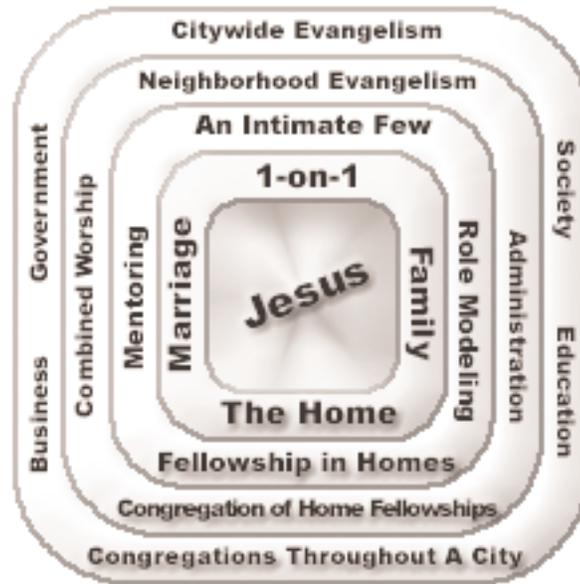


Chapter Eight

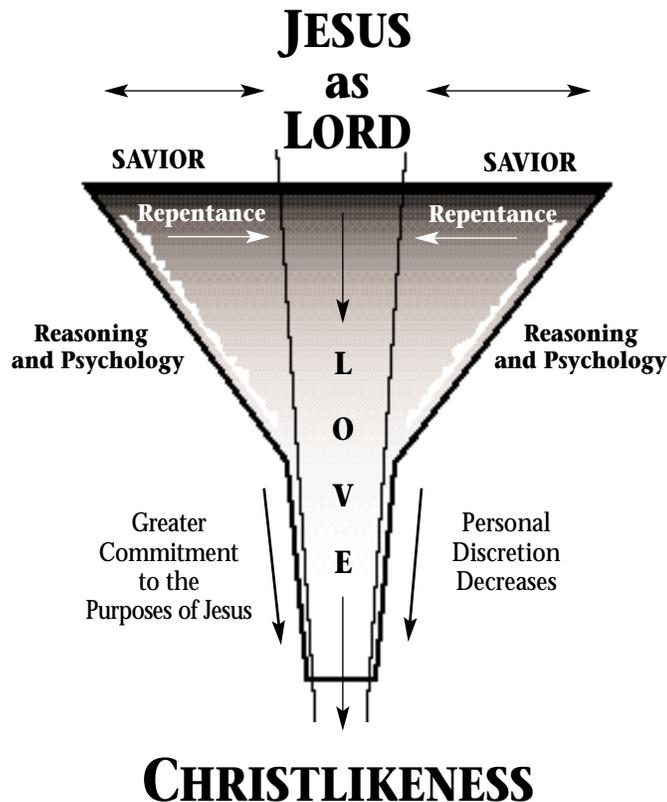
YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS



Early one Sunday morning, hours before Mike was to speak at a morning worship service, the Lord woke him up. There in his mind's eye was a vision of a funnel. As Mike stared at the funnel he could hear in his spirit an explanation of its meaning. Sketching the funnel on his computer, he then made an overhead transparency of it. When he finished his message that morning, he put the funnel transparency on the overhead projector and explained it to the congregation. To his surprise, people left their seats and came forward to repent of their sins, convicted of having believed a gospel that did not include the *Lordship* of Christ in their lives.

The following week Mike was asked to address a different congregation. The Holy Spirit prompted him, "Just tell them about the funnel." He again put the funnel transparency on the overhead projector. After he had finished explaining its meaning, people again left their seats and came forward to repent. When the funnel image was presented on retreats, the explanation elicited the same response: conviction and repentance.

This illustration represents the funnel:



□

“That if you acknowledge publicly with your mouth that Yeshua is Lord and trust in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be delivered” (Romans 10:9, JNT).¹

During the past few decades the Gospel has become “watered-down.” Many have come to Christ with the goal of “getting saved.” But salvation is the *by-product* of the biblical command to confess “*Jesus is Lord.*” The Lordship of Christ is your entry point into the funnel. Lordship implies a rejection or yielding of all that you are in your sin nature—all of your will, your rights, your possessions, your plans. You become His “disciple”. It is a conversion that demands that you weigh the cost. Note from Jesus’s words the extent of the relationship He calls for: “*If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his own cross and follow me cannot be my disciple*” (Luke 14:26,27). Discipleship entails total trust and obedience to the Master.

