God for more faith and a fuller submission to His will.

Now let's leave our own troubles for a while. When we involve ourselves in the predicaments of others, our own become less threatening. I have my share of genetic baggage, and over the years I have learned how to operate in the divine will in spite of it. As it is with me, many people have negative genetic traits that are very serious in their lives, but sometimes a lack of faith complicates their situation.

These people need much faith – but where and how do they get it when they have trouble conceptualizing what God wants? I have seen people with personality problems who I felt could handle them if they could only give God what He wants. God wants to be first in our lives. He wants us to give Him everything we possess, whether material or physical or spiritual. If we give Him our all, He will give us His all – and that is a pretty big “all.”

At times I have wanted to get into the mind of a person saddled with his own genetic baggage and make him see how to get the grace from God to handle his personality problems. But that is not possible. I can only pray that God will touch the person and open his eyes to what he really needs to do. This is where vicarious faith plays such a vital role.

Some of us, only by the grace of God, have carried our genetic baggage with us as we forged ahead. Others are faltering

along the way. We have to do for these faltering ones as the friends of the palsied man did in Mark 2:3-13. Evidently the afflicted man was in no condition to believe for himself, so his friends had faith for him. The Scripture informs us that when Jesus saw **their** (not the palsied man's) faith, He healed him.

We who have the ability to grasp what Jesus wants are obligated to have faith for our invalid brother or sister. This does not imply that the afflicted person is mentally incompetent, only that he or she needs the help of others who can believe for him. As we have stated, his affliction has diminished his ability to comprehend what it is that God wants.

“Doesn't God know this?” you ask. Yes, He does, but we have to assume our responsibility for our victimized brother and go to God in his behalf. I think we fail to see the whole picture. God expects us to pray for those who are in need. That too is a basic of Christianity. And God expects us to assume our brother's burden that is too heavy for him to carry alone. If you don't know these elemental rules of Christianity, it's high time that you learn them. Absorb them into your being and let being responsible for your brother or sister become a part of you.

What we need to do for our brother or sister's personal flaws (or for our own) is to give up everything to Christ. Becoming intimate friends of God is a priority. Get close, very close to Him. Cry out of your despair – your despair for yourself or for your friend who is hurting. God can and will step in and help your brother or sister or neighbor, whoever it is for whom your heart aches because he or she hasn't the ability to understand fully what God wants.

Don't cry just once or twice to God for help. God responds sometimes only to our persistence and hanging tough. If you don't want to humble yourself to flood Him with your entreaties, you are in a strait because you need Him more than you know. You had better call on Him and plead with Him as though your life or the life of your invalid friend depended on it. There is no doubt that it does.

A Summation of ‘Genetic Baggage’

The conclusion is that we who have these significant genetic flaws are facing an imposing mountain on our road to attaining to what God wants of us. But, by the grace of God, we can move ahead in spite of the forbidding mountain. God more than likely will not move the mountain, but He will take us over it, under it or through it in the accomplishing of His will. We must believe and we must “pester” God to help us conquer the mountain.

More than that, we can pray the effectual fervent prayer of the righteous for those who are not yet fully aware of what God wants and/or who lack the necessary faith. It’s possible that you know one or more individuals who just can’t seem to understand what God wants and what He is trying to do with them. Don’t give up on them and don’t despair of God’s helping them. Hang in there for them. They need us and they need our prayers even as we face our own hereditary flaws.

How do you think we have been able to drag our own genetic baggage along with us? Only by the prayers of others. Saints have prayed for us in the Spirit when they didn’t even know us. Others who know us have sensed our travail and gone to God in earnest entreaty that He would accomplish His full will in us. And He is doing just that.

“Thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift”!

Chapter Three

“Reprobate Silver Shall Men Call Them”

We have casually tucked this chapter into a small place in “On Growing Old.” We dislike the need for it and it is written mainly to those who don’t know God and who continually reject His overtures. It is a call and a warning to sinners to turn to God and to backsliders to return to God. He is, after all, a God of grace and mercy. BUT He is also a righteous God who will not deviate from His goal of having only righteousness in His universe. That means that eventually all sin will be abolished. Where will that leave you who have clung so tenaciously to your sins?

A God of Grace

It is hard to imagine there being a God who did not personify grace, which, we have learned, is “the unmerited favor of God to man.” That is all too short a description of something as far-ranging as grace, but for the moment it will be sufficient.

