

————— Volume 3 —————
WordPoints Daybook Series

Diligently Seeking God

*Daily Motivation to
Take God More Seriously*

Gary Henry



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WordPoints
Louisville, Kentucky
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WordPoints Daybook Series - Volume 3
Diligently Seeking God
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For my sons

Brock Adam Henry
&
Grant Parker Henry

and in memory of my father and mother

Leroy Parker Henry
&
Charlene Roberts Henry

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PREFACE

THIS BOOK IS ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF SEEKING GOD. Its point of departure is the statement in Hebrews 11:6 that God is “a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him,” and it consists of daily readings that urge us to do that. The basic premise here is that we need to seek God more earnestly than any of us ever have.

Diligently Seeking God consists of 366 meditations, one for each day of the year. While the pages can obviously be read in other ways, I do hope that most readers will use the book as a daybook, meditating on just one page a day. There really is much more here than you can get by skimming. If you have never read a book one page a day, give this one a try.

I write as a Christian, one who believes that it makes a difference which path we follow in seeking God. At the risk of being written off as old-fashioned, I must say that I accept the full force of Jesus’ bold saying in John 14:6: “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.” If anyone thinks that such a view is arrogant, my only plea is for a fair and patient hearing. I still have many things to learn about the God whom I seek, and I write about Him with a quite painful sense of my own limitations. I would be less than honest, however, if I didn’t record this as my governing conviction: it is in Jesus Christ alone that God is “reconciling the world to Himself” (2 Corinthians 5:19).

Since this book focuses on seeking God, a word of caution is necessary. Nothing here should be taken to imply that the mere act of *seeking* God, by itself, constitutes *fellowship* with Him. The case of Cornelius (Acts 10:1-48) illustrates that the sincere seeker must, at some point, learn the facts of the gospel of Christ and obey its commands. On Pentecost, those who asked what they must do were instructed, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins” (Acts 2:38).

The reader who is asking the very important question, “What must I do to be saved?” (Acts 16:30) can do no better than to study thoughtfully the clear examples of conversion in Acts.

But if *more* is involved in conversion than the seeking of God, it’s also true that no *less* is involved. If, as often seems to be the case, we emphasize all the other aspects of becoming a Christian but neglect the prior importance of *seeking* God, the result is bound to be a proliferation of nominal “Christians” who are easily discouraged, vulnerable to temptation, lacking in evangelistic impact on others, and nearly devoid of the commitment and joy that ought to attend life in Christ. Can it be denied that this is exactly what we see around us so often today?

In this work, I am trying to understand and articulate the importance of seeking God with all our hearts (Jeremiah 29:13). While this is not the only thing required if our religion is to honor God, it may be the thing we’ve neglected the most, considering the emphasis Jesus placed upon it. He taught that nothing on our part is of more basic importance than having a deep desire for God (Matthew 22:37,38). If the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing, then we need frequent, emphatic reminders of those things that Jesus said were the most important.

Whoever you are, I hope that you’ll not make the mistake of thinking that this book is written for someone else. Conversion happens to have two important sides: before and after. I’ve tried hard to keep this work from veering off in the direction of one or the other. For our purposes here, it doesn’t matter whether you see yourself as already being a Christian or not. *I believe that diligently seeking God is no less vital for those on one side of conversion than on the other.* On whichever side you find yourself, my hope is that seeking God will be the defining passion of your life.

GPH

*My beloved God
Grant in Your grace that I may
Seek You diligently that I may
Show forth Your goodness that I may
See Your shining face someday.*

Diligently Seeking God

O Lord, prepare my heart, I beseech you,
to reverence you, to adore you, to love you;
to hate, for love of you, all my sins and imperfections,
shortcomings, whatever in me displeases you;
and to love all which you love.

Give me, Lord, fervor of love, shame for my
unthankfulness, sorrow for my sins, longing for your
grace, and to be wholly united with you.

Let my very coldness call for the glow of your love;
let my emptiness and dryness, like a barren and thirsty
land, thirst for you, call on you to come into my soul,
who refreshes those who are weary.

Let my heart ache to you and for you,
who stills the aching of the heart.

Let my mute longings praise you, crave you,
who satisfies the empty soul that waits on you.

— *E. B. Pusey*

January 1

OUR DEEPEST NEED, OUR GREATEST REWARD

But without faith it is impossible to please Him,
for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that
He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. *Hebrews 11:6*

GOD REWARDS THOSE WHO DILIGENTLY SEEK HIM. In order to come to God, we must believe this great truth. Confidently acting on our faith and passionately pursuing Him, we will find the God whom we were created to enjoy. He has promised that we will not only find Him, but we will find in Him all that our hearts truly desire. In times of comfort no less than in times of pain, we must always seek God. We must seek Him with diligence and determination — as well as love — trusting that at the end of our search He Himself, and He alone, will be our reward.

Two things are needed. We must see that our deepest need is for God, and then we must seek the fulfillment of that need in God only. The first of these is perhaps the hardest to do. On the surface, we seem to desire so many more visible and more immediate things that it's hard to understand how deeply we need God. But deeper than all our other wants is this ultimate desire: our longing for God. We long for Him because we were created for Him, and when we honestly and humbly recognize the importance of this need, then we are ready to seek God. We must devote ourselves wholeheartedly to finding Him, our most fervent hope being to come into His presence and enjoy His fellowship.

We tend not to seek God when our lives are comfortable. If our temporal needs are met, we imagine that we can take care of ourselves and we forget about God. For this reason, God lets us suffer some deprivation. The needs that go unmet may differ from person to person, but each of us will have our heart broken in some ways. We will be taught to do without some of the things we deeply need, in order to learn that what we were created to enjoy is not fully available in this world. Only God can perfectly satisfy our hunger and our thirst, and He is always leading us in the direction of satisfaction in Him. He is teaching us, if we have the hearts to learn, that He is the only thing we can't do without.

Above all am I convinced of the need, irrevocable and inescapable, of every human heart, for God. No matter how we try to escape, to lose ourselves in restless seeking, we cannot separate ourselves from our divine source. There is no substitute for God.

A. J. CRONIN

January 2

IN THE IMAGE OF GOD

So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. *Genesis 1:27*

SURELY IT IS NO COINCIDENCE THAT WE YEARN FOR GOD. This profound longing cannot have resulted from a quirk in the operation of merely physical forces. Our hunger for righteousness is no caprice of nature. We desire God because we were created to do so by God Himself, the Creator in whose image we were made. As our Beginning, He is the only perfect End toward which we were meant to move.

Human beings are inherently religious. As Spinoza said, "We feel and know that we are eternal." Though we may often distract ourselves with lesser concerns, we still experience a deep-rooted longing for communion with the divine. God having put eternity in our hearts (Ecclesiastes 3:11), we instinctively reach out for concord with the Source of our being.

As creatures made in God's image, we long for relationship with other personal beings. And if we need personal relationship with our fellow creatures, we need it even more deeply with our Creator. We were designed for what the Scriptures call "fellowship" with God (1 John 1:3). Without that essential involvement, our spirits waste away in emptiness.

The purpose of our existence is described in a familiar old tradition: "The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever." These words well state the ultimate fulfillment that is available to us, looking at the matter from our perspective. But from God's perspective, may we not also say that God gave us the power to glorify and enjoy Him in order that He might show forth His goodness through us? We are vessels, instruments through whom God intends to demonstrate His goodness in our actions.

If we're alienated from God, He can't fully reveal His goodness through us. If His purpose isn't being fulfilled in us, we can't experience the joy for which we were designed, and if we miss that joy, all else in the world is futility and frustration. "O God . . . my flesh longs for You in a dry and thirsty land where there is no water" (Psalm 63:1). Having been made by God, we long for Him. When our hearts hurt in this world, what we are is homesick.

He that is made in the image of God must know Him or be desolate.

GEORGE MACDONALD

January 3

OUR NEED FOR RELATIONSHIP

That which we have seen and heard we declare to you,
that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship
is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. 1 John 1:3

A NEED FOR RICH PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP IS DEEPLY EMBEDDED IN OUR CREATED NATURE. We owe our existence not to impersonal forces, but to a personal Creator, and it was the Creator Himself who said, “It is not good that man should be alone” (Genesis 2:18). We are personal beings, and we were designed for full, vibrant relationship.

But sin destroys relationship. It severs us from God and from others, cutting us off from this thing that is so necessary to our nature. So there is perhaps no symptom of sin any more obvious than the deep, gnawing pain of isolation. And in sin, there is no groaning more desperate than to be freed from our loneliness.

But however much we need relationship in general, our most vital need, the only one we can't survive without, is our need for relationship with God. “In every man there is a loneliness, an inner chamber of peculiar life into which God only can enter” (George MacDonald). Our craving for God is a dependency we were meant to have. It is a profound need for *perfect* relationship, and to try to fill this need with our flawed connection to other human beings is not only wrong; it is hopeless.

If we fail to let God fill our need for love — if it is not in Him that our loneliness is taken away — then we will force an impossible mandate on the imperfect people around us. We will demand from others a satisfaction they aren't capable of providing for us in this broken world. Only the infinite God is able to relate to us perfectly. And even with God, what we can have in this life is only a foretaste of the perfect union that heaven will provide.

When we find that even our most intimate earthly companions can't provide the depth of relationship for which we were created, bitterness may be the tempting reaction. Yet there is a healthier response. We can see the imperfections in our own relationships as a salutary reminder. God alone is the One to whom we must look for life and unending love. To forget that is to lose the path that leads back home.

Didst thou give me this inescapable loneliness
so that it would be easier for me to give thee all?

DAG HAMMARSKJÖLD

January 4
LOVE'S QUEST

Now therefore, I pray, if I have found grace in Your sight,
show me now Your way, that I may know You
and that I may find grace in Your sight. *Exodus 33:13*

IF OUR SEARCH FOR GOD IS INSPIRED BY REAL LOVE, WE WILL NOT REST UNTIL WE HAVE COME TO KNOW HIM AS HE TRULY IS. Mere admiration may be content to sit and daydream, but real love gets up and blazes a trail toward the actual knowledge of God. Such a relentless love in the heart of one seeker is of more heavenly consequence than all the placid intellect in the world. "Of all earthly music, that which reaches farthest into heaven is the beating of a truly loving heart" (Henry Ward Beecher).

Knowing God is very much more than an informational exercise. We don't try to figure out God for the sake of curiosity; we seek to know Him for the sake of love. And the love that moves us to know God is every bit as real and robust as worldly love. "Love for the Lord is not an ethereal, intellectual, dreamlike thing; it is the intensest, the most vital, the most passionate love of which the human heart is capable" (Oswald Chambers).

Not all who say they love God have this passion, of course, but those who are lukewarm or haphazard will simply not find God. The good things that come from loving God are reserved for those who take Him seriously. "You will seek Me and find Me," God said, "when you search for Me with all your heart" (Jeremiah 29:13). Only wholehearted love has the persistence required to find God. This kind of love is an active force, always compelling us to seek and to search and to know the other. It will never let us be content until we have entered deeply into relationship with our Beloved. Love will find the way to find God.

Love is bold and aspires to grandeur. Combining the qualities of reverence and courage, love dares to seek God Himself. The deepest love in the human heart will settle for nothing less. It will not cease from its quest until it has found and known the very Source from which it was created. "Nearer, my God, to Thee, nearer to Thee; e'en tho' it be a cross that raiseth me, still all my song shall be, nearer, my God, to Thee!" (Sarah F. Adams).

Love cannot be inactive; its life is a ceaseless effort to know, to feel,
and to realize the boundless treasures hidden within its depths.

This is its insatiable desire.

JAN VAN RUYSBROECK

January 5

DILIGENTLY SEEKING GOD

But without faith it is impossible to please Him,
for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that
He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. *Hebrews 11:6*

OUR SEEKING OF GOD MUST BE DILIGENT. What does this mean? It means that we must give ourselves to the quest for God with a priority and a passion that we don't invest in any other pursuit. God must be first in our hearts. We must be ready to sacrifice anything else — indeed all else — in order to see His face. Our hearts must be purged of any conflicting interest or competing desire. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matthew 5:8). In our longing for God we must be utterly sincere, and in our seeking of God we must be passionately committed. He deserves no less than our all.

God's making of the world is such that we find it necessary to seek and search for Him, but in truth “He is not far from each one of us” (Acts 17:27). His hiddenness in this present broken world is not meant to hinder us from finding Him, but to entice us to seek Him more fervently. As He whets our appetite for Himself, God is weaning us away from our sinful, self-sufficient rebellion. He is teaching us to love Him. With convicting evidences of His power and loving tokens of His goodness, He is drawing us toward His eternal presence. “I drew them with gentle cords, with bands of love” (Hosea 11:4). It is God's good pleasure to be found by all who long for Him in honest, obedient love.

God is not neutral with regard to the inclination of our hearts. He desires that we find Him. He yearns for those who delight in Him. “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you” (James 4:8). Yet there is a danger: we must not deceive ourselves that we are seeking God if in fact it is only certain blessings from God that we seek. Resisting the tendency to focus on ourselves, we must learn to seek Him, simply and contentedly. When we diligently do so, our reward will be God Himself and He will fill our deepest longings according to the design of His own love. Having sought God earnestly, we will be enriched by the joy of a heart that overflows with His glory.

Where there is faith, where there is need, there is the True God
ready to clasp the hands that stretch out seeking for him
into the darkness behind the ivory and the gold.

H. G. WELLS

January 6
A BROKEN WORLD

What is crooked cannot be made straight,
And what is lacking cannot be numbered.
Ecclesiastes 1:15

BECAUSE OF THE DAMAGE SIN HAS DONE TO THIS WORLD, OUR HEARTS WILL NEVER FIND WHAT THEY TRULY NEED HERE. This world is simply not what it was created to be, and to live in it is to hurt deeply. No one has tasted the bitterness of our experience any more than God Himself. He has lived among us, and when His great heart pondered the magnitude and the hurtfulness of what has gone wrong, Jesus wept (John 11:35).

It is foolish to underestimate the brokenness of this world. The more truly wise we become, the more we see the utter wretchedness of our earthly condition. "In much wisdom is much grief, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow" (Ecclesiastes 1:18). The wise man, who has come to see that this world is tragically and irretrievably broken, will tend to be a man of sorrows. The unwelcome truth is this: we cannot have anything more than partial happiness as long as we live here. Our deepest needs cannot and will not be fully met in this life. To pretend otherwise is dangerously dishonest, and we'll be better off the minute we stop denying the seriousness of our unmet needs.

Yet it is also foolish to underestimate God. As much as we need to face this world's brokenness, we need even more to face the ultimate reality of God. We must learn to see His mercy as our salvation, His promise as our joy. As we fix our hope on His perfection, however, we must still not forget the imperfection of the world that we presently live in. God's Son did not die to make us healthier, wealthier, and happier in the here and now. He died to redeem us from the sin that is in our hearts and to give us eternal life. God gives us help, but He does not plan to fix this world. What He plans to fix is *us* — and then bring us to live where He is. As for this world, God plans to destroy it.

"In our sleep, pain that cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God" (Aeschylus). Let us deal no more in superficial, sentimental solutions. Let us let God be God.

To know of God without knowing of man's misery causes pride.
To know of man's misery without knowing of God causes despair.

BLAISE PASCAL

January 7

A WEARY WORLD

All things are full of labor;
Man cannot express it.
The eye is not satisfied with seeing,
Nor the ear filled with hearing.
Ecclesiastes 1:8

TO BEINGS MADE FOR FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD, THE WORLD OF TEMPORAL THINGS BY ITSELF CAN NEVER BE WHOLLY SATISFYING. What we find is that the world, even at its best, exhausts us and leaves us longing for Something More. “O God! O God! How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable seem to me all the uses of this world” (Shakespeare).

It is a frustrating, disappointing task to try to hold forever things that are essentially impermanent. We may spend many of our years looking for lasting fulfillment, but at some point most of us come to see that temporal things simply can't fill eternal longings. When we try to make them do so, we place upon the things of this world a greater burden than they can bear. “It shall even be as when a hungry man dreams, and look — he eats; but he awakes, and his soul is still empty; or as when a thirsty man dreams, and look — he drinks; but he awakes, and indeed he is faint, and his soul still craves” (Isaiah 29:8).

We would get more real joy from this world if we would pay more attention to the world to come. Our problem is not asking too much of the world, but too little of God. C. S. Lewis said, “Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures . . . We are far too easily pleased.” To seek the greater things of God is to get more from this world, not less. “He sins against this life who slights the next” (Edward Young).

The tiresomeness of temporal life by itself ought to be a clue to the fact that we were meant for more. There are many good things here to enjoy, but if we pretend that this world is all we need, we cheat ourselves. We “satisfy” ourselves with so pitifully little, when our hearts were made for so much greater joy. But even so, God keeps enticing us to be *truly* refreshed!

For when we approach God and seek to live according to his purpose, he knows and we know whence we have come: from the restlessness of the world, from the tribulation of human events, from the feeling of discouragement, from the lack of faith, from the failure to hear the message, from the twilight of moral and spiritual exhaustion.

January 8

SUBSTITUTE SATISFACTIONS

And do not turn aside; for then you would go after empty things which cannot profit or deliver, for they are nothing. *1 Samuel 12:21*

COUNTERFEIT FULFILLMENTS CAN NEVER TAKE THE PLACE OF GOD, OUR TRUE NEED. Even so, the devil's deception has always been that our deepest needs can be filled outside the limits of God's will. He defrauds us of the joy we were designed for by suggesting that our greater needs can be filled by lesser satisfactions and that even our need for God Himself can be gratified by other pleasures. This ancient lie is the source of all idolatry.

The deepest longings God has given us are longings that must be fulfilled. They will not be denied satisfaction of some kind. If we're not richly nourished by the Bread of Life, we'll be driven to pick up whatever crumbs we can from the world. But filling our hunger with other food doesn't mean we need God any less; it just means we'll be less likely to *feel* that need. However inferior worldly substitutes may be, they can still make it seem as if our needs have been met, for the time being. Just as candy spoils the appetite of a child for real nourishment, we spoil our appetite for God and foolishly suppose we are no longer hungry.

But we are "shaped and fashioned by what we love" (Goethe). Eventually, we come to bear the likeness of our chosen desires. Hence a most serious danger of substitutes is that our fascination with their fulfillment may come to be a part of our character. If we devote ourselves to other things with the kind of devotion that should be given to God alone, the time will come when we share the likeness of those things more than we share God's likeness. Such a possibility ought to frighten us.

Ultimately, of course, substitute satisfactions don't work. If we fill God-created needs with anything less than God-designed fulfillments, the result is bound to be unsatisfying in the short run, and destructive to our character in the long run. Even when we get what we want, it will not be what we want. "He who loves silver will not be satisfied with silver; nor he who loves abundance, with increase. This also is vanity" (Ecclesiastes 5:10). Temporal solutions only *appear* to fix eternal problems. Created things can never do for us what the Creator Himself desires to do.

God may well be taken as a substitute for everything;
but nothing can be taken as a substitute for God.

ANONYMOUS

January 9

SEEING AND SEEKING

So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the LORD. *Deuteronomy 8:3*

LIFE IN THIS FALLEN WORLD CONFRONTS US WITH A TWO-FOLD CHALLENGE. The difficulty is first to *see* that God is our deepest need and then to *seek* Him with the diligence that we should. The first is a problem of *awareness* — our understanding must learn how important God is to us. The second is a problem of *motivation* — our will must choose to seek God diligently. In both our understanding and our will, not to mention our emotions, we must learn to take God as seriously as He deserves to be taken.

If we don't see that God is what we most deeply need, we won't seek Him seriously. But even when we do see how basic our need for God is, it is often still the case that we don't seek Him as earnestly as we should. We simply fail to deal seriously with life's most significant issue. Why this is so is a question that ought to concern us daily.

Seeing the reality of our need and then seeking God require moment-by-moment effort. The decision to seek God with all of our heart can't be made once-for-all and then forgotten. In every single moment of choice we must exercise our will one more time, deciding again and again to maintain integrity to what we know is most important. "The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing." Such is our continual, lifelong challenge.

Not seeing our real need and not seeking God are failures that have disastrous consequences, even in the here and now. The human heart groans, longing to be filled up, and if we don't seek God as the object of our heart's desire, we will try to slake our thirst in other ways, pursuing substitute satisfactions until we have ruined ourselves. To devote our hearts to desires other than God is not only to waste our years in vanity — *it is to forfeit the deep joy for which we were created*. What could be more tragic than to miss the triumphant satisfaction of our deepest desire simply because we didn't see our need and we didn't seek our God?

The children of Israel did not find in the manna all the sweetness and strength they might have found in it; not because the manna did not contain them, but because they longed for other meat.

January 10

WHY DON'T WE SEE?

You say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing' — and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked. *Revelation 3:17*

WHY DON'T WE SEE THE DEPTH OF OUR NEED FOR GOD? How could something so important be so difficult to recognize? There are at least three reasons for our failure to see.

Distraction. The here and now has a powerful pull on us. That which is immediate seems more urgent than the remote, and the physical seems more important than the spiritual. "The world is a net; the more we stir in it, the more we are entangled" (Anonymous). It's hard to hear the quiet, eternal beckoning of God when the clatter and clamor of the present rattles loudly in our ears. Yet the distractions of the present can be resisted, and God expects us to do so. There is a sense in which God is always saying to us, "This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?" (Luke 12:20).

Delusion. When our faith fails to see beyond the here and now, we lose perspective on reality. Our sense of what's important is turned upside down. Famished with hunger, for example, Esau foolishly traded away his birthright for a bowl of soup. Later when he saw what was really important, it was too late to get his birthright back. Like Esau, we are often deluded into thinking that what we want right now is all we will ever need. Our momentary temporal desires deceive us greatly as to their eternal value.

Denial. At times, there may be an even more serious problem. We may not see our need for God because we *choose* not to see it. Refusing to admit what we know deep down to be true, we may build our lives on pride and denial, rather than truth. The self-sufficient claim that we're "doing all right" keeps us from seeing our true emptiness. If we lack either honesty or humility, we may suppress our need for God. "God is in none of his thoughts . . . He has said in his heart, 'I shall not be moved; I shall never be in adversity'" (Psalm 10:4,6). "The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God'" (Psalm 14:1). But ignoring our need doesn't make it go away. To deny the obvious fact that our hearts long for Him is to deny the God who made us.

The man who has lost contact with God lives on the same
dead-end street as the man who denies him.

MILTON A. MARCY

January 11
WHY DON'T WE SEEK?

The wicked in his proud countenance does not seek God;
God is in none of his thoughts.
Psalm 10:4

WHY DON'T WE SEEK GOD MORE DILIGENTLY THAN WE DO? If we are willing to acknowledge that God is our ultimate need, why is it so hard to do what we should about that need? For most of us, there is an obvious shortage of motivation.

To be frank, the problem comes down to a single word: self-righteousness. The failure to seek Him diligently comes from a refusal to see the hideous ugliness of our own sins against God, sins that will condemn us forever if we don't devoutly throw ourselves upon His mercy. "In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10). We wouldn't have any trouble living our love for God if we understood how fortunate we are to be loved by Him! Godly zeal is the product of gratitude.

This principle is illustrated poignantly in Luke 7:36-50. There Jesus rebuked the self-righteous ingratitude of Simon, a Pharisee who had criticized a sinful woman who lovingly approached the Lord. Jesus pointed out that she loved Him more than Simon because she was more conscious of the sins she needed to have forgiven. "Therefore I say to you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little" (v.47). If our seeking of the Lord is lukewarm, it is because we don't see that we have anything very serious to be forgiven. A passionate pursuit of God is only generated when we face the horror of our destiny without His grace.

The most powerful motive force in the world is a deeply felt appreciation for the forgiveness God mercifully makes available to us in His Son. We will truly love God only when we see something of the price He has paid to love us. "For the love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died; and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again" (2 Corinthians 5:14,15). Having been stripped of our self-righteousness and made to grieve our emptiness, we will seek God with an earnestness that is eternal.

We are called to an everlasting preoccupation with God.

A. W. TOZER

January 12

BELIEVING THAT GOD IS REAL

Nobody reaches God's presence until he has learned to believe that He exists. *Hebrews 11:6 Knox*

FAITH IN GOD IS A CHOICE THAT WE MAKE BETWEEN TWO ALTERNATIVES. The river of evidence for God's reality runs strong and deep, but its current is not irresistible. Many people do swim against it, at least for a while.

Choosing to believe that God exists is a voluntary act of trust. We believe not because we think the reality of God is absolutely unequivocal, but because we judge the evidence to be greatly in its favor. After careful thought, faith puts its trust and confidence in a premise that is seen to be supported by the weight of the evidence. Faced with the ultimate fork in the road, faith understands that a decision must be made, and it responsibly chooses one alternative.

But the decision to believe isn't merely the adoption of an intellectual position. It's the courageous taking of a stand. Like all ideas, the idea of God has consequences, and faith dares to accept those consequences. It says: "I have considered the matter and am prepared to make my choice. What I have seen has taught me to trust this thing which I can't see, the reality of God. I not only believe, but I am prepared to follow my faith wherever it leads."

"Faith" is not inferior to "knowledge." It is a certain *kind* of knowledge, one that makes available to us all the great truths that happen to be inaccessible to the "eyes" of physical sense. "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). If we could know only what our own senses have experienced, how impoverished our minds would be! Most of life's important realities have to do with things that are unseen, and it is by faith that we apprehend these truths.

The time is coming, however, when the reality of God will no longer be a matter of faith. It will be an overwhelming fact, impossible to deny and terrifying in its implications for those who have tried to deny it. "As I live, says the LORD, every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue shall confess to God" (Romans 14:11). For now, though, faith is "the response of our spirits to the beckonings of the eternal" (George A. Buttrick). To believe is to embrace both worlds, the seen and the unseen, neither more real than the other.

Faith is the subtle chain which binds us to the infinite.

ELIZABETH O. SMITH

January 13

THE BURNING “YES”

You will show me the path of life;
In Your presence is fullness of joy;
At Your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

Psalm 16:11

SEEKING GOD, WE ARE WILLING TO LET GO OF ANYTHING THAT INTERFERES WITH WHAT WE MOST GREATLY LONG FOR: LIFE WITH GOD. Giving up the lesser in order to gain the greater does hurt sometimes. There’s no question that self-discipline can be quite uncomfortable, even painful. It does no good to deny the pain. But this pain we gladly accept if our hearts truly burn with the passion of what matters more to us than anything else in the world.

The “thou shalt nots” that confront us are not simply the arbitrary rules of a God who wishes to keep His creatures as unhappy as possible. There’s no inherent virtue in abstinence, and God does not expect us to give up things just for the sake of giving them up. Instead, there’s always some gift that God wants to place in our hands, a gift we’ll have no room to hold until we put down the load of lesser packages we are presently holding. In the end, we’ll see that God asked us to give up only those things that interfered with the exchange of real love.

No one knows more than the victorious athlete how valuable it is to give up the lesser for the greater. Gold medals aren’t won by self-indulgence. They’re won by years of focused training, the choice having been made to forgo other things that might have been enjoyed in order to single-mindedly pursue a dream. While the athlete trains, he may wistfully watch while others entertain themselves living for the *moment*, but he is wisely living for a *goal*.

In the Scriptures, we are taught that hope has a purifying effect. “Everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure” (1 John 3:3). To the extent that our spiritual hope matters as much as we say it does, we’ll purge our lives of anything inconsistent with that hope, eager to abstain from things that even *distract* us from God. If we’ve paid the price to know what matters the most to us, and if we’ve realized that the only thing worth having is God Himself, then our daily choices will be much easier. The joy of the Lord will be our strength.

We find ourselves able to say “No!” to some things
because there is a bigger “Yes!” burning deep within us.

STEPHEN R. COVEY

January 14
CAPACITY FOR JOY

One thing I have desired of the LORD, that will I seek:
That I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life,
To behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in His temple.

Psalm 27:4

OUR HEARTS ARE DIVINELY CREATED RECEPTACLES, PURPOSEFULLY MADE TO RECEIVE THE JOY WITH WHICH GOD WISHES TO FILL THEM. It is true, as Bernard of Clairvaux said, that “beauty is the soul’s birthright.” Even though we’ve damaged our taste for divine things by neglect and abuse, we still find ourselves being “surprised by joy,” as C. S. Lewis put it. When we experience these moments of authentic joy, we’re reminded of the good purpose for which we were created. And we’re also reminded how foolishly we’ve strayed from the God who gave us the kind of hearts we have. God has not left Himself “without witness, in that He did good, gave us rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness” (Acts 14:17).

Concerning this temporal world and our capacity to enjoy its good things, Solomon said that it is proper for us to “rejoice.” He said that “every man should eat and drink and enjoy the good of all his labor; it is the gift of God” (Ecclesiastes 3:12,13). But more important than the enjoyment itself, Solomon also observed that God has made “everything beautiful in its time” and has put “eternity” in our hearts (Ecclesiastes 3:11). The limited joy that so intrigues us now is a delightful hint of what lies ahead for those who diligently seek God. Having been given the ability to foretaste eternity, we are now being drawn toward Him.

Have there not been times when we’ve tasted a depth of joy that amazed us, times when we learned that a good deal more joy is available to us than we thought possible? These joyous epiphanies ought to intrigue us and instruct us. They ought to suggest the vastness of what can be ours in God and whet our appetites for spiritual things. “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him” (1 Corinthians 2:9). We were made for so much more than we have yet received. Why do we so often deny and resist the God who gave us our capacity for joy?

Our Creator would never have made such lovely days, and have given us the deep hearts to enjoy them, unless we were meant to be immortal.

NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

January 15

THE JOY OF FULFILLING OUR PURPOSE

O Lord, open my lips,
And my mouth shall show forth Your praise.
Psalm 51:15

GOD MEANS FOR US TO FIND JOY IN FULFILLING THE PURPOSE OF OUR CREATION. Just as there is a satisfying rightness when a good tool is used for exactly the right purpose, there is a wholesome goodness when progress is made toward a fitting goal. When that goal is the very object of our creation, we experience something the Creator intended to be deeply gratifying. Good deeds are good not only because they are right, but because they contribute to the fulfillment of our purpose.

But what is the purpose for which we were created? One answer is that our “chief end” is to “glorify God and enjoy Him forever.” But why did God make creatures with such possibilities? Was it not so that He could show forth His own goodness through us? Jesus taught, “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). The end of our existence is not only to enjoy the glorification of God ourselves, but to be vessels through whom God can manifest His majesty and goodness to others. Our highest prayer is this: “Father, glorify Your name” (John 12:28). Literally everything about us, even our death, should be measured by this standard (Philippians 1:20,21).

Peter wrote, “If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God. If anyone ministers, let him do it as with the ability which God supplies, that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belong the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen” (1 Peter 4:11). When we live in this way, the fit between our purpose and our deeds produces joy.

In this life, our joy can't be perfect, of course. As long as sin fractures our commitment to God's purposes, we won't enjoy the fullness that can only come from perfect commitment. But if we genuinely seek God in trust and obedience, we'll find a joy that, although incomplete for now, is nevertheless deep and true.

God did not put you in the world because he needed you.
He made you for the purpose of working his goodness in you.
He has given you a mind to know him, a memory to recall his favors,
a will to love him, eyes to see what he does, and a tongue
to sing his praise. This is the reason you are here.

FRANCIS DE SALES

January 16

THE END OF ALL OUR DESIRE

As the deer pants for the water brooks,
So pants my soul for You, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When shall I come and appear before God?
Psalm 42:1,2

DEEPER THAN EVERY OTHER LONGING IS THE DEEPEST DESIRE FOR WHICH WE WERE CREATED — THE DESIRE FOR GOD. We may not recognize it, we may not be able to name it even when we feel it, and we may even try to deny it sometimes. But having been made in His image, we can no more negate the desire for our Creator than we can uncreate the nature of our being. “Somewhere in the depths of infinity lies a buried part of ourselves: that something we did not bring with us into this life, the missing piece which makes us incomplete and generates in us the yearning to be connected again with the source of our being, beyond our distorted view of perfection and innocence” (Paul Ciholas).

Having God as our deepest *need*, however, is not quite the same as feeling God as our deepest *desire*. No doubt we feel our need most sharply when we’re suffering, but the reality is, we need God every instant, and we ought to desire Him always. We don’t need God any less when we’re contented than when we’re not. Each and every day, it is “in Him [that] we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). As our deepest, most constant need, He should be our most profound, heartfelt desire.

From the infinite riches of His grace, God is able to fill our needs. He holds every true treasure that our hearts yearn for, and He “can satisfy the last aching abyss of the human soul” (Oswald Chambers). His will is for us to seek Him sincerely and make our supplication to Him concerning every empty place within us. He knows us and can sympathize with our weaknesses. “Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:16).

But beyond every one of our lesser needs, God Himself is the end of all our desire. He is the goal of our existence, the fulfillment of all we were created to be. “O LORD . . . the desire of our soul is for Your name and for the remembrance of You” (Isaiah 26:8).