Like the pull of gravity, your humility to submit to the Lordship of Jesus draws you downward into the funnel as an invisible but constant force. The tug of His faithfulness does not let go of you. When you sin, His Spirit seeks you out and brings you to repentance through His kindness (see Romans 2:4). God pursues you to the point of your

yielding so that your broken heart and spirit can once again enjoy the fullness of His presence as Lord.

As you pass into the stem of the funnel, the love of Jesus is so compelling that you do not desire to think about yourself but *only to do His will*. Your personal discretion to choose what *you* want to do withers as you continue to yield yourself as a bondservant to His will. God's goal for you as His child is to be changed by His Spirit into Christlikeness in such a way that there truly is evidence of a "new creation."

Those who understood the funnel explanation recognized that the "being saved" gospel they had received had consigned them to the sides of the funnel to deal with all their imperfections. Through the influx of reasoning and psychology into the church during the past few decades, *sins* that require repentance are now considered "problems." No longer are believers held accountable to take personal responsibility for their own sins, which would bring them through repentance into the center of the funnel. Much of pastoral counseling now convinces people that they must *understand* their problems and find out *who is at fault* for their current condition.

Through the process of problem exploration, individuals may expand their awareness about their difficulties. At the same time, however, they develop an increasing unhappiness with God. Though they might not put it into words, in their hearts they neither trust Him to do what He promises in the Bible nor do they entrust themselves to Him as Lord of their lives. Thus many Christians live as if they have been "victimized" by both God and by others. They have not grasped a loving trust in a sovereign Lord.

The Hebrew Bible: Basis for the Gospel of Jesus

The early Gospel was more comprehensive than we in the church have understood. Many today have been told an incomplete or even counterfeit gospel.

The Bible stipulates *one true Gospel* as the way to eternal life. Jesus told his Jewish listeners, "*Whoever trusts in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him. By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified*" (John 7:38,39). The "streams of living water" refer to the evidential operation of the Holy Spirit in the life of one who puts his trust in Jesus. The only Scripture in existence when Jesus spoke these words was the Hebrew Bible. If you want to trust Jesus "as the Scripture has said," you *must* study the Hebrew Bible to discern the complete Gospel.

Our acceptance by God the Father through the sacrifice of Jesus was the central issue in the early Church. **The Gospel that is based on the Hebrew Bible and understood by the early Jewish church was not man accepting Jesus as his Savior, but God accepting the Lord Jesus as the only Savior.**

Christ fulfilled the reconciliation requirements of God. Jesus' payment was complete, and a new covenant was established through His blood. The resurrection of Jesus was the Father's sign that the sacrifice for our sins had been accepted by Him. God was, and forever will be, satisfied.

As noted earlier, before the coming of Jesus a number of rabbis taught that a person must experience a *spiritual birth*, a response to God's call on his life. Conversion equaled

rebirth. Being “*born from above*” was a shift from following the letter of the law to abiding in loving obedience with God.

Being born again was the point at which you put your **full trust and reliance** in the Lord. That’s why Jesus was so surprised when Nicodemus professed ignorance of this new birth: “*Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand this?*” (John 3:10).

The Hebrew word for “faith” means more than just belief; it is a **profound trust** in God. Trust is an emotional response from the heart, far more than mere mental assent that God is real. Reliance on the Lord penetrates the very core of your being.

We must always be on guard against a counterfeit gospel. Even the first century Galatians were warned to beware of a perverted gospel: “*Even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!*” (Galatians 1:8.) Any so-called ‘gospel’ of today that differs materially from the Gospel understood by the earliest followers of Jesus is a path to hell. Satan is shrewd. He doesn’t care *how* you don’t get to heaven, as long as you don’t get there! Some people wrongfully assume that God will excuse them at the judgment throne for not knowing the true Gospel. The Bible states otherwise.