If God had not extended grace to the entire family of Adam, He would still be all-powerful, all-knowing, glorious, good – you name it – but He would not be a God of grace and mercy. His condescension to grant mercy to these vile creatures caps off His many other attributes and reveals His nature more fully to us mortals. Assuming that mankind had not failed the test in Eden, the propensity for grace would have still been part of the being of God. Man would never have seen it, though, and would never have been able to appreciate its sparkling beauty.

Grace Will Eventually Fail the Obstinate

We who know God look at His unbelievably generous actions toward man and we know that the grace of God has not failed us. Divine love has not ceased to be. Love and grace can never end. But, let me warn you who are unsaved, whether you are young or old, don't get complacent in your sins: Grace will definitely end one day for those who persist in rejecting it. I can't emphasize it enough: It is possible for one who continually

person may continue to live and know the amenities of this life. He is still benefiting from the grace that God extends to all mankind although he individually may be beyond saving grace, the grace of salvation.

When we are bereft of saving grace, we have reached the point of which the writer of Hebrews warns us:

“Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God...” Heb. 12:15a,

or as Wuest translates it,

“...lest anyone be falling away from the grace of God.”

It is evident that where there is any failure of connection between the goodness of God and man, man has been at fault. God's love is strong and steadfast and His grace never ceases to flow. It is like a person who, in the heat of summer sits under a small waterfall so that its soothing gentle waters flow softly over his fevered brow. If he chooses to get out from under the waterfall, that doesn't mean the water has stopped flowing. It is no indication that the waterfall has gone dry. The person has left the flow of waters, but they never fail to pour softly and gently over the head of anyone who wants – and who **can** -- enter their flow.

Let's take it a step further. All men, believers and unbelievers alike, came into this life under the umbrella of the

love and grace of God. When they reached the age where they could make decisions for themselves, they then opted to either stay under the canopy of grace or to withdraw from it. (No person is entirely outside the “fringes” of grace. All who are now alive still benefit from it.)

Yet, even for those who withdraw, God’s love and saving grace are still available to them until they die **or until they reach the point of being “reprobate silver”** (Jer. 6:27-30; Rom. 1:28-29; Titus 1:15-16), in which state they will have hardened their hearts so long and so often, they can no longer feel the Spirit of God entreating them to come to Him.

In the Prophet Jeremiah’s day, God had endured the wickedness of His own people so long that He was about to put them away from Him in anger. He said to Jeremiah,

²⁷“Jeremiah, I have made you a tester of metals, that you may determine the quality of my people. ²⁸Are they not the worst of rebels, full of slander? They are as insolent as bronze, as hard and cruel as iron. All of them lead others into corruption. ²⁹The bellows blow fiercely. The refining fire grows hotter. But it will never purify and cleanse them because there is no purity in them to refine. ³⁰I will label them ‘rejected [reprobate-KJV] Silver’ because I, the LORD, am discarding them.” Jer. 6:27-30 (NLT)

The Apostle Paul must have had the above scripture in mind when he wrote to the saints at Rome concerning those obstinate sinners who refused to yield to the Spirit of God,

²⁸And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient;
²⁹Being filled with all unrighteousness, fornication, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, debate, deceit, malignity; whisperers... Rom. 1:28-29.

Paul repeated those words of warning when he wrote to Titus about the same class of men:

¹⁵Unto the pure all things *are* pure: but unto them that are defiled and unbelieving *is* nothing pure; but even their mind and conscience is defiled. ¹⁶They profess that they know God; but in works they deny *him*, being abominable, and disobedient, and unto every good work reprobate. Titus 1:15-16.

Despite the dangers of being reprobate silver, as long as a sinner can feel God drawing him, he can be saved. All he has to do is turn full-face to God. If the sinner were past all hope, he could never feel the Spirit drawing him. I think I have seen two or more of these tragic figures who knew in their minds that they needed God, but did not know how to find Him. They were not then seeking God because He drew them, but because they had an intellectual knowledge that they needed Him. That is not enough: When God hides Himself from you, you can never, never discover Him.

Make Heaven Rejoice!