You awake us to delight in your praise; for you have made us
for yourself, and our heart finds no rest until it rests in you.

AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

January 17

WHAT FAITH MAKES POSSIBLE

But without faith it is impossible to please Him. *Hebrews 11:6*

IT IS POSSIBLE FOR US TO PLEASE GOD, BUT ONLY BY FAITH CAN WE DO SO. Enoch's example illustrates how we can relate to God when we have real faith. Enoch "walked with God" (Genesis 5:24). And his walk with God, based on faith, had remarkable results. "By faith Enoch was taken away so that he did not see death, 'and was not found, because God had taken him'; for before he was taken he had this testimony, that he pleased God" (Hebrews 11:5).

Enoch pleased God, the text says, by faith. Does this mean that the mere fact of intellectual "belief" pleases God? No, we must have a faith that diligently reaches toward God in a trust that is both hopeful and loving. "For we walk by faith, not by sight. We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord. Therefore we make it our aim, whether present or absent, to be well pleasing to Him" (2 Corinthians 5:7-9). If we make it our aim to be well pleasing to God, we need to understand that this wonderful possibility can be realized only by the obedience that comes from faith. "Without faith it is impossible to please Him" (Hebrews 11:6).

Faith is one part of the great triad: *faith, hope, and love*. And, in fact, the faith that makes pleasing God possible has in it a strong element of both hope and love. All three of these spiritual attributes look to the future through the eyes of trust. Working together, they produce the "work of faith," the "labor of love," and the "patience of hope" (1 Thessalonians 1:3).

Consider that the faith by which we come to God and please Him is not without real hope. While faith gives us a vision of how great our possibilities with God can be, it is hope that fervently desires these possibilities to come true. More than that, hope expects them to come true! And this expectation moves us to emulate God's character and grow in purity. "Everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure" (1 John 3:3).

By faith, we seek to please God because we love Him. It is faith that gives wings to love's natural desire. Showing us not only that God can be pleased but how we may do so, faith gives true substance to love's highest wish: the pleasure of our beloved God.

Faith is love taking the form of aspiration.

WILLIAM ELLERY CHANNING

January 18

LETTING GOD BE GOD

Know that the LORD, He is God;
It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves;
We are His people and the sheep of His pasture.

Psalm 100:3

IF OUR SEEKING OF GOD IS NOT REVERENT, IT WILL BE TO NO AVAIL. We must acknowledge God's sovereignty over us, seeing Him not only as our Creator but also our Sustainer and Ruler. It is our attempt at self-rule that has gotten us into trouble, and before God's kingdom can come, ours must go. We must humbly, confidently, and contentedly let God be God.

Humility. In a world obsessed with self, the worship of God often becomes little more than the worship of our own desires. We demand God to be whatever we wish Him to be and to solve our problems in the manner we prescribe. But God does not exist for our pragmatic purposes, and Oswald Chambers's warning is wise: "Beware of the inclination to dictate to God what consequences you would allow as a condition of your obedience to Him."

Confidence. Those who seat themselves upon God's throne and try to control what happens in the world soon realize that the task is for a human being as stressful as it is impossible. How liberating it is to relax and let God take care of running the universe! The reverent seeker rests in the confidence that God can be counted on to supervise the world without our advice and to bring to pass His purposes without our assistance.

Contentment. God must be our center, the complete source of our adequacy, the One Thing we truly have to have. When we come to understand His sufficiency, and when we unreservedly trust Him to fill our needs for security and significance, we can live with a peace that is otherwise unattainable. Dag Hammarskjöld caught the essence of this peace in these words: "Before thee in humility, with thee in faith, in thee in peace."

To seek God, in truth rather than in pride and self-sufficiency, is to seek Him in *reverence*. It is God's prerogative, not ours, to set the terms of our relationship with Him, and that relationship will not be what we long for it to be until we let God be God. "*It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves; we are His people and the sheep of His pasture.*"

The great act of faith is when a man decides that he is not God.

OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES

January 19

LETTING PEOPLE BE PEOPLE

In God I have put my trust;
I will not be afraid.
What can man do to me?
Psalm 56:11

THE MORE WE TRUST GOD'S PERFECTION, THE BETTER WE CAN DEAL WITH HUMAN IMPERFECTION. There is no other healthy way to survive life in a broken world. Nothing short of divine love can equip us to love others as we should, for it is our security in God's perfect love that makes it safe to love those who are not perfect. Without the God who ordained them, the laws of love would be difficult and dangerous indeed.

When our ultimate trust is in God, we're not as vulnerable to the disappointments that arise in our dealings with others. We can be authentically patient and forbearing. We still deeply hurt when others fail us, to be sure, and it's not right to pretend otherwise. But in our pain, we are able to view this reality from a much larger perspective. When our earthly treasures are threatened, we don't react as we would if these were our only treasures.

To the extent that we have confidence in God's power to accomplish His purposes in His own way, we'll not be driven by the urge to control what takes place around us and to keep certain things from happening. "As your faith is strengthened you will find that there is no longer the need to have a sense of control, that things will flow as they will, and that you will flow with them, to your great delight and benefit" (Emmanuel).

When we have entrusted the fulfillment of our deepest needs to God, we won't look to other human beings to provide us with more than they can provide. Our expectations of others will be more realistic when we see God as the only Source of what we most deeply need. Secure in His love, we'll not place on anyone else the impossible burden of loving us perfectly.

It should also be said, however, that trust in God's perfection frees us to see our *own* limitations in a better way. Pride is, after all, a very tiresome, unproductive thing, and the humble recognition that we are not God is not confining; it is empowering. We'll do a better job of being human beings when we quit trying to do God's work and focus on the duties that are truly our own.

Faith enables persons to be persons because it lets God be God.

CARTER LINDBERG

January 20
HIDING FROM GOD

For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.
Luke 19:10

GOD IS EAGER TO BE FOUND BY US. ARE WE EAGER TO BE FOUND BY GOD? Just as we are to know God, we are to welcome being known by Him (1 Corinthians 8:3). Our privilege is not only to lay hold of God, but also to be laid hold of by God (Philippians 3:12). We should not only seek God, but also be aware that we are sought by Him (Matthew 18:10-14).

Like Adam and Eve, many of us prefer to hide from God. "And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden" (Genesis 3:8). Having been made in His image, we have a deep longing for God. But having sinned, we are also ashamed and fearful. There is a strong temptation for us to run away.

Strictly speaking, of course, there is no hiding from God. "There is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account" (Hebrews 4:13). The only question is whether we'll deal honorably with the truth when God confronts us with it.

God's gracious purpose is that we grow in holiness, which means growing to be like Him in our innermost character. This growth can be accomplished only if we accept the truth of what He sees in us now and surrender ourselves to His remedial love. Both the diagnosis and the treatment will likely involve serious pain. But shouldn't we desire what God wants for us as passionately as we desire what we want from Him? Shouldn't we want growth in our character as much as we want comfort, and holiness as much as happiness? Such good things can come to us only on the basis of truth. There is no other way. There is no acceptable substitute for reality. "Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my anxieties; and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Psalm 139:23,24). Without such honesty, there is no growth toward God.

Batter my heart, three personed God; for you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn and make me new.

JOHN DONNE

January 21

LABOR THAT FINALLY FAILS

Unless the LORD builds the house,
They labor in vain who build it;
Unless the LORD guards the city,
The watchman stays awake in vain.
Psalm 127:1

WITHOUT GOD, IT IS VAIN. *Nisi Dominus frustra*. This was the Latin saying, from Psalm 127:1, found over the door of many English homes in years gone by. It would be hard to find another handful of words that contain a greater store of wisdom.

To seek worldly ends without seeking God is to doom ourselves to eventual failure. Accomplishments that may appear significant right now will be seen to have fallen short when the final accounting is made. And the reason is simple. If we work at cross purposes with the Creator we fight against reality, and no one can do that and win in the end. "There is no wisdom or understanding or counsel against the LORD" (Proverbs 21:30).

Obviously if what we're doing involves sinful behavior, our work can't ultimately succeed. But even if there is nothing wrong with our deeds themselves, if we simply leave God out of our plans and work in our own strength to our own glory, we still will not accomplish anything meaningful. "Apart from God every activity is merely a passing whiff of insignificance" (Alfred North Whitehead). Mortal efforts alone are simply not sufficient to achieve anything more than temporary success.

Since it takes time for the real consequences of our actions to show up, the emptiness of work that disregards God is not always apparent right now. But eventually the failure of godless activity will become clear. In the long run, if not in the short, the law of the harvest always prevails: *we reap what we sow*. We can't break this law, we can only break ourselves against it.

It is said that man proposes, but God disposes. "There are many plans in a man's heart; nevertheless the LORD'S counsel, that will stand" (Proverbs 19:21). To seek anything less than God's will in our work is to exhaust ourselves in labor that must finally fail. The wise are willing to be warned about this.

Ancient of Days! Except thou deign
Upon the finished tasks to smile,
The workman's hand hath toiled in vain,
To hew the rock and rear the pile.

WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT

January 22

THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,
And the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.
Proverbs 9:10

THE SEARCH FOR WISDOM MUST NEVER BE SEPARATED FROM THE SEEKING OF GOD. If our philosophy is not empowered by sound theology, it faces an insurmountable barrier.

The fundamental truths about God constitute the *basics* of knowledge. God's reality is the most important thing that can be known and also the most obvious (Romans 1:19,20). In the ABCs of knowledge, we start with God. Those who disbelieve often see themselves as more advanced in their learning. But "no art, no philosophy, no science, no literature, no intellectual attainments or achievements of any kind whatever will compensate for ignorance of God; the soul that knows not him is an ignorant man; the time that knows not him is an ignorant age" (W. Clarkson).

The knowledge of God is also the *basis* of knowledge. It's the organizing principle that unifies everything else, the framework within which all the pieces of information fit together. "On the day I first really believed in God," wrote Dag Hammarskjöld, "for the first time life made sense to me and the world had meaning." In God, a chaos of facts becomes a cosmos of knowledge.

The plain truth is this: we won't grow wise without seeking God, and we won't seek God without humility, respect, and reverence. That is why the fear of the Lord is the "beginning" of wisdom. Pride always corrupts the learning process. The illusion that we know more than we do (coupled with the unwillingness to accept truths that might have unwelcome consequences) will keep us from making progress in wisdom. It is respect for the Creator that opens the door to intellectual growth.

Paul wrote about certain individuals who "suppress the truth" (Romans 1:18). There are those, he said, who evade the facts and refuse to "retain God in their knowledge" (Romans 1:28). These are strong words, without a doubt, but we need to hear them. Do we allow God to be the beginning of our real-world wisdom? How honestly do we accept this, the most primary of all truths: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1)?

Far more crucial than what we know or do not know
is what we do not want to know.

ERIC HOFFER

January 23

THE UNITED HEART

Teach me Your way, O LORD;
I will walk in Your truth;
Unite my heart to fear Your name.
Psalm 86:11

ONLY WHEN WE PURSUE GOD WITH SINGLENESS OF HEART DO WE FIND THE PEACE THAT COMES FROM INTEGRITY. If we seek with less than the whole heart, the result will be less than total joy.

Indecision about God is described in our English Bibles as “double-mindedness” — and double-mindedness is a costly habit. With so much contentment at stake, why do we waver? Why don’t we choose God more wholeheartedly? Even though we say we desire fellowship with God, perhaps we’re not willing to let go of the alternative. We suppose there must be a way to have the best of both worlds. But such attempts are proverbially unwise. “Progress always consists in taking one or another of two alternatives, abandoning the attempt to combine them” (Albert Schweitzer). When the choice is between God and the devil, the eclectic approach is the very worst choice of all.

“Unite my heart to fear Your name.” This is a prayer for the integrity of a “pure” heart, one that is not only *clean*, but also *decisive*. James wrote, “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you . . . *purify* your hearts, you *double-minded*” (James 4:8). What we need is the courage to pursue God with singleness of purpose. We should pray that God will “give to the intellect, wisdom to comprehend that one thing; to the heart, sincerity to receive this understanding; to the will, purity that wills only one thing” (Søren Kierkegaard). Those with godly integrity are those who know and love and will just one thing: the glory of God.

In the end, some will look back and see that many good things were lost because they lingered in indecision. While they delayed, with hearts divided and minds not made up, they forfeited many of the blessings that could have come from disciplined action.

So while there is time, may we aspire to the joys of the united heart. May we be devout in our devotion and wholehearted in our holiness. May God help us to make up our minds.

If you had any idea how much inward peace you would gain for yourself, and how much joy you would bring to others, by devoting yourself single-heartedly to God, you would certainly pay more attention to your spiritual progress.

THOMAS À KEMPIS

January 24

THE WORK OF GATHERING AND COLLECTING

For God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy to a man who is good in His sight; but to the sinner He gives the work of gathering and collecting, that he may give to him who is good before God.

This also is vanity and grasping for the wind. *Ecclesiastes 2:26*

LEAVE GOD OUT OF CONSIDERATION, AND OUR LIVES IN THIS WORLD COME DOWN TO NOTHING MORE THAN GAINING AND GETTING RID OF THINGS. If nothing exists except the natural order, then our activities are simply variations on the theme of “gathering and collecting.” The pack rat and we are accomplishing just about the same thing.

Bertrand Russell cynically said that there are two kinds of human work: “first, altering the position of matter at or near the earth’s surface relatively to other matter” and “second, telling other people to do so.” If there is no God, Russell is right. The sublimest act of which a human being is capable would mean no more than the movement of molecules from one place to another, the mere manipulation of *things*. We would be, indeed, just “the janitors of [our] possessions” (Frank Lloyd Wright).

Deep inside, of course, we want to believe there’s more to life than gathering and collecting. We seem to need a relationship with a Being who is higher than we. But are we merely engaging in wishful thinking? If we are, then that in itself is a depressing thought. It means we have evolved to a point where our deepest need is for a significance that is impossible in the real world. We are doomed to die of spiritual suffocation, desperately needing “air” that doesn’t exist outside our own imagination.

But God does exist. And our longing for significance is a clue to our creation in His image. We were designed to do more than manipulate material things. Jesus said, “Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses” (Luke 12:15). If we disregard God, all that’s left is the dissipation of ourselves in gathering and collecting, and every “increased possession loads us with a new weariness” (John Ruskin). But so much more is possible for God-created persons! How very sad it is when we expend ourselves materialistically and settle for the “barrenness of a busy life.”

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers.

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

January 25

LESS CAN BE MORE

For whoever desires to save his life will lose it,
but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.

Matthew 16:25

WHEN WE SEEK OUR ULTIMATE MEANING AND FULFILLMENT IN GOD, THE RESULT IS NOT LESS ENJOYMENT BUT MORE. It is ironic but true: we get the most this life has to offer when we pay primary attention to something else. Temporal things are best enjoyed serendipitously. They surprise us with the greatest delight at those times when we're busy looking for something else (or more properly Someone else). So by demanding less of this life, we get more than if we made it our all in all.

The good things of God's creation are meant for our enjoyment. Solomon said, "Here is what I have seen: it is good and fitting for one to eat and drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labor in which he toils under the sun all the days of his life which God gives him; for it is his heritage" (Ecclesiastes 5:18). Within the limits of their rightful use, temporal things are deeply gratifying. A problem arises, however, when we make earthly enjoyments our main pursuit. Not only will we lose our souls for having worshiped the creation rather than the Creator, but we will have lost the true joy that comes from the creation itself.

A similar principle governs our interaction with other people. Our need for personal relationship is very deep, but we were never meant to find the ultimate fulfillment of that need in our fellow human beings. Only God can perfectly fill our hearts with love. And if we look to those around us to do what God alone can do, not only will we corrupt our relationship with God, but we will damage our human relationships with unfair expectations.

There is a sense in which we are too conservative about earthly pleasures and human relationships. Like the tight-fisted investor obsessed with protecting his principal, we lose much in the long run by our refusal to put the lesser at risk in order to gain the greater. Not only that, but like Scrooge, we also miss out on the enjoyment of the very wealth we've attached so much importance to. There is nothing in this world that we won't enjoy more if we learn to let go of it. Less idolatry means more joy.

Aim at heaven and you get earth thrown in.
Aim at earth and you get neither.

C. S. LEWIS

January 26

HEARTS THAT FEEL NOTHING

I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth.

Revelation 3:15,16

THE BLEAKEST CONDITION OF THE HUMAN HEART IS THAT IN WHICH WE FEEL NOTHING, NOT EVEN ABOUT GOD. If we absolutely couldn't feel anything at all, we would be beyond any hope.

The strongest language in Scripture is reserved for the dull of heart, those who simply don't care about God one way or the other. For that reason, it is sobering to observe that our world is a world gone gray. Modern life is all but defined by nihilistic boredom and indifference. Jaded as we are, most of our acute social ills are symptoms of a chronic emptiness of heart. We have become, as T. S. Eliot warned, "hollow men." And this hollowness, this world-weary nothingness, is frightening in its implications. We are never closer to hell than when our hearts feel . . . nothing.

We often think of the "hardened" heart as one that is angry and defiant in its self-will. But the hardest heart of all is the one that no longer feels *anything*, not even hatred. God gave us hearts that were meant to *respond*. When they no longer do so, when quite natural feelings of love and gratitude are not evoked even by the acts of God, we're in grave danger. It is good to be warned concerning those who are "without natural affection" (Romans 1:31 KJV) and those who are "past feeling" (Ephesians 4:19). These terms may sound extreme, but this is where we're all headed if we don't let our hearts respond to God as they were meant to.

One of the most memorable phrases in the King James translation of the Bible is found in Hebrews 4:15. There it says that Christ, as our great High Priest, can be "touched with the feeling of our infirmities." This is an astounding thought. Jesus Christ feels our infirmities and moves toward us in love. But what do *we* feel? Toward whom do *we* move? Do we experience our faith as something both intellectually believed and emotionally felt? If our hearts don't feel anything, it is "high time to awake out of sleep" (Romans 13:11). It is later than we think.

In the world it is called tolerance, but in hell it is called despair . . .
the sin that believes in nothing, interferes with nothing, enjoys
nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing,
and remains alive because there is nothing for which it will die.

DOROTHY SAYERS

January 27

THE GREAT PHYSICIAN

When Jesus heard it, He said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance." *Mark 2:17*

OUR MOST SERIOUS AILMENTS ARE NOT PHYSICAL BUT SPIRITUAL. We are hurt far more by the malignancies in our character than by the illnesses in our body. And it is the removal of these sins in the heart that God is concerned with. The Great Physician desires to restore our spiritual health and wholeness.

If we want to improve, we must be honest and open to the truth about our character right now. Not even the Great Physician can help us if we're not willing to be examined. Trying to hide our symptoms and pretending that nothing very serious is wrong will only result in our getting worse. An accurate diagnosis will be humbling, to be sure, but we should still want to know the whole truth. David's prayer is that of an honest man: "Search me, O God, and know my heart . . . see if there is any wicked way in me" (Psalm 139:23,24). We must desire to see ourselves as God sees us.

But more than that, we must cultivate confidence that God knows what He's doing. Whether we understand the wisdom of His plan or not, we must trust both the accuracy of His diagnosis and the effectiveness of His treatment. We must also have the courage to submit to the healing process that He prescribes. The cancer cannot be cut away from our character without radical surgery. Because sin is so entangled in our thinking, the purging operation is always painful and often lengthy. But as with physical disease, if we're not willing to endure momentary pain in order to become healthy later on, our only option is to get sicker and sicker. We can stay in our sickly "comfort" zone or we can move toward greater health, but not both at the same time. "I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live" (Deuteronomy 30:19).

How much commitment do we have to the truth about ourselves? For all our talk about loving the truth, do we really desire to see all that God sees when He examines our hearts? There will be no redemption for those unwilling to face reality.

When we go to our meeting with God, we should go like a patient to his doctor, first to be thoroughly examined and afterwards to be treated for our ailment. Then something will happen when you pray.

O. HALLESBY

January 28
SHINING FACES

But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord,
are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory,
just as by the Spirit of the Lord. 2 *Corinthians* 3:18

SOONER OR LATER, OUR LIVES MANIFEST OUR THOUGHTS ABOUT GOD. Eventually even our faces give us away. Depending on whether our hearts are inclined toward God as He truly is, our faces will glow or they will glower.

Nothing about us is more important than our conception of God. Each day our characters are unfolding and developing, and the direction in which they develop is determined mainly by our conception of God. In outward action, we tend to move toward whatever image of God we harbor in the depths of our hearts.

What if our basic view of God is false? Whether we've deliberately concocted an image of God as we prefer Him to be or we've simply been careless, errors in thinking about God are dangerous. The essence of idolatry is to misconceive God and then act as if our misconceptions were true. Idolatry is deadly because it sets before our character a goal that is an illusion, a lie. The idolater destroys himself by growing in reality's opposite direction.

Think, however, of the good things that must come to pass if the God of our desire is also the God of truth and real life. There is no greater wisdom than wisdom about God, and a "man's wisdom makes his face shine, and the sternness of his face is changed" (*Ecclesiastes* 8:1). It is not uncommon for changes in our inward character to show up outwardly, particularly in our faces. When the changes are positive in nature, produced by a more truthful conception of God, the results are often striking. As the old adage puts it, the portrait of a godly soul is a shining face.

Diligent seekers of God must seek the truth about Him at all costs. "Sinning is nothing but turning from God one's face and having turned it thus, turning it toward death" (*Angelus Silesius*). By the time we reach our ultimate goal, our faces will bear either the glory of our soul's growth or the grimness of its decay.

The gods we worship write their names on our faces, be sure of that. And a man will worship something — have no doubt about that, either. He may think that his tribute is paid in secret in the dark recesses of his heart — but it will out. That which dominates will determine his life and character.

Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming.

RALPH WALDO EMERSON

January 29

SMALL STEPS THAT LEAD TO GREAT UNDERSTANDING

And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him. *Luke 15:20*

BECAUSE THE PATH AHEAD SEEMS UNCERTAIN AND DIFFICULT, WE OFTEN FAIL TO TAKE THE STEPS THAT LIE CLEARLY BEFORE US. If we allow it to happen, doubt and difficulty can paralyze us. Not having found God already, and seeing no way out of our confusion, we neglect to seek Him at all. Our search for truth is stymied.

But the steps that we *could* take are the most important ones. Usually, it is small steps toward God, taken in trust, that lead to great understanding. Jesus spoke of the honest soul who “comes to the light” (John 3:21). Obviously, enlightenment must be sought, and the seeking can be arduous. But we do not “come to the light” by mere worry or fretfulness. More is involved than simply trying to figure things out intellectually.

Godly wisdom must be sought actively and obediently. If conscience can indicate only a step or two, then a great deal depends upon our taking those steps. What we don’t know must never prevent us from doing the duty we do know. We must use the light we already have — or cease to expect any more.

God graciously honors whatever steps we take in faith, even if those steps seem slight. Numerous biblical texts give us this confidence, such as “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you” (Matthew 7:7) and “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you” (James 4:8). God will see that we get the information we need to do the right thing, if doing the right thing is really what we intend.

Courage, much more than intelligence, is the key to great understanding in the things of God. The courageous not only think but *act with integrity to what they already know*. It is the honestly obedient who find the light they’re looking for, while the idly curious find only that the darkness grows more fearful. Active seekers are told: “If you seek Him, He will be found by you” (2 Chronicles 15:2). God is more than a disinterested witness to our quest. If our true purpose is to get back home, our Father will meet us much more than half way.

Whoso draws nigh to God one step through doubtings dim,
God will advance a mile in blazing light to him.

ANGELUS SILESIVS

January 30

TRUE HEART, BRAVE HEART

Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent council member, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, coming and taking courage, went in to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. *Mark 15:43*

HOW DANGEROUS A JOURNEY ARE WE WILLING TO UNDERTAKE IN ORDER TO GET TO GOD? Do we understand that seeking God requires a heart that is brave as well as true?

True Heart. The faith needed to seek God is a faith that is utterly sincere. The writer of Hebrews speaks of this when he says, "Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith" (Hebrews 10:22). We must not only make a genuine commitment to God, but we must keep that commitment with allegiance and loyalty. If our heart is true, it will pursue God in earnest.

Brave Heart. Spiritual growth, like any other real progress, is frightening. Since there is always loss as well as gain, we have to add courage to our sincerity. Great sacrifices are required; serious risks have to be taken. God has not guaranteed that our passage through this life will be completely safe. Some things will clearly be at risk, and we're urged to "count the cost" (Luke 14:25-33). If we delay embarking on a serious quest for God until we have hedged all our bets, then we're not worthy of God. Heading the list of the lost in Revelation 21:8 are the "cowardly," those who play it safe, afraid to pay the price to walk with God. It takes a brave heart to say such a thing as Paul, "Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ" (Philippians 3:8). And David, another man of courage, said, "Wait on the LORD; be of good courage, and He shall strengthen your heart" (Psalm 27:14).

In the hymn "Amazing Grace" there is a verse which says, "Through many dangers, toils, and snares I have already come; 'twas grace that brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home." Do we take these dangers seriously? Do we understand what's at stake if we fail to find safety in God? If nothing could go wrong on our journey, neither the true heart nor the brave would be needed. But where there is no real risk, faith is no real virtue.

Every advance in spiritual life has its corresponding dangers;
every step that we rise nearer God increases the depths
of the gulf into which we may fall.

ROBERT H. BENSON

January 31
JOYFUL STRENGTH

Do not sorrow, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.
Nehemiah 8:10

THE GREATEST STRENGTH WE CAN KNOW IS THE STRENGTH OF JOY IN GOD'S GOODNESS. Indeed, the very powers of hell quail before any person whose strength is the true joy of the Lord. And when we neglect to grow strong in this way, every other strength is but weakness. Without joy, our strength is easily broken.

Consider the source of Jesus' own strength. Only hours before He allowed Himself to be crucified, Jesus said to His disciples, "Therefore you now have sorrow, but I will see you again and your heart will rejoice, and your joy no one will take from you" (John 16:22). He prayed to God, "Now I come to You, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have My joy fulfilled in themselves" (John 17:13). John's account says that when the mob arrived to take Him, "Jesus therefore, knowing all things that would come upon Him, went forward and said to them, 'Whom are you seeking?' They answered Him, 'Jesus of Nazareth' . . . Now when He said to them, 'I am He,' they drew back and fell to the ground" (John 18:4-6). All the massed forces of evil in that hour of darkness had nothing with which to breach the fortress of joy within this great heart. Consequently, we are told to look "unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who *for the joy that was set before Him* endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:2). For nothing less than the joy set before Him, our Lord endured.

In the song that followed Israel's crossing of the Red Sea, Moses sang, "The LORD is my strength and song, and He has become my salvation; He is my God, and I will praise Him; my father's God, and I will exalt Him" (Exodus 15:2). The Lord is both our strength and our song. Is it not clear that He is our strength *when* He is our song? When we've grown honestly eager to bring glory to God and when showing gratitude to Him has become our greatest joy, then we will have grown "strong" in the highest and finest sense of that wonderful word.

Love feels no burden, thinks nothing of trouble,
attempts what is above its strength, pleads no excuse of impossibility . . .
It is therefore able to undertake all things, and warrants them to take effect,
where he who does not love, would faint and lie down.

THOMAS À KEMPIS

February 1

LONGING FOR GOD

He has made everything beautiful in its time.

Also He has put eternity in their hearts.

Ecclesiastes 3:11

WHILE WE CAN'T HELP BUT LONG FOR GOD, WE CAN, AND OFTEN DO, FAIL TO RECOGNIZE THIS LONGING FOR WHAT IT IS. Personal beings made for fellowship with their Creator will need Him in their hearts whether or not they do what they should about that need. "The yearning to know What cannot be known, to comprehend the Incomprehensible, to touch and taste the Unapproachable, arises from the image of God in the nature of man. Deep calleth unto deep . . . the soul senses its origin and longs to return to its Source" (A. W. Tozer).

This longing for God can be a great clue to what our lives really mean at the deepest level. When any longing is present, however faintly we may feel it, that is the signal of some incompleteness. Since what we need is often deeper and different than we think, we should consider our longings carefully. The eternal craving that refuses to go away, even when we're most completely enjoying this world, should not be denied. What we're needing is something much more than anything in the world itself.

Usually our longing for God is experienced as something quite vague. We are conscious only of a gentle tug at our hearts. Sometimes it feels like a sadness or a homesickness. At other times it feels like the foretaste of some great joy. We may sense it when we hear a lonely cello or see the sun set beyond the western sea. When a baby laughs in his mother's arms or an old woman weeps over her husband's corpse, we feel a joy and a sorrow tinged with something slightly mysterious. It is hard to describe, but it is unarguably there. Eternity is in our hearts.

In a broken world, however, our longing will at times take the form of outright pain. "For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now" (Romans 8:22). We long for more than we have because we were made for more than our hearts can reach right now.

Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home.

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

February 2

AWAKENING TO GOD

And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time
to awake out of sleep . . . The night is far spent, the day is at hand.

Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness,
and let us put on the armor of light. *Romans 13:11,12*

THE HEART CAN FULLY LOVE GOD ONLY WHEN THE MIND IS TRULY AWAKE TO HIM. Contrary to much of popular spirituality, biblical spirituality celebrates the mind. The mind need not be quieted for the heart to assert itself. Indeed, since the heart follows the mind and our feelings flow from our thinking, the mind must not only be awake but truthfully informed about God if our heart is to have its proper response to Him. Authentic love for God requires accurate knowledge of God, and such knowledge will not come into our possession if our minds are not engaged.

Sad to say, however, many of us spend the greater part of our spiritual lives asleep. We don't make the effort to concentrate on the critical issues that confront our souls. Our minds are not actively engaged with respect to God. As far as all the most important things are concerned, we simply sleepwalk through life. Years are lost in darkness and dullness.

Yet all is not lost. If honesty compels us to admit that we've not been as alert as we ought to be, it is urgent that we wake up. And the biblical injunction to wake up presumes that we can decide to do so. The Light necessary for our spiritual enlightenment is already shining (John 8:12; 1 John 2:8). It must be our choice, however, to "awake out of sleep" (Romans 13:11). Without such a decision on our part, the Light will have little significant effect on us. The old saying that there are "none so blind as those who will not see" reflects an important biblical truth (John 9:39-41).

So if we wish our hearts to be aroused to a fervent love of God, then our minds must be awake and aware. If Christianity is what we're thinking about, there need be no conflict between love and knowledge. We must pay reverent attention to the truths by which God would stimulate our hearts. Since there is no being alive without being alert, it is time to shake off our stupor.

O sweet and loving God,
When I stay asleep too long,
Oblivious to all your many blessings,
Then, please, wake me up,
And sing to me your joyful song.

MECHTHILD OF MAGDEBURG

February 3
DISCOVERY

... so that they should seek the Lord,
in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him,
though He is not far from each one of us. *Acts 17:27*

OUR DILIGENT SEEKING OF GOD CAN BE BASED ON THE CONFIDENCE THAT HE IS THERE TO BE FOUND. Human beings are hopeful by nature, it is true, but they are not merely "wishful thinkers." The deep human longing for God is a need for something that really exists. If we truly and honestly search for God, we will, in time, certainly find what we need to find.

Confidence. Among the great discoveries in the natural world, some were made accidentally, but many more were made by explorers who were confident of the existence of the thing they were looking for. In a similar way, it is faith, based on reasonable conclusions drawn from credible evidence, that propels us forward in our discovery of God. We should be careful, rather than naive. But having been careful, we should also be optimistic.

Patience. The person who is sure that the object of his search is actually there waiting to be found will not be unduly upset by short-term delays or frustrations in the quest. He will simply keep looking, patiently moving closer and closer to the thing that has intrigued him. So shouldn't our seeking of God be patient? After all, this quest is the most significant endeavor in the world. Should our faith not steady us as we move forward a little each day? "So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up" (Galatians 6:9 NRSV).

Persistence. It is said that Thomas Edison tried several thousand wrong approaches to the electric light bulb before he found what he was looking for. His confidence that the search was legitimate, coupled with his patience in the process, gave him a legendary persistence, no doubt amazing to those unacquainted with the power of belief. Likewise, the question is not whether we are willing to look for God, but whether we are willing to look again and again . . . and if necessary, yet again. Like a bubble making its way from the bottom of the aquarium to the top, perhaps momentarily detained but never completely deterred, we should seek our Creator's presence with persistence, until the day of glorious discovery when we look upon His face.

Time discovers the truth.

SENECA

February 4

EVERLASTING SANCTUARY

Then I heard a voice from heaven saying to me,
"Write: 'Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.'"
"Yes," says the Spirit, "that they may rest from their labors,
and their works follow them." *Revelation 14:13*

AT THE END OF THE ROAD, WE CAN GO TO AN ETERNAL PLACE OF REST AND BEAUTY AND STRENGTH. The solace and safety for which we long are things that can be fully realized. What is true in time will be even more true in eternity: "There is a place of quiet rest, near to the heart of God" (Cleveland B. McAfee). It is to be a place of "sanctuary" in the very truest sense of the word.

