

Meditations
(2009-2010)

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A Great Rock in a Weary Land – Isaiah 32:2

A man will be as a hiding place from the wind, and a cover from the tempest, as rivers of water in a dry place, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land.

Most of us in our modern world rarely deal directly with the harsh forces of wind, storm, drought and heat that nature can wield. But in Isaiah's day, people were often caught without defense against the rages of the environment. However, they had also come to realize that nature itself provided their refuges, in the rivers and in the rocks.

In this verse, Isaiah is prophesying that a man, the man Jesus, would Himself be a refuge. People would seek Him in great desperation because of the overwhelming winds, tempests, and famines in their lives. He would be their cover, their security, their source of refreshment, and their comfort.

What we need to understand, however, is that the *only* way we can know the great strength and provision of Christ is precisely in the context of great need. Without the storm, a shelter has no meaning. Unless we thirst, water has no appeal. Until the sun beats mercilessly down upon us, we never look for a shady place to escape it.

In the same way, God deliberately brings each of us to situations where we have no resources of our own by which to survive. From our point of view we might think of this as cruel, but in fact there is no other way we can comprehend the great glory and mercies of God except in the specific context of harshness and poverty.

Nevertheless, there are many who foolishly reject the grace and gifts of God, clinging proudly and stubbornly to their miseries. These are also people who routinely deceive others, not knowing that they in fact are the ones being deceived.

But they will be exposed, Isaiah tells us, in the day when “a king will reign in righteousness, and princes will rule with justice” (verse 1). Then, he says, “The foolish person will no longer be called generous, nor the miser said to be bountiful” (verse 5). Also, the schemes of the schemers will be revealed as evil, as intending to “destroy the poor with lying words” (verse 7). Only the truly generous will continue to stand (verse 8).

Isaiah also warns those who are not particularly evil, but who are merely complacent. In verses 9-14 he speaks to women who are accustomed to enjoying the benefits of pleasant fields and fruitful vines. He tells them to be troubled, and to go into mourning, for they are about to have all their comforts and securities removed from them.

The time is coming, he writes, when “the palaces will be forsaken, the bustling city will be deserted, the forts and towers will become lairs forever, a joy of wild donkeys” (verse 14). But once again, we should see this devastation not as cruelty, but as the necessary backdrop for the revelation of God. For these things will only last, Isaiah says, “until the Spirit is poured upon us

from on high, and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field, and the fruitful field is counted as a forest” (verse 15).

Just as a cold drink is most pleasant when we are most thirsty, so the reign of God will be established after a season of deep desolation, that His glory might be most evident. We sometimes think we understand the goodness of God now, but how much more will we (or if not us, then those who live during that coming day) be unspeakably grateful when Isaiah’s prophecy is finally fulfilled.

“Then justice will dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness remain in the fruitful field. The work of righteousness will be peace, and the effect of righteousness, quietness and assurance forever. My people will dwell in a peaceful habitation, in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting places” (verses 16-18).

All-Sufficient Grace – 2 Corinthians 9:8

And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work.

It's hard to imagine any Christian these days who has not sung the song "Amazing Grace." The lyrics speak of the astonishing work of grace in salvation, when we are taught to fear God's righteous wrath, and then miraculously He lifts that fear from our hearts. This death-to-life transition is indeed the greatest miracle we can experience, of which natural birth itself is only a picture.

When asked to give a definition of grace, many people respond with the phrase "God's unmerited favor." It is true that none of us deserves salvation, yet out of His infinite love and at great cost to Himself, God has purchased our redemption. But we are sometimes led to believe this is the only work of God's grace. Paul understood that redemption was just the opening act in an eternal drama of outpoured power in our lives.

I love the "all" verses in scripture. God is able to make ALL grace abound, so we will have ALL sufficiency in ALL things. But notice, this speaks of His ability: "God is able." It does not mean He *will* give us everything just because He *can*. Our role is important as well.

Paul tells us that God's abundance is specifically available "for every good work." I therefore personally define grace in this manner: *Grace is whatever it takes to do whatever He calls us to do.* Grace contains all the resources we need to be obedient and fruitful in God's kingdom.

So what resources are included? Well, it could be money or other supplies. It could be information, or the wisdom to make the right choice. It could be the help of a friend. It could be a series of "coincidental" circumstances. It could be something very supernatural, like a miracle of protection or a miracle of healing. Or it could simply be the strength to persevere.

One key to receiving God's grace is that the choice of what it looks like and how it comes must be left up to Him. So often when we run into complexities in our lives we immediately begin to lay out our wonderful plan for how God should solve them. But that makes us the master and Him the servant. We should rather be like Mary at the wedding in John chapter 2. "Here is the problem. The solution is up to You. We'll do whatever You tell us to do."

You see, a primary purpose of grace is the furthering of God's relationship with us. God is not troubled by our troubles. Not in the least. What concerns Him is our ignorance of His power, His goodness, and His glory. We really have little knowledge of what He can do, despite the astonishing stories in scripture and even despite His working in our own lives.

We are so often prone to disregard the divine authority and the limitless creativity of God. So we bring our problems to Him, and if He doesn't respond in a way that suits us, we take them back and begin to work on them again ourselves. Very few of us have reached a place where we understand God the way Job did: "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him" (Job 13:15).

I have also come to realize that God's grace is not something I can draw on only in the big crisis moments. It is just as available for the small details of my life. If I have a scheduling or transportation conflict, I turn it over to Him. If I am missing an ingredient for my dinner preparations, I ask Him what to do about it. If a friend unburdens her problems to me, I wait until He gives me something to say to her...or else I say nothing. In each situation, the weight goes on His shoulders, not on mine.

I especially have learned to pray for God's grace when I am facing an unpleasant situation or task. The interesting thing is that sometimes He removes the problem altogether. Sometimes, He takes away the sting. And sometimes the sting is very much there, but I find within me strength and peace even as I walk through it.

What this produces in me is a deeply tangible awareness of the presence of God in my life. In the many demonstrations of His grace, I learn of His love for me and His personal interest in every detail of my existence. In a sense, grace is the glue that binds me to God.

And day by day, as my trust in Him grows, the testimony of His reality is able to spill out of my life into the lives of those around me. This is what Jesus was talking about when He said, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your *good works* and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16).

When I am peaceful in a crisis, this allows those around me to grow more calm and God gets glory. When I can give my last dollar knowing He will supply my needs, another person is blessed and God gets glory. When I am able to love in the face of someone's anger and that anger is thereby dispelled, God gets glory. This is the essence of grace, that God is in me "to will and to do for His good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13) so His kingdom can move forward another small step in the life of the person next to me.

When this process takes place, life stops being overwhelming and instead becomes an adventure. As I discover God's infinite creativity in the face of complexity, it becomes easier and easier to relax in His care. Even the pains I suffer, and those I see around me, become important brush strokes in the master painting He is crafting, which one day will reveal the fullness of His glory and wisdom and love.

So I encourage you too, my friend, to draw freely on God's amazing, abounding, all-sufficient grace.

Barriers – Psalms 107

Four very specific barriers separate man from God. Each of these barriers is part of our fallen nature, and each requires supernatural grace to overcome. In Psalms 107 we find four pictures that vividly depict these four aspects of our fallenness.