According to Luke 15.7, there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine who need no repentance. We are inclined to think of the lost sinner in this parable as a repentant backslider because it follows the parable of the Lost Sheep, which clearly refers to a backslider who has been found. But Jesus did not limit His statement in the 15th verse to those who had wandered away from the other sheep. He said only, “one sinner.” If you think it over, the “joy in heaven” is not restricted to a backslider’s return; it includes all sinners who repent upon hearing the Word of God. To clarify this view, consider this:

Before Adam sinned, we were all, as his unborn progeny, “in the Father’s house” (not just Eden, but the presence of God). As Adam was, so were we: fulfilled and content to be in God’s presence. Now all humans are lost sheep that have been lost so

long they have no active memory of home. They have only a very faint recall, buried deep in the depths of their awareness, of a place that was once home. They know it only as an urge to worship someone or something that is greater than they are. It is really a subliminal yearning to return to the Father's house (the Father's presence).

You may be one who has wandered away from the Father's house during your lifetime. Or you may be one who has never known the Father in this life and you have only a dim subliminal awareness of having once been in the Father's house. Whichever description fits you, heaven is waiting for you. God has His hands outstretched to you. Don't once again reject His pleas to come to Him. There is a point at which grace will cease flowing for you. Beware! You may be dangerously near that cutoff place.

There is a small chance that someone in that condition will read this discourse. If you are that person and if you still feel a tug at your heart, know this: God has not yet given up on you. In His mercy He has still seen fit to soften your hard heart and give you another chance at repentance and salvation. You should jump at the chance quickly. Pounce on it. Your eternal fate depends on it. Before you have reached the fateful cutoff mark, God has once again reached out His hand in entreaty. Think of it: The sovereign God, Creator of all things, is beseeching you as though He desperately needed you, to come home. Clasp that hand. Cling to it. Cry out to God and give Him everything you have and everything you are. He will hear you.

Be warned —

“He, that being often reprov'd hardeneth his neck,
shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy.”
(Prov 29:1)

Chapter Four

Sex Is Not the Be-All and End-All of a Good Marriage

Scriptural Love Is the Prime Ingredient

Sex is not the main element in a good marriage, whether the couple is young or old. A marriage can never be a good one if there is no love present. Sex is a vital ingredient without doubt, but it alone can never sustain a marriage. This is well attested to by the many marriages that have foundered in the shoals of sex or, to call it correctly, lust. Sex is just one of various factors that are necessary ingredients in a good marital bond. Nevertheless a good marriage that has endured for a number of years can well withstand the strain of an involuntary lack of sexual intimacy.

This would not be a case of the woman's constantly saying, "I have a headache" or the man's failure to perform due to his trysts with women outside the marital bond. Those constitute serious flaws in the marriage. What we are referring to are valid instances of physical inability to perform by the man or the woman, or a lack of sex drive due to age on the part of either the husband or the wife. These things may put a moderate strain on the union, but they will not break it up or even cause a need for counseling IF the following two items are present: 1) Both parties are saved, and 2) both parties love each other as God ordained they should. This certainly could not be the mistaken human idea of love, but the love that flows from God. Please read 1 Corinthians 13 (note that in Cor. 13 the word "charity" in our present-day terminology should be translated, "love").

Human Affection Is a Factor

I believe that in a good marriage there is primarily a godly love, and there is, secondarily, the human affection that the

couple have for one another. But only the love that is epitomized and personified by Jesus Christ could have compelled Him to make the ultimate of all sacrifices as He did. This same type of love is a must in a good Christian marriage. Great affection of one person for another can be a wonderful thing, but it can't compare with the love of God. It is this love that we as Christians should channel toward our fellow creatures. I say "channel" because the only true love flows from God to us and we then direct or channel it to others. It does not originate with us. A strong affectionate bond may begin with one person and flow to another, but biblical love is not so; it cannot be conjured up by any mortal means.

It's evident that we should think twice, no, thrice, before saying so glibly, "I love you" to someone who strikes our fancy. It is also evident that if we don't know God we cannot know love. It is not in us. God alone dispenses love.

True godly love by both husband and wife will enable the marriage to endure any stress put upon it, but when human affection is present also, it further strengthens the bond and makes a life without sex more than just tolerable but pleasant despite the absence of sexual intimacy. This may be incomprehensible to any who lack affection for their mate, but it is true.