One of Dalhart Windberg's paintings is called *Everlasting Sanctuary*. A print of that painting first arrested my attention in the hallway of the hospital where my mother lay dying. It drew me immediately into a world both strong and serene. Later, friends gave me a small copy to hang in my home, and I'm always eager to enter the scene that it depicts. When I am world-weary, I can hear Windberg's distant waterfall. I can smell the cool evergreens that shelter the river and feel the gentle warmth of the meadow beneath my feet. A deep desire for sanctuary stirs within me.

In literature, I think there is no more powerful evocation of sanctuary than Imladris, or Rivendell, in the work of J. R. R. Tolkien. In the imaginative world of Middle Earth, where good and evil are at war, Rivendell is the elven refuge in a steep, hidden valley cutting through the moors beneath the Misty Mountains. Rivendell resonates with me because I know it represents reality. It connects me to a truth that is larger than my own life.

It's not inevitable, of course, that I will arrive at the eternal sanctuary of God's home. If I do, it will be the consequence of right choices about God that I am making right now. I know that not every road leads to the gate of heaven. There is only one that does, and I put my feet on that path when by faith I courageously acquiesce to what I know of God's will.

Bring us, O Lord God, at the last awakening into the house
and gate of heaven, to enter into that gate and dwell in that house,
where there shall be no darkness nor dazzling, but one equal light;
no noise nor silence, but one equal music;
no fears nor hopes, but an equal possession;
no ends nor beginnings, but one equal eternity,
in the habitations of thy majesty and thy glory, world without end.

JOHN DONNE

February 5

THE BATTLEFIELD OF THE HUMAN HEART

If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it. *Genesis 4:7*

IN THE AGE-OLD CONFLICT BETWEEN RIGHT AND WRONG, IT IS OUR EVERY HEARTS THAT ARE AT RISK. The tempter seeks to destroy us by deceiving us and drawing our will away from God. And to the extent that we allow our hearts to be turned against God, we allow evil to gain another unfortunate victory. We become yet another name on Satan's long list of victims.

Our hearts are under attack on all fronts. There is not a single dimension of our thinking where we are not challenged by evil and confronted with crucial choices. In our intellect, the choice is between truth and deception. In our affections, we must decide between love and hatred. In our will, the stark alternatives are obedience to God and disobedience. Unless we determine not to let it happen, wrongheadedness, and even wrongheartedness, will overwhelm us in each of these realms and wipe out every good thing we were created to enjoy.

These truths are sobering, to be sure. We have an obvious need for humility and vigilance in everything that pertains to our spiritual welfare. But it is also possible for us to have courage and hope. Endeavoring to strengthen the backbone of his young friend Timothy, Paul wrote, "For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind" (2 Timothy 1:7). We are caught up in a cosmic struggle, but the Creator of this cosmos is far greater in power and wisdom than all the forces of evil combined. The rightful King reigns from His powerful throne!

The devil can tempt us and test us, but he does not have the power to overrule our choice. On the other hand, God could overrule our choice, but He will not. Having given us the freedom to choose, He *exhorts* us to resist the devil's deception and to hold onto the truth. He *invites* us to find in Him that which is real life. So the basic issue is easy to understand and dangerous to forget. Moses captured it in his historic words to Israel: "I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live" (Deuteronomy 30:19).

The devil wrestles with God, and the field of battle is the human heart.

FEODOR DOSTOEVSKY

February 6

CLARITY

Then they said to Moses, "You speak with us,
and we will hear; but let not
God speak with us, lest we die." *Exodus 20:19*

AS LONG AS WE CAN AVOID BEING "TOLD" WHAT GOD REQUIRES OF US, WE THINK WE CAN POSTPONE DOING ANYTHING ABOUT OUR RESPONSIBILITIES. If somehow we can say that we're not sure what God's will is, we can substitute ambiguity for action. But when God speaks, the issue is suddenly clarified. The focus then shifts from the doubtful issue of whether God's will is this or that to the rather simple issue of whether we're going to do it or not. God having spoken and we having heard His will, there is nowhere to hide. The time for obedience has come.

Suppose that I have incurred an expense from a business in a city far away, an expense that in my opinion is at least unwelcome, and maybe even unreasonable. The first thing I can tell myself is that I don't have to pay the debt until the bill actually arrives. But beyond that, until the bill arrives I can tell myself that there's a possibility the debt will not even be assessed against me — if the company has not actually "spoken," there's a chance it really has no desire to collect the debt after all. Safely hidden behind this barrier of uncertainty, I will probably procrastinate going to the mailbox. I know that the moment I find the bill in my hands, the issue will be clarified. Immediately, the focus will shift from the question of what the will of the creditor might be to the question of whether I'm going to pay the bill or not.

Is there a clue here as to why we study the Bible so little? And perhaps a clue also as to why, having studied the Bible, we spend so much time in textual controversy and doctrinal debate? Surely God's word is not as hard to comprehend as the vast number of our disputes would seem to indicate. Sometimes the more likely possibility is that we are just putting off "going to the mailbox." The complexity of our talk about what God's will "might" be is a substitute for action in regard to what our conscience already knows. God has not only spoken, but He has spoken clearly. What is needed from us is a little less talk and a lot more action.

Why are we so terrified for God to speak to us?
Is it because we know that when God speaks we must
either do what He asks or tell Him we will not obey?

OSWALD CHAMBERS

February 7

FOR THE PURPOSE OF OBEDIENCE

The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law. *Deuteronomy 29:29*

GOD'S WORD IS NOT GIVEN TO US FOR THE PURPOSE OF IDLE SPECULATION BUT FOR THE PURPOSE OF OBEDIENCE. We misappropriate the truth God has revealed when we make it merely the grist for intellectual debate. The greater design of the Scriptures — requiring more effort and promising a richer reward — is to provide the practical materials for building a better, more obedient life. When we study, we ought to be looking for this “obeyable” information. To study for any other reason is actually dangerous.

In the matter of obedience, one problem is that we delay obeying what we've learned from the Scriptures because we can't see as far down the theoretical road ahead as we'd like. Perhaps we don't fully understand why God would require such a thing as the Scriptures have indicated. Or it may not be clear to us what the consequences would be if we took God at His word. Or we may not see how this or that act of obedience fits into the overall scheme of God's will. There is no shortage of obstacles, more or less theoretical in nature, that can stymie the serious student who wants not only to obey but to understand what is being done. The irony of growth, however, is that understanding comes from moving ahead with our obedience, rather than holding back. In any case, understanding can wait, but obedience cannot.

But another problem related to obedience is that we often delay doing our duty until we feel that we can get it exactly right. We may think we need to make more progress in the realm of spiritual theory before we can do very well in the realm of spiritual practice. And so we linger in our many abstractions, seeking the strength we need for obedient living. Yet solid spiritual progress lies down the clear road of honest obedience to what we presently know is right, not the winding path of theoretical curiosities. We can't seek God without using our minds to the best of our ability, it's true. But neither can we find God without carrying out what our minds have learned already.

The really important thing in life is not the avoidance of mistakes, but the obedience of faith. By obedience, the man is led step by step to correct his errors, whereas nothing will ever happen to him if he doesn't get going.

PAUL TOURNIER

February 8

WE MUST TRY TO GROW

Then He said to the man, "Stretch out your hand."
And he stretched it out, and it was restored
as whole as the other. *Matthew 12:13*

IT IS TRUE SPIRITUALLY, AS WELL AS PHYSICALLY, THAT SIGNIFICANT GROWTH REQUIRES THE EXERTION OF EFFORT. It is inconsistent to say that we want to grow but do nothing about it. Passivity only breeds weakness and leads to stagnation.

Dallas Willard, in his provocative *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, quotes William Law's statement that "God has made no promises of mercy to the slothful and negligent. His mercy is only offered to our frail and imperfect, but best endeavours, to practise all manner of righteousness" and also Henry Thoreau's wry observation that "men will lie on their backs, talking about the fall of man, and never make an effort to get up." A life that grows toward God is an active enterprise, not merely a passive status to be enjoyed. To be a Christian, one must "walk in Him" (Colossians 2:6).

Those who move forward are those who reach forward "to those things which are ahead" (Philippians 3:13). Paul urged Timothy, "Meditate on these things; *give yourself entirely to them*, that your progress may be evident to all" (1 Timothy 4:15). The gospel, the glad tidings of our salvation, must not simply be heard and appreciated; it must be responded to. Not only at first, but forever afterward, the gospel must be "obeyed" (Romans 1:5; Galatians 3:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:8; 1 Peter 4:17; etc.).

It is a pity that so many individuals have come to think of religion and spirituality as the mere giving of mental assent to correct doctrine, as if life in God had to do only with the thinking of the mind and nothing to do with the activity of the body. But the flesh is not inherently evil, and the enjoyment of grace by faith does not preclude the requirement of bodily obedience. Our bodies, in fact, can be a valuable ally in our spiritual growth. Trained by the effort involved in spiritual disciplines and godly habits, our bodies can aid and support us in our seeking of God. In Jesus' own life, we see an obvious link between His inward strength and the habits of His outward activity. If He had to exert effort, should we expect to grow strong by merely passive means? Bodily, as well as mentally, we must seek God with diligence.

The lazy man does not, will not, cannot pray, for prayer demands energy.

EDWARD MCKENDREE BOUNDS

February 9

UNCONDITIONAL SURRENDER

And not only as we had hoped, but they first gave themselves to the Lord,
and then to us by the will of God. *2 Corinthians 8:5*

TO SEEK GOD SINCERELY IS TO GIVE OURSELVES TO HIM COMPLETELY. The good things that come from life in God come to those who yield themselves to Him entirely. If we hold back parts of our hearts or our lives from His benevolence, we will miss the unique blessings that flow from commitment. If we sow sparingly, we will not reap bountifully (*2 Corinthians 9:6*).

“A living sacrifice” is the expression Paul used to characterize the yielding of ourselves to God: “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service” (*Romans 12:1*). In the Law of Moses, animals that were sacrificed to God had to be slain. It was not possible for the worshiper to retain the living animal for himself and still give a part of it to the Lord. The very life of the animal itself had to be given. Corresponding to those sacrifices, our offering must be total. Although ours is a “living” sacrifice, the gift must be no less complete than if our bodies were to be slain. God deserves no less than our all, both inwardly and outwardly.

But the partial approach not only tries to give God less than He deserves, but it involves us in great difficulty and frustration. Just as a timid soul can't leap a large chasm by taking two medium-sized jumps, the requirements of our new life can't be met by the half-hearted efforts of our old mind. If we try to hang on to all that we think is ours and give God only enough of our outward behavior to get us to heaven, we are attempting the impossible. The old self will never be happy having to give up parts of itself to God. Since it never relinquishes its own desires except when forced to do so, the old self will never find Jesus' yoke “easy” and His burden “light” (*Matthew 11:30*). So the old self must die and a new self must come to life. We must be “crucified with Christ” (*Galatians 2:20*). When that happens, we will then find that the Lord's “commandments are not burdensome” (*1 John 5:3*).

The Christian way is different: harder, and easier. Christ says,
“Give me all. I don't want so much of your time and so much of your money
and so much of your work: I want You. I have not come to torment your
natural self, but to kill it. No half-measures are any good.”

C. S. LEWIS

February 10

ON BEING A PERSON “AFTER GOD’S OWN HEART”

But now your kingdom shall not continue. The LORD has sought for Himself a man after His own heart, and the LORD has commanded him to be commander over His people, because you have not kept what the LORD commanded you. *1 Samuel 13:14*

THE GREATNESS OF CHARACTER THAT DISTINGUISHED DAVID FROM SAUL LAY NOT IN DAVID’S OUTWARD CIRCUMSTANCES OR EVEN HIS INBORN ATTRIBUTES, BUT IN THE CHOSEN DISPOSITION OF HIS HEART. He was a man “after God’s own heart.” What attributes are suggested by this remarkable phrase? No doubt the essence of David’s character could be described in numerous ways, but the story of his life indicates at least the following requirements if we are to be of the same spiritual caliber as he.

We must genuinely respect God’s will. As a man of faith, David could be counted on to trust God’s wisdom implicitly, carry out God’s instructions faithfully, and depend on God’s help humbly. He showed his respect for the *person* of God by taking the *will* of God with utter seriousness, and this disposition is no less necessary for us than for him. It is useless to aspire to David’s character if we’re not willing, as he was, to move at God’s command.

We must reverently repent of sin. David’s integrity is never seen any more clearly than on those occasions when he was confronted with the fact of sin in his life. Just as he understood the need for godly sorrow, David also understood how to accept chastisement and make real corrections in his conduct. When he did wrong, he did what was right about the wrong he had done.

We must doggedly refuse to give up seeking God. Like everyone who has ever truly entered the arena, David knew what the tears of defeat tasted like. Yet one thing could always be said about him: he got up every time he was knocked down. It would take more discouragement than there is in all the regions of hell to keep a man with this kind of heart from seeking God. Jesus said, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:21), and David’s life is one heroic illustration of that principle. The things we deeply desire determine our character. Do we wish to be people “after God’s own heart,” really and truly? Then we must, in our own hearts, desire and cherish the treasures of His will more than the trinkets of our own moods.

A man’s heart is right when he wills what God wills.

THOMAS AQUINAS

February 11

THE FACE OF FRIENDSHIP

And Jacob said, "No, please, if I have now found favor in your sight, then receive my present from my hand, inasmuch as I have seen your face as though I had seen the face of God, and you were pleased with me."

Genesis 33:10

NO ONE EVER CAME TO GOD IN TRUE PENITENCE WITHOUT FINDING GOD'S WELCOME TO BE THAT OF A FRIEND. Having refused to live by the laws of our Creator's kingdom, we know that justice demands our banishment from His presence. As rebels against His love, we are right to fear the consequences of our rebellion. But the wonder of God's character is the grace by which He is willing and able to make us His friends once again.

Jacob had every reason to fear the wrath of Esau, the brother he had so treacherously supplanted before fleeing to Haran. As he returned to Canaan, Jacob prepared many gifts, hoping to placate the anger that he assumed would still be smoldering in his brother's heart. Contrary to all expectation, however, Esau was eager to be reconciled. "Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept" (Genesis 33:4). Jacob's gifts were not necessary, Esau insisted, but Jacob begged that these be accepted as tokens of his gratitude for the grace he'd been shown. Jacob knew that he had no rightful claim to the friendship of either God or his brother. That his brother's face was friendly was as unexpected as the fact that he'd been allowed to survive in his wrestling with God the night before. Slowly, Jacob was growing in his understanding of God. He was learning that those who will struggle for what is right and deal realistically with their sins can always expect a friendly welcome in the presence of God. And Jacob saw something of this grace in his brother's countenance: "I have seen your face as though I had seen the face of God, and you were pleased with me."

When we come to our senses and seek God honestly and penitently, we too will find that He is "gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger and great in mercy" (Psalm 145:8). As traitors, we deserve to be banished from His presence. But such is the love of our Father that He is eager to welcome us back home.

This, this is the God we adore,
Our faithful, unchangeable friend.
Whose love is as great as his power,
And neither knows measure nor end.

JOSEPH HART

February 12

THE LOVE OF A SOUL NEAR ITS HOME

The silver-haired head is a crown of glory,
if it is found in the way of righteousness.
Proverbs 16:31

IN THE LATER YEARS OF LIFE, OUR HEARTS CAN COME TO LOVE MANY THINGS ABOUT GOD THAT OUR MINDS LEARNED IN OUR YOUTH. In our journey toward God, experience may enable us to appreciate Job's statement: "I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You" (Job 42:5). It is only the passing of years, for most of us, that can turn our knowledge of the facts into gentle understanding and affectionate wisdom. In old age, we are better able to see just how true the truth really is.

To begin with, there is a difference between knowing God in theory and knowing Him in experience. If the choice is between truth and falsehood, it's obviously a good thing to be taught the truth about God when we are young. But it's only when we've had a few years to work with the truth during life's ups and downs that we really appreciate the value of what we learned about God in our earlier years. It's in the actual living of life that we come to cherish the truthfulness of God's truth. David said, "Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good" (Psalm 34:8). The longer we have lived with God, the sweeter His goodness will begin to taste.

But there is something else about age. As F. W. Robertson said, "Manhood in the Christian life is a better thing than boyhood, because it is a riper thing; and old age ought to be a brighter and a calmer, and a more serene thing than manhood." One reason for this serenity is that, normally, the older Christian is closer to reaching heaven than the younger is. And the closer we get to our true home, the more we cherish the love of our Father who waits for us there. It was not Paul the young man, but Paul "the aged" (Philemon 9), who wrote these words of hopeful love: "Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but to all who have loved His appearing" (2 Timothy 4:6-8). As the years go by, the "sweetly solemn thought" alluded to in Phoebe Cary's great hymn will fill our hearts more fully: "One sweetly solemn thought comes to me o'er and o'er: today I'm nearer to my home than e'er I've been before."

Old age can love God better than a doctor of theology can.

February 13

GOD NOT ONLY GIVES, HE GRACIOUSLY RECEIVES

I know also, my God, that You test the heart and have pleasure in uprightness. As for me, in the uprightness of my heart I have willingly offered all these things; and now with joy I have seen Your people, who are present here to offer willingly to You. O LORD God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, our fathers, keep this forever in the intent of the thoughts of the heart of Your people, and fix their heart toward You. *1 Chronicles 29:17,18*

WHAT CAN WE POSSIBLY GIVE THAT WOULD BRING PLEASURE TO GOD? Not one of us has ever given to Him anything that was not flawed or incomplete. Is there any offering within our power to give that would not offend the majesty of God? It seems almost presumptuous to think of our “giving” to Him. And yet, we’re not only encouraged to give, but we’re encouraged to believe that our gifts are truly significant to God.

The very desire that we have to give to God is, of course, a response to His love for us. John wrote, “In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us . . . We love Him because He first loved us” (1 John 4:10,19). In any giving between us and the Creator, it is always God who takes the initiative. Whatever we give is only a giving back to God. “For all things come from You, and of Your own we have given to You” (1 Chronicles 29:14).

It remains true, however, that we can give to God. And although our gifts fall short of the perfection He deserves, the wondrous truth is that God is still ready to receive them. Jesus went so far as to say, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me” (Revelation 3:20). The Lord is eager to enjoy our sincere hospitality. He is pleased to dine at our table!

Even so, it takes a certain courage to offer ourselves back to God. We are tempted to think that none of our feeble efforts to love God will make any difference to Him. But they will indeed. When we continue to offer God whatever we can, getting back up after each defeat and resisting the devil’s suggestion that we ought to give up and quit, what we’re offering to God is a loyal heart. And not only does God find real joy in this gift, He surrounds us with the strength to move forward. “For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show Himself strong on behalf of those whose heart is loyal to Him” (2 Chronicles 16:9).

God hears no sweeter music than the cracked chimes of the courageous human spirit ringing in imperfect acknowledgment of his perfect love.

JOSHUA LOTH LIEBMAN

February 14

AN IMPORTANT REDEFINITION

You have also given me the shield of Your salvation;
Your gentleness has made me great.
You enlarged my path under me;
So my feet did not slip.
2 Samuel 22:36,37

JUDGED BY ANY WORTHY STANDARD, KING DAVID WAS A GREAT MAN. But the best part of his greatness was something nobler and stronger than we might expect, and it came from a source we may find surprising. David's understanding of both his strength and its source is reflected in this honest prayer to God: "Your gentleness has made me great." This is an intriguing statement, full of interesting implications concerning our concept of greatness.

Our world sorely needs a redefinition of greatness, does it not? Despite what many people think, power and authority alone do not constitute greatness. Nor do talent, skill, and accomplishment. More is involved, obviously, than wealth, worldly recognition, and fame. These things may often coincide with greatness, but they themselves do not define a person as great. All such things are to human greatness what clothing is to human beauty.

We don't have to know much about David to recognize that in addition to all the trappings of greatness, he possessed some attributes that went much deeper. One of these was the patient, compassionate use of the power at his disposal. Not many "great" men would have spared the life of Saul, as David did when he could have easily done away with his worst enemy (1 Samuel 24). Where did David learn what he knew about true greatness? How did he acquire such strong love and powerful patience? The simple, magnificent truth is that David had learned to treat others as God had treated him: "Your gentleness has made me great."

We can't seek God rightly if we're seeking wrong things for ourselves. In particular, if our intentions are based on brute-force concepts of human greatness, we're on a path that leads away from God, not toward Him. Now and then we need to redefine our personal concept of what greatness is and where it comes from. It is nothing less powerful than God's *gentleness* that can make us great. And when it has done so, our own gentleness will be the strongest part of our strength.

Greatness lies, not in being strong, but in the right use of strength.

HENRY WARD BEECHER

February 15

THE ULTIMATE PARADIGM

Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; for as I was passing the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you." *Acts 17:22,23*

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF OUR LIFE'S "JOURNEY" IS LARGELY DETERMINED BY THE "MAPS" OF REALITY THAT ARE STORED IN OUR MINDS. If our maps are wrong — if they don't accurately represent the "territory" as it really is — we'll be misdirected and end up far from where we need to go as human beings. In the end, we'll be disappointed with our "destination" if we've based our actions on erroneous ideas about what is true and real. Our perceptions of reality are very important. They need to be as accurate as possible.

But if we can see that our maps, our "paradigms," are important in life generally, can we see how crucial they are when the specific subject is God? If by "theology" we mean the "study of God," there could hardly be a study of more practical importance. A. W. Tozer was right when he argued, "It is impossible to keep our moral practices sound and our inward attitudes right while our idea of God is erroneous or inadequate. If we would bring back spiritual power to our lives, we must begin to think of God more nearly as He is." To have maps of *this* territory that turn out to be wrong is to have a problem of eternal proportions.

None of us can say we are entirely free of this problem. Even at our best, the tendency is for us to worship not the Creator but creatures of our own desire. To some extent, all of us have been guilty of idolatry, which is the worship of something other than God as He truly is. So the question is not whether anyone presently has a full knowledge of God, but whether we are moving in that direction. Jesus said, "And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent" (John 17:3). Growing in our understanding of God requires honesty, humility, repentance, diligent study, and a host of other demanding requirements. But there can be no eternal life for us if we fail to make the knowledge of God our highest goal and pursue it with wholehearted passion.

What comes into our minds when we think about God
is the most important thing about us.

A. W. TOZER

February 16

GLORY AND GRANDEUR

The heavens declare the glory of God;
And the firmament shows His handiwork.
Psalm 19:1

THE VAST RICHES OF GOD'S MAJESTY ARE SIGNIFIED BY EVERY WORK OF HIS CREATION, FROM THE VERY GREAT TO THE EXTREMELY SMALL. There is nothing about the natural environment that God has designed to surround and support us that does not show His greatness — if we have eyes to see and hearts to understand.

The more urbanized our culture becomes, the more difficult it is for us to keep in contact with nature. Our automated, technological way of life cuts us off from the primary evidence for God. It is no coincidence that deep faith in the reality of God is more widespread in agrarian communities, where people interact more with the marvelous things that God has made and less with the things of man's making. The farmer who has a chance every morning before the sun comes up to rub his hand gently along the side of his milk cow, feeling her heartbeat, has an eloquent advantage over the executive who knows little more than the feel of his computer keyboard. The less daily contact we have with what God has created, the more difficult it is to think of God as we should.

Or perhaps our habitat's powerful statements about God don't impress us because they are so commonplace. We've seen sunsets on many occasions. A flower is nothing new. We saw the snow fall so many times last winter we wished we'd never see it again. And that ingenious raccoon who gets into our garbage can is nothing but a nuisance. At some point, we simply quit paying attention. Even the most amazing things cease to amaze us.

But the vast, eternal sweep of God's wisdom, love, and power remains, waiting for us to open our eyes wide with the wonder that was so easy when we were children. The thunderous surf pounds the rocky shoreline every day. The clouds billow and continue their lazy drift across the blue sky. The aged oak welcomes the sparrows into its branches. The deer lifts his antlers and sniffs the wind, his ears alert. A clear stream tumbles noisily down the mountainside while the massive peak above silently surveys the earth for miles around. Everywhere, and in all things, the creation scintillates with the glory of its Maker.

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS

February 17

WORTHY TO BE PRAISED

I will call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised.

2 Samuel 22:4

THE MORE DILIGENTLY WE SEEK GOD, THE MORE WE WILL UNDERSTAND THE IMPORTANCE OF PRAISING HIM. To praise God is to acknowledge His greatness, not only by *feeling* a deep desire to honor His excellence but also by *expressing* that desire. "Worship" is the word that most accurately describes this act of praise to God. Because He is God, God is to be worshiped. Both in our hearts and on our lips, there is to be a song of gladness for all that God is.

While it is certain that we don't praise God as we should, our problem is not simply a failure to praise Him; it is a failure to appreciate His *worthiness* to be praised. If the word "praiseworthy" can rightly be applied to any being, surely that being is God. His intrinsic nature is such as to deserve the exaltation and adoration of His creatures. In the majestic throne scene in chapters 4 and 5 of Revelation, the striking emphasis of the entire vision is on God's worthiness to receive worship. This note is sounded in the exultant praise of the twenty-four elders around God's throne: "You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and by Your will they exist and were created" (Revelation 4:11). *Worthy art Thou, O God! O how worthy!*

As personal beings created in God's own image, we have a built-in need to praise our Maker. We don't often recognize that need for what it is, but the almost tangible sense of rightness and goodness that is present in moments of real worship ought to tell us that the adoration of God fills a very deep need within us. We have been made such that praising God is as much a joy to experience as it is a duty to fulfill. But how intensely we experience that joy depends on how deeply we have sought to know God's worthiness, and also to know our debt of gratitude to Him. There will never be a day so dark that the brightness of God's glory does not deserve our praise. "Receive every day as a resurrection from death, as a new enjoyment of life . . . let your joyful heart praise and magnify so good and glorious a Creator" (William Law).

To the ear of God everything he created makes exquisite music, and man joined in the paean of praise until he fell, then there came in the frantic discord of sin. The realization of redemption brings man by way of the minor note of repentance back into tune with praise again.

February 18

WORTHY TO BE LOVED

I delight to do Your will, O my God,
And Your law is within my heart.
Psalm 40:8

WHY DO WE LOVE GOD? Is it because His attributes so often result in benefit to us personally or because He is simply worthy to be loved? Do we love God for His sake or for our own?

An utterly honest appraisal of our hearts will often reveal that our seeking of God has been more a seeking of certain blessings from God rather than a seeking of God Himself. Very few of us are not indicted by these words from Thomas Merton: "They respect God as a Master. But their heart does not belong to Him. They are not really interested in Him, except in order to insure themselves against losing heaven and going to hell. In actual practice, their minds and hearts are taken up with their own ambitions and troubles and comforts and pleasures and all their worldly interests and anxieties and fears. God is only invited to enter this charmed circle to smooth out difficulties and to dispense rewards."

But a "true love of God must begin with a delight in his holiness" (Jonathan Edwards). Our devotion to God must be akin to Job's. Although Satan sneered, "Does Job fear God for nothing?" (Job 1:9), the truth was that Job's faithfulness reached far beyond the benefits he had been receiving from God. When every other reason was stripped away, Job did what was right simply because it was right. He loved God because God deserves to be loved.

It may help to try to look at love from God's side. Can we imagine our plight if, in deciding whether to love us, God had ever asked the question, "What's in it for Me?" If any part of His love depended on our ability to "help Him solve His problems," there would be no love. Apparently, He loves us because we are His creatures, simply for our own sake. And we are to love Him because He is our Creator, simply for His own sake. Love's joy has to do with giving, not getting. The moment our main focus shifts from the Beloved to ourselves, true joy begins to disappear. "Give me, good Lord, a longing to be with you, not to avoid the calamities of this world, nor so much to attain the joys of heaven, as simply for love of you" (Thomas More).

Love for God springs from His own excellence
rather than from our need of Him.

JAMES M. HOUSTON

February 19

A GREATER SENSE OF THE POSSIBLE

Eye has not seen, nor ear heard,
Nor have entered into the heart of man
The things which God has prepared for those who love Him.
1 Corinthians 2:9

THE GREATNESS OF GOD FAR EXCEEDS THE LIMITED WAYS IN WHICH WE SEEK HIM. In all the good things that grow out of love, it is we who are limited, not God. If we enjoy but little of the bounty that is available, it is because our hearts have been hampered by our rebellion against Him. We experience no more than a small measure of God's greatness, sometimes because of unrepentant sin in our lives and at other times because our vision of God is so inadequate. We need a greater comprehension of what is really possible, a deeper desire for what can be ours.

One of the realities of sin is that in alienating us from God, it also stands between us and the help that He could give us. And there is not one of us so free of sin that we don't need to hear Isaiah's words to Israel: "Behold, the LORD'S hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; nor His ear heavy, that it cannot hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear" (Isaiah 59:1,2). The principle embedded in this text is just as important for the devout Christian as it is for anyone else. Sin — any sin at all, however "small" — hinders God from blessing us fully. So if our experience of God seems meager, we may need to quit waiting for God to answer our prayers and understand that He is waiting for us to repent of the sins that keep Him from doing so.

But another tragic truth is that fallen creatures, even forgiven ones, have only a shrunken knowledge of God's nature and His power. Even if we've grown a little in our vision of what could be ahead for us, we still have much to learn. Our God is "able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think" (Ephesians 3:20). He is eager to lift us to planes higher than we can yet imagine. Our need is for a bigger desire, a greater sense of what can happen if we're willing to submit to God as He removes from our hearts the things that hold us back.

If I were to wish for anything, I should not wish for wealth and power but for the passionate sense of the potential, for the eye which, ever young and ardent, sees the possible. Pleasure disappoints, possibility never.

SØREN KIERKEGAARD

February 20

PRAYING FOR THE GREATER THINGS

But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. *Matthew 6:33*

THE MOST FERVENT DESIRES THAT WE BRING TO GOD IN PRAYER ought to be desires having to do with His glory, His purposes, and His will. Too often, the only question on our minds is whether God is working things out the way we wish. Rarely do we concern ourselves with the more important question: whether what is happening redounds to the praise of God's glory. Properly understood, prayer is about God, not about us.

Like the disciples, we all need to say, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1). But learning how to pray is not simply learning more effective ways to ask for what we want. As we learn to pray, we must learn to want the higher things that relate to God's rule and His righteousness, and we must learn to want them for higher reasons than those that usually motivate us. Both our requests and our reasons for making them indicate how far along the road of spiritual growth we've traveled. As we learn to seek God more diligently, the less selfishly we'll pray for what we want from God and the more genuinely we'll desire what God wants for us.

Much of modern prayer is characterized by what can only be called a "demanding" spirit. Conditioned as we are to think that "feeling good" is the main thing in life, our dealings with God tend to revolve around His ability to do whatever will make us feel better. But this utilitarian approach kills the communication that God seeks from us. When we think of no more than God's usefulness to us and, in effect, threaten to quit believing if He doesn't straighten out every one of our difficulties, we're being childish and shortsighted, if not outright blasphemous. God is not Santa Claus, and real prayer has to do with far more than whether He is giving us what we want. To "seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness" means, among other things, that we lay aside our demands and simply trust God to give us what we need — giving thanks that His gifts always result in His greater glory.

O Lord, let me not henceforth desire health or life except to spend them for you, with you, and in you. You alone know what is good for me; do therefore what seems best to you. Give to me or take from me; conform my will to yours; and grant that with humble and perfect submission and in holy confidence I may receive the orders of your eternal providence, and may equally adore all that comes to me from you.

BLAISE PASCAL

February 21

NO USE PRETENDING

For we all stumble in many things. *James 3:2*

WE COMMONLY MAKE TWO MISTAKES WITH RESPECT TO LIFE IN CHRIST. Either we ourselves underestimate the value of what is truly good about it, or we misrepresent that goodness to others, portraying the Christian's life as something other than what it is. The great gifts available in Jesus Christ — the forgiveness of sins and the hope of heaven — are of incalculable worth. It took the death of the Son of God to make these gifts possible, and we err greatly if we ever undervalue them. But we err no less if we misrepresent what the Christian's life is like in a world damaged by sin. "There is no escape from an aching soul, only denial of it. The promise of one day being with Jesus in a perfect world is the Christian's only hope for complete relief. Until then we either groan or pretend we don't" (Larry Crabb).

The tools are surely available in the Scriptures to build a better life in this world than would be possible by any other means. As Paul put it, godliness is "profitable for all things, having promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come" (1 Timothy 4:8). But even at its best, the Christian's life may involve great sorrow and difficulty. It's true that God offers to sustain us *through* the pain, but it's not wise to pretend that the pain doesn't hurt.