They wandered in the wilderness in a desolate way; they found no city to dwell in. Hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted in them. Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble, and He delivered them out of their distresses. And He led them forth by the right way, that they might go to a city for a dwelling place. Oh, that men would give thanks to the Lord for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men! For He satisfies the longing soul, and fills the hungry soul with goodness.

Like these men, all of us are lost...and we don't even realize it. We have no true food, no drink, no shelter for our souls. We may wander in this lostness for years, until somehow we discover there is a God to whom we can cry out. He responds to our cries by leading us to a safe city, where He feeds our souls with His own goodness. In this way, the first barrier, **ignorance**, is overcome.

Those who sat in darkness and in the shadow of death, bound in affliction and irons--because they rebelled against the words of God, and despised the counsel of the Most High, therefore He brought down their heart with labor; they fell down, and there was none to help. Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble, and He saved them out of their distresses. He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death, and broke their chains in pieces. Oh, that men would give thanks to the Lord for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men! For He has broken the gates of bronze, and cut the bars of iron in two.

Even after we taste of the goodness of God, our nature soon rebels against His word and His counsel. God then “brings down our hearts” with affliction, irons, and the shadow of death. Once again we must reach that place of desperation where we cry out to God. Once again, He mercifully breaks our chains and destroys our prisons, thereby overcoming the barrier of **rebellion**.

Fools, because of their transgression, and because of their iniquities, were afflicted. Their soul abhorred all manner of food, and they drew near to the gates of death. Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble, and He saved them out of their distresses. He sent His word and healed them, and delivered them from their destructions. Oh, that men would give thanks to the Lord for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men! Let them sacrifice the sacrifices of thanksgiving, and declare His works with rejoicing.

In addition to the problem of our resistance to God's word, we also are separated from Him by our foolish indulgences and iniquities. God responds by sending afflictions that torment our bodies and again bring us near death. The means of our salvation is yet the same: we must confess our transgressions and cry out to God to rescue and heal us. Only then can the third barrier, **sin**, be torn down.

Those who go down to the sea in ships, who do business on great waters, they see the works of the Lord, and His wonders in the deep. For He commands and raises the stormy wind, which lifts up the waves of the sea. They mount up to the heavens, they go down again to the depths; their soul melts because of trouble. They reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken man, and are at their wits' end. Then they cry out to the Lord in their trouble, and He brings them out of their distresses. He calms the storm, so that its waves are still. Then they are glad because they are quiet; so He guides them to their desired haven. Oh, that men would give thanks to the Lord for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men! Let them exalt Him also in the assembly of the people, and praise Him in the company of the elders.

This final picture is interesting. These men are not lost, they are not rebelling, nor are they sinning. They are simply going about their business, and in fact are very aware of the works and wonders of the Lord. Yet once again God sends a deadly storm that brings them to the point of terror and desperation. Only when they cry out does He calm the storm and still the waves.

What is this fourth barrier? I think it is hidden in the little phrase, “at their wits’ end.” These men were separated from God by their own **self-sufficiency**. They were competent sailors who understood the sea. They appreciated what God had made. But they needed to know Him more fully, and we can only know God fully when we come to the end of ourselves.

As we look over these four stories, we see a clear pattern. The barriers that separate us from God rise out of our own nature. Yet only He can tear them down. He will not destroy them, however, until we become profoundly aware of our helplessness, and are humbled enough to cry out to Him.

Once these authentically desperate cries reach His ears, God responds quickly and dramatically. He feeds our hungry souls. He tears down our prisons. He heals our broken bodies. And He guides us to our “desired haven.” As the psalmist says so well, “Oh that men would give thanks to the Lord for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men!”

Depending on the Lord – Isaiah 10:20

And it shall come to pass in that day that [they] ... will depend on the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, in truth.

Let's face it. When things get really tough, we depend on whatever seems to us most solid and most real. Usually, that's ourselves. Sometimes it's an authority figure such as a parent, or an authority structure such as the government. But Isaiah is prophesying about a time when people will depend on God "in truth."

Here is the whole verse.

And it shall come to pass in that day that the remnant of Israel, and such as have escaped of the house of Jacob, will never again depend on him who defeated them, but will depend on the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, in truth.

You may know the story. For generations, the Israelites had drifted away from God's laws and God's worship, trusting instead in the idols they made with their own hands. Isaiah was warning them that God would soon turn them over to their enemies, the Assyrians. As captives in a foreign land, they would be completely dependent upon their captors for every aspect of their survival. But the day would eventually come when God would bring a small group, a "remnant," back to the land of their birth, where they would then depend on Him only.

Later in Isaiah we find the same process summed up in two verses.

Who among you fears the Lord? Who obeys the voice of His Servant? Who walks in darkness and has no light? Let him trust in the name of the Lord and rely upon his God. Look, all you who kindle a fire, who encircle yourselves with sparks: walk in the light of your fire and in the sparks you have kindled – this you shall have from My hand: you shall lie down in torment. (Isaiah 50:10,11)

I call it arranging our own blessings. When we have no light, we "encircle" ourselves with the sparks of whatever seems best to us. It's much harder to trust in something we can't see, much less control.

But God does not let this plan work. By His own hand, the scripture says, we will lie down in torment. He will even give us over to our enemies. Depending on how hard-headed we are, He will allow us to suffer as long as it takes to discover the uselessness of *every* support structure except Himself.

Nevertheless, the day will come when at least some of us (a remnant) will figure out that God alone is to be depended on *in truth*. The Hebrew word for truth, *emet*, means something that is reliable and permanent. The word is made up of three letters from the Hebrew alphabet: the first letter, the middle letter, and the last letter. God created everything, God sustains everything, and God will complete everything.

Thus it is wise, when the storms of life come upon us or the darkness surrounds us, to choose to trust in God alone. We should not think of painful trials as the work of our enemy, but as the work of God to bring us to a total dependence on Him. Even if the enemy does have a part to play, he will be most upset, and most defeated, if in our distress we turn quickly to God with our radical, and restful, trust.

Do Not Grieve the Holy Spirit - Ephesians 4:30

And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.

For quite a few years I had been enjoying FreeCell, one of the solitaire games on my computer. Each possible way the cards can be dealt is numbered, and I had created a little scoresheet where I checked them off as I won them. Of course, I knew my propensity to get caught up in this kind of activity, so I carefully disciplined myself. After each game I would get up and do something constructive before allowing myself to play another.

One afternoon I had started a game when the phone rang. It was a woman who sometimes called for either counsel or sympathy. I was glad when my daughter picked up the phone, for I knew she would probably be able to provide the needed encouragement. A short while later the call was over, and Amy came in to report on her talk. When she sat down in the chair by my desk, I looked at her to determine if now *she* would need a chance to talk. She seemed fine, and when I asked if everything had gone okay, she assured me it had. So as she described her conversation, I divided my attention between her words and my game.

Then suddenly, without warning, I had one of the strangest experiences of my life. It was as though I was looking at an old-fashioned movie film, the kind where there are a series of frames that create the illusion of motion. Everything was normal--except one frame was different. For the briefest of seconds, I clearly saw a Figure standing behind my daughter.