The early Church understood salvation as a process based on repentance and loving trust in Jesus. And in the Hebrew Scriptures, God expressed His heart’s desire for a love relationship with His chosen people. The two agree. But many of the Israelite leaders perverted this love into a series of rules and obligations designed to earn salvation only if precisely followed.

God lays the same relational requirement in both the Old and New Testaments; that is, to **love Him**. If we try to keep God’s commands without loving Him, we’ll become proud and get caught up in what we do for Him. Paul tells us in I Corinthians 13 that “*without love, we are nothing.*” Living out God’s commands because of our love for Him keeps us humbly dependent on Him, and contrite when we fail.

The foundation of love is found in Deuteronomy 6:4,5: “*Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.*” The Hebrew word for love, *ahav* (ah-hahv’), means to be filled with desire and delight and passion for the one you love. You long to be in your loved one’s presence. The heart-cry of God throughout the Tanakh is a longing for a love relationship with His people. The ten commandments tell us that God promises to show His love to a thousand generations of those who love Him and keep His commandments.

Quoting from that same Deuteronomy passage, Jesus delivered the greatest commandment: “*Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.*’ *This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second [which is from Leviticus] is like it, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments*” (Matthew 22:37-40). The Greek word *agape* (ah-gah’-pay) is used for love here and its meaning is similar to the Hebrew *ahav*.

To summarize the priority of loving God: Everything in our Christian life—everything about knowing God and experiencing Him, everything about knowing and doing His will—depends on the quality of our love relationship with Jesus. If our love relationship with Jesus is not right, nothing in our life will be right.

Let's review three of the key elements of conversion in both Old Testament Israel and the Hebraic church—repentance, agape (*ahav*) love, and trust:

1. Salvation requires your Repentance

John the Baptist, Jesus, and Peter at Pentecost all affirmed repentance as the first step of salvation.

Biblical repentance always demands a turning from sin and a turning to God. Do you see these two distinctives? **Turning from** sin and **turning to** God.

That's the vital message in this verse: *"I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must **turn to God in repentance and have faith** in our Lord Jesus"* (Acts 20:21).

Repentance grieves you that you have grieved God; you hunger for the forgiveness, cleansing, and restoration that only He can give. That grief is the *"godly sorrow [that] brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret"* (2 Corinthians 7:10).

For years, Sue had prided herself on her moral lifestyle and sound reputation, but inside she felt more like a "whited sepulcher." Hidden from view were the pride, independence, and selfishness that influenced so many of her decisions. When God made these known to her as the detestable sins that they were, she anguished before him. Desire for independence from Him vanished as she yielded to His Lordship. Her change of heart was *relational*. It went a thousand miles beyond agreement with a set of teachings and rules.

2. Salvation requires your agape (*ahav*) Love

In the early church, there was an intensity of love for God in accepting the Gospel message that is often lacking today.

God desires a love relationship with His people. This love is wonderfully manifested by those who know the Gospel of the Hebrew Scriptures and understand the depth of their own depravity. For them it is easy to see God's grace in the atonement and to appreciate the sacrifice of Jesus on their behalf.

Trevor McIlwain of New Tribes Missions has gotten a phenomenal response by teaching natives the Bible in chronological order, from Genesis to Revelation. When they complete the Old Testament, they see the depth of their own sin. Then when they hear about Jesus, they are delighted to respond in love to His sacrifice on the cross.

3. Salvation is incomplete without your Trust

The unwavering trust that God requires of His children is the fabric woven throughout the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. Look at some of God's promises to those who trust Him to take care of things:

*"Many are the woes of the wicked, but the LORD's **unfailing love surrounds** the man who trusts in him"* (Psalm 32:10, emphasis added).