Now no doubt the situation just described calls for a marriage of more than one or two years standing, but it does not have to be one of thirty, forty or fifty years. Although there may be a mutual affection in the beginning of a marriage, it takes the passage of time to mellow it to a warm rosy glow and to enrich it to a satisfying nonphysical intimacy. If the love of God is present on both sides, the affection for one another will grow as the months and years go by – and in a good marriage that could be in a relatively short time. In fact, a good marriage, even if it's one of only two or three months and has all the right pieces in the right place, could withstand the disruption of sexual intimacy for any length of time. And the one deprived would still love and care for the other. But this type of situation calls

for total submission to God on the part of the one who is so deprived. Nevertheless, it can be done. Love can conquer all things.

Couples who have been married for more than a few years find there is a deep sense of well-being and satisfaction in just being close to one another. This is not a matter of sexual intimacy; it is one of physical (without the sex) and emotional intimacy that goes beyond the limits of sheer sex.

You have grown accustomed to having one another around, even "under foot" at times, and when the partner is not there, a strong sense of incompleteness assails the other. Sex is not the answer to the need. The answer is to have the partner come back from the trip he/she was on or come back from being away just for a day on the job. This is affection and warmth and intimacy that does not come in a bottle labeled "Sex." It is a God-given prize given to those who earn it by faithfulness and love.

If you and your spouse are not oldsters and have been married a mere two, three or five years, you are certainly not left out of this select group. Do you love her? Does she love you? Is there even now a warm closeness between you? I predict that, if you both cling to the Lord, no carnal impulses that come upon either one of you can separate you. Your bond is now in the process of being established. If you have a good marriage, a mutual love and affection will exist between the two of you and the grace of God will keep your marriage through the fires of hell.

Nor will faithfulness to one another be a matter of compulsion. The compulsion will lie only in the love of God that binds you and the natural affection for one another that makes the bond pleasant.

You Have Questions

There are a dozen questions that may arise in your mind at this point. I have neither the time nor the expertise to answer them all, but let's look at one of them:

We mentioned above that human affection “further strengthens the bond [of marriage] and makes a life without sex more than just tolerable but pleasant...” What if there is an incapacity to perform sexually by one partner and either one of the married couple does not have a warm affectionate feeling for the other despite loving the other in a godly way?

Now that is a sticky question. I am not a marriage counselor, so I will walk softly here and give my suggestions as one who adheres to the tenets of Scripture. If both are saved and continue faithful in the way of holiness, the marriage will endure. And, again, if both are saved and follow the scriptural description of love (1 Cor. 13), there will not be a constant bickering between them, although it may not be “a marriage made in heaven.” In other words, it will not be perfect, but it will definitely not be hell on earth. In fact, if both are saved and both are praying persons, it is likely that affection for the other by the one who didn't have it will grow with the passage of time. It is intriguing how God makes up for our lack if we only will show love one for another.

I frankly confess that I have not always measured up to these ringing descriptions of love that I am giving you, but regardless of my shortfalls of love or the inadequacy in this area by any other person, the statements are true. Further, **God requires me now to live up to every demand of love expressed in His Word and particularly those demands I have expounded on in this discourse and various other writings.** If I purport to have shown the way to those who don't know the way, I myself am lost if I don't follow it.

Keeping Lustful Thoughts in Check

There are some men in their later years who have been troubled by the need to control the lustful thoughts that assail their minds. They wonder why this should trouble them at their

advanced age. They needn't be. In this age of longer life and improved health in the senior years it is only natural that the libido or sex drive should remain well into the declining years. Even when the ability to perform physically fails, it seems that the last thing to fail a man is his sex drive. The body may be feeble, the hands unsteady and the legs may be weak and inept, but the impulse is often there to the last gasp.

The person who follows Christ must deal with any sinful impulses in exactly the way he dealt with them when he was younger: Whether he is capable of performing the sex act or not, he should reject these lustful thoughts immediately. Left unhindered, they will poison his spiritual life. I wrote in a treatise "Be Careful about What You Think" that only what comes from the heart can defile a person. A thought wafted into the mind by a capricious breeze or an evil adversary can't harm a person if he does not take it into his mind and think on it. If he entertains the thought it goes deeper and deeper into his being until it settles into his "heart" or the essential part of his being. It then becomes a part of the person and he will act accordingly, if he is physically able.