Three things were instantly and forever impressed into my soul. The first impression was simply the knowledge that this was Jesus. I did not see His face, but I knew without a doubt it was Him. The second thing I knew with absolute certainty was that He was not angry. I've known what it's like to have someone angry with me, and that feeling was not there. The third thing however gripped me the most strongly, which was that I had made my Savior sad. Even without seeing His face, His heart somehow touched mine and I felt His grief.

As Amy got up to leave, I sat there processing what had just happened. Slowly I reached up and clicked out of my game. I then made my way to my bedroom closet. There on my face before God, I wept. At first all I felt was deep repentance. But gradually, I realized I was also grateful. My God had given me a clear revelation of what did and did not please Him. I returned to my desk, deleted the program and threw away my scorecard. Today I don't even remember how to play FreeCell.

When at Calvary Christ received the full wrath of God against our sins, it did not remove the fact that they still bring Him great sorrow. Paul spoke of this grieving process in Ephesians 4:25-32.

Therefore, putting away lying, "Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor," for we are members of one another. "Be angry, and do not sin": do not let the sun go down on your wrath, nor give place to the devil. Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need. Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed

for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.

I cannot say with certainty that playing cards is always sinful. What I do know is that our entertainments are powerful, drawing us into hours of distractedness, making it very easy to ignore the quiet opportunities God might give us—either to commune with Him or to be used in service to others. I also suspect that the hours we have invested in most entertainments will end up being of little or no value in light of eternity.

Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire. (I Corinthians 3:12-15)

If We Hold Fast – Hebrews 3:6

Christ [is] a Son over His own house, whose house we are if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm to the end.

The question of eternal security (that is, whether we will make it all the way to heaven once we start out with Jesus) has been wrestled with since theological wrestling first began. Like several things in scripture, there are verses that sound like we can never lose our salvation, and other verses that sound like we most certainly can.

It has always been my thought, in matters such as this, to operate under the more risky scenario. In other words, I would rather be overly concerned to do what is needed to insure my place in the kingdom, than to take it for granted and somehow miss out. The question, of course, is--what is needed?

Hebrews 3:6 tells us we are part of Christ's house if we "hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing." Notice that it does not mention living a perfect life or doing certain religious practices or praying a certain prayer. Confidence and rejoicing are matters of the heart. Only when the heart is right does the life of Christ overflow in our own lives.

But also notice that it speaks of *the* confidence and *the* rejoicing. Believers are to hold on to the very unique experience they have when they are first born again. This becomes an important thing to consider. At that specific time you understand to be your entry point into the family of God, did you also experience a supernatural confidence and rejoicing? For those of us who started very young, and thus responded to the call of God several times as we grew older, can we recall at least one of those events to have included an astonishing, God-given faith and joy?

You see, salvation is the most supernatural and holy event that can happen to a person. Even divine miracles such as healing are not as significant, for we will still eventually die. But at the moment of salvation God takes our deadened spirit and breathes eternal life into it. What is more, the Spirit of God Himself somehow enters our beings, becoming our counselor and comforter.

If this doesn't produce an overwhelming assurance and gladness, I don't know what could. However, the emotions of those first hours or days do eventually fade. What follows is a lifetime of determined "holding fast" to what we know once happened. Difficult questions will arise, and our enemy will tempt us to doubt God. Painful circumstances will severely test our joy.

I find it helpful to make a distinction between understanding and faith, and between happiness and joy. You see, unlike understanding, faith doesn't exactly reside in the mind. It affects the mind, and in some ways we have contact with it through our minds. But faith lives in our spirits. Thus the man in Mark 9:24 could say, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief." In his inner being he somehow knew that Jesus could heal his son. In his mind, it made no sense.

In the same way, even in the darkest hours of fear or suffering or grief, when our hearts are melted or broken, there can still be a deep and abiding joy and hope down in our spirit. And it is there that we must "hold fast," knowing that God's strength and healing will eventually come to

our emotions as well.

There is, however, another process described in Hebrews 3. Verses 7 through 11 quote Psalms 95:7-11, which speaks of the children of Israel “hardening their hearts” or “going astray in their hearts” when the trials came. The writer of Hebrews then clearly warns us in verse 12, “Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God.”

I think what happens here is that instead of our minds and emotions being fed and nourished by our spirits, the flow gets turned around. We decide to let our thoughts and feelings take the lead, and in that they are never strong enough to withstand the testings and temptings of life, our hearts become hard and rebellious. Therefore we are instructed to “exhort one another daily...lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin” (verse 13).

The children of Israel who had rebelled in this manner all died in the wilderness and did not enter the promised land. It is not as clear that all who rebel today are equally without hope. But to the extent that rebellion still resides in us, we should be very, very concerned. Verse 14 says, “For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end.” It seems that if our confidence is *not* steadfast, we may not be truly “partakers” of Christ.

The Greek word for “partake” is a combination of *having* and *being with*. It means a very close sharing of nature and purpose. We speak of partaking of the bread and cup in communion. The bread and wine literally become part of our physical selves. This is a picture of how Christ’s nature becomes an actual part of our spiritual natures.

What is His nature? It is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22,23). We who partake of His nature will by definition have these qualities as part of our natures. If we don’t, He isn’t part of us and we aren’t part of Him.

I believe these scriptures are challenging us to test our confidence and joy. First, we must decide if these are truly there, deep within us. This requires a quieting of all the noises and distractions until we can “hear” the voice in our spirit. If we don’t find God’s nature in ours, we must humble ourselves, confess our sins, and plead for His grace until the assurance of His acceptance comes. That’s how salvation actually takes place.

But even after we are able to “know in our knowers” that God is alive in us, we must continually and willfully keep the flow going from our spirits to our mind and to our emotions...and not allow the stream to be reversed. Those of us who are truly born again will **want** to do this. That is our eternal security. If the “want” is not there, neither is the life.

“Therefore with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.” Isaiah 12:3

Increase Our Faith - Luke 17:5-10

And the apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith."

So the Lord said, "If you have faith as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be pulled up by the roots and be planted in the sea,' and it would obey you. And which of you, having a servant plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come at once and sit down to eat'? But will he not rather say to him, 'Prepare something for my supper, and gird yourself and serve me till I have eaten and drunk, and afterward you will eat and drink'? Does he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I think not. So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.'"

We should notice that the disciples did not ask Christ the question we might have asked. They did not say "What is faith?" As with their earlier request in Luke 11, "Teach us to pray," they were not simply curious philosophically. They were practical men, and they sincerely wished to be brought to the place where they could live and walk as their Master did.

It is clear that Jesus was also not interested in being abstract or academic. His response is very direct. Faith, He essentially tells them, is a matter of great authority and great humility. If they had even the tiniest measure of faith, they could speak to that tree they were standing by, and it would be pulled up and planted in the sea. Not thrown in the sea. Planted.

The longer part of His answer involves a servant who has labored hard in the fields or pastures. This man, upon arriving at the house, does not feed himself. Rather, he prepares a meal and serves it to his master, waiting patiently until the master has finished eating. After this the servant is able to take care of his own needs. But not only does the master not thank the servant for his service, the servant does not see any of this inequity of privilege as being wrong.