*“Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will **make your paths straight**” (Proverbs 3:5,6, emphasis added).*

*“So this is what the Sovereign LORD says: ‘The one who trusts will **never be dismayed**’” (Isaiah 28:16, emphasis added).*

Salvation for the Jews was based on a loving trust in God: *“Abraham **trusted God**, and it was credited to him as righteousness” (Genesis 15:6, emphasis added).*

Accepting the Gospel: Forceful Conviction Required

One of the more perplexing verses for some is Matthew 11:12: *“From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it.”*

In light of the military examples in the Hebrew Bible, picture this illustration of that verse: Around a military fortification such as the walls of Jerusalem, “killing zones” are established to concentrate weapon fire for maximum killing effectiveness. Those who attack the fort must first courageously battle their way through the killing zone. Because of the strong likelihood that they might be killed in the attack, these individuals have to “be dead” to everything beforehand in order to fully focus on their objective.

Such forceful determination was the standard for those who gave their lives to follow Jesus. This essence is captured in Matthew 13:44-46: *“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and **sold all he had** and bought that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and **sold everything he had** and bought it.”* It takes tremendous certainty to give up everything you’ve got in order to lay hold on what God is offering you.

Accepting the Gospel: Accepting the Covenant

The early Jewish followers of Jesus clearly understood the significance of covenants. Today we understand dimly at best.

God had established covenants with His people through Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David. Jeremiah had prophesied that the Jews could expect yet another covenant. *God* is the initiator of the covenants between Himself and His people. Each covenant carries with it God’s promises and man’s responsibilities if he accepts God’s terms.

Paul reminded the Gentiles about covenants as part of the heritage received from the Jewish people: *“Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises” (Romans 9:4).* The writer to the Hebrews builds the foundation of the Messiahship of Jesus on the institution of a new covenant: *“To Jesus the mediator of a **new covenant**, and to the **sprinkled blood** that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel” (Hebrews 12:24, emphasis added).*

These words sound quaint and very antique to us in the postmodern West. But what

a thundering impact Jesus' words must have had on the Jewish ears who first heard them: "*This is my **blood of the covenant** [gasp!], which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins*" (Matthew 26:28, emphasis added). Suddenly in that upper room that evening, it was a new ball game on earth. The rules were changing, and a new covenant was transcending the old.

But the new covenant did not eradicate the old. The old became the enduring *foundation* for the new. The old is still there as the historical basis. And today, we cannot adequately appreciate the new unless we have a heart-knowledge of the old, as the early Jewish followers did. For it is from the heart that we put our loving trust in Jesus to enter a covenant relationship with our heavenly Father through His Son's shed blood.

No Salvation Without Forgiveness

One truth in particular startles many believers. Jesus declared, "*If you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins*" (Matthew 6:15). The question for us is, Can we be forgiven of *anything* by our heavenly Father if we do not forgive others who have violated us?

John warns about unforgiveness: "*We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a **liar**. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, **cannot love God**, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother*" (1 John 4:19-21, emphasis added).

The early Church understood that our Father will not consummate a relationship with an unforgiving person. Why? Because his Father refuses to forgive him. There will be no evidence of the Holy Spirit operating as a stream of living water in a bitter, unforgiving person. That person has failed to appreciate how much he or she needed to be forgiven by the shed blood of Jesus. That's a *relational* fact, something fairly obvious to early believers—but not so obvious to those who have given themselves to the false, man-centered gospels of today.

Our decision to forgive opens the way for the Holy Spirit to take up His residence in us. Richard Wurmbrand, a Jewish believer who suffered for his faith for fourteen years in a Romanian prison, teaches a profound and correct interpretation of the Lord's Prayer. He states that "*forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors*" should be translated "*forgive us our debts as we **have already forgiven** others their debts.*" Only through a correct understanding of forgiveness could the martyrs throughout history have responded with grace to their persecutors. Those suffering for their faith *had already forgiven* their tormentors.

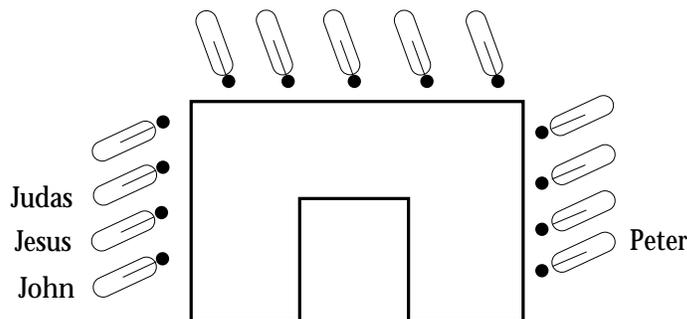
***"Forgive us our sins, for we forgive everyone
who is indebted to us"*** (Luke 11:4).