I knew an old gentleman many years ago who was well into his eighties at the time. This man would often stand on the street corner on his unsteady legs rather than resting himself in a comfortable chair at home. When they would ask him why he was standing there, he would reply in a quaky voice, "I'm just watching the sweet young things go by"! (Draw your own moral from this true story.)

We have to remember that this was before the days of improved health for seniors. An unfortunate man who was unable to perform sexually was quite often left with an urge for sex and no way to express it. I knew Dad Stafford and I am sure he was not capable of performing sexually, but the drive had not left him. If he had caught one of those "sweet young things," he would not have known what to do with her.

But the point is made by this incident that as long as a man's mind is active he will have the impulse toward sex, which

is not bad if the impulse is kept within the bounds of Scripture and marriage. (Perhaps I had better tone down my rhetoric: not all men have the same drive for sex. Some are not much bothered by this thing called libido.)

Advice to Older Singles

As for you who are single at this time in your life, whether by chance or by choice, if you should find a suitable companion, well and good. But common sense tells us that we should look for someone who is compatible with us, with our temperaments, with our tastes and goals. Why find the first person who says, "Marry me," simply to gain companionship or to satisfy a sexual urge? If you do that, you may wish many times, in the bitter aftertaste, that you had continued being lonely or that you had handled the sexual drive in a manner befitting a Christian bequeathed with the wisdom that comes from on high.

In addition to the preceding advice learned by observation and experience, I give you Paul's counsel on the subject:

"It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; {4} that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, {5} not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God..." (1 Th 4:3-5 NIV)

Whatever the Christian's lot may be at any particular time in life, he should be mindful that he is, first and foremost, a child of the King. King's children don't behave themselves unseemly nor do they practice sin. They don't play fast and loose with the sex drive; it is a dangerous projectile that can go wild unless handled properly. As children belonging to the royal family, they don't play the fool and they conduct themselves at all times in a manner befitting their royal standing. And they would rather die than bring shame upon the King.

Chapter Five

Peacefully Facing the End of Life

As I get older it is only natural that thoughts of my own impending death should occur to me now and then.

How to Face One's Approaching Demise

I handle it very well, thank you, my friends, because I have the Spirit of God within me and the hope of a more real life after this one has slipped away from me. Don't be confused by the biblical word, "hope"; it really means solid assurance. It is called hope only because we do not have it yet.

"For we are saved by hope: but hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for? But if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it." (Rom. 8.24, 25)

I must admit that, when I look at others in my age bracket who have no hope in Christ, I wonder how they handle it. If I were they, I would be obsessed with and consumed by the thought of dying. This thought would nip at my heels like an irascible Chihuahua, "What will there be for me after death: complete oblivion or an eternity of torment?" The concept of either destiny would not give me much comfort.

I am convinced there is a built-in mechanism in man that gives him a tolerance of the idea of death, even when it looms large and terrifying on the horizon. It is, in a sense, the universal grace of God to all men, but it is not always responded to in the correct way. I see old sinners who are still the same liars and cheats and lechers they were when they were younger. You would think that old age would bring them to their senses; at least the approaching end of life would make them pause in their sinful pursuits and think about the afterlife. But no; these confirmed sinners want to get as much carnal pleasure out of this

life as they can. And they don't want to hear about salvation or the hope of eternal life.

I can't judge my fellow creatures, but the idea does occur to me that some men and women have reached the point of no return. We discussed this in chapter three, "Reprobate Silver Shall Men Call Them." That is, they have hardened their hearts so often against the entreaties of God that they can no longer be touched. They no longer hear His voice, and when they hear our human voice entreating them in God's stead, to them we seem to be jesting. I can't judge these individuals and officiously assign them to the ranks of the doomed. I can only say there is a class of people like that and some individuals seem to be daring God to label them as such. God alone knows who has finally "merited" that distinction. We have previously said that Jeremiah called them "reprobate silver." What a terrible state in which to draw near to the end of one's life!