An interesting aspect of this story is that the listener transitions from being the master at the beginning to being the servant at the end. Jesus is not putting His disciples in either role. Rather, He is illustrating a principle, the principle of authority and submission. The reason this story falls so painfully on modern ears is because we have no real sense of the sacredness of duty, especially duty based on positional hierarchy.

But try as we might to revise things a little, this story is consistent with Christ's definition of faith throughout the gospels. There is the story (in Luke 7:9) of the centurion who desired healing for his servant. He told Jesus he was not worthy for Him to come into his house. Because he himself lived in a hierarchy of military command, he understood the authority Jesus had simply in the words He spoke. Jesus was amazed, and told the people around Him, "I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!"

A similar request for healing is found in Matthew 15:22-28.

And behold, a woman of Canaan came from that region and cried out to Him, saying, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David! My daughter is severely demon-possessed." But He answered her not a word.

And His disciples came and urged Him, saying, "Send her away, for she cries out after us." But He answered and said, "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

Then she came and worshiped Him, saying, "Lord, help me!" But He answered and said, "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs." And she said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their masters' table."

Then Jesus answered and said to her, "O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire." And her daughter was healed from that very hour.

Like the servant in the first story and the centurion in the second, this woman was not resentful that she was in a subordinate class. Her expression of humility was neither fake nor manipulative. Rather, she peacefully accepted the higher status of others, and again the healing power of God was released as a result of her "great faith."

In the 18th chapter of Luke, Jesus was teaching on the coming day when the Son of Man would again be revealed. At the end of His discussion, almost as a private musing, He asks, "Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?"

There is no question that faith has been on earth in the past. Many people, both famed and unnamed, occupy the honored "Hall of Faith" in Hebrews 11. Here is how some of the famous are described (verses 32-35).

For the time would fail me to tell of Gideon and Barak and Samson and Jephthah, also of David and Samuel and the prophets: who through faith subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, became valiant in battle, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. Women received their dead raised to life again.

Yet the stories of the unknowns are also listed.

Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented—of whom the world was not worthy. (Hebrews 11:35-38)

Once again we see the two key components of faith in these Old Testament saints--the courage to stand strong in God's miraculous authority and an unwavering willingness to accept humiliation and abuse. The apostles also operated in this same faith during the days of the early church.

But the question remains, will Christ find these when He returns? Are we also ready to pray, “Lord, increase our faith”? Or has not our culture, and even the church, raised some very different standards in our day? Do we not pursue the equalization of privilege between all people as one of our highest aims, thereby forfeiting even the concept of positional authority? Do we not encourage self-actualization and self-esteem as premiere virtues? Do we not teach our children to aspire to personal greatness? “You can be anything you set your mind to!”

Or will we recall the quiet voices of Mary, “Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38), and of John the Baptist, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30).

If we truly desire to possess the faith of Christ, I believe we need to become as the servant in the story, gladly serving without expectation of appreciation or reward, knowing too that our Master has the full power to move trees--and even mountains--and that as His representatives we can draw on that power to accomplish His will in our world.

It Shall Be Unclean - Haggai 2:10-14

On the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, in the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet, saying, "Thus says the Lord of hosts: 'Now, ask the priests concerning the law, saying, "If one carries holy meat in the fold of his garment, and with the edge he touches bread or stew, wine or oil, or any food, will it become holy?"'"

Then the priests answered and said, "No."

And Haggai said, "If one who is unclean because of a dead body touches any of these, will it be unclean?"

So the priests answered and said, "It shall be unclean."

Then Haggai answered and said, "'So is this people, and so is this nation before Me,' says the Lord, 'and so is every work of their hands; and what they offer there is unclean.'"

While many of the detailed requirements of Old Testament ritual were fulfilled in the sacrifice of Christ, these laws nonetheless contained eternal principles that remain entirely intact. Buried in the little book of Haggai is one such principle which our modern world would do well to assimilate.

Haggai had been tasked by God to refocus the hearts of the exiles who had returned from Babylon and were supposed to be rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem. Because they had gotten distracted by the preoccupations of their own lives, God had lifted His blessings from them. He then warned the people, through Haggai, to "Consider your ways."

*You have sown much, and bring in little;
You eat, but do not have enough;
You drink, but you are not filled with drink;
You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm;
And he who earns wages,
Earns wages to put into a bag with holes. (1:6)*

It's clear that the people were not being lazy. Nor is there any mention of moral wrongdoing. The only accusation God made against them is that they had built themselves "paneled houses" before they built a house for Him. In other words, His priorities had become secondary to theirs.

In case they might see their financial struggles as random bad luck, or perhaps an attack of the devil, God spelled out the truth quite bluntly in verses 9-11.

"You looked for much, but indeed it came to little; and when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why?" says the Lord of hosts. "Because of My house that is in ruins, while every one of you runs to his own house. Therefore the heavens above you withhold the dew, and the earth withholds its fruit. For I called for a drought on the land and the mountains, on the grain and the new wine and the oil, on whatever the ground brings forth, on men and livestock, and on all the labor of

your hands.”

The people took Haggai’s words to heart, and it is said they “feared the presence of the Lord.” God immediately responded by stirring up their spirits to work on rebuilding His house. He also encouraged them to be strong, for He was with them. “According to the word that I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt, so My Spirit remains among you: do not fear!” (2:5)

How quickly God returns to us when we return to Him. He has no pleasure in our poverty or distress. He even “stirs up our spirits,” giving us the needed strength to do what He has commanded, and comes alongside as we walk in His ways.

However, God had one more important point to impress upon the people through the words of Haggai. He gave the priests a little quiz taken from their law books. The first question: If holy meat touches something else, like bread or stew or wine or oil, will any of these become holy as well? The priests answered rightly, “No.”

Question two: If someone who has become ritually unclean because he touched someone who died then touches any of the same bread or stew or wine or oil, will it become unclean? The priests answered, “It shall be unclean.”

The bad always corrupts the good. The good can never purify the bad. How often we reverse these principles in our day. A few wrong words, some immoral situations...but the acting was so good! The show was so funny, or so mentally engaging, or had such amazing special effects.

I believe God is saying to His people in our day that humor and brilliance and talent do not sanitize the things we take into our spirits. A little arsenic poisons an entire candy bar. A teaspoon of manure ruins even the best batch of brownies.

The exiles in Jerusalem had repented of their wrong priorities. They had returned to the assignment God had given them. But God still knew they would be most vulnerable not to the large-scale assaults of their enemies, but to the little--seemingly innocent--compromises. The only way they would avoid these snares, God told them, was never to forget the “blight and mildew and hail” with which He had previously struck them. In the same way God chastens us today, so we might realize the absolute standard of obedience to which we are also called.

Lest We Drift Away – Hebrews 2:1

Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away.

It is impossible to park on a river, unless I suppose it is frozen or dried up. But in the normal flow of life, life will take you with it. Which, if life were holy and good, would be a good thing. Unfortunately, life in our world is rarely good.