God knows that we will be hurt and betrayed by people. A wise friend, Bert Schlossberg, told us years ago, "*You can never walk in the fullness of Jesus until you can wash the feet of Judas.*" Rarely can human effort or strength ever wipe away the hurt you feel from what others have done to you in the past. Only through loving trust in Jesus and the power of His grace can you forgive the 'Judases' in your life. To the ancient Hebrews God was *Yahweh-Rapha*,

the Lord our healer. Our trust and reliance in God releases His power to remove the sting of those painful memories.

Bert's words impacted our hearts. On February 21, 1994, we celebrated our twenty-fourth wedding anniversary with him and his wife Exie during our stay with them in Israel. We gathered for dinner at the Biblical Resources Center south of Jerusalem to participate in a reenactment of the Last Supper. We were seated around a triclinium (three-sided) table eating what would have been a traditional Passover meal at the time of Christ. Jesus and His disciples would have reclined on their left side around the three outside edges of the foot-high table with their heads facing the table.

This diagram depicts the likeliest seating arrangement of Jesus and His disciples at the Last Supper:



The second position on the left was traditionally the host of the meal. That would have been Jesus. The first position on the left was the “go for” person who assisted the host. John 13:23,25 (“*One of them, the disciple whom Jesus loved, was reclining next to him...Leaning back against Jesus, he asked him, ‘Lord, who is it?’*”) indicates this to be John. The first position on the right represented the lowest place at the table. In John 13:24, Peter motions to John. Speculating that he was embarrassed as a result of the argument over “*which of them was to be considered greatest*” (see Luke 22:24-32), Peter possibly took this position across from John and Jesus.

Remember that Jesus had responded to His betrayer, Judas, by washing his feet. The third position on the left was reserved for the person whom the host wanted to honor or for special guests outside the family. When Jesus was asked who would betray Him, He said, “*It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.’ Then, dipping the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas Iscariot, son of Simon*” (John 13:26).

We were deeply affected by the possibility that Jesus would have honored His betrayer. In our hearts we knew that it was within the character of Jesus to do such a thing. Certainly all of us at that meal left with a deeper conviction of how far we who follow in the steps of Jesus must go to forgive those who hurt us.

The Indwelling Holy Spirit: Caring For the Needs of Others

The Jewish people at the time of Jesus' birth had been anticipating the Messiah for centuries. In Matthew 11 John the Baptist, who was then in prison, sent his disciples to Jesus to ask, "Are you the one who was to come?"

Jesus sent them back to John, responding with six things that the Jews knew from the prophet Isaiah would identify the Messiah when He came: The blind receive sight; the lame walk; those who have leprosy are cured; the deaf hear; the dead are raised; and the good news is preached to the poor. The Messiah was to be recognized by His care for others, a theme repeatedly emphasized for *all* God's people throughout both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.

Hebraic faith required action on the part of the individual. In this light, Jesus Himself reveals what He will demand as a sign of our faith at the final judgment: "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40).

Each of us needs to consider seriously our covenant responsibilities. If your faith has not caused you to care for others, then you have no faith. James reaffirms this critical Hebraic truth: "Faith without deeds is dead" (James 2:26). This is a far cry from the contemporary faith that goes forward at a meeting, then settles back into a comfortable lifestyle and stays at the "Baby Christian" level forever after.

The consummation of the covenant between Jesus and His follower evidences noticeable change in the follower's life. When he is sealed with the Holy Spirit, those changes begin to pour out like "living water."

***"I, John, your companion in the suffering and kingdom
and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus"*** (Revelation 1:9).