Sometimes, though, we do pretend. In our pride, we conceal the heartache of deep needs that God allows, for the time being and for our ultimate good, to remain unfulfilled. And in our pride, we also cover up the reality of our continuing struggle with sin.

Yet the problem is not always pride. Often it is the popular but mistaken doctrine that we can obtain complete relief and total joy right now, and that if we hurt emotionally or if we struggle with sin, then we've just not reached the plateau of happiness where more committed Christians live. We may be suffocating in a "spiritual" climate where pretense is rewarded and honesty is frowned upon. If so, we're missing the very thing that can draw us toward a richer taste of God: a deeply felt, realistic acceptance of the imperfection that yet remains within us.

One result of extricating ourselves from the tangled complexity of life is simplistic preaching that fails to deal with life as it is. Rather than penetrating life with liberating truth, such preaching maintains a conspiracy of pretense that things are better than they are or ever can be until Christ returns.

LARRY CRABB

February 22

THE STRONG HEART IS NOT CALLOUS

I am weary with my groaning;
All night I make my bed swim;
I drench my couch with my tears.

Psalms 6:6

IF WE THINK THE STRONG DON'T FEEL PAIN, WE KNOW LITTLE OF WHAT STRENGTH IS ABOUT. Soldiers know that courage is not the absence of fear but fortitude in the face of fear, and those who are truly strong understand that strength is not the absence of pain but nobility in the face of pain. The strong are those who deeply experience pain without giving up either their reverence or their gratitude. Rather than going around the pain, strong people go through it. There is no shortcut to any place worth going to.

We normally think of skill as the ability to do difficult things. If because of natural talent a person finds himself easily able to do things that are difficult for other people, that may be somewhat impressive. But how much more impressive it is when someone has the drive and the discipline to do things that he himself finds difficult. In a similar way, it would be no great accomplishment for a person to bear an emotional pain that he didn't really feel. But those who open their hearts and feel the pain this world can inflict, still maintaining a gracious respect and gratitude toward God — those are the folks with an admirable strength!

When we're suffering, friends frequently remind us that God's intent is not to shield us from all pain in this life, but to strengthen us so we can deal with the pain in the right way. Do we really believe that? Perhaps what we believe is something slightly different: that God will help us find a kind of "strength" that will anesthetize us so we won't feel the pain quite so much. Perhaps we don't really trust God to help us acquire real strength — the kind that protects us without deadening our hearts and rendering us unable to feel what we need to feel.

The immense spiritual strength that Jesus possessed involved much more than mere anesthesia. He not only felt the full range of emotions that are the lot of humanity, but He felt them intensely and vividly. We should aspire to a strength that is no less alive. Genuine discipleship to the Son of Man will not turn us into unfeeling robots. It will teach us to feel what God feels.

We are healed of a suffering only by experiencing it to the full.

MARCEL PROUST

February 23

WE CAN TRULY CHANGE

... that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness. *Ephesians 4:22-24*

FEW THINGS ARE MORE UNIVERSAL THAN THE HUMAN DESIRE TO CHANGE FOR THE BETTER. The sheer size of the self-help section in any bookstore is a fair indication of how desperate we are to conquer the problems that beset us and increase the quality of our lives. Virtually every person would like, in some significant way, to improve the “self” that he or she presently is.

How ironic it is that, despite our deep desire for change and the lavish attention that publishers pay to our personal improvement, many people still hold to the deterministic idea that real change is not possible for a human being. This viewpoint says we are so conditioned by heredity and environment that we can't change in any radical way. Whatever we “are,” that is what we'll always be. And our culture has no shortage of psychologically correct labels to define what we are. Once labeled, a person cannot unlabel himself. The most he can hope for is to keep from externally acting out what the label says he'll always be on the inside.

Christianity, however, makes a deeper change possible. After listing certain groups who practiced notorious sin, Paul said to the church in Corinth, “And such were some of you” (1 Corinthians 6:9-11). These were people who'd actually changed, and the change was not just behavioral. In his letter to the church in Rome, Paul wrote: “Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:3,4).

What Jesus Christ offers the groaning human soul is not superficial pain relief but radical surgery. The drastic rehabilitation He envisions is certainly not the work of one day. But just because we require more than a quick fix, that doesn't mean we're forever locked into our mistakes. “Beware of succumbing to failure as inevitable” (Oswald Chambers).

Change, indeed, is painful, yet ever needful;
and if memory has its force and worth, so also has hope.

THOMAS CARLYLE

February 24

THE GREAT ENCOUNTER

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Romans 12:21

EACH OF US HELPS TO WRITE THE STORY OF THE HUMAN RACE EVERY TIME WE MAKE A CHOICE. Every single one of us is a part of this fascinating story. We either add to the dignity of our race by making choices that promote goodness, or we further degrade it by making those that promote evil. Surrounded by situations that were, for the most part, brought into being by forces outside our control, we either help to beautify or mar the story of human freedom, depending on what we choose to do when faced with those situations. As Donald Creighton has suggested: "History is the record of an encounter between character and circumstance." Individually, we are each a part of that encounter.

Not only is greatness of inward character the greatest of all greatnesses, but it lies within the power of every individual. It doesn't depend on having a public stage upon which to act. And it doesn't depend on whether other people are doing what they should. Try, for example, to hear a Washington or a Lincoln grumbling, "I could've been a great president if I'd been lucky enough to come to the office in better circumstances. If the times hadn't been so difficult, I might've had a chance to show them what I could do." In a very important sense, character is independent of external conditions. Good character does good work to meet the needs of the present moment, no matter what those needs happen to be. In your imagination, pick any truly great person and drop him or her into a different time, place, and social status. Doesn't that person simply do whatever is needed to improve *that* situation? Greatness of character doesn't wait on circumstance to deal it a favorable hand. It plays with honor *whatever* hand it is dealt.

Do we realize the importance of our own daily encounter with circumstance? What is outside of us can seem so much more powerful than what is inside. The surging rush of all that happens can appear so overwhelming that it's hard to feel we're anything more than "dust in the wind." And yet . . . there remains within us a will that is free. When we make even a single choice to do what is right before God, we alter the course of history for the better.

Nothing splendid has ever been achieved except by those who dared believe that something inside them was superior to circumstance.

BRUCE BARTON

February 25

THE CULT OF THE NAKED EMPEROR

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves,
and the truth is not in us. *1 John 1:8*

IT SEEMS TO BE HARD FOR THOSE WHO HOLD UP CHRIST AS THE ANSWER TO EVERY PROBLEM TO AVOID PRETENDING THEY'VE MADE MORE PROGRESS THAN THEY HAVE. We sometimes talk and act as if the devout Christian can be released completely from suffering and struggle in this life. Surely we know that the truth is otherwise, but like the courtiers in "The Emperor's New Clothes," all of whom praised the king's non-existent garments, we're afraid to speak the obvious. There is pressure to keep up the illusion of perfect emotional happiness and complete victory in the battle against sin. But the price we pay is that we actually make less progress in joy and purity than we would if we were more honest.

When it comes time to encourage a friend, we show that it's possible to be both realistic and compassionate. "Don't be so hard on yourself," we say. "It's okay to hurt and to struggle. All of us are broken vessels, and we needn't be afraid to experience life as it really is. We can't be perfect, but we can be persistent. Hang in there, and cry whenever you need to." These are wise words. But when the struggle is our own, we lose our balance, either drowning in despair or naively pretending that God has solved all of our problems already. It's hard to hold a balanced perspective.

Whatever it means in this life to be "in Christ," it does not mean total freedom from setbacks and sorrow. To be in Christ is to groan. It is to live out the days of our pilgrimage in *hope*. This hope can no doubt make a great difference in our present reality, but only when it's honest about what that present reality is. "For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed with our habitation which is from heaven, if indeed, having been clothed, we shall not be found naked. For we who are in this tent groan, being burdened, not because we want to be unclothed, but further clothed, that mortality may be swallowed up by life" (2 Corinthians 5:2-4). Let us not conspire to praise our present "clothing" more than the facts warrant. If we're among His faithful people, Christ will one day clothe us in perfect glory. Our rags will be turned into riches. Until then, there is a need for honesty about our raggedness.

Have the courage to appear poor, and you
disarm poverty of its sharpest sting.

ANNA JAMESON

February 26

THE CULT OF SELF-FLAGELLATION

For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think. *Romans 12:3*

THERE IS A SUBTLE DANGER IN CONFESSING OUR BROKENNESS. As we learn to acknowledge the seriousness of our failures and the depth of our sorrows, various forms of self-righteousness can creep into our thinking. Secretly we may come to look upon those whose lives appear more trouble-free as being somehow less spiritually mature than we are.

Congratulating ourselves on how frankly we recognize our own misery, we may question the honesty of anyone who seems to be living a happy life. Surely such people are just not facing life's realities. They must be in "denial," as the cognoscenti say. And if it can be shown that some people really are free of anything but the minor annoyances of life, we suppose it must be because God knew they couldn't handle the serious sorrow that we have.

Sometimes we take an egotistical approach to praise and pity that is almost competitive in nature. Like fishermen trading tall tales, we play "Can you top this?" with our stories of hard times, as if there were something inherently praiseworthy about suffering. But great suffering does not by itself indicate nobility of character (1 Peter 4:15), and the Hebrew writer would remind us, "You have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin" (Hebrews 12:4). Whatever we've suffered is only "such as is common to man" (1 Corinthians 10:13).

"Woe is me" is not always the humble statement it pretends to be. When Elijah complained, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God of hosts; because the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left; and they seek to take my life" (1 Kings 19:14), God dealt gently with Elijah's feelings. But He also pointed out that the prophet hadn't cornered the market on righteousness quite as completely as he supposed: "I have reserved seven thousand in Israel, all whose knees have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him" (v.18). The truly "poor in spirit" (Matthew 5:3) tend to keep the focus on God's fullness, not their own emptiness.

True humility makes no pretense of being humble.

FRANCIS DE SALES

February 27

REAL CHANGE, SLOW PROGRESS

Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected;
but I press on. *Philippians 3:12*

WHEN MUCH-DESIRED CHARACTER CHANGE DOESN'T HAPPEN VERY QUICKLY, WE TEND TO GIVE UP HOPE THAT WE CAN EVER REALLY CHANGE AT ALL. But worthwhile journeys aren't usually accomplished all at once, and we shouldn't think that we've not gone anywhere, just because our journey toward God is not complete. Good things often take time.

The apostle Peter affirmed that real, significant character change can be a reality for those who are in Jesus Christ. In exhorting his readers to live reverently before God, he reminded them of the fundamental difference Christ had made in their lives: "Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ; as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, as in your ignorance; but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct . . . knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot" (1 Peter 1:13-19).

But as we gain confidence in the *possibility* of change, we also need to develop patience in the *process* of change. In this life, not even the most faithfully obedient Christian can claim to be anything more than a work in progress. In the ongoing renovation of our character, there is much damage yet to be repaired, and quick fixes will simply not suffice. In our hurried-up culture, we've gotten into the habit of demanding immediate results. But despite the appeal of an instant and effortless makeover, wouldn't it be worthwhile to go for something greater, a real renewal that runs deeper than the surface? The unavoidable truth is that our hearts need an inside-out transformation. This is the goal God has in mind for us, and there is no shortcut to it. We should make sure that any impatience we have with our present imperfection does not turn into impatience with God Himself.

A slow cure is best. Have courage and patience. The work of cleansing your soul will go on for a lifetime. Our perfection consists of struggling against our imperfection . . . Think of the possibilities God has placed in you.

February 28

GOING TOWARD GOD, COME WHATEVER MAY

We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God. *Acts 14:22*

BETWEEN WHERE WE ARE AND WHERE WE WANT TO BE IN ETERNITY, THE ROAD THAT MUST BE TAKEN IS AT TIMES A DIFFICULT TRACK THROUGH DESOLATE COUNTRY. There is no other way to reach home. God is our guide and His help is our hope, but the journey must still be made.

The spiritual life is not principally about the avoidance of difficulty. It's about going toward God despite the difficulties that obstruct us. For now, our greatest prayer is not for peace but for progress toward the Promised Land. The peace will come in due season. This was John Bradford's thought when he prayed, "Life is a pilgrimage. I came from the Lord and I will return to the Lord. I may pass through dangerous places. O Christ, be my guide."

In our journey toward God, much that lies before us is unknown. From where we stand at present, it is impossible to see either the heights of joy that we'll reach or the depths of sorrow through which we must pass. Each day dawns with the promise of both triumph and testing. If we commit ourselves to God, there is no telling what will happen. This only do we know: our God is the sovereign King of His creation. He is moving all of history toward a glorious finale, and those who are loyal to Him are going toward something unimaginably, and eternally, great.

As wayfarers, our need is for courage, not comfort. "For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise" (Hebrews 10:36). Do we remember what the Lord prayed for His disciples? He said, "I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one" (John 17:15). Those who would follow the Lord can't go "around" this world any more than He did — they must follow Him "through" the world. "Father, hear the prayer we offer: not for ease that prayer shall be, but for strength, that we may ever live our lives courageously" (L. M. Willis). While the foolish spend their time praying to be excused from the journey, the wise simply pray for whatever strength that this, the greatest of all journeys, may require.

Not fare well,
But fare forward, voyagers.

T. S. ELIOT

February 29

HOW THE SOJOURNER LIVES AND LOVES

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God. *Hebrews 11:8-10*

IT WAS NOT A CURSE BUT A GREAT BLESSING THAT UPROOTED ABRAHAM FROM HIS EARTHLY HOME. Far from the land of his youth and never again owning a plot of ground as his home, Abraham lived out his life wandering from one shepherd encampment to another. This was a great blessing because it made it much easier for Abraham to look beyond this world. As a sojourner dwelling in tents, he “waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.”

When we stay so long in one place that it begins to feel like “home,” we may forget that our lease on this life is temporary. We quit dreaming about heaven, and we get to the point where we don’t want to let go of the things we’ve grown so accustomed to. We should learn from the Hebrew patriarchs. They “all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth” (Hebrews 11:13).

But we should be careful not to misunderstand what it means to be a sojourner. Despite all the painful consequences of sin in the world, it is still a world made by our Heavenly Father, and He means for us to enjoy it (Ecclesiastes 5:18,19). Let us not measure our holiness in terms of how miserable we can make ourselves. Our challenge is not to keep from enjoying this world; it is rather to keep from settling down in it.

“For our citizenship is in heaven,” Paul wrote to Christian friends, “from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ” (Philippians 3:20). “Here we have no continuing city” (Hebrews 13:14). It is good for a guest to enjoy himself — as long as he remembers that he’s a guest. Abraham must surely have enjoyed the passing sunrises, sunsets, and starry nights in the strange land of Canaan. Yet his heart could not be held for long by these things. He was too much in love with their Giver.

Not where I breathe,
but where I love, I live.

ROBERT SOUTHWELL

March 1
LIKENESS

As for me, I will see Your face in righteousness;
I shall be satisfied when I awake in Your likeness.
Psalm 17:15

LIFE IN GOD IS NOT ABOUT US; IT IS ABOUT HIM. We need to be reminded of this. In a day when “self-actualization” is thought by many to be the ultimate goal, we must remember that Christianity is not about the simple reformation (or even the “actualization”) of our own character. It is about the character of Christ being formed within us. Christianity is about God.

It is clearly true that our own characters need to be reformed. The sins we’ve allowed to creep into our lives have marred us and made us into beings very different from those we were created to be. But God’s purpose in dealing with sin is not merely to remove the habits that hinder us from “self-actualization.” As Liliias Trotter wrote, “Holiness means something more than the sweeping away of the old leaves of sin; it means the life of Jesus developed in us.” This is the very desire Paul indicated when he addressed the Galatian Christians: “My little children, for whom I labor in birth again until Christ is formed in you” (Galatians 4:19).

In the New Testament, our coming to bear a closer likeness to God is nothing less than the goal of the gospel. Paul wrote, “But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Corinthians 3:18). And writing to another group of Christians, Peter said that God’s 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” (2 Peter 1:3,4). We are called to partake of God’s own nature.

God created us in His own image so that we could show forth His goodness and respond to His love. Sin destroys our ability to do these things, and if sin’s damage is to be undone, we must not only be forgiven of the sin itself, but we must be remade in God’s image. He has arranged for us to be crucified and recreated. To seek Him is to seek this very thing.

The essence of true holiness is conformity to the nature and will of God.

March 2

MORE THAN MERE SUFFERING

Though you grind a fool in a mortar with a pestle along with crushed grain,
Yet his foolishness will not depart from him.

Proverbs 27:22

NOT ALL WHO SUFFER LEARN THE LESSONS THAT SUFFERING CAN TEACH. The Proverbs vividly describe the fool who is chastened often by life's painful experiences but never learns what he's being taught. The wise person pays attention to pain, making the right changes in his life when he sees what the consequences of wrongful behavior are. Yet the fool pays no heed. He blames and he complains, but he doesn't learn. "As a dog returns to his own vomit, so a fool repeats his folly" (Proverbs 26:11).

How can we avoid this foolishness? When we suffer, how can we keep our eyes open and gain a greater wisdom?

Much could be said, but the answer comes down to this: only the tender heart is teachable. When we find ourselves responding to pain with resentment, it's probable that our hearts have started to become tough and unteachable. Self-pity, bitterness, and such-like often tempt us when our hearts are heavy. But if we choose a "hard" response to suffering — that is, if we turn away from either reverence or gratitude — then we lose the humility that is required for learning. But there is also a danger on the other side. If we find ourselves becoming secretly proud of the "humble" way we're dealing with our difficulties, then this martyr-spirit will likewise keep us from learning as we should. To be teachable, we must be neither cynical nor sanctimonious.

James wrote, "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). In the end, it is self-centeredness that prevents patience from having its perfect work. To gain wisdom from our suffering, our focus must not be on ourselves. The main object in life is neither to defend ourselves against suffering nor to exploit it self-righteously, but to seek a greater Truth outside of ourselves.

I do not believe that sheer suffering teaches. If suffering alone taught, all the world would be wise, since everyone suffers. To suffering must be added mourning, understanding, patience, love, openness, and the willingness to remain vulnerable.

ANNE MORROW LINDBERGH

March 3

BRILLIANCE AGAINST A DARK BACKGROUND

And he shall be like the light of the morning when the sun rises,
A morning without clouds,
Like the tender grass springing out of the earth,
By clear shining after rain.
2 Samuel 23:4

HOW MUCH MORE WELCOME IS THE LIGHT OF A LAMP AT MID-NIGHT THAN IT WOULD BE AT NOON! The scientist would be quick to tell us that the lamp doesn't really shine any more brightly when it's dark than when it's light; the darkness only makes it appear so by its contrast. But emotionally, what a difference the darkness makes! Without the background supplied by the darkness, we'd hardly love the light as we do.

Perhaps this explains why some human lives seem to have more depth and texture than others. Those who've battled to maintain a luminous faith after suffering serious failure or significant sorrow aren't any more "real" than anyone else, but they certainly seem so. We're drawn to sufferers who have survived.

The attractive power of David's passionate love for God shines with such splendor partly because of the black moral failures from which his honor had to recover. And consider a man like Paul. He never staggered morally, but here was a man whose desire for God blazed with a special brightness because of the long, dark years of his lonely travail as an apostle. The struggle only made his hope more precious. "The time of my departure is at hand," he said. "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (2 Timothy 4:6,7).

The suggestion here isn't that sorrow should be invited into our lives. But when it makes an appearance, as it will in the life of anyone who dwells on this planet, we can make it our aim to shine all the more radiantly against the dark background that has developed. The Lord Jesus Christ was a "Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3), and we love Him dearly for having tasted the salt of our tears. Unlike Him, our sorrows are often the consequence of our own misdeeds. But whether the darkness is of sin or some other sorrow, we can seek God in such a way as to brighten our character with the brilliance of tested faith.

May the lessons of the darkness fill my days with awe
so that I may learn to experience you, my God,
all the days and nights of my life. Amen.

NAOMI LEVY

March 4

WHAT HAPPENS TO FAITH AS LIFE UNFOLDS?

In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

1 Peter 1:6,7

ALL BUT THE MOST CYNICAL WOULD AGREE THAT THE INNOCENT EAGERNESS OF YOUNG FAITH IS A PART OF ITS BEAUTY. This spirit is a part of the childlikeness that Jesus said we must recover if we are to enter the kingdom (Matthew 18:1-5). But as life unfolds, experience can cruelly test our confidence in the greatness and goodness of God. What then? Is faith to be given up as a relic of our immaturity, or is there a greater thing that can happen?

It should be noted that some people do live for long periods without meeting any serious test of their faith. It would be unfair (and also condescending) to charge every such person with having a faith that is naive or ill-informed. Faith in the heart of a human being can be the real thing whether it has been “proven” or not.

But in the case of most of us, hardships eventually do test the genuineness of our faith, sometimes sorely. What happens to a well-founded faith as the years go by?

First, consider that faith is more than a feeling and more than a mood. It is a conviction, a choice to commit ourselves to the truth that God is indeed the Creator revealed to us in the Scriptures. And like any decision to trust, the commitment of ourselves to the truth about God is likely to be tested. But mere testing doesn't mean our faith was foolish. To the contrary, it may well demonstrate just how wise our choice was. Truths that we grasped in the noonday sun don't have to be thrown away during the hours of darkness. That's when their value is most apparent.

Ultimately, faith is akin to friendship, and there's a big difference between a friend who *would* help us and one who *has* helped us. As life lengthens, the well-placed confidence of our youth can become a fixed friendship with God, tried and true. Such a trust is the mainstay of our maturity, as Paul well knew: “I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day” (2 Timothy 1:12).

Faith is that which is woven of conviction
and set with the sharp mordant of experience.

JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL

March 5

SOME THOUGHTS ON GOD'S GOODNESS

The LORD is good,
A stronghold in the day of trouble;
And He knows those who trust in Him.
Nahum 1:7

THE SIMPLE AFFIRMATION THAT GOD IS GOOD IS A MARVELOUS THING. Perhaps the marvel of it is lost on us today, but two thousand years ago the notion that the Creator is benevolently inclined toward His creatures was a radical concept. What is more, the news that the goodness of the true God has been manifested in the atoning death and triumphant resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ, blew through the fear and superstition of the pagan mind like a cleansing hurricane. The human heart has simply never entertained a more nourishing, strengthening thought than the idea that God is good — perfectly, lovingly, and victoriously *good*.

Make no mistake, the goodness by which God makes possible our reconciliation, and by which He will one day judge the world, doesn't mean that all will be saved and none lost (Romans 11:22). To commit sin is always, in one way or another, to refuse the benevolence of God's will in the here and now — and if we're lost in eternity, it will be the consequence of having refused God's love for so long that time ran out and our lives finally ended in rebellion (John 3:16-19). Some will simply not accept God's reconciliation on His terms, and we're told that these "shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power" (2 Thessalonians 1:9). God will not force His goodness upon any whose final choice is to refuse it.

But we need not reject the truth about God's goodness. We can accept it. Peter wrote that we can entrust ourselves "to a faithful Creator" (1 Peter 4:19). This truth is far more than a lucky charm to be worn while we live any way we wish. It happens to be the most "disturbing" concept that can seize our thinking. Whoever truly comes to terms with the unfailing goodness of God will never again deal with sin or with uncertainty in the same way. A deep, grateful confidence that God is good will win the war against both wickedness and worry.

Yet, in the maddening maze of things,
And tossed by storm and flood,
To one fixed trust my spirit clings;
I know that God is good!

JOHN GREENLEAF WHITTIER

March 6
EBENEZER

Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen, and called its name Ebenezer, saying, "Thus far the LORD has helped us."
1 Samuel 7:12

WHATEVER HARDSHIPS WE MAY YET HAVE TO FACE, THE HELP OF GOD THAT HAS BROUGHT US THIS FAR IS NO SMALL THING TO BE THANKFUL FOR. Boggled down as we often are in the painful particulars of daily living, our perspective may be so confined that we suppose the bad outweighs the good. Like Job, we may wish we'd never been born (Job 3:1-26). We may question whether there is any use in trying to go forward, or whether, if we do try to go forward, there is any possibility that we'll get the help we need. But consider this: the person who is alive to ponder such questions is always a person on whom God has not given up. Without His constant grace, we would not have made it this far.

The Scriptures teach that God is not only the Creator, but He is the Sustainer of life. The Hebrew writer says that God "upholds" all things by His power (Hebrews 1:3). And Paul reminded the Athenians that it is in Him that we "live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). If God ever withdrew Himself from us, we would in that instant cease to enjoy anything that deserves to be called "life." And very likely, in that instant we'd also be stricken with the consciousness of the good we had taken for granted, including the gift of all the time we used up questioning whether God had been good to us. It is, after all, only by God's grace that we have the "opportunity" to doubt Him.

Do we despise the grace that has upheld us? Though we have more than mere survival to be thankful for, can we not see even in this survival evidence that God is willing to help us? He has not only proven His power, but He has proven His patience with us!

A failure of gratitude is one of life's more serious failures, and one that is fraught with danger. Without God's providence, we would have been vanquished long ago. If we don't acknowledge that He has graciously watched over us in the past, we may have to learn the hard way what the diminishing of His grace means in the future (Isaiah 5:1-7). But if we will look backward with the eyes of gratitude, we can look forward with the eyes of faith.

Who brought me hither
Will bring me hence; no other guide I seek.

JOHN MILTON

March 7

LIGHT ON THE ROAD

Moreover You led them by day with a cloudy pillar, and by night with a pillar of fire, to give them light on the road which they should travel.

Nehemiah 9:12

IF WHAT WE REALLY WANT TO DO IS FOLLOW GOD, HIS ASSURANCE TO US IS THAT WE'LL ALWAYS GET THE INFORMATION WE NEED TO DO HIS WILL. Many things we may not understand, but there will always be sufficient light on the road to guide our next step, if our motive is to obey our Father's will.

Jesus pointed to the importance of motive when He said to certain ones, "Why do you not understand My speech? Because you are not able to listen to My word. You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do" (John 8:43,44). Whose desires we most deeply want to do is the crucial factor that determines whether we'll understand the things we need to understand. And it takes a person of more honesty than many of us have mustered to tell the truth about whose will means more to us: God's or someone else's.

How much obedience really matters to us is indicated by the use we've made of the light that has already shone upon our path. Does the day-to-day evidence of our decisions show that we're thankful for this light? If not, there's little point in seeking further light. As long as our conscience smites us for not doing the duty that lies clearly before us, we don't have the luxury of worrying about the various hypothetical questions that cloud the future.

Biblical faith is much more than a simple trust that God's light will lead us. It's an active *following* of that light step by step. We certainly should rest in the confidence that the road will be illuminated according to our needs, but there's also a need for sobriety. God is a rewarder of "those who diligently seek Him" (Hebrews 11:6), and we show that we're diligent seekers by actually taking the steps He has shown us. The path toward God will challenge our willingness to obey perhaps more often than it does our ability to understand. In any case, our choice must be to move forward. God will not allow darkness to hinder the diligent.

God wills us to tread the hidden paths of grace in faith only; and so He only gives us just such light as we need for the present moment. It is not His will that we should see before us or around us, but He never fails to grant such light as makes it impossible for us to lose our way so long as we follow His leading.

JEAN NICOLAS GROU

March 8

THE PREPARED HEART

For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD,
and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel.

Ezra 7:10

OUR “NATURE” IS GIVEN TO US BY GOD, BUT OUR “CHARACTER” IS CREATED BY OUR CHOICES. What we do with the raw materials of our created nature brings into being a character that is either good or bad. Of course, the fact that character is a matter of choice does not mean the choices are always *carefully* made. Indeed, many people simply live by default, going with the flow and ending up with a character that has been chosen haphazardly. But haphazard choices are still choices. Whether we’ve been careful or careless, we’ll still have to account to God for our decisions.

Ezra is said to have “prepared his heart.” Apparently he had given some thought to the sort of man he wanted to be. Surely he was aware of what the major alternatives are that lie before a human being, and his choice to pursue godliness seems to have been a deliberate decision. It’s not unlikely that Ezra had given some consideration to the matter of *consequences*. There is no more consequential choice than the choice of one’s character, and Ezra had no doubt considered that some kinds of character would take him places he didn’t want to go to.

It is worth noting the particular character Ezra prepared himself to have. This wise man determined that he would (1) *seek* God’s will, (2) *do* whatever he learned, and (3) *teach* to others the things that he had both learned and lived. We could look a long time and not find a better three-point program for character development. Seeking, doing, and teaching . . . the will of God. These things are close to the heart of what human existence is all about.

If we’ve not already done so, it’s urgent that we prepare our hearts. It’s time to think seriously about what matters most to us. What kind of people do we intend to be? “When a man does not know what harbor he is making for, no wind is the right wind” (Seneca). But preparing our hearts requires more than charting our course. We must also count the cost and resolve that we’ll pay the price to have a character that’s worth having. The devil is eager to test how well prepared our hearts really are.

You cannot dream yourself into a character;
you must hammer and forge yourself one.

JAMES ANTHONY FROUDE

March 9

MOMENTS MAKE A LIFE

What is man, that You should exalt him,
That You should set Your heart on him,
That You should visit him every morning,
And test him every moment?

Job 7:17,18

GROWING TO BE A PERSON OF GODLY INTEGRITY IS THE WORK OF A LIFETIME, BUT WHETHER WE GROW IN THIS DIRECTION OR NOT IS DETERMINED BY THE MANY LITTLE DECISIONS WE MAKE MOMENT BY MOMENT. A human life is the accumulation of all its moments, so there is no such thing as an unimportant decision.

Remembering the simple, momentary nature of life ought to be helpful to us if we're serious about seeking God. Daunting tasks lose their power to discourage us when we break them down into each moment's doable deeds. At any particular moment, whatever *should* be done *can* be done. Taken individually, single moments are always manageable. But when we take on the burden of doing more than one moment's work at a time, our burden is both impossible and foolish. "The next hour, the next moment, is as much beyond our grasp and as much in God's care, as that a hundred years away . . . The moment which coincides with work to be done is the moment to be minded; the next is nowhere till God has made it" (George MacDonald).

One of the most empowering questions a person can ever ask is this: *what is the very best thing I could actually do right now, in this present moment?* Forget the *next* moment or some *other* moment — what is the main thing that lies before me at *this* moment? In the end, lives of great, climactic godliness result from a decision to do right by the ordinary moments. Obedience is not impossible. Right now, we must simply embrace whatever we know the Lord would want us to be doing . . . *at this moment.*

Did our Lord not warn us to be careful about the "little" things? Did He not say, "He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much" (Luke 16:10)? Life is a long journey indeed, but although the steps that take us toward God are many, they should be taken — indeed, can only be taken — one at a time. The key to life is the peaceful, persistent management of the moments.

Take care of the minutes, and the hours will take care of themselves.

LORD CHESTERFIELD

March 10

DAMAGING DESIRES

There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.
Even in laughter the heart may sorrow, and the end of mirth may be grief.

Proverbs 14:12,13

DO WE REALLY BELIEVE THAT GOD'S WILL IS BETTER FOR US THAN ANYTHING THAT IS CONTRARY TO HIS WILL? Most of us would say yes, but the evidence suggests that we have a hard time cultivating an *unconditional* confidence that God's way is best. We may give up certain things in order to do what is right, but we often make these sacrifices somewhat reluctantly, perhaps for no other reason than to keep from going to hell. Deep down, we often feel the thing we had to part with would have been a "better" fulfillment of our real desires, had God just allowed us to have it.

Perhaps the trouble is not that we have too little faith in God; it may be that we just have too much faith in ourselves. It's an obvious fact that we live in an age that exalts the desires of the human heart, whatever they may be. Jeremiah's prayer, "O LORD, I know the way of man is not in himself; it is not in man who walks to direct his own steps" (Jeremiah 10:23), strikes us as quaint, if not primitive. We tend to view the doing of our "own thing" as wise, and even courageous.

When we reflect on the matter more deeply, however, what do our hearts tell us? If the truth be told, haven't we each privately experienced the truth of the principle that "there is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death"? Wouldn't it be wiser after all to have, with Jeremiah, a healthy distrust of our own ability to see what is lastingly good?

One of the profound tragedies of our present world is the persistence with which we pursue fulfillments that are bound to break our hearts. We find that many of our enjoyments leave a bitter, deadly aftertaste. Too often, our pleasure is followed by regret. But Solomon reached this conclusion long years ago: "The blessing of the Lord makes one rich, and He adds no sorrow with it" (Proverbs 10:22). It takes trust to believe that this is true, and that God's will is better — really *better* — than any alternative.

A mother may understand that her little child would like to take a sparrow in its hand. She is careful to prevent that from happening, even though she is sure the child would be glad to have it . . . She knows a moment's pleasure with the bird will bring great sadness later . . . She is guiding the child away from those pleasures which bring tears.

March 11

THE PROBLEM OF PROFANITY

... lest there be any fornicator or profane person like Esau,
who for one morsel of food sold his birthright.