And so we must diligently, tirelessly row our boats upstream. How do we do this? Hebrews 2:1 says we must “give earnest heed to the things we have heard.” If we translate the rather old-fashioned phrase “earnest heed” into something more modern, we might say we should give the things of God our *eager attention*.

Eager is different than dutiful or fearful. Eager means it’s something we want very, very much to do. The only way we can become eager to pay attention to God is through a daily process of discovering how wonderful He is. Otherwise, there are many other things and places and people and ideas that can easily seem more wonderful.

D.A. Carson has summed up this process very wisely.

People do not drift toward holiness. Apart from grace-driven effort, people do not gravitate toward godliness, prayer, obedience to scripture, faith and delight in the Lord. We drift toward compromise and call it tolerance; we drift toward disobedience and call it freedom; we drift toward superstition and call it faith. We cherish the indiscipline of lost self-control and call it relaxation; we slouch toward prayerlessness and delude ourselves into thinking we have escaped legalism; we slide toward godlessness and convince ourselves we have been liberated.

If we truly desire to discover the wonderfulness of God, in a way that is powerful enough to fight the strongest currents, I would suggest spending some time reading the book of Hebrews. You see, if the key is in the “things we have heard,” well then, we need to hear those things very often and very clearly.

So, let’s start with chapter one, verses one through four.

God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become so much better than the angels, as He has by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they.

When I read this a few days ago (and when I’ve reread it every day since), I am overwhelmed by the idea that God upholds ALL things. In a world where so many things seem to be falling through the cracks, or just plain falling apart, it is immensely reassuring to know that if we back far enough away, we can “see” (with the eyes of faith) that God has it all well in hand. In *His*

hands. Every terrifying event, every evil deed, every arrogant ruler, every desperate circumstance—all of these are still being upheld by the hand of God, by the simple word of His power.

And in this knowledge, we will find peace. It is a very different sort of peace than the “peace” of ignorance or indifference. Those will take our boats downstream faster than we can imagine. Nor should we settle for the “rest” that comes from indulging in pleasant distractions. If we seek comfort by amusing ourselves, we will miss God.

True godly peace requires every bit of our spirits straining to resist our flesh and the temptations that surround it. What Dr. Carson calls “grace-driven effort” is the steady hand that grasps the oar of God’s truths, even when we can’t quite see where we’re headed.

But as we pull against the tides of temptation, we will discover that it becomes easier and easier. Why so? Because in fact we are created to do His will. Our beings are actually designed to agree with God. Even though our fallen nature is still with us, we can by God’s grace choose in our spirit to line up with His will.

And as we make this choice to agree with Him on a regular, moment-by-moment basis, we will not only grow strong and confident and joyful, but we will also become truly eager to keep our full attention on Him.

Let Him Take Heed – I Corinthians 10:12

Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.

We have a propensity, if we are honest, to read scripture mainly for someone else. But in this sobering passage in I Corinthians, Paul is addressing *me*, because I am someone who truly thinks that she “stands.”

There’s nothing wrong, of course, in believing that I stand, that is, that I am in right standing with God. The danger, according to Paul, is that we who think we stand still can fall if we stop paying close attention to some very specific threats.

Here is his list of threats:

1. We must not lust after evil things (verse 6).
2. We must not become an idolater (verse 7).
3. We must not commit sexual immorality (verse 8).
4. We must not tempt Christ (verse 9).
5. We must not complain (verse 10).

Paul is basing this discussion on the example of “our fathers,” the children of Israel who were led by God through the desert. He begins by noting that this group of people were all in ‘right standing.’ “All our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ.”

“But,” Paul reminds us, “with most of them God was not well pleased, for their bodies were scattered in the wilderness.” He then tells us they are to be specifically seen as examples for our instruction, so that we might not fall as they did. Therefore I must ask myself continually some important questions.

Am I lusting after something that is evil? In other words, do I desire something other than God Himself or things that are consistent with His nature? In Numbers 11:4 it says that the Israelites “yielded to intense craving” for the food they had known in Egypt. In their hearts they thereby turned from willingly following God, and they lusted for those things He had taken them away from and out of.

Am I an idolater? Paul quotes Exodus 32:6, “The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play.” This is a reference to the Israelites’ response to the golden calf idol Aaron had built. After doing their “duty” to this idol, by rising early and offering sacrifices, they lapsed into riotous self-indulgence. When anything other than God is our god, we will at some point allow ourselves to compromise our devotion.

Am I sexually immoral? In Numbers 25, the Israelites had joined into the immoral lifestyle of some foreign nations. An Israelite man even brought a Midianite woman to the tabernacle and

was having sex with her in front of everyone. God responded by sending a plague that killed 23,000 people. What stopped the plague was a brave priest, who stabbed them both through with a spear. God not only wants us to be sexually pure ourselves, but we must also defend sexual purity as an ideal. When we tolerate what God does not, we too are sharing in that immorality.

Do I tempt (test) Christ? The sin here (in Numbers 21:4-9) is impatience and disrespect. God had not provided the Israelites with as much water or with the variety of food they had once enjoyed. In the assumption that God owed them what they desired, they challenged His goodness. He responded again by a severe punishment, but this time it wasn't a plague. Instead, the people were given the opportunity to look at a bronze serpent that represented God, or they would die from the bites of the poison serpents He had sent. We test God when we forget His sovereignty and our total helplessness without Him.

Do I complain? While the Israelites complained against God more than once, probably Paul is thinking of the day when they stood on the edge of the promised land at the end of their journey. But this time their gripe wasn't about the food. This time they mourned their entire exodus from Egypt. "If only we had died in the land of Egypt! Or if only we had died in this wilderness!" (Numbers 14:2). Finally, God had had enough. "How long shall I bear with this evil congregation who complain against Me?" He told the people, "As I live...just as you have spoken in My hearing, so I will do to you" (Numbers 14:27,28).

We might see God's decision to allow all but a handful of faithful followers to die in the desert as being the consequence of sin only in the Old Testament. We who have access to the salvation of Jesus are not in the same place. But if it were that simple, why is Paul treating it so seriously? Why does he warn us, in this detailed fashion, to "take heed"?

Far from giving us a pass because of Christ's substitution, Paul says that these ancient experiences were deliberately intended to be an "admonition" (instruction) for those "upon whom the ends of the ages have come" (I Corinthians 10:11). That's us. The difference (in verse 13) is that, unlike the Israelites, we have been given a "way of escape" so we might bear up under the temptations to lust and complain (and so forth) *without sinning* (verse 13).

Nevertheless, the choice is ours. We must not only "take heed," which means to pay VERY close attention to our lifestyles and habits, but also, Paul reminds us in conclusion, we must actually *flee* from idolatry (verse 14). This is the primary sin, reflected in the first of the ten commandments, and it is the one thing that requires the most energy and devotion. You see, our enemy will let us rise above a lot of other lesser sins, if it means he is able to keep our attention and priorities centered on anything else but God.

Partakers of the Divine Nature - 2 Peter 1:2-4

Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord, as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.

In our world of seemingly endless options, we sometimes overlook the reality that scripture only gives us two. Either we are “partakers of the divine nature,” or we are in bondage to the “corruption that is in the world through lust.”