'Dying with Dignity'

As for "dying with dignity" (an extremely overworked term) in your own home and in your own bed – I wish the best for both you and me, but don't set your heart on it. I can speak in stark terms here because I am one with you. I am as old or older than most of you. If, speaking from a human viewpoint, you are in a leaky boat, I am in the same boat with you. There are no thousands of retirement dollars flooding my bank account every month. My insurance is more limited than I would like it to be. I frankly believe that only God has kept me alive and rational up to this point because He has more work for me to do. If I should die tomorrow or if senility should overtake me, that doesn't alter the fact that God has kept me breathing and thinking reasonably clear up to now. So, while I can, I want to speak bluntly to you and at the same time infuse you with hope and trust in Almighty God.

We have to face cold hard facts here. I have seen sterling saints die in hospitals and in horrible accidents far away from home. Hebrews 11 tells us of some who were "sawn asunder"

and tortured in various ways. These were they of whom “the world was not worthy.” The majority of the apostles were martyred. During the reign of Nero saints were slain by lions and some were covered with pitch and set afire, then hoisted aloft on poles to provide lighting for the city of Rome. Martyrdom for the name of Jesus can be torturous, but it is the most glorious way in which to die. (Now please don’t go out and try to make yourself a martyr by deliberately infuriating someone who hates the name of Jesus. We have told you already that such is not martyrdom; it is stupidity.)

None of these died in the comfortable surroundings of home. Are we any better than they? No. God has nowhere in the Scriptures promised His saints an easy way out of this life. Put your trust in God now while you are able to call on Him and He will be with you wherever you are at the time of your demise. Go beyond a casual acquaintance with God; immerse yourself in Him, in His will and His love. Wherever you leave this Earth and no matter how tragically, God will take you across the Great Divide and welcome you home. That is truly dying with dignity.

Consider Jesus the “Author and Finisher of our faith”: for the joy that He knew awaited Him He looked with scorn on the shame and pain of the cross, and He is now seated at the right hand of God. (Heb. 12.2, 3) Can you imagine how great that hoped-for joy must have been to take Jesus through suffering such as no man had ever endured before or since? Jesus wasn’t clutching after dignity when He died. He died naked, tortured and terribly humiliated. Are we better than He?

Jesus went from the lowest depths of hell into the glorious heights of heaven all because He submitted to whatever the Father wanted of Him. We will go from our own private hell into the glories of the heavenlies if we learn to submit. If God wants me to die far away from home, it is all right. If I will leave this life by being drowned in the depths of the sea, it too is all right. Wherever and however I die, I will immediately be with the Savior upon my demise.

Very few people I have known died with physical dignity. Your entrance into life was not exactly a pleasure jaunt and your exit from it may be physically traumatic. But if God is with you, it doesn't matter. When I was a child the adults had a saying: "You will die of a chill or a fever." The means by which you make the trip is not significant; it's whether you are ready for the trip. Are you ready? If not, get ready. When the trip occurs, you may not have time even to say, "Lord, have mercy!" Get ready now. Why will you die unprepared for the one last journey you have known all your life you would have to take?

Having God keep you alive year after year as the odds against your making it through another year grow longer and longer with each birthday, is a blessing. But the blessing is not in being kept alive – the Christian should not have to cling desperately to life – but in being kept alive to do God's will. Life is not such a picnic in Disneyland that we should feel it necessary to hug it fervently to us. But life that revolves around the will of God is worth whatever it entails to maintain that life. God's will is paramount. The accomplishment of the will of God is indeed the Holy Grail the sincere Christian should constantly be seeking.

If it weren't for the inbred fear of dying, many persons who are in severe physical distress would willingly give up this life. They would prefer to escape the hardships and pain or just the plain stifling sense of futility that goes with mortal existence. But they have the species-perpetuating fear of death that keeps them frantically gasping and grasping for just one more breath in a life they no longer want.

When the older Christian who is in failing health has a strong reason for living, life with its aches and pains and times of momentary mental lapses actually becomes a—well, it becomes a pleasure. It gives the individual the type of firm hope for the future that he needs while living in a bleak present. He has a sense of accomplishment; and what better accomplishment could there be than working for God? You only have to know that God sees what you do. He is the One who rewards us.

I am trying my utmost to bring you to the place where your confidence in Almighty God will be unshakeable and whatever God does and whatever He allows to happen to you will be all right. As for my own future, I cannot say with a certainty validated by Scripture that I will never be senile or fall prey to Alzheimer's disease. How can I when I've seen many men and women of strong faith succumb to the same afflictions? Faith will not always repel these scourges. If you belong to God, and I know I do, the assurance you have is that it will always be well with you, whatever your lot.