Hebrews 12:16

TO BE PROFANE IS TO CHOOSE THE IMMEDIATE SATISFACTION OF THE TEMPORAL OVER THE MORE DISTANT VALUE OF THE SPIRITUAL. Profanity is worshipping the wrong thing, honoring the secular in such a way as to dishonor the sacred. Irreverent language is a form of profanity, of course, but that is only one symptom of the problem. In the larger sense, the profane person is one like Esau who trades away great intangible privileges for the instant satisfaction of what is "right here" and "right now."

The faith of a person like Moses offers a helpful contrast to the profanity of Esau. The writer of Hebrews says, "By faith Moses, when he became of age, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward" (Hebrews 11:24-26). Faith, which accepts and acts upon future realities that are beyond the grasp of the senses, enabled Moses to keep focused on who he was and what was most important to him, even while his immediate surroundings were playing powerfully on his desires. It is a mark not only of his godliness but also his honor that he refused to barter his spiritual birthright for any "passing" thing. Moses had the kind of integrity that knows how to subordinate impulse to principle.

It's undeniable that the present has a powerful pull on us. In the heat of the moment, the appeal of immediate gratification is both strong and urgent. Although the promises it makes are usually empty, those promises are often so cunningly crafted that they feel, for all practical purposes, like an irresistible force. Whatever is "right here" can seem much more real than anything "over there." But let's be candid: if the lesser things seem more real to us than the greater, that's a reality that we ourselves have helped to create by the things we've chosen to think about.

It is quite natural and inevitable that, if we spend sixteen hours daily of our waking lives in thinking about the affairs of the world and five minutes in thinking about God and our souls, this world will seem two hundred times more real to us than God.

WILLIAM RALPH INGE

March 12

THE RELIGION OF THE UNDISTURBED

So they come to you as people do, they sit before you as My people, and they hear your words but they do not do them; for with their mouth they show much love, but their hearts pursue their own gain. Indeed you are to them as a very lovely song of one who has a pleasant voice and can play well on an instrument; for they hear your words, but they do not do them.

Ezekiel 33:31,32

OF ALL THE VAIN RELIGIONS IN THE WORLD, PERHAPS NONE IS Sadder to see than the religion of the undisturbed. Real religion involves dealing with a life-changing God who will probe the abscesses of our sin-damaged character with a view to real healing. God is not content simply to leave us as we are, and if we seek Him with any real honesty, we come within range of a power that is the most disturbing force in existence. It's a force that will either transform us into beings whose purity is fit only for heaven, or it will drive us into a rebellion against God that can only end in hell. There is no in-between. And yet we often trifle with religion as if it were a harmless experience, more a pleasant part of our "lifestyle" than a transforming power.

Sometimes, we simply don't see how much we need to be changed, and we react defensively to the suggestion that anything about us may be unsatisfactory. True, we may have some faults and foibles, a few counterproductive habits, and even a neurosis or two. But "repentance" seems too strong a word for the changes we need to make, and we prefer preachers who recognize how respectable the lives are that we've built for ourselves.

At other times, we simply view religion as an "interesting" or "entertaining" experience, something merely meant to be enjoyed or appreciated. If we have issues that might require actual change, we view science and psychology as the only tools that can help us in that area. God and religion, however, have a more limited role. Their purpose is make us *feel* that "all is well" (whether we change or not), and if we thank the preacher for chastising us now and then, our appreciation is for an emotional experience that somehow made us feel better for having been chastised. And having dabbled in religion, we go our way *undisturbed* and *unchanged*.

There comes a moment when people who have been dabbling in religion ("man's search for God") suddenly draw back.

Supposing we really found Him? We never meant it to come to that!

Worse still, supposing He had found us?

C. S. LEWIS

March 13

A NECESSARY TURNING

Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew 18:3

ANY “SEEKING” OF GOD THAT DOES NOT INVOLVE A REAL CONVERSION OF THE HEART IS BUT A MOCKERY OF GOD. Self-help books and the psych-up speeches of “recovery” gurus cannot by themselves make us presentable before God. Dressed even in the best behavior of our present spiritual condition, we are not fit to be at the banquet table of our Maker. We — yes, even *we* — must be converted. Deep change must take place, change so deep that it can only grow out of what is called “godly sorrow.”

This sorrow, which leads to genuine conversion (Acts 3:19), differs from the “sorrow of the world.” The latter is little but a self-centered, woe-is-me regret that we’ve brought so much unhappiness upon ourselves, but godly sorrow rises above self-interest and grieves for what our sin has done to God. It is an honest, God-centered recognition that what really needs to be changed about us is not our dysfunctional habits, but our rebellion against our Father. Godly sorrow faces the reality that without a radical *conversion*, we are lost. “For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death. For observe this very thing, that you sorrowed in a godly manner: What diligence it produced in you, what clearing of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what vehement desire, what zeal, what vindication! In all things you proved yourselves to be clear in this matter” (2 Corinthians 7:10,11).

John the Baptist blistered the self-righteous ones in his audience who supposed that his call for repentance applied only to the pagans: “Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not think to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Matthew 3:7-10).

Turn to God quickly and completely. Be converted to him.
Do not keep procrastinating. It is a huge sin to expect God
to be merciful while we continue a sinful life.

RICHARD ROLLE

March 14

ANOMIE

Then Cain went out from the presence of the LORD and dwelt in the land of Nod on the east of Eden. And Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch. And he built a city, and called the name of the city after the name of his son — Enoch. *Genesis 4:16,17*

AS WE CROWD EVER MORE TIGHTLY INTO THE CITIES AND LIVE OUR LIVES IN THE BOSOM OF URBAN POTENTIAL AND POSSIBILITY, THE MORE UNEASY OUR HEARTS BECOME. The impersonal forces that stalk our city streets terrify us and leave us to wonder where, if anywhere, we belong. In our hearts, we feel cut off from “home.”

“Anomie” is a word used to describe this feeling. Derived from the Greek word for “lawlessness,” the term was coined by French sociologist Émile Durkheim to denote the conditions that result when a society’s “normative code” begins to disintegrate. In more recent years, “anomie” has come into popular usage as a description of the “alienation” felt by individuals when they sense that the structures of society are collapsing. It’s that sickening, rootless feeling that the world is coming apart. One of the great ironies of human society is that this feeling of alienation is most prevalent where people are the most closely packed together.

The point is not that rural life is good and city life is evil. It is certainly possible to choose a godly character and live a quality life in either place. But cities do have one great disadvantage: when a society rejects the “normative code” of moral and ethical truth that has previously held it together, the results will be felt in a more concentrated way in places where people have massed together in greater numbers. If the normative code has been rooted in the reality of God, whatever social consequences attend the rejection of God, those consequences will increase exponentially as the population of a city grows more dense. It can be argued that the need to mitigate the social consequences of sin is one reason God defeated the project at Babel and forced the human race to spread out over the face of the earth (Genesis 11:1-9).

But whether urban or rural, this world’s life leaves us with a gnawing uneasiness. We can hardly dispel the feeling that we’re adrift, cut loose from what were meant to be our moorings. And a large question confronts us: *from Whom are we alienated?*

The soul hardly ever realizes it, but whether he is a believer or not, his loneliness is really homesickness for God.

HUBERT VAN ZELLER

March 15

ASHES AND ANGUISH

And the LORD will scatter you among the peoples, and you will be left few in number among the nations where the LORD will drive you. And there you will serve gods, the work of men's hands, wood and stone, which neither see nor hear nor eat nor smell. But from there you will seek the LORD your God, and you will find Him if you seek Him with all your heart and with all your soul. *Deuteronomy 4:27-29*

THERE IS A CERTAIN HOPELESSNESS THAT OFTEN PRECEDES THE HOPE THAT CAN BE FOUND IN GOD. Until we've been driven to despair concerning our own "gods, the work of men's hands," we are hardly ready to appreciate the God who is truly God.

As long as we remain "here" in the realm where life seems to be working tolerably well, we'll probably do very little seeking of God. Self-confidence keeps us from looking for anything outside of ourselves. But hopes built on self-confidence have a way of crumbling, and the time comes when we have to go over "there" to a realm where nothing we can do has any hope of securing our survival. "From there," Moses said, "you will seek the LORD your God, and you will find Him if you seek Him with all your heart and with all your soul." The sooner we go from "here" to "there," the sooner we'll seek God with all our hearts and all our souls.

Some people have the wisdom and humility to see for themselves the truth of Solomon's conclusion: "I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and indeed, all is vanity and grasping for the wind. What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be numbered" (Ecclesiastes 1:14,15). Most of us, however, have to have help. We have to be broken by circumstances painful enough to destroy our proud dream of self-sufficiency. We have to be *driven* to despair — the impossible hopes of human self-rule have to be torn from our grasp.

The good things that await us in God are things that require trust. To the extent we're not willing to let go of the created things we've been clinging to, we're not ready to receive what the Creator has for us. If it takes ashes and anguish to destroy our worldly hopes, then these are not bad things. Exactly what it is that should follow our despair may be a matter of disagreement, but the philosopher is our friend who forces us to look, without blinking, at the utter hopelessness of naked human existence.

Life begins on the other side of despair.

JEAN PAUL SARTRE

March 16

SILENCE AND SOLITUDE

My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?
Why are You so far from helping Me,
And from the words of My groaning?
O My God, I cry in the daytime, but You do not hear;
And in the night season, and am not silent.
But You are holy, enthroned in the praises of Israel.
Psalm 22:1-3

AT THOSE TIMES WHEN GOD IS SILENT, WHEN HE LETS US STRUGGLE AND LEAVES OUR QUESTIONS UNANSWERED, WE SHOULD HUMBLY AND PATIENTLY SUBMIT TO THE SOLITUDE THAT HIS SILENCE IMPOSES ON US. Solitude is not some evil circumstance to be avoided at all costs. It is God's will that we be alone sometimes, wrapped within a silence unbroken even by His word.

Job, for example, found himself in the middle of events that he didn't understand. Not only did he not understand them, but the outward appearance of these events was such as to call God's goodness and justice into question. From the information given to us by the scriptural account, we know what was going on "behind the scenes," and we can see that nothing inconsistent with either God's goodness or His justice was allowed to happen. In fact, the ordeal Job was called upon to endure was the result of God's gracious confidence that Job was one of His most faithful people (Job 1:6-22). But none of this was explained to Job himself. It simply looked like a hostile attack by God, an attack all the more hurtful because God wouldn't answer his questions about it. And in the grip of such a situation, Job found that the help of even his best-intentioned friends only made the pain more perplexing. The lessons to be learned during the time of God's silence could only be learned in solitude. For a while, Job had to be left alone.

Even Jesus Christ, who knew well why His suffering was necessary, had to endure the "abandonment" of God. Mark writes that "at the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?' which is translated, 'My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?'" (Mark 15:34). At that moment, neither the company nor the counsel of earthly friends would have been fitting. When it is God's purpose to surround our suffering with His silence, it is foolish to break the silence with the chatter of human conversation.

The silence of God must be met with the wisdom of solitude.

PAUL CIHOLAS

March 17

DARK DAYS OF FAITH

Then his wife said to him, "Do you now still mean to persist in your blamelessness? Curse God, and die." "That is how foolish women talk," Job replied. "If we take happiness from God's hand, must we not take sorrow too?" And in all this misfortune Job uttered no sinful word.

Job 2:9,10 Jerusalem Bible

BOTH REVERENCE AND GRATITUDE MUST BE MAINTAINED DURING THE DAYS OF DARKNESS. God is not any less there when life is hard than when it is easy. This is an objective fact, regardless of what our feelings may indicate. The challenge is to discipline our feelings when necessary and maintain our faith in the face of hardship and doubt. Dark days need not be days of utter defeat.

As one of the Lord's apostles, and having endured more than a few difficult days, Paul could say, "We are hard pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body" (2 Corinthians 4:8-10). To be "hard pressed" doesn't mean that we have to be "crushed." We may be "perplexed, but not in despair."

To the church in Smyrna, Christ sent this message: "Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life" (Revelation 2:10).

We simply must not allow the onset of pain in our lives to demolish our faith. Is it not a finer and nobler thing to believe when it's difficult than when it's easy? After all, it doesn't take much character or integrity to believe when God's reality is radiantly shining and all the obvious blessings are flowing our way. "Do not even the tax collectors do the same?" But when the clouds roll in, that is when people of real faith continue to honor God and thank Him for His goodness. When it must meet some significant test, that is when trust means the most. The value of faith doesn't really become obvious until there is some doubt to be dealt with.

I praise Thee while my days go on;
I love Thee while my days go on:
Through dark and dearth, through fire and frost,
With emptied arms and treasure lost,
I thank Thee while my days go on.

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING

March 18
OPENNESS

Therefore the LORD brought upon them the captains of the army of the king of Assyria, who took Manasseh with hooks, bound him with bronze fetters, and carried him off to Babylon. Now when he was in affliction, he implored the LORD his God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers . . . Then Manasseh knew that the LORD was God. *2 Chronicles 33:11-13*

HARD HEARTS NEED TO BE “OPENED,” AND SOMETIMES THE ONLY THING THAT WILL OPEN THEM IS ADVERSITY. For this reason, we need to be careful about our attitude toward adversity.

Hardship tends to have a chastening effect upon us. If our hearts have begun to toughen up with a spirit of pride or self-sufficiency, the unwelcome pain of some serious difficulty can be a salutary thing. It can soften our hearts and open them up by reminding us of the proper reverence we ought to have toward our Creator, thus restoring our perspective.

Affliction doesn't always soften a person's heart, of course. Sometimes it has the opposite effect. Concerning those who lived in his day, Jeremiah said, “O LORD, are not Your eyes on the truth? You have stricken them, but they have not grieved; You have consumed them, but they have refused to receive correction. They have made their faces harder than rock; they have refused to return” (Jeremiah 5:3). If we have chosen the “victim mentality” as our basic outlook on life, affliction will only make us feel more sorry for ourselves — our hard hearts will only grow harder and more resentful. A time can come when, for all practical purposes, we've lost our ability to hear the truth even when God is using adversity to get our attention.

Often, however, pain does have a beneficial effect, at least in the long run. Hardship has a way of scratching the shell around our hearts just deeply enough to let in a little of the truth we've been resisting, and the result is a more receptive, honest response to the circumstances around us. We're wise if we allow adversity to have this effect upon us.

There is an important sense in which we are strongest at our most painful moments of weakness. At least this much is true: our greatest opportunities to *grow* in strength come when we respond to reminders of our weakness with humility and honesty.

Affliction plows and opens our hearts, so that into our innermost nature the truth penetrates and soaks like rain into the plowed land.

CHARLES HADDON SPURGEON

March 19

WHAT SACRIFICE MEANS

Then the king said to Araunah, "No, but I will surely buy it from you for a price; nor will I offer burnt offerings to the LORD my God with that which costs me nothing." So David bought the threshing floor and the oxen for fifty shekels of silver. 2 Samuel 24:24

FEW IDEAS ARE MORE IMPORTANT TO OUR RELATIONSHIP TO GOD THAN THE IDEA OF "SACRIFICE," AND YET FEW IDEAS ARE MORE WIDELY MISUNDERSTOOD. The very word has been cheapened.

First, there is the false belief that the value of a sacrifice is determined by the intrinsic value of the thing given. According to this thinking, a person who gives a hundred dollars to God has always given a hundred times more than the person who gives only one dollar. But sacrifice is measured in terms of what it cost us — not the degree to which someone else might have been able to afford the same gift (Luke 21:1-4). Sacrifice involves the acceptance of some significant personal loss. Strictly speaking, a sacrifice is the relinquishing of something we could hardly afford to do without. As an affluent people, we may do much external good by giving from our surplus (whether of money, time, talent, or effort), but let us be careful before we speak of having made a "sacrifice."

Second, there is the grasping, covetous view which turns a sacrifice into a grudge. "Our notion of sacrifice is the wringing out of us something we don't want to give up, full of pain and agony and distress. The Bible idea of sacrifice is that I give as a love-gift the very best thing I have" (Oswald Chambers). Paul's point is important: "God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7).

Third, and perhaps worst, is the constant search for a way to make everything easy. We have somehow acquired the opinion that getting to heaven with relative ease is simply a matter of being sufficiently devout. Whatever needs to be done in regard to God, we seem to think that if we can just figure out the right spiritual technique, the thing can be made easy, perhaps even automatic. And if a way can't be found to make it easy, then we question whether it has to be done at all. But in our quest for convenience, where has the concept of *sacrifice* gone? The old-timers used to say, "There are no shortcuts to any place worth going to." At some point, don't we have to ask what a relationship with God would be worth if it were so easy as to cost us nothing?

The service that counts is the service that costs.

HOWARD HENDRICKS

March 20

DETERIORATION

When an unclean spirit goes out of a man, he goes through dry places, seeking rest; and finding none, he says, "I will return to my house from which I came." And when he comes, he finds it swept and put in order. Then he goes and takes with him seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter and dwell there; and the last state of that man is worse than the first. *Luke 11:24-26*

IF ITS PROPER OCCUPANCY IS NEGLECTED, THE HUMAN HEART FALLS INTO A GHOSTLY RUIN. A certain kind of work is necessary to make our hearts the joyous abode of God which they were created to be. When we make the mistake of neglecting this work, for whatever reason, a deadly chaos begins to develop.

Perhaps the word "focus" best describes the effort we must make. Having been given minds that can choose the objects of their thought, it is absolutely essential that we exercise this choice in such a way as to elevate our hearts rather than allow them to be degraded. To those who would be Christians, this simple instruction is given: "Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth" (Colossians 3:2). Not only *can* we choose to focus on truths that keep our hearts from deteriorating, but we *must* do so. "Whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy — meditate on these things" (Philippians 4:8). To ignore this admonition is to bring about the almost certain disintegration of our own hearts.

Just how badly can a neglected heart deteriorate? Paul gives an ominous hint of the possibilities when he describes those who were living "in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart; who, being past feeling, have given themselves over to lewdness, to work all uncleanness with greediness" (Ephesians 4:17-19).

Great damage is done by the simple decision to do nothing about God. Between actively growing toward Him and actively growing away from Him, there is no safe middle course. To do nothing is to deteriorate. Either we choose to seek God diligently or our hearts will fall into darkness, decay, and finally . . . death.

A house with no one living in it deteriorates rapidly. The soul that does not celebrate God becomes a dark, ruined, deserted place.

March 21

THE DANGER OF UNDISCOVERED SIN

Who can understand his errors?
Cleanse me from secret faults.
Psalm 19:12

THERE IS NO HUMAN BEING WHO DOES NOT NEED HELP IN SEEING HIS OWN SINS ACCURATELY. The extent to which we seek this help is one of the truest indicators of our desire to seek God.

When it comes to errors we need to correct, we can hardly trust our own hearts to tell us all we need to know. Through the prophet Jeremiah, God said, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?” (Jeremiah 17:9). Very deep within our hearts lie two desires. One is for other people to think about us as we wish them to think, and the other is to think about ourselves as we wish to think. The wag who said that “life is one long struggle to think well of ourselves” was not just being cynical. Anytime the objective evidence would require seeing ourselves in some way other than the way we wish to see ourselves, we all have a tendency to shade the evidence and skew the perspective. We spare no effort in trying to find some way to look at the situation in a way that reflects on ourselves in the most “understanding” way. Some people do have more self-honesty than others, but there is no person on earth who is completely honest with himself. We tend to deceive ourselves about ourselves. We all have “secret faults” that are “hidden” from our own sight.

Even when we try to understand ourselves, we find that it’s difficult to do so. We simply don’t understand ourselves well enough to diagnose our own ailments. The only safe course is to seek God’s help. In *My Utmost for His Highest*, Oswald Chambers wrote pointedly, “We have to get rid of the idea that we understand ourselves. That is always the last bit of pride to go. The only One who understands us is God.” The danger of undiscovered sin is so great that only a fool would rely on do-it-yourself schemes. Solomon warned that “he who trusts in his own heart is a fool” (Proverbs 28:26). It takes humility as well as honesty to face the fact that God is the only perfect “discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12).

We can only be used by God after we allow Him to show us the deep, hidden areas of our own character. It is astounding how ignorant we are about ourselves!

OSWALD CHAMBERS

March 22

REPENTING BEFORE WE SIN

With her enticing speech she caused him to yield, with her flattering lips she seduced him. Immediately he went after her, as an ox goes to the slaughter, or as a fool to the correction of the stocks, till an arrow struck his liver. As a bird hastens to the snare, he did not know it would cost his life.

Proverbs 7:21-23

DEALING WISELY AND DECISIVELY WITH TEMPTATION REQUIRES STRENGTH OF CHARACTER. If sin is to be avoided, we must be able to interrupt the train of events described by James: “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” (James 1:14,15). When we feel ourselves being pulled in the direction of doing something we know is wrong, we must have the character to “draw the line” and refuse to cross it. Most people know what it feels like to hate or loathe a sin that has already been committed. But wouldn’t it be a great thing to have the same intensity of feeling *beforehand* so that the act could be prevented?

One reason we succumb to temptation as we do is that we don’t really say “No!” to sin. We often *think* that’s what we’ve done, and so we’re frustrated to find ourselves going ahead and doing that which we think we’ve rejected. But often, the actual fact is that we’ve not at any point really said “No!” to the act we’re contemplating. Decisively rejecting sin is more than a vague feeling that we ought not to do the thing. It’s more than the soft whisper of our conscience. Rejecting sin requires that we gather ourselves together, decide upon our course of action, and *refuse* to commit the act. It certainly does include the feeling that we shouldn’t do the deed. But it must be more than a feeling. It must be a *commitment* — a resolute, decisive, final commitment not to let ourselves be carried along by the momentum of temptation.

There’ll surely be times when we find that we’ve already allowed temptation to give birth to sin in our lives. At such times, godly sorrow does require character. But for all those who have enough character to feel sorry for what they’ve done after the fact, there are far fewer who have the character to feel sorry in advance and “repent” of the deed before it has a chance to take place.

It is much easier to repent of sins that we have committed than to repent of those we intend to commit.

JOSH BILLINGS

March 23

MORE THAN MERE INSURANCE

What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?
Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?

Romans 6:1,2

WHAT SHOULD THE WORD “SALVATION” MEAN TO US? In the real world, there are probably as many different concepts of salvation as there are people who suppose they’ve been saved. But if and when we desire to be “saved,” what should we desire?

Think for a moment about the first stanza of one of our greatest traditional hymns, “Rock of Ages” by A. M. Toplady. The well-known words are these: “Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in Thee; let the water and the blood, from Thy riven side which flowed, be of sin the double cure, cleanse me from its guilt and pow’r.” What is the double cure for sin we seek in Christ? From what two things do we desire to be saved? If all we want to be saved from is the *guilt* of sin, we desire less than we sing when we worship with this song. Beyond wanting absolution from the guilt that would keep us out of heaven, we need to be released from the *power* of sin. In other words, we need to be saved not just from the consequences of sin, but from sin itself.

Those who would be saved by Jesus Christ are required to accept Him as their *Lord*, and not just their *Savior*. His purpose is to reform us and remake us in His image, starting today, and our deepest desire needs to be that reflected in another of the old hymns, “Have Thine Own Way” by Adelaide Pollard: “Have Thine own way, Lord, have Thine own way! Thou are the Potter, I am the clay. Mold me and make me after Thy will, while I am waiting, yielded and still.”

Christ went to the Cross to make possible more than mere insurance against the catastrophic loss of our souls in hell, an expedient that would allow us to live in sin until we cry out to be “saved” at the very end. He sacrificed Himself to save us from *sin* — both its guilt and its power. Our deliverance from sin will culminate in heaven, but the process is meant to begin right now! Is that the kind of salvation we’re interested in?

“But,” you ask, “don’t all Christians desire to have Christ to be their Savior?” Yes. But here is the catch: many want this only for the *next* world. They want Christ to help them into heaven when they die. This is not wanting Christ to be your Savior. It must be had in *this* world. If Christ saves you it must be done in this life, by changing and altering everything about you.

WILLIAM LAW

March 24

ARE WE LOOKING FOR AUTOMATIC OBEDIENCE?

Then He said to them all, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me." *Luke 9:23*

IN OUR EFFORT TO LIVE IN CONSISTENT OBEDIENCE TO OUR HEAVENLY FATHER, WE SOMETIMES TRY TO MAKE IT EASIER THAN IT CAN EVER BE IN THIS LIFE. We suppose there must exist some state of holiness where right conduct has become automatic. Yet no such state exists. As G. Campbell Morgan cleverly put it, "Holiness is not inability to sin, but ability not to sin." Obedience is never anything less than a choice on our part, and we may as well face the fact that the choice will sometimes be very hard.

There are certainly means by which we can minimize the number of hard moments that come our way. It would be foolish not to do all we can to establish godly habits and patterns of obedience in our lives. When we do this, we gain the advantage of a momentum that is going in the right direction. But there will be a certain number of hard moments that still have to be faced, and it's precisely in these moments that we find out how much commitment to God we really have. If we only obey when the momentum is favorable, what kind of commitment is that?

We shouldn't be so foolish as to underestimate the devil's diligence. If we ever did get to the point where we could turn back the common temptations with relative ease, our adversary would simply up the ante and hit us with harder choices. Until we're on the other side and out of his reach, the Evil One is not going to give up on us. It's naive to look for some stage up ahead where saying no to him will have become so easy as to be automatic.

Modern avionics are such that today's aircraft will, for all practical purposes, fly themselves. In the spiritual realm, however, there is no such thing as an autopilot that will take the hard work out of decision-making. Obedience will always require moment-by-moment choices. Even those who live a long time and make much spiritual progress face this reality: there is never anything more than a decision standing between us and disobedience.

Jesus did not say, "Come to me and get it over with." He said, "If any man would come after me, let him take up his cross daily and follow me."

Daily is the key word. Our commitment to Christ, however genuine and wholehearted it may be today, must be renewed tomorrow . . . and the day after that . . . and the day after that . . . until the path comes at last to the river.

March 25

LEARNING TO LOVE OUR FATHER'S DESIRES

Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work." *John 4:34*

ONE OF THE HIGHEST REASONS FOR DOING WHAT IS RIGHT IS THAT WE DESIRE TO BE EXACTLY WHAT OUR FATHER WANTS US TO BE. We do this not for our own sake, but for His. Because we love Him and also trust Him, we love whatever He desires for us.

Loving our Father's desires does not come naturally. We have to learn this kind of love. The much easier thing is to love what we want for ourselves, and then love what God wants for us only insofar as it coincides with our predetermined wishes. In fact, we often go so far as to decide what God's will is based upon nothing more than what we want that will to be.

Because of our entrenched habit of self-centered thinking and selfish choosing, learning to do God's will for God's sake requires that a war be waged. Our unruly mind must be subjugated to His mind. And the reason for this is not merely arbitrary. As natural as it feels to think self-centeredly, selfishness actually runs counter to the laws of nature. Our demands are in rebellion against reality — they're a futile attempt in the short run to violate principles that are inviolable in the long run. Selfishness is a revolt against the way the world works, a childish effort that simply can't succeed in the end. Thus, before it's too late, our thinking needs to be brought into subjection to the truth about how things really are, and Paul speaks of "casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5).

The more we come to trust God's wisdom and love, the more we'll be eager to subordinate our desires to His. Our love for Him will draw us into a deeper longing to act according to His will. The apostle John wrote, "For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3). Ultimately, being "pure in heart" may mean this very thing: not only to want "one thing" ourselves, but lovingly to want the same "one thing" that is God's own desire.

You may grow so to follow His voice that even your thoughts will be brought "into captivity to the obedience of Christ." This bondage is perfect freedom, for we desire, He and we, only one and the same thing, and the true heartlove makes it all joy to follow, even if the path is narrow and rough.

LILIAS TROTTER

March 26

DOING WHAT WE CAN DO

For if there is first a willing mind, it is accepted according to what one has, and not according to what he does not have. *2 Corinthians 8:12*

STRANGE AS IT SOUNDS, WE ACCOMPLISH THE GREATEST THINGS SPIRITUALLY WHEN WE LEARN TO WORK WITHIN OUR LIMITS. If we expend our energy fretting about our obstacles and complaining about our limitations, we'll do little lasting good; yet when we accept our limits and get busy gratefully doing what we are, in fact, able to do, productive things start to happen.

On one hand, the realization that God doesn't expect of us anything we can't do should relieve us of a great deal of stress. But on the other hand, the realization that God does expect of us what we can do ought to be a stimulant. When the time for judgment comes, our Judge will be concerned with what we've done with our abilities, the possibilities He placed before us. Even now, we can already see the harm that has come from failing to do little things in a timely fashion, things that were certainly doable at the moment we chose not to do them. A human lifetime eventually accumulates from these moments, and eternity will be the ultimate outworking of all these choices we're making right now.

If we're serious about making spiritual progress, one of the most helpful things we can do is meditate on the virtue of "resourcefulness." One old-fashioned definition says that resourcefulness is "figuring out how to do a lot with a little." In regard to spiritual things, we surely do need to be more resourceful, don't we? Teddy Roosevelt used to say, "Do what you can, with what you have, where you are." Applying that good advice to our spiritual lives, we can learn to grasp the simple, doable things that lie right before us and resourcefully squeeze the maximum good out of each moment. We grow toward God by just such steps.

British writer Lawrence Durrell once said in an interview, "It's idle to strive for things out of your reach, just as it's utterly immoral to be slothful about the qualities you have." This principle is as true in the spiritual life as it is in the craft of writing. If a thing is not possible, neither is it necessary. What is necessary is the doing of what we *can* do.

I am only one, but I am one. I can't do everything, but I can do something.
And what I can do, I ought to do. And what I ought to do,
by the grace of God, I shall do.

EDWARD EVERETT HALE

March 27

IMPROVE!

For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.

1 Corinthians 15:9,10

DEEP WITHIN US THERE SEEMS TO BE A NEED TO MAKE PROGRESS. We appear to have a basic, built-in drive to get to higher and higher levels of quality — and we're unhappiest when our lives have come to a standstill. The word "frustrated" means that we've stopped, we've been blocked in our effort to move toward something that's important to us. The things that frustrate us are often obstacles of our own making, but even so, frustrated people are unhappy people. When we're not getting better and doing better, we don't like being a human being.

From the standpoint of spiritual realities, sin is obviously the root of the problem. It is the fundamental explanation for both our failure to grow as we need to and the feeling of frustration that inevitably follows. When all has been said and done, it is God our Creator toward whom we must move and in whom we must grow. Apart from a right relationship with Him, no progress we can make will mean anything in the end. "Unless the LORD builds the house, they labor in vain who build it" (Psalm 127:1).

Yet even when we acknowledge the primary role God must play in our progress, we sometimes still don't move ahead. We fail to see the need on our part to take the spiritual steps we could take and to make the progress that is available to us each day. We can't, in this life, be perfect. But we can make *progress*. We can *improve*. We can make each day better than the last. We can make the conscious decision to upgrade something about our character and conduct every day. We can reach forward. We can determine that the grace God has shown us will not have been in vain.

One way to understand the corruption by which sin destroys the human spirit is to think of it as a "stagnation." When we cease to move toward God, we stagnate. When we're not improving and making progress, we decay into a motionless death. To be delivered from this stagnation means that we are given God's help to get up and get going again — toward Him.

Holiness is not the end of progress, but deliverance from standing still.

G. CAMPBELL MORGAN

March 28

PHILOSOPHIES, CHOICES

And if it seems evil to you to serve the LORD, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD. *Joshua 24:15*

IF GOD IS THE GOD HE REVEALS HIMSELF TO BE IN THE SCRIPTURES, IT IS NECESSARY THAT WE MAKE A DECISION EITHER FOR HIM OR AGAINST HIM. One way or the other, we must decide. To default on this question and simply let our lives unfold haphazardly is the ultimate foolishness. Weeds love an untended, neglected garden.

A human being will serve *something*. In the end, it will be seen that something was the primary principle of each person's life, even if it was nothing more than the principle of laziness. Joshua's challenge to the people of Israel took it for granted that they would serve some god. The question was only which god it would be. He called on them to make their choice, if not wisely, at least decisively: "Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve."

In childhood, many people memorized the text at John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." Do we really believe this? If we do, how can we fail to decide what we're going to do about this truth? Could there be any greater insult to a God who gave His Son for us than simply to say that He is not even important enough for us to deal with right now? When Elijah found the people of Israel vacillating between the worship of God and that of Baal, he explained to them that it was time to get off the fence. "And Elijah came to all the people, and said, 'How long will you falter between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him.' But the people answered him not a word" (1 Kings 18:21).

The question of God is no small matter. Indeed, it is the most basic of life's issues. Whatever we do when confronted with this question influences our character at its deepest level — and what we do about God is also indicative of what our character already is at its deepest level. One cannot be a quality person and not deal in a quality way with this issue. We are what we choose.

One's philosophy is not best expressed in words; it is expressed in the choices one makes . . . In the long run, we shape our lives and we shape ourselves. The process never ends until we die. And the choices we make are ultimately our responsibility.