The first option is ours by choice. We “partake” of God’s nature as one might choose to partake of good food. The Greek word is actually *koinonos*, which some of you will recognize as being related to *koinonia*, or shared companionship. We gain this nature of God by deliberately associating (communing) with Him. He is always willing, but we must also consciously determine to be part of this supernatural community. It is never forced upon us. Notice how Peter phrases it: “that...you *may be* partakers.”

Option two is very, very different. It is something that must be escaped. It holds us captive against our will. It is described as corruption, as something that is in the world, and as something that is produced by lust. The word translated “corruption” is a powerful word. It refers to things which destroy and which will themselves be destroyed. This is our destiny apart from the mercy of God.

The word I want to focus on, however, is the word “lust,” or *epithumeo*. It literally means directing our passions toward a desired object. While we normally associate this with sexual desire, it actually can apply to anything we deeply long for. In most of the scriptures that use *epithumeo* it is translated “lust” or occasionally “desire.” However, in the King James Version you will sometimes find instead the old-fashioned word “concupiscence.”

Picture if you will a long line, a continuum. At one end of the line is concupiscence. At the other end of the line is *agape*, which is the word that best describes God’s nature. Each of us lives somewhere on that line, and we are affected by both forces. Even before we are saved we see the mercies of God, in the natural world and in the people around us. There is even an echo of God’s nature within us, which enables at least some of us to be kind and good.

But no matter where we are on that line, until the point of our salvation we are moving toward the concupiscence end. Only by God’s redeeming grace can we be turned around and headed toward *agape*. The agenda of our life then becomes this steady movement toward heaven. It happens through the moment-by-moment decisions to keep our eyes and minds (and even our bodies) turned in the right direction.

This is what Peter is discussing in his second epistle. He says we who are believers have everything we need to keep ourselves aligned with God’s nature—specifically the power, the knowledge, and the “exceedingly great and precious promises.” God also continually “calls” us,

not through loud demands, but through the beauty of His glory and virtue. Peter goes on (in verses 5 and 6) to identify the steps we must take to make this calling a reality in our lives: faith, virtue, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love.

Because it is a process that obviously requires great commitment, it would be helpful to understand more about this line we're on. I'm going to borrow two natural images to describe our options. For the concupiscence end, I picture a black hole. This is a strange component of our universe that sucks everything into itself, even light. It is always consuming and is never satisfied.

There is a description in Habakkuk 2:5 of a man who lives in concupiscence. "Indeed, because he transgresses by wine, he is a proud man, and he does not stay at home. Because he enlarges his desire as hell, and he is like death, and cannot be satisfied, he gathers to himself all nations and heaps up for himself all peoples." This man craves wine, women other than his wife, and endless power...but despite all that he "gathers to himself," his hungers are never abated.

The *agape* end of the line can be represented by the sun. Out of its own resources it endlessly pours light and warmth into the universe around it. From this light and warmth there springs up new life which is blessed and sustained by the energies it receives, and which in turn passes good things on to others.

There are many wonderful descriptions of the *agape* life in the New Testament. I've chosen this one (Romans 12:9-13) because it has so many practical aspects. "Let love (*agape*) be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good. Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another; not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer; distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality."

I doubt there is anything that can be more strongly contrasted than concupiscence and *agape*. But here is the crux of the matter: we can be facing in only one direction on our line. We are either receiving the warmth of God's love, or we are being drawn into the blackness of death. If, after our rebirth (which effectively turned us heavenward for the first time), hell no longer holds power over us, then why would Peter and the other writers of scripture be so concerned that we "give all diligence" to becoming like God?

I think the key comes down to our *epithumeo* (desires). You see, while most of the time this word is used in a negative context, there are several scriptures that speak of desires which are godly. For instance, Jesus tells His disciples (in Matthew 13:17) that "...many prophets and righteous men desired (*epithumeo*) to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it." In Philippians 1:22 Paul writes that he has a strong *epithumeo* to "depart [from this life] and be with Christ."

Some religions have proposed that the path to holiness is found through renouncing all desire. Christianity instead promotes increased desire--but only for God Himself. The more we look toward Jesus, and the more we come to *know Him* deep in our innermost beings, the more our desire for Him will replace every other *epithumeo* we might have. As Peter expressed it, "Grace

and peace be multiplied to you in *the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord*, as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through *the knowledge of Him* who called us.”

Concupiscence tempts us to be self-seeking and self-exalting, and then demolishes the self in its all-consuming corruption. *Agape* requires absolute selflessness, but even as we are dying to ourselves we are mysteriously raised to join into the *koinonia* of Christ, a fellowship that frees us to become more significantly individual than anything that can be found “in the world.”

Perfect and Complete - James 1

My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing. (James 1:2-4)

James, like many other Bible writers, does not speak of self-improvement. That's a human-level perspective on God's agenda. Rather, he uses these enormous, impossible words "perfect and complete, lacking nothing." All of us have a sense that we ought to be getting a little more holy over time. But very few of us dare to measure our lives on a daily basis against God's divine standard of perfection.

If we look closely at this first chapter, however, we will discover that James is asking us to do things we actually *can* do. He understands that as we do these things, God Himself will supernaturally work His perfection into us.

He opens his discussion with the phrase, "Count it all joy." He's not saying we should naturally be happy when we find ourselves in times of trials. The joy he speaks of is not a response. The word "count" is a matter of the will, not the emotions. We are to choose to see our trials as good and acceptable *because* of their power to bring us to God's perfection. Our emotions may tremble or grieve, but our spirit can find peace in the knowledge that God is working something of great value in these very difficulties.

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. (5-8)

Next on our to-do list is asking. Among the challenges of the Christian walk is that there is much we don't understand, and there are many decisions which are hard to make. God tells us that when we ask Him for the wisdom we lack, He will give it to us "liberally and without reproach." The catch is, we must be very serious about accepting this wisdom and adjusting our lives accordingly. God isn't going to give us something to simply ponder, another viewpoint we can weigh against other competing views to see which we prefer.

Let the lowly brother glory in his exaltation, but the rich in his humiliation, because as a flower of the field he will pass away. For no sooner has the sun risen with a burning heat than it withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beautiful appearance perishes. So the rich man also will fade away in his pursuits. (9-11)

Here is one of the things God apparently wants us to be wise about: our attitude toward wealth. Being poor, James tells us, is a position of honor, whereas riches can be a snare, leading us to put our energies into things that will quickly disappear. Notice again that our assignment is to "glory" in our lowliness. Like "counting it all joy," this glorying is a matter of the will. We must deliberately choose to evaluate poverty and wealth--and every other aspect of life--in the same way God does.

This reinforces the truth that God's wisdom is often backwards from the world's wisdom, and therefore is not something that can be successfully merged with it. I should also point out that James is *not* saying we should pursue either poverty or wealth. Rather, if we are poor it is something to rejoice about. If we are rich, we should have a sober and humble awareness of the unreliability and transience of our wealth.

Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him. Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death. (12-15)

Next on our list is endurance. The key to endurance, according to James, is our understanding of temptation. Temptations are different from trials, in that trials are about suffering whereas temptations are about sin. When we give in to something that tempts us, it is like testing positive for a disease. There's something wrong inside. Our inclination is to blame the tempter (Eve tried that, remember?). But God says we are drawn by our own desires.