But again, don't let me hinder your faith that God can heal you or a loved one of oncoming senility or Alzheimer's disease. Although I don't know of it's happening firsthand, I have heard of individuals being healed of either one of the twin terrors, senility or Alzheimer's, and I believe the reports because I know that God is fully able to vanquish any affliction. But let your faith in God be strong enough to accept His will for you or your loved ones. You surely don't want to follow God just for the spectacular miracles He can perform. And, just as surely, you want His full will to be done always.

Some men and women of greater faith than I possess, in their waning years have been the victims of either one of the twin terrors. With that evidence staring me in the face, I will have to fall back on my favorite theme: If God has a work for you to do and if you are willing to do it, nothing in heaven or earth or hell can keep you from doing it.

Furthermore, I'll also say this once again: When God has wrought all His will through you, your day is done in His reckoning. He will then allow something to effectively "take you out of here." By that I do not necessarily mean that you will die physically, which certainly is a probability, but that you may still exist physically while being no longer active in the affairs of men. The twin terrors or some other plague of old age may render you hors de combat or out of the battle.

Does all of this sound too negative to you — you who cast out demons and work great healings through the power of God?

I can only say this: Whether my premise is right or wrong, it finally comes down to a matter of trusting God for your latter days. You can slow the process of aging, but you cannot stop it, by faith or any other means. It is our heritage. As the late Bishop John Holly once said, "God can heal old people, but He will not heal old age." It will catch up with you. While you are moving yon mountain by your faith, you could fall prey to any number of diseases that will carry you out of here. No one lives forever. Despite that, if you are a man of great faith, your faith will take you over that Great Divide into the arms of Jesus. Trust Him, not for your continued healing — let it go, my friend; you have to leave here some time! — but for His will to be done with you.

Christianity is a way of faith and faith does not always say such-and-such cannot happen to me because "I am a child of God." True faith is confident that whatever happens *is for the best* because "I am a child of God."

True faith acknowledges that all men and women are subject to the ills of this sin-cursed life and that the only difference between the vulnerability of the unbeliever and the believer is that God selects what will befall His child. Whatever God judges will be ultimately harmful to the believer is blocked by the Holy Spirit. Those adversities of life that can only harass the believer and not hurt him are oftentimes allowed to plague him because, like all other men, he is still under the curse of sin. He still must endure the afflictions that descend on all flesh.

But he has God on his side and nothing can hurt him in an ultimate way. Nor can anything cause him to sin. The negatives that come rolling in like a tide will bring a blessing to him.

"And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose." (Rom 8:28)

Whether you are shivering from a chill or burning with a fever at the time, God will call you home some day. Are you ready?

I was at the bedside of a saint in her late sixties when she was dying. A deadly disease had blasted all physical dignity to smithereens. She couldn't talk above a whisper, and while I was standing there I saw her lips moving as though she were trying to say something to me. As I bent over to hear what it was she wanted me to do, I heard this soft voice like the gentle rain falling on a thirsty land. In the midst of her continuing distress she was actually rejoicing in the Lord! She was not asking me to do anything for her nor was she petitioning God for healing. Out of the depths of her misery and loss of physical dignity she was praising the God of her salvation even as He was loosing the silver cord tying her to her mortality.

Now to further impress on your mind what God can do for you in your old age, let me bring you a continuation of this somber tale: This saint whom God was carrying in His arms as she was crossing the stygian waters died a day later. Grief! Distress! Her children were devastated. Sobs were wrung spasmodically from their torn emotions; there was hand wringing — but no out-of-control demonstrations and no questioning of God.

There is more. Her mother, who was in her late eighties at the time, had been informed of her daughter's passing. One of the grandchildren brought her to the house to see her daughter for the last time before the morticians arrived. I had been apprehensive of the moment because I knew what a terrible blow it would be for her to see her child lying there a corpse.

When she entered the room she immediately wept. Who would not? When you are in your eighties you never expect to outlive your children. You certainly don't expect in your lifetime to enter a sterile sickroom environment and see your daughter lying on the bed lifeless. There is an emotional umbilical cord that is always connecting you and your child and you are not prepared to lose your child despite any grievous illness.