ELEANOR ROOSEVELT

March 29

THOSE WHO WILL SEE GOD

Blessed are those who keep His testimonies,
Who seek Him with the whole heart.
Psalm 119:2

THE TRUTHS THAT OPEN UP OUR RELATIONSHIP TO GOD ARE WON NOT SO MUCH BY THE CLARITY OF OUR INTELLECT AS BY THE PURITY OF OUR HEART. The doors of wisdom, through which we must pass to see God, are not broken down by the brute force of a strong mind alone. "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding" (Proverbs 9:10). The intellect must be in good working order, of course, for its work is indispensable. But it is the pure heart that opens the door and keeps us on the path to God. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:8).

Let's be careful, however, not to diminish the importance of rational thinking where God is concerned. We dare not de-emphasize the intellect, for there is no such thing as a right relationship with God except on the basis of propositional truth. The God of the Scriptures is always the "God of truth" (Psalm 31:5). But what determines whether the intellect gets the information it needs to make its approach to God? More than mere curiosity to *know* about Him, is it not the sincerity of our desire to *serve* God?

Many are the reasons why people might be interested in religion and pursue the idea of God intellectually. Entire lifetimes have been spent in this study by people who never came to know Him in the here and now, and will not see Him in the hereafter (Matthew 7:21-23). The truth is, diligent study only becomes the diligent seeking of God when the intellect is driven by a pure heart. And whether we've actually sought God or not is evidenced more by the tokens of discipleship than those of scholarship. As Elbert Green Hubbard said, "God will not look you over for medals, degrees, or diplomas, but for scars."

We know these things, of course, but we forget them. We need to be reminded that seeking God is not an exclusively intellectual endeavor. Perhaps because it is easier just to think about God than to be an actual disciple, we need to be warned that God is more than an idea.

At the day of judgment we shall not be asked what
we have read but what we have done.

THOMAS À KEMPIS

March 30

DOING WHAT'S RIGHT . . . FOR GOD'S SAKE

Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done. *Luke 22:42*

GREAT SPIRITUAL PROGRESS OCCURS WHEN WE LEARN TO DO WHAT IS RIGHT FOR REASONS HIGHER THAN THOSE THAT HAVE MOVED US IN THE PAST. The very act of doing the right thing is important, of course. But even more important than that is our motive for doing it. Jesus repeatedly emphasized the importance of the heart. And we must get to the point where we do the right thing not just for good reasons but for the higher reasons — the highest of all these being the pure love of God Himself.

It is not an easy thing to wrestle with the question “What are we to do?” and keep the focus on God. Even as we consider what God’s will might be from a theoretical standpoint, it’s hard to keep our thoughts from being overpowered by the more immediate concerns that relate to ourselves. *How will this or that action affect our feelings? What will make us happy? What will others think of us? What will we think of ourselves? What’s our best strategy?* All this fretful self-concern about the pros and cons of human behavior makes it appear that life is about us. But life is not about us; it’s about God. All the self-centered questions in the world matter very little next to the question of God: *what does God desire?* And we are never in more danger of acting selfishly than when the thing that God desires happens to be a thing that also accrues to our advantage. It’s hard to keep from wrapping plain old self-will in the mantle of “God’s will.”

At some point we must learn not only to do what’s right but also to do it for God’s sake. Whether obedience seems advantageous or disadvantageous to us personally can’t be allowed to dominate the discussion. Many good things do come to the obedient, and it would be naive to suggest that we shouldn’t be drawn to these. But they can’t be our primary concern. Jesus taught that we get the good things God has for us only by forgetting these things and keeping our focus on Him. We find ourselves only when we lose ourselves, and life is gained in the act of giving it up.

“Not as I will, but as thou wilt.” To be able to say these words and truly mean them is the highest point we can ever hope to attain. Then, indeed, we have broken out of time’s hard shell to breathe, not its stale air, but the fresh, exhilarating atmosphere of eternity.

MALCOLM MUGGERIDGE

March 31

THE BEAUTY OF HOLINESS

Give unto the LORD the glory due to His name;
Worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness.

Psalm 29:2

GOD IS TO BE WORSHIPED IN THE “BEAUTY OF HOLINESS,” BOTH THE BEAUTY OF OUR GRATITUDE FOR HIS HOLINESS AND THE REFLECTED GLORY OF HIS HOLINESS IN OUR OWN LIVES. We were made to experience beauty, and the highest beauty available to us is the beauty of holiness.

Unfortunately, holiness does not have the best of reputations. Those who strive for it are thought to be anxious, repressive, and slightly neurotic. Yet however many unhealthy people there may be in the world, such an image is an unfair caricature of the genuine seeker of God. If we do fit the stereotype of the emotionally strung-out saint, we’ve probably not made our way very far down the path of real sanctity. Far from being incompatible with health, holiness may be defined as wholeness and health in the most comprehensive sense, as is indicated by the very etymology of the words. “The old word for *holy* in the German language, *heilig*, also means healthy. And so *heilbronn* means holy-well, or healthy-well. You could not get any better definition of what *holy* really is than healthy — completely healthy” (Thomas Carlyle).

But if the holy life is not below the level of normal, there is also a sense in which it is not above. We don’t help ourselves by thinking of holiness as an extraordinary state of being, a state not meant for most of us. In the Scriptures, obedience is presented as the ordinary thing. It is simply the intended, normal mode of human living. If anything is to be called extraordinary, that would be unholiness. To be holy just means that we’re living a life where all the parts of our being are in their proper, normal place. Holiness is quite ordinary in that it is “the symmetry of the soul” (Philip Henry). And what a beautiful symmetry it is!

The human spirit was created to thrive on God’s beauty. When we long for our God and reach for Him, when we devote ourselves with a whole heart to showing forth His goodness, we come closer to a beauty that from the beginning was meant to surround us and delight us.

Holiness has love for its essence, humility for its clothing,
the good of others as its employment, and the honor of God as its end.

NATHANAEL EMMONS

April 1

READY TO LISTEN

Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and it shall be, if He calls you, that you must say, 'Speak, LORD, for Your servant hears.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. Now the LORD came and stood and called as at other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel answered, "Speak, for Your servant hears." *1 Samuel 3:9,10*

AS WE SEEK GOD, WE MUST KEEP OURSELVES OPEN TO HIS WORD. Like rich, fertile soil ready to receive the sower's seed, our hearts must be receptive to the word which God intends to plant there. Although marvelous good things can come from God's word in our hearts, this word can't even take root in our hearts if they are hardened or unhearing. We must be ready to listen.

To be ready to listen means that we're ready to receive whatever God wishes to say. Yet our hearing is often hindered by presupposition and prejudice. We already have fixed ideas about what God "must" say, and there are limits to what we'll listen to, even from God. But if we limit ourselves to what we *want* to hear, not many of us will hear what we *need* to hear. It is critically important that we move past our personal preferences and allow God to say to us whatever He wills. After all, a servant is in no position to dictate to his master what instructions the master is allowed to give. As those who would serve God, we have not been asked to serve in an "advisory capacity." It is our role (and our high privilege) to wait upon His word and do His bidding, whatever that might be. *"Speak, Lord, for Your servant hears."*

The gift of language has been vouchsafed to us by God. But the gift was not given just so that we might speak; it was given that we might *hear* when our God speaks to us. Great issues hinge upon our choice in this matter. Readiness to listen is no accident of personality, randomly possessed by some people and not by others. It is a deliberate decision we make to open ourselves to God's word. James encouraged us to do this: "Receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves" (James 1:21,22). If we can honestly say what Samuel said, "Speak, Lord, for Your servant hears," then we have a maturity that can take us toward an even greater maturity in the things of God.

One of the highest and noblest functions of man's mind is to listen to God's Word, and so to read his mind and think his thoughts after him.

JOHN R. W. STOTT

April 2

THE DECLARATION OF GOD

No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him. *John 1:18*

IT IS A STUNNING FACT THAT GOD HAS MADE HIMSELF KNOWN TO THE HUMAN RACE THROUGH HIS SON JESUS CHRIST. Having been created in His image, we have a desperate, undeniable need to know the God who is our origin. We may not recognize this need for what it is, but it is there nonetheless. Without the knowledge of our Creator, we die. But sin cuts us off from Him and sets up the direst of predicaments: we must have the knowledge of God or perish, but this is the very knowledge which is impossible for us, in sin and on our own, to acquire.

Yet we were not left in our helpless state; God deigned to move toward us and make Himself known, even in our sinful condition. He has disclosed that which we could never have discovered on our own. "No one could ever have found God; he gave himself away" (Meister Eckhart).

When God disclosed Himself in the person of Jesus Christ, that was the completion of a process begun long before. "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 . . . [who is] the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person" (Hebrews 1:1-3). "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

Jesus Christ is God "explained" in human terms. He is "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation" (Colossians 1:15). When Philip asked to be shown the Father, Jesus replied, "Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, 'Show us the Father'?" (John 14:9). As Augustine of Hippo wrote long ago, "Christ as God is the fatherland where we are going. Christ as man is the way by which we go."

What if we neglect this declaration of Himself that God has made? Then we die. Ultimately, there is no alternative. Jesus could not have said it more clearly: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6).

Christ is the aperture through which
the immensity and magnificence of God can be seen.

J. B. PHILLIPS

April 3
IDOLATRY

You shall have no other gods before Me. *Exodus 20:3*

OUR CREATOR IS THE ONLY BEING WHOM WE MAY WORSHIP, AND WE MUST MAKE IT OUR AIM TO WORSHIP HIM AS HE TRULY IS. God is the only eternal, self-existent Being. Of all the things that exist, only He is uncreated — everything else that exists has been caused to exist by Him. Hence, if we worship anything other than God, we are worshipping a created thing, a “creature,” rather than the Creator, who alone is to be worshiped (Romans 1:20-25).

The Scriptures have a good deal to say about the danger of “idolatry.” But is it really the practical problem today that it was in ancient times? We probably don’t feel much temptation to worship anything in nature, and we certainly wouldn’t make a graven image. If we’re concerned about idols at all, we’re probably more tempted by the modern ones like money and material things (Colossians 3:5). But whether the idolatry is ancient or modern, we don’t see it as a serious problem because we are people who know that God should be our highest concern.

But suppose we’ve enthroned God in our hearts, and the thing that occupies the throne is simply a false conception of Him. Suppose the “God” we worship is not God as He has revealed Himself to be, but God as we have wrongly conceived Him in our own minds. In this case, are we not worshipping a “creature” of our own making? And are we not practicing a form of idolatry that is all the more dangerous because it is so subtle and sophisticated?

These days there seems to be a growing tendency for us to define God in the subjective terms of our own likes and dislikes. We demand that God be the kind of God we think He should be, or else we won’t “believe” in Him. But we’d better be careful. A day is coming when our very real Creator will be our very real Judge. If we’ve been unwilling to bow before the awesome truth of His reality and have concocted an imaginary “God” more agreeable to us, then the real God, the Reality that we found so unacceptable in time, will simply be unavailable to us in eternity.

Let us beware lest we in our pride accept the erroneous notion that idolatry consists only in kneeling before visible objects of adoration, and that civilized peoples are therefore free from it. The essence of idolatry is the entertainment of thoughts about God that are unworthy of Him. It begins in the mind and may be present where no overt act of worship has taken place.

April 4
GOD MINIMIZED

"A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am the Father, where is My honor? And if I am a Master, where is My reverence?" says the LORD of hosts to you priests who despise My name. Yet you say, "In what way have we despised Your name?"
Malachi 1:6

EVEN IF WE DO NOT PRACTICE IDOLATRY, WE MAY STILL FAIL TO GIVE GOD THE REVERENCE HE IS DUE. We may fail to take Him seriously. And like those of Malachi's day, we may not even admit to ourselves that we've not given God His rightful honor. Because of our lack of shame, our error is all the more egregious.

The modern view grants little majesty to God and evokes little awe from us. Even in prayer, we speak to God so casually that anyone listening might think we were shooting the breeze with a neighbor across the backyard fence. A. W. Tozer was not wide of the mark when he prefaced his trenchant *The Knowledge of the Holy* with this comment: "The Church has surrendered her once lofty concept of God and has substituted for it one so low, so ignoble, as to be utterly unworthy of thinking, worshiping men . . . The words 'Be still, and know that I am God,' mean next to nothing to the self-confident, bustling worshiper [of our day]."

I believe at least two forces play upon us and tempt us to take a casual approach to God. First, science has demystified so many previously awe-inspiring phenomena that we've almost forgotten what it's like to be amazed. We're jaded. Awe is simply not a feeling we experience much anymore, even with respect to God. But second, our age is one in which informality is the accepted style. In almost every realm of thought and action, the trend is toward ease and comfort. Is it any wonder that we've become more relaxed in our attitude toward God?

The fading of reverence for God is one reason our spirituality is so shallow and so weak. How can we be filled with any depth of satisfaction when we minimize the very God who is capable of filling us up? Our malady was well diagnosed by J. B. Phillips's famous five words: "Your God is too small." Until we realize that the self-indulgent "worship" that passes for reverence today is an insult to God, it's not likely that we'll seek Him as we should.

If we haven't learned to be worshipers, it doesn't really matter
how well we do anything else.

ERWIN W. LUTZER

April 5

TAKING TIME TO THINK ABOUT GOD

When I remember You on my bed,
I meditate on You in the night watches.

Psalms 63:6

THINKING ABOUT RELIGION IS NOT EXACTLY THE SAME THING AS THINKING ABOUT GOD. The subject of religion often ends up being as much about ourselves and “our relationship to God” as about God Himself. We find ourselves pondering our attitude, our obedience, our feelings, our needs, our difficulties. At some point, however, should we not take time out and think about God Himself? Surely we must. We must contemplate His nature, His attributes, His will. We must meditate on our beloved God, allowing Him to be the sole object of our thought.

It is an interesting aspect of our religious life that we often spend so much time in polemics that we have little time left over to grow strong in the truth after we’ve defended it. C. S. Lewis, who was no small apologist himself, once said, “A man can’t always be defending the truth; there must be a time to feed on it.” It’s not that debates about religion are wrong. Given the truth-is-whatever-you-think temper of our times, we need more debate, rather than less (Jude 3,4). But the truth is not to be defended merely because we enjoy the clash of ideas in the intellectual arena. The point of the whole enterprise is to clear away mistaken ideas about God — *so that God can be truthfully thought of and adored for what He is!* If we never get around to actually meditating on God, then we’re not much better off than those Paul spoke of who “knew God,” but failed to “glorify Him as God” (Romans 1:21).

There is a passage in Malachi which seems to indicate that God has a special place in His heart for those who love to think of Him: “Then those who feared the LORD spoke to one another, and the LORD listened and heard them; so a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear the LORD and who meditate on His name” (Malachi 3:16). We greatly benefit when we think about God. But the greatest good of all is that our minds are lifted out of our little concerns and caught up in the wonder of Someone who existed long before we ever had the need to think of Him.

There is something exceedingly improving to the mind in a contemplation of the Divinity. It is a subject so vast, that all our thoughts are lost in its immensity; so deep, that our pride is drowned in its infinity.

CHARLES HADDON SPURGEON

April 6

REAL THEOLOGY

These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. *Matthew 15:8*

OUR REAL THEOLOGY IS WHAT WE REALLY BELIEVE ABOUT GOD. This is not necessarily the same thing we tell others we believe, or even what we tell ourselves. It's what produces our actual behavior. If we frequently act in ways that contradict what we say we believe about God, at some point we have to ask ourselves whether what we say we believe is what we really do believe. Are we fooling anyone but ourselves? "Our real idea of God may lie buried under the rubbish of conventional religious notions and may require an intelligent and vigorous search before it is finally unearthed and exposed for what it is. Only after an ordeal of painful self-probing are we likely to discover what we actually believe about God" (A. W. Tozer).

We need to be careful, though, in how we go about resolving our inconsistencies. When people are trying to achieve integrity, they often get rid of the wrong thing. Suppose, for example, a person says he believes in the principle of courtesy, but he often finds himself acting discourteously. He might smooth out the conflict by saying, "My actions show that courtesy is not really and truly one of my principles. So rather than be a hypocrite, I'm going to just openly admit to being a rude person. At least that way, I'll be consistent." Where is this person's mistake? It's in the assumption that if he doesn't really "believe" in courtesy, then it must be the *belief* that's wrong. He gets rid of the wrong thing, his belief, on the assumption that this is the only way to resolve the conflict. But there is a wiser way. He might go back and objectively reconsider whether courtesy is a valid principle. If it is, and he hasn't really been believing that, then the answer is to *start* really believing that. When he does, then his actions will eventually fall into line with what is now a *practical* belief, as well as a *professed* one.

It takes work, but if we diligently seek God, we'll seek daily to narrow the gap between our professed beliefs and our practical beliefs. We'll pay the price to buy into whatever truths we have discovered. It's not enough to believe what is true; we must engage it and make it our own.

There's a distinction between our "espoused values" — which we profess to believe in — and our "values in action," which actually guide our behavior.

CHARLOTTE ROBERTS

April 7

LIFELONG LEARNING ABOUT GOD

For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. *Colossians 1:9,10*

IF CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT IS IMPORTANT IN OUR LIVES, IT IS MOST IMPORTANT OF ALL IN OUR THINKING ABOUT GOD. Nothing is more vital than making our concept of God correspond as nearly as possible to God as He truly is. Thus the single best thing we can do to improve ourselves each day is to improve, even just a little bit, the accuracy of our knowledge of God.

We can't know God completely, of course. God is infinite, and even if sin were not a factor, the finite knowledge of creatures could never encompass the Creator fully. Nevertheless, God has chosen to reveal something of Himself to us. And we are able, with the minds that He has given us, to apprehend things about Him that are objectively true. There are many things we can't know, but those that we can know, we can know truly (Deuteronomy 29:29). Our knowledge of God can be dependably factual.

But, of course, it is also possible to have in our minds things about God that *aren't* true! The same minds that can apprehend truth can also embrace untruth, and the danger of believing a lie about God is a most serious danger indeed. If we ever need to be careful, it is surely with this, the most important subject our minds are capable of considering. Wherever God is concerned, we need to think *carefully* so that we will think ever more *clearly*.

Our need for improvement never ceases. As long as life lasts, growth in our knowledge of the Creator needs to be a priority. We can't afford to be complacent. Paul warned that "if anyone thinks that he knows anything, he knows nothing yet as he ought to know" (1 Corinthians 8:2). There is not one of us whose understanding of God doesn't need to be refined and purified. And maybe the reason we don't make any more progress than we do is that we are content with so little. We pick up a scrap or two of knowledge and we cease our search, when in reality we can know a God whose riches of truth are vast and deep and strong.

God's treasure is like an infinite ocean, and yet a little wave of emotion, passing with the moment, is enough for many.

BROTHER LAWRENCE

April 8

CAREFULNESS IN SPEAKING OF GOD

And so it was, after the Lord had spoken these words to Job, that the LORD said to Eliphaz the Temanite, "My wrath is aroused against you and your two friends, for you have not spoken of Me what is right, as My servant Job has." *Job 42:7*

JOB'S FRIENDS, WHO HAD PRESUMED TO SPEAK ON GOD'S BEHALF, FOUND THEMSELVES THE OBJECT OF GOD'S WRATH BECAUSE, AS HE SAID, "YOU HAVE NOT SPOKEN OF ME WHAT IS RIGHT." Speech is among the highest of our gifts as God's creatures, and it is a most serious thing to employ this gift in speaking about the Creator Himself. The gravity of saying anything untrue about God is such that it would be far better to remain silent than to speak in error. And yet, we often speak with shocking carelessness about God, casually tossing around opinions about Him as if it were no more than a game. We speak of our Creator offhandedly.

As a writer, I write these very pages with an almost paralyzing sense of responsibility, a fear of misleading any reader. Solomon's reminder is never very far away from my consciousness: "In the multitude of words sin is not lacking, but he who restrains his lips is wise" (Proverbs 10:19). And then there is James's admonition: "So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak . . ." (James 1:19). The subject of God, of all the subjects in the world, is the one that deserves the greatest care and the greatest reverence from one who speaks or writes.

Computer programmers talk about "validating the input." Since the quality of a program's output depends on the accuracy of the input (garbage in, garbage out), it's always wise to *validate* the input, checking to make sure the information is as accurate as it was first thought to be. When the computer is our brain and the subject is God, can we not see how crucial it is to make sure our concepts are correct before we "output" them to others?

Just as it is possible for us to understand truth about God, it is possible for us to speak truth about Him. But we must be careful. Words about God have the power to uplift and to strengthen. But those words must be "acceptable words . . . words of truth" (Ecclesiastes 12:10). *Words of truth*. Nothing less must be our goal.

Forge thy tongue on an anvil of truth
And what flies up, though it be but a spark,
Shall have weight.

PINDAR

April 9

WE MUST KNOW GOD TO LOVE AND WORSHIP HIM

But then, indeed, when you did not know God, you served those which by nature are not gods. *Galatians 4:8*

IN OUR SEEKING OF GOD, THE THING THAT WE SEEK IS NOT AN ABSTRACT KNOWLEDGE OF HIM, BUT A PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE THAT LEADS TO RIGHT LIVING. The knowledge of God does much more than satisfy our intellectual curiosity. It is the key to active obedience. Without a true knowledge of God, neither our thoughts nor our deeds can be what they ought to be.

The lives we lead grow out of the thoughts we think. And since our thinking about God is the most basic thinking we do, it's also the most basic determinant of our behavior. Our character and our conduct are determined by the way we think about God.

No personal relationship can be what it ought to be if it is not based upon truth. It is important, for example, that a husband and wife view each other truly. To whatever extent either holds a misconception of the other, the relationship will be hindered. Surely no less is true of our relationship with God. David said, "The LORD is near to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him in truth" (Psalm 145:18). We simply can't relate to God properly if our conception of Him is at odds with reality. Jesus Himself said, "But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him" (John 4:23).

"Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life" (Proverbs 4:23). All of our thoughts are important, but by far the most important are those that have to do with God. We've been created to show forth God's own goodness by loving Him and praising Him, and it's truth that makes it possible for us to do both. David acknowledged the essential role of truth in worship when he prayed, "I will worship toward Your holy temple, and praise Your name for Your lovingkindness and Your truth; for You have magnified Your word above all Your name" (Psalm 138:2). Those whose hearts are filled with the greatest adoration of God are those whose minds see most clearly who He really is.

They that know Thee not may call upon Thee as other than Thou art,
and so worship not Thee but a creature of their own fancy; therefore
enlighten our minds that we may know Thee as Thou art, so that
we may perfectly love Thee and worthily praise Thee.

A. W. TOZER

April 10

DELIGHTING IN GOD'S LAW

But his delight is in the law of the LORD,
And in His law he meditates day and night.

Psalm 1:2

FOR THOSE WHO DILIGENTLY SEEK GOD, THERE IS NO GREATER DELIGHT THAN LEARNING GOD'S WILL, DOING IT, AND REFLECTING ON IT IN THEIR MINDS. Along this path lies the good life. Joshua was reminded of this in God's charge to him: "This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success" (Joshua 1:8). Because God is good, any word that He has spoken is good. To love Him, revere Him, and respect Him is to rejoice whenever He speaks. "The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart . . . more to be desired are they than gold" (Psalm 19:8,10).

In Psalm 1, the person who is said to be blessed is one who "meditates" in God's law. Meditation requires more than a hurried glance at the Scriptures once in a while. It first involves concentrated study and then the leisurely contemplation of what has been learned. When we meditate on God's law, we admire its beauty and ponder its application in our lives. We ruminate on it and mull it over, indulging ourselves in the real enjoyment of thinking about God. The godly person doesn't just do this on rare occasions. He does it "day and night."

We must learn to appreciate God's word as our rule of life, our law, our *torah*. The word *law* has such a negative connotation that it's hard for us to have such an appreciation. We'd rather think of the Scriptures as "inspirational" literature, there for us to consult if we ever need a lift. But the very lift we need is to delight in the *law* of the Lord. God has revealed His will not just to inspire us, but to *govern* us — we need to meditate on it day and night.

Delighting in God's law is simply a part of our delight in God Himself. In another of the Psalms, David said, "I delight to do Your will, O my God, and Your law is within my heart" (Psalm 40:8). The more we discover what God is really like, the more joy it will bring us to turn His precepts over and over in our minds and revel in the sheer goodness of such a great God.

God is my being, my me, my strength, my beatitude, my good, my delight.

CATHERINE OF GENOVA

April 11

GREATER MINDS AND HEARTS

... that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height; to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. *Ephesians 3:17-19*

WHY SHOULD WE DESIRE TO HAVE GREATER POWERS OF COMPREHENSION? Most of us do have such a desire. We'd like to have our hearts and minds enlarged. And a greater capacity for understanding is a worthy aspiration. But to what use would we put such a gift? Why do we wish for it?

The human mind is a vessel meant to be filled with God. But the sin which alienates us from God shrivels our mind, shrinking its capacity for understanding the knowledge of God. If we seek deliverance from sin, one of the greatest reasons for doing so is that we long to have a heart that can know more of God.

What we do with our minds would often have to be described as "prostitution." We take an instrument made for God's glory and we misuse it pursuing things of far less value, things which are often not only unworthy of our minds, but also quite selfish.

But when we aren't actually prostituting our minds, we're often guilty of simply neglecting them. We don't really apply ourselves to the work of learning about God, and so the spiritual insight that we have begins to atrophy. Perhaps we need to hear Paul's admonition to Timothy: "Meditate on these things; give yourself entirely to them" (1 Timothy 4:15).

In Ephesians 3:17-19, Paul prayed that his brethren might gain a greater ability to comprehend spiritual realities. His desire was that they might "know the love of Christ which passes knowledge" and "be filled with all the fullness of God." We have a desperate need to know the God who has made us and loved us. Because we need to know more of Him than we can know with our present limitations, we need to have greater minds and hearts. And since the highest use of our mind is to know God, the ability to know God more fully and glorify Him more properly is the noblest goal to which our intellect can aspire.

O God, light of the minds that see you, life of the souls that love you, and strength of the souls that seek you, enlarge my mind and raise the vision of my heart, that, with swift wings of thought, my spirit may reach you, the eternal wisdom, you who live from everlasting to everlasting; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

April 12

THE EXCELLENCE OF HIS MAJESTY

O LORD, our Lord,
How excellent is Your name in all the earth,
Who have set Your glory above the heavens!
Psalm 8:1

IN THE WORKS OF HIS CREATION, GOD HAS MANIFESTED THE PERFECTION OF HIS GOODNESS, WISDOM, AND POWER. He has set His glory above the heavens. How excellent is His name in all the earth! God's greatness is so vast that it stretches our imagination to its limit. But the evidence is all around us, and we need to open ourselves up more fully to an appreciation of His glory. We must make sure that the grandeur of all these things is not lost on us. What could be a greater tragedy than to be surrounded by God's glory and yet fail to be moved by it appreciatively?

Consider an analogy. As I write these lines I am listening to a magnificent recording of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, one of the towering artistic achievements of human civilization. It's hard to imagine that anyone could listen to this music and not be moved by its exhilarating power. But there are such people. Suppose that a man sits in a concert hall while this symphony is being performed and he fails to be moved by it because he isn't really paying attention. Suppose that he's preoccupied with his expensive new shoes, which are a tad too tight. Wouldn't this fellow's situation be sad? While he was fretting over the relatively unimportant concerns of his own little world, he missed the opportunity to be transformed by something much bigger than he was. A huge experience surrounded him, but he missed it because his attention was focused on himself. In our case, we're surrounded by the very works of God. If these don't affect us, then our situation is sad for the same reason. We are the losers.

"O LORD, our Lord, how excellent is Your name in all the earth, who have set Your glory above the heavens!" Is the stupendous glory of His creation lost on us? Do we not have eyes to see? Are we not paying attention? If not, it's imperative that we rise above the little worries of our lives. We must allow ourselves to be moved by the majesty of our God.

In the vast and the minute we see
The unambiguous footsteps of the God
Who gives its lustre to an insect's wing
And wheels his throne upon the whirling worlds.

WILLIAM COWPER

April 13

ACCORDING TO EACH ONE'S NEED

Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light. *Matthew 11:28-30*

GOD KNOWS OUR NEED FOR REST. No one understands more than He how sin has disturbed our souls and disquieted our minds. Not only does He have the wisdom to see our need, but He has the ability and the love to provide for that need in the very best way. To have "faith" in God means we put our confidence in all three: His wisdom, His goodness, and His power.

While it's true that all sin comes from a willful rebellion against the requirements of God, it's also true that the consequences of sin can be quite different from person to person. The word "death" (Romans 6:23) covers many different kinds of damage. Each of us stands before God broken and in need of restoration, but what needs to be restored depends on the unique combination of qualities God gave us in the first place.

Sometimes we need help seeing what our own needs really are. The story is told in Matthew 19:16-22 of a young man who came to the Lord and said, "Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?" When Jesus told him to keep the commandments, he replied, "All these things I have kept from my youth. What do I still lack?" Jesus instructed him to give everything he owned to the poor and then follow Him. At that point, the text says that "he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions." Here was a man who seemed to be honest. He seemed to seek relief from the damage of sin in his own life. But when the Lord put His finger on the problem that he needed help with the most, he rejected the Lord's help.

Are we willing to accept the Great Physician's diagnosis, and are we willing to take the steps His gospel requires? If so, then rest will be given to each of us according to our need. The gifts of God are as wonderfully varied as the people whom He has created. It was He who gave each of us our own attributes, and it is He who can restore what each of us has lost.

For one man conversion means the slaying of the beast within him; in another it brings the calm of conviction to an unquiet mind; for a third it is the entrance into a larger liberty and a more abundant life; and yet again it is the gathering into one of the forces of a soul at war with itself.

GEORGE JACKSON

April 14

BOTH REST AND RESPONSIBILITY

For the love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died; and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again.

2 Corinthians 5:14,15

IN THE GOSPEL THERE IS A HEALTHY BALANCE BETWEEN SECURITY AND MOTIVATION. The central fact of the gospel is that “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). But this information is more than merely interesting. It is motivating. “The love of Christ compels us.” If Christ died for us, we must live for Him. Thus the gospel holds in balance both of the things we need: a source of rest and a sense of responsibility. “He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again.”

Since different people need different things, the gospel addresses each of us where we are. If we’re worried, downtrodden, and fearful, we need to hear of God’s love. But if we’re lazy, irresponsible, and presumptuous, we need to hear of God’s requirement that we serve Him actively. But even while we’re being warned, we still need to be reminded that God is on our side. And conversely, while we’re being reassured, we dare not forget that obedience is necessary. The gospel never loses sight of either rest or responsibility — and neither should we.

Jesus put the emphasis wherever it was needed. He didn’t hesitate to emphasize one of these more than the other if that’s what His hearers needed. Depending on the audience, Jesus could say, “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28), but He could also bluntly ask, “Why do you call Me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do the things which I say?” (Luke 6:46). This does not mean that Jesus contradicted Himself. It simply means that He knew the difference between those who needed a sedative and those who needed a stimulant. For our part, do we understand the gospel’s provision for both needs? And do we have the honesty to see in which direction our own personal needs are the greatest at any given moment?

It is true that the convert has laid upon him an obligation like no obligation in all the world because he has been loved like no other love in the world; but the convert has also been given a peace like none in the world, for he knows that God loves him, not for what he is, but for what God is.

WILLIAM BARCLAY

April 15
HE KNOWS

But He knows the way that I take;
When He has tested me, I shall come forth as gold.
Job 23:10

HAVING MADE US AND PROVIDED FOR US EVERY INSTANT, GOD KNOWS WHATEVER CAN BE KNOWN ABOUT US. He knows all of our circumstances and all of our choices. He knows not only what we've done, but what we've aspired to do. Our hearts lie before Him like an open book. "He knows the way we take."

There is a big difference between "reputation" and "character." Reputation is what others think we are. It consists of inferences that have been drawn about us from evidence that is always imperfect and incomplete. Character, on the other hand, is what God knows we are, with all the evidence taken into account and every inference drawn with perfect precision.

It's an unpleasant fact that our reputation is sometimes *worse* than our real character. Even when the information is more or less correct, it is possible for others to take the facts and reach faulty conclusions about us. Often however, the information is simply not correct, or at least not complete, and so we console ourselves by saying that others don't know enough about our "extenuating circumstances" to make a fair assessment of us. But God does know. And we can be sure that His dealings with us will be based on the perfect knowledge He has of our real character, regardless of whether others deal with us fairly or not.

But frankly, aren't there also times when our reputation is *better* than our character? If others knew everything we've ever done or left undone — absolutely everything — it's likely that at least some of our reputations would have to be adjusted downward. God knows this too. He knows what we really are.