We can only endure (that is, make it through a temptation without falling for it) when our desire for God becomes stronger than our desire for the thing which would entice us. In other words, we must become so aware of the beauty and desirability of God that our love for Him changes us on the inside. And that, my friend, is again a matter of choice. We must choose to think about God, and to keep our eyes and minds away from those attractions that do not fully honor Him.

Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning. Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures. (16-18)

Here the instruction is to "not be deceived." This one is a little tricky because deceptions are, well, deceiving. So James spells out the lie. He says that no one else but God is responsible for the things that are good in our lives. No one else can take credit for truth, or for human achievements, or for the blessings we enjoy. The government doesn't give us our security, colleges don't give us our wisdom, technology doesn't give us the solutions to our problems, and (most of all) we ourselves don't earn or deserve the successes we experience. If something is good, it has come from God and God alone.

So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God. Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. (19-21)

Although this seems like just another series of to-do's, James is actually beginning here to describe the picture of God's part in our perfection. Because the testings of our faith have taught

us patience, because our understanding has been made clear by God's wisdom, because we now are able to evaluate our lives from His perspective, because we have learned to endure temptations and to reject lies, "So then...." So then, we are able to be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to become angry. So then, we will lay aside filthiness and wickedness. So then, we will receive with meekness the redemptive words of God.

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does. (22-25)

Do not misunderstand. We still must make continual and deliberate choices to live out the perfection God has worked into us. But that perfection is now truly ours. We know the truth of God's priorities. Our faith through patience and endurance has built into us a supernatural strength. We have discovered God's love and we respond by loving Him.

How can we test our perfection? That's simple, says James.

If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion is useless. Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world. (26-27)

If God has made us complete, it will be made evident by what we say and do. Let me emphasize this. *Our words and actions are the result, not the source, of our perfection.* Good talk and generous deeds and clean living mean nothing unless they are the outflow of God's own nature in us. If they come from anywhere else, they are not part of the righteousness of God and have no eternal value.

So in review, we must begin by gratefully acknowledging that our sufferings are God's chosen means to teach us patience. We should prayerfully seek His wisdom, that we might understand and follow in His ways. As our knowledge of His perspective on things (such as wealth) increases, our attitudes and choices should reflect these same values. And finally, when temptations come, we must resist them with great endurance, knowing that if we do, we will "receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him."

Siftings - Luke 22:31-32

And the Lord said, "Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren."

In this remarkable statement, Jesus gives us a behind-the-scenes view of how His kingdom operates. At the time Peter did not, and could not, understand what He was saying. But we who now know the whole story have much less excuse for our wrong theologies when it comes to the matter of temptation and testing.

I have found eight insights in these few lines that have given me great assurance whenever I encounter difficulties in my life.

1. Jesus tells us that trials *will* come. In His final hours with His disciples before His crucifixion, it was a subject He mentioned often. At the Passover supper He told them, "In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). In the garden of Gethsemane, He asked them to pray, not for Him, but for themselves: "Pray that you may not enter into temptation" (Luke 22:40, 46).
2. Satan can do nothing without God's permission. As in the more extensive story of Job (see Job 1 and 2), Jesus reveals here that Satan acts only in full submission to God.
3. God permits our trials.
4. Our trials are designed to be siftings, that is, violent shakings to determine what we are made of. Will we be grains of wheat, which do not fall to the ground, or are we chaff and debris?
5. During the sifting, Jesus does not abandon those who are His. Rather, He prays for our faith to remain strong.
6. Jesus' prayers are always answered. This is an important thing to understand. As we know, Peter's faith seemed to fail. In his hour of temptation, he was confronted not by a sword-wielding soldier, but by an inquisitive servant girl. Fear overtook him, and three times he denied the Master to whom he had hours earlier pledged undying allegiance. Jesus, knowing full well this would happen, set up the rooster signal specifically because He wanted Peter to grasp His sovereignty in the situation.
7. Jesus knew Peter would return to Him. He did not say "if," but "when." He understood that the more significant event was not Peter's personal failure but his resulting comprehension of faith. Faith is the outworking of God's nature within us. When Peter came face to face with his own helplessness, and wept in bitter repentance, he was far more victorious against the kingdom of Satan than he would have been if he had never denied Christ.

8. The testings of our faith give us something to give others. Peter was able to look Jesus in the eye, both in the hour of his temptation and later on the seashore when Jesus recommissioned him as a trusted disciple (in John 21:15-19). But most of the people to whom Peter would later minister (including ourselves, who read his wonderful letters) do not have that eye contact with our Lord. The power of Peter's testimony is not only his unwavering devotion to Jesus, but also his deep appreciation of the value of suffering (see I Peter 4:12-14).

You see, we mature spiritually only as we discover both our weakness and His strength. If you are able to learn the life-story of anyone who now walks in deep fellowship with God, it will invariably contain times of intense suffering and personal failure. Why then should we ever view our own trials as anything less than God's precious gifts, carefully designed to bring us to Him, to conform us to His nature, and to provide us with the means to strengthen others?

That He May Be Glorified - Isaiah 61:3

The Lord has anointed Me...to give them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they may be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that He may be glorified.

One of the most devious, and most damaging, of our enemy's strategies is the concept that we have innate rights. By that I mean we have been led to believe we are owed something by virtue of our very existence. It is true that we can have humanly-bestowed rights. For example, under the laws of our nation we receive certain protections and certain privileges in exchange for our loyal and compliant citizenship. But these are not innate, and they can be removed from us.

What we have instead, as beings created by God, is a vast array of gifts, beginning with the gift of life. We have also been given such gifts as creativity, the ability to feel joy, assignments that give us a sense of worth, and the wonderful opportunity to experience relationships with other created beings. God has privileged us to live on this beautiful planet, with all the resources it offers for our productivity and pleasure.

The subtle shift in thought—from seeing these things as gifts to seeing them as somehow due to us—can become the source of immense discontent. Because another person has received more of something, there arises a feeling of inequity that robs me of the ability to be grateful for that which I do have.

But even more, I believe it has caused the Christian community to build certain aspects of its battle plan on a wrong foundation. We have joined the secular world in seeking to defend and preserve “human rights,” including the “right to life.” While this sounds good, and carries weight in many arenas, it misses the far more solid foundation that God Himself established.

The message of Isaiah's wonderful announcement in chapter 61 is that God has stepped into the misery of human existence with the promise of a Savior who will liberate the captives and heal the brokenhearted. He will bring comfort and consolation to those who mourn. He will bring good tidings to the poor.

Then, in verse three, we find an amazing exchange that God offers His people. He is willing to take our ashes in trade for His beauty. He will take our mourning and give us His joy. He will take our “spirit of heaviness,” and will reclothe us in His garment of praise.

This, I think, paints a more accurate picture of God's design for human redemption. We are born into the world with a deep desire for God, but because of our sin we inevitably reach toward other impotent sources to supply our needs and longings. These substitute gods cannot satisfy us, and eventually our lives are reduced to heaviness, mourning, and ashes.