I waited apprehensively. And I prayed. Then this devout woman did something that temporarily allayed my personal grief. She was both enabled and ennobled by the Holy Spirit —

for it was a noble thing she did. She stood by her daughter's bedside and lifted her own hands and face to heaven and praised the God of all comfort for His unfailing goodness. There were no tears now except those she had just shed, which were still glistening on her face. But in this grand moment there was no weeping. As she stood there in that profile of submission and quiet praise, time stood still. I heard nothing other than her muted exalted praise. It was a moment and a scene that should have been chiseled in stone. I still recall it now and again. I will never forget it.

After this clear and unmistakable sign of surrender to the divine will, the bereaved mother lowered her hands. Time resumed. She again wept silently. Once again I had to handle my own grief. Her grandchildren came in to see their deceased mother who had been, it seemed, so alive and vibrant "just yesterday." The house was filled, not with loud desperate cries, but with the subdued grief of those who have a hope in God. God had asked this blessed mother to sacrifice her Isaac. She had acquiesced. In a reversal of the usual schedule of life, the daughter had died with true dignity (in the sight of God) and the mother had shown she had grown old gracefully. All concerned had said yes to the will of God.

At this point in relating the story I had started to say, "God on His throne was well pleased." But that is not stating the situation clearly. God was not merely somewhere far off on a majestic throne; He was also there in the room and in the house with His bereaved children who had submitted to His will – and He was very much pleased.

Summation

Now what has this book been all about? It is about old people being a mighty force in the army of God. I am referring to old people praying as they know how to pray, loving as they have been taught, yielding fully to the divine will and giving of their resources as God wants them to give. There is a battle in which we must engage, a war to be won. By no means are we

retirees in this army. We are active soldiers in God's army and will be until we literally die.

This literary effort is a wake-up call. If you thought that God meant for you to quietly disappear into some remote corner of His economy, you were mistaken. As older people, we have experience and spiritual skills that we can use to the glory of God. Come on, my fellow oldsters, get out of your rut and join me in serving God as we never have served Him before. That is what age is all about in the Kingdom of God. It is about increased usefulness; it is about talents that have been forged in the hot fires of unremitting opposition and love that has grown with the passage of years. It is about serving God with all that we have.

The battle cry has been sounded — as trained warriors we must respond quickly and zealously. Let's march gloriously to Zion, trampling the enemy under our feet as we, like a mighty tidal wave, surge victoriously onward.

As little as you may think of yourself, YOU can be a definite and vital part of that triumphant procession. No, that is not stating it strongly enough. It is not just that you CAN be a part— you MUST be a part of the army of God: the thought of being otherwise at the tag end of life is totally unacceptable.

About the Author...

Aaron J. Smith is a second generation Apostolic/-Pentecostal who does not look on the term as a rigid mold from which there can be no scripture-based variation. The son of Karl F. and Josephine Smith, Aaron and his siblings were taught early on to deliberately choose their faith, not inherit it. Both parents considered themselves to be, first of all, Christians without regard to a denominational label. His father, a bishop in the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World, Inc., was the pastor of the Church of Christ of Apostolic Faith in Columbus, Ohio and was what might be termed an "enlightened Pentecostal thinker" of his day. He had the penchant for examining doctrinal thought in the clear light of the Scriptures regardless of tradition. This trait was passed on from father to son.

Mr. Smith contributed articles regularly to the Christian Outlook in the early 60's and in the period between 1982 and 1984. He is the author of several other books: Essays on Pentecostal Terms and Concepts, From Eternity to Eternity: Jesus Christ, A Handbook for Believers, Acts: History and Theology, A Devout Man, Thoughts Pulled from the Web, vol's. I and II, and A Layman's Awesome Look at God.

Mr. Smith married Pat Ross in 1981. She was a tremendous help to him in his career as Director of the External Studies Department of Aeon Bible College in Indianapolis. In 1991 he retired from his post at the College. Mr. and Mrs. Smith had moved with the College from Columbus, Ohio to Indianapolis in 1981 shortly after their marriage. In 1994 they moved to Atlanta, Georgia where he requested and received permission from the Georgia State Council of the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World to launch the Georgia State Counselor, the official newsletter for the Council. He resigned from the post in 1998.

Further indulging his love for writing, Mr. Smith has written a wide variety of teaching and evangelistic pamphlets targeted both at Christians and those who do not yet follow Christ.