God's infallibly perfect knowledge of us is at once comforting and sobering. "He knows the way we take." He is not only infinitely wise; He is infinitely good. He can be counted on to do what is right. And the wonder of all wonders is that, knowing us as He does, He is willing for us to know Him. If we're willing to deal with what He can show us about ourselves, He is willing to show us more than we could ever imagine about the God that He is.

It is astonishing that I — dust, ash, and mud —
May on familiar terms be with the highest God.

ANGELUS SILESIVS

April 16

STRENGTH FOR THE LOYAL HEART

For the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show Himself strong on behalf of those whose heart is loyal to Him.

2 Chronicles 16:9

THE LORD IS LOOKING FOR THOSE WHOSE HEARTS WILL BE TRUE TO HIM. And He is eager to “show Himself strong” on behalf of such people, those who know the meaning of loyalty.

Asa, the king of Judah to whom the admonition was addressed in 2 Chronicles 16:9, was a good man in many respects. The general course of his life was commendable, but there were times when his decisions left much to be desired. Earlier, he had been told by one of the prophets, “The LORD is with you while you are with Him. If you seek Him, He will be found by you; but if you forsake Him, He will forsake you” (2 Chronicles 15:2). This warning was not always heeded, however. And when Asa deviated from his duty, he forfeited the help of a God who fights on behalf of “those whose hearts are wholly his” (Jerusalem Bible).

There is hardly a virtue more noble than loyalty. Consider the cluster of words in our language that denote this trait. *Faithfulness* and *fidelity* imply adherence to one’s vows or obligations — the fulfillment of duty and the keeping of promises. *Allegiance* means that one has been true to an authority to which he is subject. *Fealty*, an older word, once referred to the obligation of a vassal to a feudal lord, but now means faithfulness to a law or principle that one has pledged to uphold. And the word *loyalty* itself gives us the picture of a person who has such a steadfast and devoted attachment to something that he or she is not easily turned aside.

Think of the good things that would come out of a serious application of these ideas to our seeking of God. If we sought Him with a loyalty that He could count on — a faithful love that would hold us at His side — what strength He would make available to us! Our greatest need is for fidelity, the honor that holds steadfastly to all the truth we know of God, however little that may be at present. If we turn our back on what we know of Him, then, as traitors, we cut ourselves off from His help at the time we need it most. Our seeking must be with an allegiance that will die in battle before it will do any treachery to God.

Lord, help me faithfully to journey along my road,
holding my rightful place in the great procession of humanity.

MICHEL QUOIST

April 17

PRINCIPLE VS. IMPULSE

By faith Moses, when he became of age, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward.

Hebrews 11:24-26

IN ORDER TO DO WHAT IS RIGHT, OUR CONSCIENCE AND OUR WILL SOMETIMES HAVE TO OVERRULE THE DESIRES OF THE MOMENT. According to the text above, Moses had such an experience in deciding to forgo his future as an Egyptian prince. In order to serve a higher good, he let go of the pleasures that were immediately available to him and accepted a difficult task that cost him the rest of his life. Impulse would have said *Stay in Egypt!* — but principle said *Go!* Moses chose to be a man of principle.

No matter how much we grow spiritually, we're still going to have some "hard moments." The fewer the better, obviously, and the person who commits to a disciplined life will find obedience easier than the one who makes no such commitment. Indeed, when we've trained and exercised ourselves in godliness (1 Timothy 4:7,8), we'll find that God's commandments are "not burdensome" (1 John 5:3). But there are still going to be times when the right thing and the easy thing are not the same thing. And godliness will choose the right thing, whether difficult or not.

No one could have been more prepared for Gethsemane than Jesus was. Yet it would be an insult to suggest that making the choice He did was an easy experience. The decision was literally an "agony" (Luke 22:39-46). He "offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears," and He "learned obedience by the things which He suffered" (Hebrews 5:7,8). Whatever may have been the impulses of His flesh, He chose to base His actions on the principle of love for the Father's will.

Doing the right thing, based on principle and regardless of circumstance, is the essence of character, integrity, and honor. The ability to make such a choice is an important part of the image of God in which we were created. When we use this gift to make principled choices, rather than impulsive ones, we honor the God whose image we bear and we also please Him.

A free will is not the liberty to do whatever one likes, but the power of doing whatever one sees ought to be done, even in the very face of otherwise overwhelming impulse. There lies freedom indeed.

GEORGE MACDONALD

April 18

WHEN THE FLESH IS WEAK

Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation.
The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak. *Matthew 26:41*

DURING THE DIFFICULT HOURS OF GETHSEMANE, JESUS NOT ONLY HAD A SPIRIT WILLING TO DO THE RIGHT THING, BUT HE HAD, BY VIRTUE OF LIFELONG EXERCISE, A FLESH THAT SUPPORTED AND CARRIED OUT THE DICTATES OF HIS SPIRIT. In contrast, the disciples' spirit was willing, but their flesh was too weak to put into action the things their spirit wanted to do. And so it often is in our own experience. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.

The weakness of the flesh is a problem, it's true. But it's also true that there are some things we can do to diminish this problem. We struggle with the flesh's weakness, but we're not the victims of a problem we can do nothing about. If it's weak, the flesh can be strengthened. It can be disciplined. It can be trained.

The example of Daniel is helpful here. In the "lion's den" episode, he demonstrated a remarkably strong will. Faced with a royal edict that ordered the death of anyone who prayed to God, Daniel simply went home and . . . prayed to God. But this was not a man who suddenly steeled his will to do the right thing. He was an old man who "knelt down on his knees three times that day, and prayed and gave thanks before his God, *as was his custom since early days*" (Daniel 6:10). Since childhood, Daniel had been *training his flesh* to carry out his spirit's will in regard to daily prayer.

In the case of Jesus, it would be hard for us to imagine what His needs were in the Garden of Gethsemane. Neither can we imagine the resources of both spirit and flesh that were available to Him in that hour of greatest need. But whatever those resources were, they were not suddenly built up in that hour. Every single day of His life, Jesus had been engaging in regular activities and disciplines that *took care of and trained His flesh* to be the ally of His spirit. There was more than a coincidental connection between Jesus' daily lifestyle and the fact that His flesh was strong enough in a crisis to implement the intentions of His spirit.

The general human failing is to want what is right and important, but at the same time not to commit to the kind of life that will produce the action we know to be right and the condition we want to enjoy.

This is the feature of human character that explains why the road to hell is paved with good intentions. We intend what is right, but we avoid the life that would make it a reality.

DALLAS WILLARD

April 19

SELFISH MOTIVES ARE NOT STRONG ENOUGH

For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments.
And His commandments are not burdensome. *1 John 5:3*

ONE OF THE MOST POWERFUL THINGS WE CAN DO IS IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF OUR MOTIVES. Since we obey our conscience only when we're sufficiently motivated to do so, our motivation needs to be as energetic as possible. But it is mainly as we move toward higher and nobler motives that the strength and effectiveness of our motivation increases. *Motive is the key to motivation.* So the improvement of our motives is a matter of great practical importance. Whatever the reasons are that move us to do good right now, personal growth requires more than just believing those reasons more strongly. We must acquire some other, higher reasons.

To be specific, we must become people whose hearts are less and less self-centered. If we are moved by no more than the desire to get what we want and avoid what we don't want, then our motivation is going to fail us eventually. In the hardest moments, selfish motives (however "noble") are simply not strong enough to move us toward right conduct.

The purest and most powerful motive we can have is simply the real love of God. When Jesus said "If you love Me, keep My commandments" (John 14:15), His point was not just that those who love Him are expected to keep His commandments, though that's certainly true. Jesus was also teaching that loving Him is the *key* to keeping His commandments. Only when we act out of love will we find that His commandments are "not burdensome" (1 John 5:3). No other motive is strong enough to keep us moving consistently in the direction of obedience.

And so we must get outside of ourselves and be drawn into concerns that are more vast and "moving" than the mere rise and fall of our own happiness. To a great extent, this is what growth toward spiritual maturity is about. It is learning to live by the strong laws of love. We must live not by the laws of self-interest disguised as love, but by the laws of real upward-looking love itself. When we've grown in health to the point where our spirits are genuinely turned upward, then we'll know a strength we could not have known while sick with selfishness.

A man's spiritual health is exactly in proportion to his love for God.

C. S. LEWIS

April 20

THE ULTIMATE REASON TO REFUSE SIN

But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Look, my master does not know what is with me in the house, and he has committed all that he has to my hand. There is no one greater in this house than I, nor has he kept back anything from me but you, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" *Genesis 39:8,9*

THERE ARE MANY REASONS TO ABSTAIN FROM SIN, BUT THE MOST IMPORTANT IS SIMPLY THE THOUGHT THAT SIN IS AN OFFENSE AGAINST THE GOODNESS OF GOD HIMSELF. Although we injure ourselves greatly when we sin, that is not the worst thing about it. Sin is an issue that has much more to do with God than with us. And just as the love of God is the most powerful reason for doing right, it is also the main thing that should keep us from doing wrong.

After committing adultery with Bathsheba and then murdering her husband, David expressed his sin in these words: "Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight; that You may be found just when You speak, and blameless when You judge" (Psalm 51:4). Surely, many people were hurt by David's transgression, including David himself. But compared to the wrong done to God, all of these wrongs were as nothing.

In spiritual matters, deciding to take God seriously is the most effective precaution we can take. If we love God as unselfishly as we should, we'll hold His honor more dear than our own, and that sense of honor will defend us and protect us from doing anything that would detract from His glory. Loving reverence is always the ultimate prophylaxis against evil. The willpower we need can only come from a combination of love and respect for God Himself.

This was clearly true in Joseph's case. When he was being seduced by his master's wife, there would have been any number of pragmatic reasons to refuse her advances. Had he been so foolish as to yield, he would have jeopardized nearly every aspect of the good life he had begun to build for himself in Egypt. Yet all of these considerations put together did not weigh as heavily in his thinking as the single factor that mattered most: God's honor. Whatever else might have been said, Joseph showed that he understood the crux of the matter when he said, "How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?"

Sin is the dare of God's justice, the rape of his mercy, the jeer of his patience, the slight of his power, and the contempt of his love.

JOHN BUNYAN

April 21

GOD MUST BE SOUGHT EVEN BEFORE SPIRITUAL STRENGTH

But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness,
and all these things shall be added to you. *Matthew 6:33*

WHAT BLESSINGS ARE INCLUDED IN “THESE THINGS” THAT WILL BE ADDED WHEN WE SEEK FIRST GOD’S RULE AND HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS? When He made this statement, Jesus was speaking of temporal needs like food and clothing. But doesn’t the principle of putting first things first apply even to “these things” that are of a spiritual nature? Even when the blessings that we seek are spiritual, we must not seek them for selfish reasons or personal benefit. God is not to be sought for what we can get out of Him; He is to be sought for what we long to give to Him. We were created to enjoy a relationship that revolves around Him, not around us. Only when we get this priority fixed in our minds and seek God first will other things fall into their rightful place.

Although spiritual blessings are higher than temporal ones, they are the same in that they come to us indirectly as we seek God, not directly as we seek our own desires. The example of happiness is a good one. It is a much sought-after temporal blessing, but ironically, it eludes us when we pursue it for its own sake. Instead, it comes to us indirectly, as a by-product of contributing to others’ happiness. And spiritual blessings, at least in this regard, are no different. The strength we desire doesn’t come by focusing on our own needs, however spiritual those needs may be. These things are by-products of focusing on God. If we’re obsessed with ourselves (*Are we getting the help we need with our problems?*), it’s not likely that we’ll find what we’re looking for.

A. W. Tozer once wrote, “Selfishness is never so exquisitely selfish as when it is on its knees. Self can turn what would otherwise be a pure and powerful prayer into a weak and ineffective one.” Our prayers must not be self-centered, but God-centered. It is when we’re weak that we’re strong. We find ourselves when we forget ourselves. Having been made for the purpose of showing forth His goodness and His glory, we find our lives when we lose them in His. When we seek Him first — not His blessings, but God Himself — all “these things” will be added to us.

Live out your life in its full meaning; it is God’s life.

JOSIAH ROYCE

April 22

IF WE HAD SUCH A HEART

Oh, that they had such a heart in them that they would fear Me and always keep all My commandments, that it might be well with them and with their children forever! *Deuteronomy 5:29*

FEAR FILLED THE HEARTS OF ISRAEL WHEN THEY STOOD AT THE FOOT OF MOUNT SINAI AND HEARD THE ACTUAL VOICE OF GOD. Struck at that moment by the majesty and power of the Creator, they begged that God not speak to them directly anymore, saying to Moses, "Surely the LORD our God has shown us His glory and His greatness, and we have heard His voice from the midst of the fire . . . Now therefore, why should we die? For this great fire will consume us; if we hear the voice of the LORD our God anymore, then we shall die . . . You go near and hear all that the LORD our God may say, and tell us all that the LORD our God says to you, and we will hear and do it" (Deuteronomy 5:24-27).

These were reverent words. God acknowledged their propriety when He said to Moses, "I have heard the voice of the words of this people which they have spoken to you. They are right in all that they have spoken" (v.28). But God also knew that once the emotion of the moment had passed, the people's reverence would disappear and they would drift into disobedience. He longed for them not only to say the right words, but to have a real reverence in their hearts that matched the respectfulness of their words: "Oh, that they had such a heart in them that they would fear Me and always keep all My commandments, that it might be well with them and with their children forever!" (v.29).

The idea of a heart that reverently and gratefully humbles itself before its Maker is such a simple idea that we're in danger of underestimating its importance. We may make the mistake of assuming that we already have this kind of heart, simply because we've said so many words that acknowledge God. But if we truly had such a heart, what a difference it would make! Not only would our faithfulness to God be more steady, but we would have given to God the single most important thing that He seeks from us: *a heart willing to be redeemed.*

The tumult and the shouting dies,
The captains and the kings depart,
Still stands the ancient sacrifice,
A humble and a contrite heart.

RUDYARD KIPLING

April 23
GODLY FEAR

And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul . . .

Deuteronomy 10:12

IF WE'RE LOOKING FOR THE THINGS OF BASIC IMPORTANCE, IT WOULD BE HARD TO FIND A CONCEPT MORE BASIC THAN GODLY FEAR. In the text above, Moses asked what it was that God required of Israel, and answered the question by saying that God required them to fear Him, to obey Him, to love Him, and to serve Him with their whole hearts. The fear of God is the first thing on the list, and this is more than a mere coincidence. Many years later, Solomon would say that this is the very heart and soul of what it is to be a human being: "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man's all" (Ecclesiastes 12:13). This statement should summarize our deepest and most fundamental attitude toward God.

Why is our faith today so superficial, our spiritual discipline so ineffective, and our way of life so powerless? Given the disappearance of godly fear from our religious practice, it is hardly surprising that we are weak. We can't expect to *do* as our spiritual forefathers did if we're not *moved* as they were. "By faith Noah, being divinely warned of things not yet seen, *moved with godly fear*, prepared an ark for the saving of his household, by which he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness which is according to faith" (Hebrews 11:7).

There are different kinds of fear, of course, and some are not to be desired. Any sort of fear that is inconsistent with love has no place in our relationship with God (1 John 4:17-19). But reverent fear is not inconsistent with love. Indeed, a popular dictionary describes reverence as "a feeling of profound awe and respect and often love." It is the blending of love and godly fear that transforms our seeking of God into a *diligent* seeking of God. If it is godly fear that moves us, we'll take with utter seriousness every syllable of His revelation to us in the Scriptures (Hebrews 12:25-29). And taking this truth as our guide, we'll be eager, in both awe and adoration, to draw near to the living flame of His Presence.

The fear of God is to be united with the love of God; for love without fear makes men remiss, and fear without love makes them servile and desperate.

JOHANN GERHARD

April 24

GODLY SORROW

For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death. *2 Corinthians 7:10*

BEING SELF-CENTERED MAKES IT DIFFICULT FOR US TO FEEL GODLY SORROW, AND SO WE FIND IT DIFFICULT TO REPENT OF OUR SINS IN ANY LASTING WAY. By definition, godly sorrow is a remorse that grieves what our sins have cost *God*, and if our thoughts have to do mostly with our *own* gains and losses, then whatever mourning we do will be worldly, not godly. To turn away from sin decisively, we have to concentrate on things higher than ourselves.

Godly sorrow is a stronger force than worldly sorrow. In *2 Corinthians 7:11*, Paul describes how it had affected the church at Corinth: "See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done" (NIV). A sorrow powerful enough to produce these things is much more than a mood. It is a deep-down disturbance that recognizes what is really wrong with sin, and this recognition continues to govern one's conduct long after the painful effects of the sin have been ameliorated (*1 Corinthians 15:9,10*).

The quality of one's character is indicated by what disturbs that person. As long as their own situations are comfortable, most people are not disturbed by anything at all. Some people, however, have a higher character than that. While their own situations may still be comfortable, these people are disturbed by the evil that is "out there" in the world, and they make the world a better place by crusading against social injustice and so forth. But beyond that, an even higher character is possessed by those who are disturbed most of all by the evil of their own sins. And what they are disturbed about is just the fact of having sinned against God, whether the sin has caused them any other pain or not! These folks are the unselfish, God-centered people who, once they realize they've erred, will grieve the wrongfulness of their sin, and not just its painfulness. The self-pitying sorrow of the world leads to death, but godly sorrow leads to . . . God Himself!

It is one thing to mourn for sin because it exposes us to hell, and another to mourn for it because it is an infinite evil; one thing to mourn for it because it is injurious to ourselves, and another thing to mourn for it because it is wrong and offensive to God. It is one thing to be terrified; another, to be humbled.

April 25

THIS IS OUR WISDOM

Surely I have taught you statutes and judgments, just as the LORD my God commanded me . . . Therefore be careful to observe them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes, and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people." *Deuteronomy 4:5,6*

IN OUR MOMENTS OF HIGHEST ASPIRATION, WHAT IS IT THAT WE WOULD LIKE TO BE KNOWN FOR? At our funeral, if someone says, "Here is the one area where this person showed more wisdom than in any other area of his life," what would we want that thing to be? If we are to be true seekers of God, then the careful observance of God's law must figure prominently in our ambitions.

There is nothing wiser we can do than to observe God's law carefully. This is the very thing that Moses, at the end of his life, implored the people of Israel to do. "For this," he said, "is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes, and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.'"

There is no greater wisdom available to us than the wisdom of God's will. One of the worst tragedies of human experience is our arrogant dismissal of God's wisdom as "foolishness" (1 Corinthians 1:18-25). It is we who are foolish, however. The more prudent we are, the more sense we will see in this statement: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding" (Proverbs 9:10).

There is no greater reputation available to us than a reputation for having served others in ways that are consistent with God's wisdom. The apostle Paul, for example, could sum up the life of his ancestor David with the simple statement that he died and was buried "after having been useful to his own generation in accordance with God's purpose" (Acts 13:36 Weymouth). We would only lower ourselves if we aspired to being useful in any other way.

So what issues and concerns do we want others to think of when they think of us? It's a corny old cliché, but it still has the ring of truth: "What happens to us in the hereafter depends on what we're here after." If when others think of us, they think at once of the good things that come from seeking God's wisdom, then it's fairly certain that we've been "after" the right thing.

God shall be my hope, my stay, my guide, and lantern to my feet.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

April 26

ASPIRING TO BE ACCEPTABLE

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
Be acceptable in Your sight,
O LORD, my strength and my Redeemer.
Psalm 19:14

THE PROSPECT OF BEING ACCEPTABLE TO GOD CAN ACT UPON US WITH GREAT FORCE. But if we wish the words of our mouth and the meditation of our heart to be acceptable to *Him*, we must redefine what is acceptable to *us*. We must learn to love the same things that He loves, conforming ourselves to His character.

The lives we end up with are determined, to a large extent, by the things we aim for. For this reason, the things we aim for should be carefully considered. Paul wrote to the Christians in Philippi, "And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, that you may *approve the things that are excellent*, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, being filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God" (Philippians 1:9-11). Isn't this the great goal that should entice us and attract our minds? Isn't learning to "approve the things that are excellent" the key to all the other progress we wish to make?

To approve the things that are excellent, our minds must be trained to recognize the excellence of those things that are excellent by God's standards. So Paul says that we must grow "in knowledge and all discernment." Just as an art critic must learn how to recognize artistic greatness when he sees it, we must learn how to recognize the greatness of that which is morally and spiritually excellent when we come in contact with it. Day by day, our judgment must come to coincide more closely with God's, so that the things we approve are the same things He approves. Spiritually speaking, our tastes must be refined.

David did not discover a *way of life* that was acceptable to God without learning to *think* in ways that were acceptable to Him. And neither will we make much progress in our spiritual quest if we don't send our standards of acceptability to His school of excellence. May our very *meditations* be acceptable in God's sight!

Grant me grace, O merciful God, to desire ardently all that is pleasing to thee, to examine it prudently, to acknowledge it truthfully, and to accomplish it perfectly, for the praise and glory of thy name. Amen.

THOMAS AQUINAS

April 27
BE STILL!

Be still, and know that I am God;
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth!
Psalm 46:10

BEFORE WE MAKE ANY OTHER RESPONSE TO GOD, WE MUST RESPOND TO HIM WITH RESPECT. If we don't first dispose ourselves before Him in reverent silence, our deeds will be deficient in both strength and significance. The obedience that most highly honors God is an obedience deeply grounded in awe and wonder. "Be still," God says to us, "and know that I am God."

There is a time to speak, but there is also a time to be silent. Nowadays most of us have too little acquaintance with any silence that could be called worshipful. We seek God talkatively, rather than respectfully. In the relationship between God and man, we are doing too much of the talking. We may pause in our words once in a while, but even then, our minds are not reverentially silent before God. They are still racing at full throttle, fueled by the frenetic self-concern of our busyness. And the fact that the busyness is *religious* busyness doesn't do much to lessen the problem.

There is no question that the majesty of God calls for a response from us. Serving God is not a merely passive matter. But we must take the time to stand still and be lost in wonder before we rush out to do God's bidding. And even as we actively carry out God's instructions, we must often pause in silence to steep our minds in His grandeur. If we fail to do so, our activity will lack the essential ingredient of reverence. Without the qualities that come from reverence, our service will be shallow and our lives will be little more than an accident waiting to happen. It is stillness and silence that produce the best doers and speakers of God's word. And the louder the world, the harder these are to come by.

In this age of the world, we've discovered how to multiply our own words vastly, and we're frequently reminded of the power of these words. But we dare not forget their danger. "The LORD is in His holy temple. Let all the earth keep silence before Him" (Habakkuk 2:20).

With our loss of the sense of majesty has come the further loss of religious awe and consciousness of the divine Presence. We have lost our spirit of worship and our ability to withdraw inwardly to meet God in adoring silence.

April 28
VERBIAGE

But I will come to you shortly, if the Lord wills, and I will know, not the word of those who are puffed up, but the power. For the kingdom of God is not in word but in power. *1 Corinthians 4:19,20*

IMPRESSIVE TALK ABOUT GOD IS NOT THE SAME THING AS ACTUAL LIFE IN HIM. Eloquent words about God may abound in some circles, and there is certainly no shortage today of profound discussion about the subject of spirituality. But our relationship with God is not determined by either the eloquence or the profundity of our talk. Not even the *truthfulness* of our words is enough, by itself, to guarantee a real relationship with God!

It is tempting to stay in the realm of talk and never venture out into the world of action. After all, it is easy and pleasant to talk about God. When we verbalize truths about God, we not only feel a sense of spiritual satisfaction ourselves, but others also come to think of us as being wise and spiritually mature. But if we talk about God in such a way that the true emptiness of our hearts is concealed, either from others or ourselves, we are doing something that is exceedingly dangerous. As the painful realities that could draw us toward a real relationship with God are buried beneath a blanket of fine religious words, we may discover that our own verbiage has become our greatest hindrance in moving toward God. Endlessly repeating the truth about Him will have become a substitute for dealing with the truth about ourselves.

We're perhaps familiar with the biblical warnings against words-only religion. Paul, for example, warned about "idle talkers" (Titus 1:10), indicating that such people "profess to know God, but in works they deny Him" (Titus 1:16). And Jesus Himself spoke sternly on the subject: "These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me" (Matthew 15:8). But are "idle talkers" just the professional imposters and the intentional hypocrites? Surely these texts have a wider application. They are a warning also to those of us who've slipped *carelessly* into the assumption that if our words are good, then that is all we need to be concerned about. Intentional or not, hypocrisy is a very serious matter. The soundness of our faith involves more than the sound of our words.

All he has rests on his tongue. His religion is something to make a noise with.

JOHN BUNYAN

April 29

FOOLISH DISREGARD

The fool has said in his heart, "There is no God."
Psalm 14:1

TO DISMISS GOD FROM OUR DECISIONS IS A MOST FOOLISH THING TO DO. The reality of God is the most massive truth we'll ever encounter, and the most consequential. It is folly to omit this truth from our thinking, as if we expected it to move out of our way.

Some individuals disregard God by adopting the intellectual position that He does not exist. These have thought the matter through and come to the conclusion that there is no God. In their conduct, they may live as if there were a God and may even adhere to a certain spirituality, but their position, at least philosophically, is that a personal God does not exist.

If God does exist, such a denial is obviously unwise. But many of us disregard Him in a way that is no less foolish. We do this when we simply conduct our lives without taking God into serious account. This is a more practical kind of atheism. We pay lip service to a God who perhaps exists, but we believe this God can be safely set aside in the actual conduct of our day-to-day affairs. He has no real impact on our lives. In Psalm 14:1, it is this kind of fool who is described. He says "There is no God" not so much by his dubious philosophy, as by his disobedient lifestyle.

There is a sense in which this kind of atheism is more arrogant than any other. In Psalm 10, for example, we are shown how *presumptuous* it is to disregard God: "The wicked in his proud countenance does not seek God; God is in none of his thoughts" (v.4). "He has said in his heart, 'I shall not be moved; I shall never be in adversity'" (v.6). "He has said in his heart, 'God has forgotten; He hides His face; He will never see'" (v.11). "He has said in his heart, 'You will not require an account'" (v.13).

When we live in this manner, we trivialize God in the most blasphemous way. Unlike the atheist who believes there is no God to be dealt with, we believe we don't really have to deal with the God who does exist. We think that, for all practical purposes, He can be ignored. But if God is our Creator, our disregard only shows us to be foolish. It does nothing to diminish Him.

A man can no more diminish God's glory by refusing
to worship him than a lunatic can put out the sun by scribbling
the word darkness on the walls of his cell.

C. S. LEWIS

April 30

THE SIMPLE WILLINGNESS TO ACKNOWLEDGE GOD

So Moses and Aaron came in to Pharaoh and said to him, "Thus says the LORD God of the Hebrews: 'How long will you refuse to humble yourself before Me?'" *Exodus 10:3*

RARELY HAS ANYONE DEFIED GOD AS BLATANTLY AS PHARAOH DID WHEN HE REFUSED TO LET THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL LEAVE THE LAND OF EGYPT. His contempt for the God of Israel was open and arrogant. When requested by Moses and Aaron, at the command of God, to allow Israel to leave Egypt, Pharaoh replied bluntly, "Who is the LORD, that I should obey His voice to let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, nor will I let Israel go" (Exodus 5:1,2). And indeed he did not. Throughout nine of the worst disasters any Egyptian could imagine, Pharaoh refused to bow before the mighty God who brought these plagues upon him. It took a tenth plague, involving the death of his own firstborn son, to break his pride. And even then, as soon as the immediate crisis was over, he changed his mind and sent his army after Israel. The very least we can say about this man is that he was extraordinarily strong-willed. Anyone who can hold out in rebellion against God as long as he did is no ordinary rebel (Exodus 10:1,2).

But as shocking as Pharaoh's rebellion was, a similar stubbornness is at the root of every person's sin. When we disobey what we know to be God's will, we are saying by our actions, "Not Thy will, but mine be done." Sin is always a refusal to acknowledge God. It is a declaration of our independence, a stiff-necked resistance to God's sovereignty. And as long as we hold out in this resistance, God will be asking us, as He asked Pharaoh, "How long will you refuse to humble yourself before Me?"

The tempter's argument is that we don't *need* to humble ourselves. Adam and Eve found the "courage" to defy God only after being led to believe they could get away with it (Genesis 3:1-8). Satan had said, in effect, "Stand up and take care of yourselves. Don't let God interfere with anything you want." Once they imagined that such a rebellion could succeed, sin was not far behind. So from the beginning, sin has always disguised itself as strength. The only real strength in the world, however, is that which the devil denies: a simple willingness to acknowledge God.

Independence is not strength but unrealized weakness
and is the very essence of sin.

OSWALD CHAMBERS

May 1
HIGHER GROUND

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. *James 1:25*

IT IS NOT FROM THINKING ALONE THAT WE MAKE SPIRITUAL PROGRESS, BUT RATHER FROM THINKING, DOING, AND THEN LEARNING FROM WHAT WE'VE DONE. Whoever makes an honest attempt to do what God's word has taught him to do, that person, James says, "will be blessed in what he does." We get to higher ground not by meditation alone, but by movement.

Our conscience is a cautionary faculty that warns us when we're about to violate our principles. It was given to restrain us. But sometimes we need to be stimulated, and our conscience should do that also. It should move us to act in ways that are consistent with our principles. Often, however, we fail to act. Afraid of making a mistake, we do nothing. And consequently, we learn nothing. By failing to act on the best of our present understanding, we forfeit the opportunity to grow in that understanding.

Improvement is the result of examining what we've done. The more we do, the more we have a chance to improve. But if we wait to do anything until we can get it exactly right, we'll probably do very little. Perfect conditions for action rarely present themselves, and the person who waits for them is wasting valuable time. "He who observes the wind will not sow, and he who regards the clouds will not reap" (Ecclesiastes 11:4). In the real world, we have to go ahead and do the best we can.

Spiritual growth has more than one dimension. On the one hand, it requires that we eschew evil. But on the other, it requires that we do the good we know to do, and then learn to do even better. "You therefore, beloved, since you know this beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked; but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ . . ." (2 Peter 3:17,18). Maturity comes from actions carefully considered beforehand and then carefully evaluated afterward.

Renewal is the principle — and the process — that empowers us to move on an upward spiral of growth and change, of continuous improvement . . . Moving along the upward spiral requires us to *learn, commit, and do* on increasingly higher planes.

May 2

PEACEFUL MANAGEMENT OF THE MOMENTS

No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it. *1 Corinthians 10:13*

LIVING A GODLY LIFE IS NOT WITHOUT ITS DIFFICULTY, BUT IT IS OFTEN MORE SIMPLE THAN WE SUPPOSE. The natural simplicity of godliness is that it amounts to the peaceful management of the individual moments that come to us, one at a time. Some of these moments are certainly harder than others. Powerful desires can surge up and threaten to overthrow our conscience. When our principles are tested, we may find that we don't have as much commitment to them as we thought we had. Or we may find that we've just been fooling ourselves — the principles we've been professing are not really our true principles after all. But despite these difficulties, no single moment asks of us anything impossible. Our tests come in single file, and if we take them as they come, we can learn to manage our moments more effectively.

In *1 Corinthians 10:13*, we are assured that temptation's difficulties will never be more than we can bear. However strongly we're tempted, there will always be a "way of escape." But the key to doing what's right is managing the moments, which means breaking down the larger difficulties into decisions that are small enough for us to handle. God is willing to help us, but only with the actual needs of the *present* moment. "One is given strength to bear what happens to one, but not the one hundred and one different things that might happen" (C. S. Lewis). God doesn't protect us from all *possible* problems; He helps with our *actual* problems.

No matter how formidable our difficulties, the right step to take at any moment will always involve the doing of something that is quite doable. Freedom means that we *can* take this step, and responsibility means that we *should* take it. If we fail to exercise the freedom we've been given, we'll lose it and end up as slaves to the flesh. How infinitely better it would be if we learned to manage our moments with wisdom, strength, and peace.

Character is distilled out of our daily confrontation with temptation, out of our regular response to the call of duty. It is formed as we learn to cherish principles and to submit to self-discipline. Character is the sum total of all the little decisions, the small deeds, the daily reactions to the choices that confront us.

SIDNEY GREENBURG

May 3

IS THERE ANYTHING WE CAN'T LET GO OF?

Jesus said to him, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me." But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. *Matthew 19:21,22*

GOD ALONE IS TO BE WORSHIPED, AND WE MUST MAKE SURE THAT NOTHING ELSE TAKES HIS PLACE WITHIN OUR HEARTS. Surrounded with so many things that attract our devotion, it is not easy to love God with a pure, wholehearted devotion. But this is the very thing we must learn to do.

Even Abraham, the very father of the faithful, had to be taught to surrender his heart completely to God. As Isaac, the beloved son of Abraham's old age, began to mature, God saw that Abraham's attachment to Isaac was growing deeper by the day. Abraham needed to be tested. He needed to be taught that, if necessary, he could do without . . . yes, even Isaac, the dearest blessing he'd ever received from God. "Take now your son," God said, "your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering" (Genesis 22:2). Though his hand was stayed at the last moment from actually taking Isaac's life, the agony through which Abraham had passed to get to that point had taught him that none of God's gifts must ever be allowed to occupy the place in our hearts reserved for the Giver alone. Whatever we hold on to besides God must be held loosely.