Then at some point we hear the proclamation of grace, and by that grace we become able to admit our desperation and to accept His salvation. The divine exchange takes place, and we begin to walk in the life He has purchased for us at the cost of His own blood. This greatest of all gifts requires from us the deepest of all gratitudes. We deserve nothing, but out of the bounty of

His goodness He gives us His beauty and His joy.

It is when this process becomes real in our minds and hearts that we begin to realize the true value of life in others. Each unborn child, each beggar on the streets, each broken old person-- every being who bears the imprint of the divine image--all are potential recipients of God's amazing grace. His sacrifice purchased sufficient life for the entirety of creation. The issue is not their right to life. The issue is His right to His creation.

For you see, when the exchange is made and we enter into His redemption, Isaiah tells us that we become "trees of righteousness" which the Lord Himself has planted. We are not "rocks of righteousness," permanently shaped from the start. Rather, we are living, growing beings who grow to display His nature, and eventually to bear His fruit, for the explicit purpose of bringing Him glory.

And a significant part of that glory is our own joyful worship. We tend to see worship as something we give to God, but in fact it is entirely the outflow of His overwhelming generosity toward us. He causes it. He deserves it. He is glorified by it.

*I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,
My soul shall be joyful in my God;
For He has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
He has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
As a bridegroom decks himself with ornaments,
And as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
For as the earth brings forth its bud,
As the garden causes the things that are sown in it to spring forth,
So the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring forth before all the
nations. (Isaiah 61:10,11)*

The Pursuit of Happiness – Titus 2

Most of us who follow Christ believe (or at least, we *believe* we believe) that riches do not bring happiness. Many of us also have figured out that fame can be a truly difficult blessing. But the one place where we often assume the end of the happiness rainbow can be found is in our relationships.

The problem with this is not that there are not great joys to be experienced in healthy relationships. The issue is that when we are *unhappy*, we have an almost universal impulse to put pressure on those around us to remedy our discontent. In other words, we pursue our happiness by subconsciously demanding it from others.

But as I read the Bible, I do not find support for this plan. To be sure, there is much written about how we are to treat others with godly love and kindness. Yet surprisingly, even this is not to be done primarily with their happiness in mind. How much less are we encouraged to expect them to be responsible for our emotional well-being.

Titus 2 is a little chapter that is packed with relationship instructions. Older men are to be “sound in faith, in love, in patience.” Older women are not to slander and are to teach “good things” to the younger women, including how to love their husbands and children. Young men are to be a pattern of godliness so others can find nothing bad to say about them. Servants are told to please their masters in all things.

But if we look closely, all of these qualities are to be pursued for one very specific purpose: the glory of God. In verse one they are called “the things which are proper for sound doctrine.” In other words, the holiness of our lives is intended to bring credibility to the truth of God’s principles.

Therefore, young women are to be “discreet, chaste, homemakers, good, obedient to their husbands.” Why? “*That the word of God may not be blasphemed.*” Bondservants are to be “obedient to their own masters, to be well pleasing in all things, not answering back.” Why? “*That they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in all things.*”

I have learned that the best motivation for me to authentically and permanently change my behaviors is my desire to please God. While I realize that His acceptance of me is based on His own love, not on what I do, nonetheless I have no greater joy than to know my words and actions are pleasing to Him.

But if you think about it, this recipe for honoring God is what also makes our human relationships healthy and fulfilling. A husband who is “sober, reverent, temperate, sound in faith, in love, in patience” for God’s glory is going to be a joy to his wife as well. A servant who is honest, loyal and respectful because God is pleased by this will certainly be a pleasure to his master too.

The world around us, and sometimes even the church itself, can so often become obsessed with finding formulas for a happy marriage, well-adjusted children, and prosperous business

relationships. We sometimes even ask God to help us with these goals.

But suppose we were to make a healthy relationship with God Himself our primary goal? Suppose our minds were so focused on seeing His kingdom come, His will being done, in *our* lives for *His* sake, that everything else became secondary?

It is my belief that as we deliberately turn our hearts and thoughts toward Jesus, the things of earth will begin to take their proper place in our lives. That's because He always directs us back to the needs of those around us. "If you love Me, feed My sheep," He told Peter (John 21:17). But we will love them best if we minister to them for Him--not because of their loud, hungry bleatings.

For you see, they are in fact *His* sheep, just as we ourselves are. He is providing for their happiness, and He will provide for ours. And so truly, when we seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, all good things will also be added to us (Matthew 6:33).

We Have Waited – Isaiah 25:9

And it will be said in that day: “Behold, this is our God; we have waited for Him, and He will save us. This is the Lord, we have waited for Him; we will be glad and rejoice in His salvation.”

Every now and then in Isaiah’s flow of fearful prophecy, he peels back the corner of the present and gives us a glimpse of the reality that will become fully visible “in that day.” Chapter 25 begins with praise to the Lord God for what He *has done*. The prophet is looking back from the end times, rather than forward toward them.

The passage contrasts two groups of people. There are the strong and terrible nations, and there are those who are poor and needy (see verses 3-4). In that day, it says, “the strong people will glorify You, and the city of the terrible nations will fear You.” But the reason they will then honor and respect God is specifically because He will have turned their fortified city into a ruin, never to be rebuilt.

On the other hand, the poor and needy will have found God to be their strength in times of distress, and a refuge from the storms. Note that (prior to the end of time) God does not remove the distresses or the storms. Instead, He provides a place of safety (Himself) in the middle of these difficulties. He is also described as “a shade from the heat,” and a wall against which the “terrible ones” could only storm and blast.

If we truly know God, we should expect to find ourselves among the poor and needy. Jesus spoke of those who were poor in spirit, mournful, meek, and spiritually hungry and thirsting (see Matthew 5:3-6). It was these, He told us, who would inherit the kingdom of heaven. What especially divides this group from those who do not inherit the kingdom? I would suggest it’s what Isaiah put his finger on: they were willing to *wait* for God.

We get another glimpse of the strong and terrible crowd in verse 11 of Isaiah 25. It says that God “will bring down their pride, together with the trickery of their hands.” Here we see these people as independent, self-directed, and grasping for what they desired—even if it involved dishonesty. God will trample them “as straw is trampled down for the refuse heap.” By contrast, those who trustingly waited for the Lord eventually come to the day when they are able to fully rejoice in His salvation. For them, God will prepare a great feast.

One other verse in this chapter personally intrigues me. Many years ago we were driving in Alabama along a remote but lovely stretch of Highway 65. Suddenly I had what I would call an inner vision. About a hundred yards above the surface of the ground, I “saw” a strange invisible membrane stretched out over us. I somehow knew that this shroud was preventing me from seeing something very real, just on the other side. It struck me then that we think we know so much, when there is so very much we have been given no awareness of.

It was much later that I came across verse 7 of this chapter. “And He will destroy on this mountain the surface of the covering cast over all people, and the veil that is spread over all nations.” Verse 8 goes on to say, “He will swallow up death forever, and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces; the rebuke of His people He will take away from all the earth; for the

Lord has spoken.”

If these things are true, and I believe they are, then we are foolish if we make our decisions and choices based on what we now see, instead of waiting, in hope and peace, for the God whose word WILL come to pass.