What picture do you get of the early Church in the book of Acts? Wayne Jacobsen, author of *A Passion For God's Presence*, writes:

They were preoccupied with Jesus. Their ministry had power. Their community had reality. They were willing to sacrifice. Believers in the early Church weren't living up to a slate of expectations. They were simply doing what came naturally to people who loved God with all their hearts.²

Weigh these verses as you consider *your relationship* with the Lord Jesus Christ:

*"We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our **fellowship** is with the **Father** and with **his Son, Jesus Christ**...But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin"* (1 John 1:3,7, emphasis added). In what ways are you on a daily basis "walking in the light" as Jesus did? Light cannot be hidden, and your "spiritual brightness" should be readily apparent as you walk!

*"But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must **walk as Jesus did**"* (1 John 2:5,6, emphasis added). *"To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an **example**, that you should **follow in his steps**"* (1 Peter 2:21, emphasis added).

added). Jesus demonstrated a denial-of-self lifestyle.

Your fellowship must first be with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ. If you claim to be in Him, you must walk as Jesus did, a path of suffering. Suffering is not a popular concept in this culture. Yet the early Jewish believers recognized that the world in which we live is an *arena of suffering*. Rabbi Philip Sigal emphasizes the ancient Hebraic doctrine of suffering as a precedent for salvation. The mystery of God's covenant relationship with Israel can be seen in the balance of the *miraculous interventions* of God when He delivered His people and the *concealment* of His presence during other times of persecution and duress.³ God's silence did not mean that His covenant had been canceled. He had reasons beyond their, and our, scope of understanding for why He chose not to rescue.

So, too, present believers cry out to God in their painful struggles. Are there times when you have persevered in prayer with faith and trust, only to feel as though the heavens are brass? This is part of the mystery of God for you: Can you by faith cling to His promises of never forsaking you even when it seems He is not responding? The power of your testimony intensifies its impact on others when they see that God has not only *sustained* you in the midst of the fire but has actually brought you to the point of *thanksgiving* for the suffering because of the glory God receives through you.

For example, for years a friend had struggled with a debilitating illness. Then her husband became seriously ill and was unable to work. Hospital bills accumulated. She had been asked to speak to a large group of women about her testimony of God's sustaining power. She found, though, that she couldn't quite bridge the gap between seeing herself as a *victim* of adverse circumstances and envisioning herself as a *participant* in a process of refinement that could strengthen and encourage others who might face similar trials. Depending on how her pilgrimage was presented, hearers would perhaps empathize with the pain and thank God that they hadn't faced such trials. Or they would give glory to God if thankful joy characterized her presentation. He had indeed healed the sting of the events and had granted her the privilege of joining Him in the cup of suffering. Her subsequent testimony brought glory to God and comforting hope to fellow sufferers.

This latter concept is illustrated in 2 Corinthians 1:3-6:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer.

The Lord empowers His people to endure the night of affliction through His grace. As we walk in the light, His blood cleanses us, enabling us to follow "*in His steps*." The Bible tells us that Jesus "*learned obedience from what he suffered*" (see Hebrews 5:8). Paul notes in Romans, "*Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the*

Holy Spirit, whom he has given us” (5:3-5, emphasis added).

Suffering is not only an indispensable part of our relationship and walk with the Lord Jesus. It also represents a vital facet of intimacy with the heavenly Father:

*For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the **Spirit of sonship**. And by him we cry, ‘**Abba, Father**.’ The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are **God’s children**. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—**heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ**, if indeed we **share in his sufferings** in order that we may also **share in his glory**. I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us (Romans 8:15-18, emphasis added).*

The Father works in us a glory that can be displayed only through our identification as sons and daughters of suffering. God doesn’t intend for you to go through these struggles all alone, however. When you stand before Him and He announces your name before the host of heaven, He will show you what He accomplished in you. It will not be your merit or religious activity that will count on the judgment day, but Jesus showing His work in removing your sinful nature and imparting His own pure character in you.

“Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because he who has suffered in his body is done with sin” (1 Peter 4:1).

Sometimes we Christians are so caught up in our suffering and trials that we are forced to ask ourselves, “Am I suffering because of some special attack by the devil (see 1 Peter 5:8), because of a sin on my part (see James 5:15,16), or because of my participation in the sufferings of Christ (see 1 Peter 4:13)? We might find that we are able to accept an occasional affliction as just a part of the human condition. But there certainly are times when we are confronted with trials from all sides and sources and find that we can no longer “gut it out.” In those situations we would do well to examine our lives and hearts before God to determine if there is indeed a chastisement occurring to return us to God through repentance. (Committed prayer and counsel from a spouse or fellowship of intimate friends can be helpful!)

This is a thoroughly biblical approach and even referred to by the writer of Hebrews as an *encouragement* (see Hebrews 12:5). God’s intervention in our lives reveals the love He has for us as His children: “*My son, do not despise the Lord’s discipline and do not resent his rebuke, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in*” (Proverbs 3:11,12). Granted, this view may be unpopular in today’s culture of disrespect, delicate psyches, and “I-am-a-victim” mentality. God’s Word, however, does not conform itself to popular opinion.

“Glory in his holy name, let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice. Look to the Lord and his strength; seek his face always” (1 Chronicles 16:10,11).

Lest you become overwhelmed by sorrow and suffering and throw your hands up in despair, remember a key Hebraic principle: *joy* in the midst of affliction. The Colossian

saints were admonished to have great patience and endurance, which are developed only through trial and testing. Yet they are instructed in the same breath to joyfully give thanks to the Father! (See Colossians 1:11,12.) There are over a dozen Hebrew words for *joy* in the Old Testament. As theologian Carl Henry stated, “Joy is not merely a sporadic experience but an enduring disposition and characteristic of the devout believer. What distinctively marks the believer is joy even in affliction.”⁴

No stranger to suffering, Paul from his prison cell could urge the Philippian believers to “*rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!*” (Philippians 4:4). If we truly trust in God’s sovereignty—that nothing can happen to us outside of His will and plan for our lives—then what have we to fear? “*Whom have I in heaven but you? And being with you, I desire nothing on earth. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. Those who are far from you will perish; you destroy all who are unfaithful to you. But as for me, it is good to be near God*” (Psalm 73:25-28).

Even as we are being transformed into the likeness of Christ from one glory to the next, we have also that blessed assurance of our home in heaven. God had promised the people of Israel that the obedient would indeed rise to have body and soul reunited for eternity: “*But your dead will live; their bodies will rise. You who dwell in the dust, wake up and shout for joy. Your dew is like the dew of the morning; the earth will give birth to her dead*” (Isaiah 26:19). These words of encouragement, “*We will be with the Lord forever*” (1 Thessalonians 4:17), should never be far from our hearts or from our lips. When was the last time *you* joyfully pointed a troubled saint back to that reality?

Your ongoing relationship with Him is critical if this is to be accomplished. And as we shall see, this intimacy is all the more crucial if your marriage and family are to bear fruit in a covenant relationship with the Father. “*Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the **joy set before him** endured the cross*” (Hebrews 12:2, emphasis added).

As you read the following poem, ponder your level of trust in the nearness of Jesus in your own life. Do you recognize yourself as a “child of His love?” Is one step enough for your faith to see, or do you need to analyze the destination, implications, and consequences before moving an inch? Can you put a finger on the greatest fear that may be keeping you from trusting wholeheartedly that “*in all thy journeying He goes before?*”

STEP BY STEP

“As thou goest, step by step I will open the way before thee”

(Proverbs 4:12, New Translation)

Child of My love, fear not the unknown morrow,
Dread not the new demand life makes of thee;
Thy ignorance doth hold no cause for sorrow,
Since what thou knowest not is known to Me.

Thou canst not see today the hidden meaning
Of My Command, but thou the light shalt gain;
Walk on in faith, upon My promise leaning,
And as thou goest, all shall be made plain.

One step thou seest—then go forward boldly,
One step is far enough for faith to see;
Take that, and thy next duty shall be told thee,
For step by step thy Lord is leading thee.

Stand not in fear, thine adversaries counting,
Dare every peril, save to disobey;
Thou shalt march on, all obstacles surmounting,
For I, the Strong, will open up the way.

Wherefore go gladly to the task assigned thee,
Having My promise, needing nothing more
Than just to know, where'er the future find thee,
In all thy journeying I go before.

Frank J. Exley