As our Creator, God is unique. We have a need for Him unlike our need for any other thing that exists. He is the only being we have to have, the only thing we can't do without. We are to be inseparably devoted to Him alone; He is to be our only real "possession." All other things must be loved with a love we can let go of, and if our attachment to anything other than God is so strong that we can't let go of it, then that thing, whatever it is, has become an idol to us. Yet God loves us too much to leave us where we are. The trials and tribulations that break our hearts are often the providence through which God is teaching us that He is, in fact, the only One we can't do without. Although painful, this is the best thing that can happen to us.

The dearest idol I have known,
Whate'er that idol be,
Help me to tear it from thy throne,
And worship only thee.

WILLIAM COWPER

May 4

GOOD AND RIGHT AND TRUE

Thus Hezekiah did throughout all Judah, and he did what was good and right and true before the LORD his God. *2 Chronicles 31:20*

TO LIVE LIFE AT ITS BEST, WE MUST LEARN TO COMBINE THREE THINGS: WHAT IS GOOD, WHAT IS RIGHT, AND WHAT IS TRUE.

Learning to recognize these things is no small challenge, and learning to balance them harmoniously is an even greater challenge.

Good. The Hebrew word translated “good” in this text is the same as in Genesis 1:4: “And God saw the light, that it was good.” It is a word the Hebrews used to describe things that are beautiful, fair, and pleasant. In this sense, our conduct is “good” when it is characterized by grace and gladness and good cheer. The warmth of such goodness attracts us very naturally. We welcome the joy and the merriment that we associate with the good.

Right. By their word for “right,” the Hebrews referred to justice, equity, and uprightness — qualities that are no less important than goodness. If we are to be all that God desires us to be, we must learn to balance the beauty of goodness with the rectitude of justice, striving to emulate God’s own character in this respect (Romans 11:22). Jean-Jacques Rousseau observed, “We always love what is good or what we think is good; it is in our judgment of what is good that we can make mistakes.” Our fondness for what is good must be informed by a commitment to what is right. If it is not, then our goodness will be little more than selfishness.

True. The Hebrew word *emeth* denoted certainty, trustworthiness, and faithfulness. It had to do with surety and stability, and it referred especially to the bedrock dependability of God’s word. To be a person of truth was, in ancient Israel, to be a devout, religious person, living according to the sure truth that had been revealed to the nation by God. David prayed, “Lead me in Your truth and teach me, for You are the God of my salvation; on You I wait all the day” (Psalm 25:5). In the long run, it is this truth that must give stability to our concepts of both goodness and justice. In fact, our attempts to do what is good and right can do great harm if they are not controlled by a prior devotion to truth. We never do ourselves, or others, a bigger favor than when we improve our understanding by submitting it to the authority of truth.

Truth has no special time of its own. Its hour is now — always.

ALBERT SCHWEITZER

May 5

SEEKING A GOD WHO IS BOTH FAR AND NEAR

. . . so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us. *Acts 17:27*

AS WE SEEK GOD DILIGENTLY, WE ARE STRUCK BY THIS REMARKABLE TRUTH: THE GOD WHO IN HIS GREATNESS IS FAR ABOVE US IS ALSO THE GOD WHO IN HIS GRACE COMES VERY NEAR US. Teilhard de Chardin pointed to this paradox when he wrote, "All of us, Lord, from the moment we are born feel within us this disturbing mixture of remoteness and nearness." Who has not felt this truth, that although we're cut off from God, He is still not very far away?

If we contemplate the distance between God's glory and our own small existence, we must be amazed that He takes thought for us and stoops to help us. "When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have ordained, what is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You visit him?" (Psalm 8:3,4).

Nevertheless, it is a fact that the God whom we seek is a God who can actually be found, even by us. We must seek Him, and our seeking must be earnest and wholehearted. But the diligence that pleases God (Hebrews 11:6) is necessary because of love, not because God is difficult to find. He is, as Paul said to the Athenians, "not far from each one of us" (Acts. 17:27).

Although God's greatness and His grace are equally important to us, there are specific times when we need to be reminded of one more than the other. The inimitable William Barclay wrote, "O God, our Father, as we read Your word, humble us at the sight of Your holiness, and then comfort us with the memory of Your mercy. Humiliate us with the realization of our sinfulness, and then uplift us at the sight of Your love . . . When we are lazy and lethargic, let Your word stimulate us to thought and to action. When we are restless and distracted, let Your word calm our troubled hearts with the peace that passes understanding."

So the God of our worship can also be the God of our love! "For thus says the High and Lofty One Who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: 'I dwell in the high and holy place, with him who has a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones'" (Isaiah 57:15).

Even though God is glorious, he is still intimate. God is high and yet low, enormous and yet within us, awesome and yet lovable.

FRANÇOIS DE FÉNELON

May 6

THE FEAST WITHIN

Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Ephesians 3:20,21

THE EXPERIENCE OF GOD CAN BE SO MUCH GREATER THAN ANY OF US HAVE TASTED; THE PITY IS THAT WE CONTENT OURSELVES WITH SO LITTLE. Compared to the depth of God's riches, our experience of Him has often amounted to little more than wading in the shallows. We've satisfied ourselves with so little knowledge of Him, hardly more than scraps. Our contentment has been our undoing.

Do we really have any desire that could be called *hunger and thirst*? Jesus taught that those who will be "filled" are those who long to be filled (Matthew 5:6). And James said simply, "You do not have because you do not ask" (James 4:2). It may be that, in the practical affairs of day-to-day living, we're simply refusing to recognize how deeply we really do need God.

Do we have the courage to go more deeply into a relationship with God? To walk closely with God is to go into territory that is, for us, uncharted and often frightening. Somehow we sense that God will require changes in our character so radical and steps in our obedience so dangerous that we find it safer to stay where we are in the lowlands, far from the adventure of real life with God. Confronted by disturbing, unpredictable truths, we retreat.

Do we live our lives without ever really knowing what is in the depths of our own soul? Even though we spend much time thinking about ourselves, most of us are little more than strangers to our real selves. We've never really plumbed the depths of all that God created us to be. Vast areas of personal potential lie unexplored. Powerful personal resources lie untapped, resources given to us by God to be used in the service of purposes greater than we've allowed ourselves to dream. We live out the span of our days standing on the threshold of self-discovery, losing out on real life because we've not dared to let ourselves be lost in God.

With regard to the sumptuous inward feast God has prepared for us, why do we tarry so long on the outside looking in? We are foolish to wait. "Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the man who trusts in Him!" (Psalm 34:8).

I am spiritually hungry. I have lingered too long in the garden outside.

TERESA OF AVILA

May 7
CENTER

... and he who believes on Him will by no means be put to shame.
1 Peter 2:6

GOD WILL NEVER DISAPPOINT US. He is the only secure, unchanging center around which we can order our lives, and in which we can ground our peace. He is an infallible point of reference.

To say that God will never disappoint us is not to say that we will never be disappointed. We may sometimes be disappointed that God does not do as we wish. But this is not because of any objective failure of faithfulness on His part. It comes rather from a subjective failure on our part to understand God's wisdom, His methods, and even His love.

God is often described in the Scriptures in terms of things that are solid and immovable. One figure is that of a *rock*. David, for example, said, "Truly my soul silently waits for God; from Him comes my salvation. He only is my rock and my salvation; He is my defense; I shall not be greatly moved" (Psalm 62:1,2).

But another interesting figure is that of an *anchor*. In the New Testament, Christians with a wavering faith were urged to hold on to their hope: "This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast" (Hebrews 6:19). And they were reminded that God's promise is backed up by His oath, "that by two immutable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us" (Hebrews 6:17,18).

Our frequent frustrations in life result, more often than not, from having an unstable center. In selecting our end-all-and-be-all, we select some fairly shaky things, often with tragic results. And even when we suppose that God is our center, our faith often turns out to be not in God Himself but in certain earthly blessings that He's allowed us to have temporarily. But like Job, we need to love God for His own sake, even when His wisdom withdraws particular blessings from us. And like Paul, we need to be grounded in God and able to say, "For this reason I also suffer these things; nevertheless I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day" (2 Timothy 1:12).

Change and decay in all around I see;
O Thou who changeest not, abide with me.

HENRY F. LYTE

May 8

DELIGHTING IN GOD

Delight yourself also in the LORD,
And He shall give you the desires of your heart.
Commit your way to the LORD, trust also in Him,
And He shall bring it to pass.
Psalm 37:4,5

AMONG THE MANY GOOD THINGS WE SHOULD BE ABLE TO SAY ABOUT GOD, WE SHOULD BE ABLE TO SAY THAT HE IS DELIGHTFUL TO US. He is the source of all that should stir us most deeply. "God is so vastly wonderful, so utterly and completely delightful that he can, without anything other than himself, meet and overflow the deepest demands of our total nature, mysterious and deep as that nature is" (A. W. Tozer).

If we are instructed to delight ourselves in God, this means that we can choose to do so. It is within our power to determine the objects of our delight (Philippians 4:8), and we can, if we will, make the choice to delight in God. That our will is involved in our delight should tell us that "delight," at least in regard to God, is something more than an emotional feeling. It is a settled conviction concerning the excellence of God. Sometimes this conviction will be accompanied by moods and feelings that are "delightful," but sometimes it will not. In any event, we must determine that our minds will appreciate God for all that He is, and give Him the priority that He deserves in our thinking and doing. The ultimate test of whether we delight in God is not how we feel, but whether we *acknowledge* Him as He should be acknowledged.

That said, let us not hesitate to say also that desiring God in an emotional way is good. Our values should be such that our minds come to the subject of God with enjoyment and eagerness, rather than with reluctance. Surely when Jesus said, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Matthew 22:37), He intended that we love God with more than our intellect and our will. Did He not also mean that our hearts should thrill at the thought of God?

This love can only be possible when we grow in our appreciation of the goodness of God's holy character. As long as our delight depends upon His conforming Himself to our wishes, that delight will be small. We must learn to love the truth about God.

A true love of God must begin with a delight in his holiness.

JONATHAN EDWARDS

May 9

NO TRIVIAL PURSUIT

Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. *2 Timothy 2:15*

SOME QUESTIONS CALL FOR A SOBER, DELIBERATE CONCENTRATION OF OUR MINDS, AND THE GREATEST OF THESE IS SURELY THAT OF OUR RELATIONSHIP TO GOD. What endeavor could possibly be more worthy of diligence than the seeking of our Creator's glory?

Trifling is undesirable even in worldly matters. Those who dabble in what they do, acting superficially and without any serious intent, rarely accomplish any lasting good. But to trifle with God is not only undesirable; it is deadly. The irreverence which insults God by dabbling in worship and discipleship is a sin of such profound implications that we probably have no more than an inkling of how offensive it is to Him. When we see that we're being careless, Solomon's warning about the "sacrifice of fools" ought to arrest us: "Walk prudently when you go to the house of God; and draw near to hear rather than to give the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they do evil" (Ecclesiastes 5:1).

If we wish to do what is right toward God, we must have an earnest intent. "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God," Paul wrote to Timothy. In this text, the KJV translators conveyed the idea of diligence with the word "study," which in their day meant "to endeavor, make it one's aim, set oneself deliberately to do something" (OED). To "study" is to work hard at what we're doing, and when we're doing something that is to be offered to the very God who made us, a "studied" effort is appropriate, to say the least. In an earlier letter, Paul had written to Timothy, "Meditate on these things; give yourself entirely to them, that your progress may be evident to all" (1 Timothy 4:15). In matters of the spirit, little progress can be made if progress is not a serious goal.

As busy people, we tend to see religion as one activity on our agenda, one element in our lifestyle. But to be real, religion must be more than simply one of our interests. Our meditative moments must do more than supply "balance" to our schedule, so that we can get back to our self-centered business with increased vigor. If Mammon is our true master, then whatever moments we spend "worshiping" God will be wasted.

Those who trifle lose their labor.

RICHARD BAXTER

May 10

DESIRE MORE DEEPLY FELT

Then He spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart. *Luke 18:1*

SOMETIMES WHEN GOD APPEARS UNWILLING TO GRANT OUR REQUESTS, THE RESULT IS THAT WE ARE LED TO SEEK HIM MORE FERVENTLY. When our prayers are not instantly answered, we should not jump to foolish conclusions about God Himself. It may be that He is waiting for us to find out, by our continual prayer, just how deep our desires really are. Our prayers may be answered much later than we had hoped — and in ways much better than we had imagined. When that happens, we're able to enjoy a deeper appreciation of God's goodness.

In Luke 18, Jesus told His disciples the story of a widow who refused to give up when a judge did not grant her petition for help, but continued to plead until finally the judge answered her request. Jesus' point was that we "always ought to pray and not to lose heart" (v.1). The desired answer to our prayers may not be immediately forthcoming, but we should not suppose that God doesn't hear or that He doesn't care. His delay may actually mean that He cares more than we think. It is His wisdom, no doubt, that prevents Him from rushing into quick fixes to our problems when they need a more long-lasting solution. In any event, Jesus assured us that God's ears are open to those "who cry out day and night to Him," even though "He bears long with them" (v.7). From us, God is looking for persistent faith and persistent prayer.

In one of his well-known metaphors, Spurgeon said, "The spade of agony digs deep trenches to hold the water of life." It is a fact that our hearts often need to be *prepared* before God can bless us. We have too little grasp of mercy's value, and we need to be *taught* truly to enjoy the good things God is able to do.

So hunger is not always a bad thing. There is an old saying that "hunger is the best sauce." And Jesus said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled" (Matthew 5:6). Perhaps our hunger needs to grow more intense before we can properly appreciate the feast. If so, God may withhold the feast until we are ready.

Standing outside mercy's gate, we grow more passionately earnest in our pleading. First we ask, then we seek, and finally we plead with cries, tears, and a broken heart.

CHARLES HADDON SPURGEON

May 11

SEEKING GOD WITH THE WHOLE PERSON

Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the Lord!
Blessed are those who keep His testimonies, who seek Him with the whole heart!
Psalm 119:1,2

IF WE ARE TO BE WHOLE PERSONS, WE MUST SEEK GOD WITH OUR WHOLE HEARTS. Doing this requires a more balanced effort than most people have ever given to their seeking of God.

Intellect. The intellect, or mind, is our ability to acquire knowledge, think, and reason. In giving us this wonderful ability, God intended us to use it to apprehend truth about Him and about His creation, including ourselves and our relationship to Him. With the intellect, we are able to be aware of God and understand at least something of His nature and His will.

Emotions. Not only can we know, we can have feelings about what we know. And how impoverished we would be without our feelings and our affections! To know about God without having any desire for Him would be a dry and dusty business indeed.

Will. Our intellect and our emotions weren't given for their own sake, but to support our actions. It is with the decision-making ability of our will that we *respond* to God. And if we don't give God our will by obeying Him, then our knowledge and our feelings are worth little. These things are to move us to godly action.

Toward the end of his life, Moses exhorted the people of Israel to remain faithful to God after they entered the Promised Land. If they did not, the land would be taken away from them, and they would be scattered among the nations. As they suffered in exile, however, they could turn back to God. And if they did so *with all their heart*, they would find God again: "But from there you will seek the LORD your God, and you will find Him if you seek Him with all your heart and with all your soul" (Deuteronomy 4:29).

To seek God with the "whole heart" means, primarily, to seek Him with complete sincerity. But God gave us hearts with more than one dimension, and we were designed to seek Him in all of these. Is this not also what wholeheartedness means? To give God less than all three — our intellect, our emotions, and our will — is to be less than a whole person.

Man was made to know good with his mind, to desire it with his affections once he knows it, and to cleave to it with his will once he has felt its attraction.

J. I. PACKER

May 12

TENDER HEARTS

“. . . because your heart was tender, and you humbled yourself before the LORD when you heard what I spoke against this place and against its inhabitants, that they would become a desolation and a curse, and you tore your clothes and wept before Me, I also have heard you,” says the LORD.
2 Kings 22:19

IT IS OUR CHOICES THAT DETERMINE OUR CHARACTER, AND ONE EVERY CRITICAL CHOICE IS WHETHER TO HAVE A HEART THAT IS “TENDER” WITH RESPECT TO GOD. Although we have minds that are capable of knowing God, this knowledge is not automatic. We have to choose to be receptive and responsive. Evidently Josiah had made such a choice, and it is a wonderful thing that God said about him: “You humbled yourself . . . when you heard what I spoke.” On the other hand, no sadder thing can be said than the verdict pronounced by God upon certain ones in Isaiah’s day: “When I called, you did not answer; when I spoke, you did not hear” (Isaiah 65:12). To fail to respond to God is a serious failure.

If we may use the word “impressionable” in a positive sense, that is what the tender heart is. Like clay that is soft enough to receive an impression, the tender heart is capable of being “impressed,” or influenced, by God. It feels and responds naturally. The tender heart can be touched. It is moved by the things it should be moved by. To have such a heart is to have chosen to be responsive to God and receptive to the words He has spoken.

Some, however, have a heart that is “past feeling” (Ephesians 4:19). This sort of heart is without “natural affection” (Romans 1:31 KJV), and is not “easy to be entreated” (James 3:17 KJV). Having lost its sensitivity by repeated refusals to respond, the hard heart can no longer be touched or affected by stimuli that once would have moved it quite easily. It’s difficult to imagine a more serious problem than this condition of character (Romans 2:5).

In God’s providence, each of us is confronted each day with facts that ought to move us. Whether we are *willing to be moved* is a question of character, and such questions of character demand our most sober attention. The whole issue of spiritual growth hangs in the balance as we make the daily decisions that determine our responsiveness, the sensitivity of our hearts.

What is this darkness? What is its name? Call it an aptitude for sensitivity. Call it a rich sensitivity which will make you whole. Call it your potential for vulnerability.

MEISTER ECKHART

May 13

EMPTINESS

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. *Matthew 5:3*

THERE IS NO PLACE IN GOD'S KINGDOM FOR THOSE WHO REFUSE TO RECOGNIZE THEIR SPIRITUAL POVERTY. Although we can't see the depth of our need as fully as God sees it, we certainly can see something of it if we open our eyes. The kingdom is for the honest. If we pretend to be full even though we are empty, our seeking of God will come to no good end.

As individual human beings, we are desperate to believe two things: (1) that we are worth something, and (2) that we are going to have what we need. Larry Crabb has helpfully described these as needs for *significance* and *security*. We simply do not have any deeper needs. On an average day, most of our time is spent pursuing these things, and we've been endlessly creative in our efforts to get them on our own, apart from God. It turns out, however, that He is the only real source of significance and security open to us. And not only that, His plan requires us to admit the total failure of our own previous attempts at these things.

Yet rather than abandon our futile attempts to fill our own needs, we often try to bring these with us when we come to God, as if we think we've been partially successful in filling ourselves up and we just need God to supply the last little bit. This problem of coming to God thinking we are already partly full is an old problem. Concerning some, Paul said, "For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God" (Romans 10:2,3). It is hard to admit the failure of our own systems and to come to God with a brokenhearted sense of our need, our poverty, and our emptiness.

But as painful as it is to admit our total bankruptcy before God, there is no other way to be receptive to Him. "In my hand no price I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling" (Augustus M. Toplady). It is only when our vessel has been drained of its last dregs that it is ready to be filled anew. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Only those who see themselves as utterly destitute
can fully appreciate the grace of God.

ERWIN W. LUTZER

May 14

MOVED BY GRATITUDE TO SEEK AND TO SERVE

And Jesus answered and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." So he said, "Teacher, say it." "There was a certain creditor who had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. And when they had nothing with which to repay, he freely forgave them both. Tell Me, therefore, which of them will love him more?" *Luke 7:40-42*

GRATITUDE FOR GOD'S FORGIVENESS IS A POWERFUL FORCE THAT MOVES US IN THE DIRECTION OF TRUTH AND GOODNESS. To the extent that we're aware of the magnitude of our sins and the love that had to be shown by God to make their forgiveness possible, we will be motivated both to seek Him and to serve Him. If our motivation toward God is not what it should be, here is the key to progress: *we must increase our love by increasing our gratitude.*

Paul spoke of the "constraining" or "compelling" effect of Christ's love for us. "For the love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died; and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again" (2 Corinthians 5:14,15). And the love of Christ is that which compels us even before we've been forgiven of our sins. It is our recognition of His love and our joyous anticipation of gratitude to Him that move us to respond to the gospel in the first place.

It is important to remember the proper order of these things. God's love comes first, and then our gratitude and love. If we're not careful, we may lapse into thinking that God confers forgiveness upon us because we are those who love Him. However, just the opposite is true. "Love is not the cause of forgiveness. Forgiveness causes love. The more we are forgiven, the more we love" (William Tyndale). John said simply, "In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us" (1 John 4:10). "We love Him because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

In general, gratitude comes from a sense of our emptiness and need. If we're proud and self-sufficient, and if we suppose there is little about us to be forgiven, then there will be little gratitude in us — and consequently little love, little seeking of God, and little in the way of service to Him. Without the power of gratitude, we fight a losing battle.

A true Christian is a man who never for a moment forgets what God has done for him in Christ, and whose whole comportment and whole activity have their root in the sentiment of gratitude.

JOHN BAILLIE

May 15

ACTIVE LOVE AND THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

He who does not love does not know God, for God is love. 1 John 4:8

WE ARE CONSTANTLY REMINDED IN THE SCRIPTURES TO KEEP OUR SEARCH FOR GOD CONNECTED TO OUR DAILY INTERACTION WITH THE PEOPLE AROUND US. Confident answers to our questions about God can't always be found by philosophical inquiry alone. We have to take our meditations to work with us and weave them into our dealings with other human beings. It is in the giving and receiving of love that truth has its best chance to come to the surface and win our conviction.

In matters that relate to God, there is an interesting "back and forth" that takes place between our *thinking* and our *doing*. Proper thinking is necessary for proper doing, of course, and we must never forget the primacy of God's word in determining right conduct. But there is also a sense in which proper doing is necessary for proper thinking. Our thinking and our doing need each other.

Having lives that are a bit more concrete, common people seem to find God more easily than do those who're more sophisticated (Mark 12:37; 1 Corinthians 1:26). They may lack philosophical acuity, but down-to-earth people do know about one thing: they know about real, practical, everyday *love*. They know how to love a God whom they've not seen because they know how to love other folks whom they *have* seen. And this is consistent with John's statement, "If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?" (1 John 4:20).

Suppose that I have been agonizing privately over some dark question concerning God. It is entirely appropriate — indeed it is essential — that I search the Scriptures carefully and that I spend much time meditating on the matter. But suppose that after long labor in the realm of study, thought, and even prayer, I am still perplexed. My neighbor cannot cut his grass because he is needed at the bedside of his wife who is dying of cancer. There is at least some likelihood that the answers that have eluded me in the library will come to me in the toolshed as I prepare to do for my neighbor what he needs me to do for him.

He who desires to see the living God face to face should not seek Him in the empty firmament of his mind, but in human love.

FEODOR DOSTOEVSKY

May 16

SINCERELY SETTING OUR HEARTS ON GOD

Behold, You desire truth in the inward parts,
And in the hidden part You will make me to know wisdom.

Psalm 51:6

IF WE DEAL WITH GOD AT ALL, WE MUST DEAL WITH HIM IN GOOD FAITH. Our approach to Him must be sincere and straightforward. To the best of our ability, we must really and truly want from God what our approach to Him seems to say that we want.

Most people are aware that the strongest language in the Scriptures is directed against hypocrisy. We recall, for example, Jesus' exposé of the Pharisees: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness" (Matthew 23:27,28). Yet while we wince every time we read these words, we don't normally see ourselves as being guilty of the sin they condemn. We're not everything we should be, but we're not guilty of such blatant deceit, at least not intentionally.

But hypocrisy wears many masks, and it can creep into our character quite subtly. If we say we seek God and we engage in outward actions that appear to be those of a seeker, the implication of all this is that we desire God — for His own sake, as He truly is, and on whatever terms He stipulates. Unfortunately, we often have something less in mind. All we really want from God, much of the time, is just a little help adjusting our outward lives to the prevailing social standards of goodness. What He desires, however, is to adjust our inward lives to His eternal standards of truth, which is a very different thing. If we really have no intention of going where we know God is headed, what does that say about our seeking of Him?

God is not to be mocked. He cannot be manipulated. There is no possibility of deceiving Him about our intentions when we come before Him. As "the God of truth" (Isaiah 65:16), He requires that our actions truthfully reflect our desire and that our true desire be nothing less than conformity — body, soul, and spirit — to the realities of His truth.

Sincerity is the prime requisite in every approach to the God who requires "truth in the inward parts" and who hates all hypocrisy, falsehood, and deceit.

GEORGE B. WILSON

May 17

OUR CASUAL REQUESTS FOR GOD'S COSTLY GRACE

You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss,
that you may spend it on your pleasures. *James 4:3*

FROM GOD'S PERSPECTIVE, OUR EXPECTATIONS OF HIM MUST OFTEN SEEM QUITE CARELESS. We have no adequate idea of His grace or His eternal purposes, and so we make claims upon Him so casually that we come close to being flippant and disrespectful. God's goodness is indeed a treasury of wonderful riches. But it was not set up to fund the removal of every little inconvenience from our lives in this world. We need to be careful what we ask for and why. God's grace is not to be taken lightly.

Imagine that a loving, wise parent has made excruciating sacrifices for a son or a daughter to go to college. The parent is then disheartened to receive frivolous "Send more money!" messages when the student's lifestyle indicates that there's little appreciation for what had to take place for those funds to be made available. In a much more profound way, God must find it disturbing to receive casual "Help me with this problem!" messages from us, when it is obvious that we're out of touch with the reality of what had to be sacrificed to make our prayers possible.

The more serious aspect of the problem is that we see the Cross as little more than our ticket to a trouble-free life. Not only do we underestimate the cost of God's grace, we also fail to appreciate its purpose. The Son of God did not go to the Cross merely to purchase our convenience, or even our happiness. No, what happened on that dark day was "that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself" (2 Corinthians 5:19). It is not too much to say that we should see even the blessing of forgiveness in this light. We should not seek to be forgiven merely because it benefits us personally. We should seek it because our reconciliation is a part of God's eternal purpose in Christ, the outworking of which purpose redounds to "the praise of His glory" (Ephesians 1:12-14). The kingdom of heaven is not about us. It is about God. We seek to be saved for God's sake, not our own.

God does not pass out packages of spiritual victory sent special delivery to the person who requests them. Your sin cost him the death of his Son; he is not about to hand out spiritual bandages. He uses your struggles to give you a thorough housecleaning, reorganize your priorities, and make you dependent on his grace. There are no cheap, easy miracles. You must want spiritual freedom, not merely for your own sake, but for God's sake as well.

ERWIN W. LUTZER

May 18

YIELDING TO GOD

For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I live on in the flesh, this will mean fruit from my labor; yet what I shall choose I cannot tell. For I am hard pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better. Nevertheless to remain in the flesh is more needful for you. *Philippians 1:21-24*

IT TAKES REVERENCE, AS WELL AS TRUST, TO YIELD TO THE GREATER GOOD OF GOD'S WILL. Not only does His wisdom know what is best, but His love desires what is best. We can take it as a given that God will always do what is best in any set of circumstances. Unfortunately, the circumstances often involve decisions and requests on our part such that doing what is best requires God to chasten our demanding spirit, rather than give us blessings that He would otherwise be delighted to give.

There are two extremes in prayer. At one extreme, there is the person who sees God as an ill-tempered tyrant who begrudges every request. This person needs to be encouraged to think of God as a Father who is benevolently inclined toward His creatures (Matthew 7:11). But at the other extreme is the person who sees God as an indulgent deity who exists simply to grant our every wish. This person should be reminded to show reverence to God.

Traditionally, the prayer in Matthew 6:9-13 is referred to as "The Lord's Prayer," and it is certainly a prayer that reflects the Lord's deepest desire with respect to His Father: "Your kingdom come. Your will be done." There is, however, no prayer more characteristic of the Lord's own heart than His anguished cry in Gethsemane: "O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will" (Matthew 26:39,42). As God's Son, He "learned obedience" (Hebrews 5:8).

Unlike the Lord, we not only fail to yield submissively to God's will, but we often are so presumptuous as to ask for things that are in outright conflict with that will. We do not know how to pray as we ought. We need help even in knowing what to ask for. Here, then, is an opportunity for us to learn humility. We can defer to the Lord and pray for help in our praying. We can pray for Him to do whatever, in His wisdom, He sees best.

Not what we wish, but what we need,
Oh! let your grace supply,
The good unasked, in mercy grant;
The ill, though asked, deny.

JAMES MERRIK

May 19

QUALITIES THAT KEEP US FROM GOD'S BEST BLESSINGS

And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, being filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God. *Philippians 1:9-11*

IF WE DON'T DO AWAY WITH THE THINGS THAT KEEP OUR LOVE FROM ABOUNDING, WE CUT OURSELVES OFF FROM GOD'S GOODNESS. We need to work on purifying our hearts, so that they become ever-expanding receptacles for the gifts of God.

Consider the concept of "laziness" in regard to spiritual growth. Numerous texts in the Proverbs speak of the general undesirability of being a sluggard (Proverbs 6:6-11). But sluggishness is more than a minor character flaw. It can kill us spiritually. The writer of Hebrews said, "We desire that each one of you show the same diligence to the full assurance of hope until the end, that you do not become sluggish, but imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises" (Hebrews 6:11,12).

The church in Ephesus was praised for having been stalwart in their defense of the faith and tireless in their work for the Lord (Revelation 2:1-3). "Nevertheless," Christ said, "I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place; unless you repent" (Revelation 2:4,5). Having previously loved and served the Lord so fervently, a certain coldness had begun to restrict their relationship with Him. Unless they took decisive steps to correct this problem, it would destroy their fellowship with Christ. He would disavow them and disown them.

God has made it possible, through Jesus Christ, for us to have a truly rich relationship with Him. But the richness of this relationship can't be enjoyed if our hearts are held back by indifference or inactivity. Loving God is a vigorous transaction, and love's rewards come to those who are reaching forward. May we leave behind anything that dilutes our love for God — and anything that limits our capacity to receive God's love for us.

Wake up, believers, from your lowly condition! Throw away your laziness, sluggishness, coldness, or whatever is interfering with your pure love for Christ.

CHARLES HADDON SPURGEON

May 20

ARE WE BEING HINDERED BY CARELESS THINKING ABOUT GOD?

But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. *Romans 6:17,18*

CONCEPTS HAVE CONSEQUENCES IN OUR LIVES, AND CONCEPTS OF GOD ARE THE MOST CONSEQUENTIAL OF ALL. False information about God will mislead us, whereas truthful information about Him is a “lamp” to our feet and a “light” to our path (Psalm 119:105). Christianity is a powerfully transforming force because it involves a deep renewal in our thinking (Romans 12:1,2), especially our thinking about God Himself (John 17:3). Yet long after the time when many of us should have experienced quantum improvements in the quality of our lives, we still struggle to maintain a minimum level of purity and holiness. We stumble as if we were walking in the dark. Could it be that our outward actions are being produced by inner thinking that is unworthy of God? Are we still being hindered by careless thinking about our Creator?

In Romans 6:17,18, Paul expressed gratitude that his readers had been “set free from sin.” This, he said, had followed from their having “obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered.” Most people think of “doctrine” as nothing more than religious theory, and they spend little time with it because they feel it is not very practical. But doctrine (which means “instruction”) is eminently practical. Without right thinking, there simply can be no right practice, at least none that will stand the test of time. The entire work of the devil is based on falsehood (John 8:44; Revelation 12:9), so it should come as no surprise that truth is the means by which God undoes that work (John 18:37; Acts 26:18). To know God as He truly is, and to base our practical decisions on that truth, is to be “set free from sin.” There is no other way to make progress. Jesus said it with utter simplicity: “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32).

We should set ourselves the goal of carefully improving our thinking about God a little bit each day. There is no question that our lives will be governed by some sort of thinking about God. The only question is what the quality of that thinking will be.

A thoughtless or uninformed theology grips and guides our life with just as great force as does a thoughtful and informed one.

DALLAS WILLARD

May 21

READMITTANCE TO THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

They shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads. There shall be no night there: They need no lamp nor light of the sun, for the Lord God gives them light. And they shall reign forever and ever. *Revelation 22:4,5*

THROUGH JESUS CHRIST, GOD IS MAKING IT POSSIBLE FOR HUMAN BEINGS TO HAVE AGAIN THE KNOWLEDGE OF HIM THAT WAS LOST IN THE FALL. Contrary to what the tempter had promised, Adam and Eve found that asserting their independence from God's will did not gain them a knowledge equal to God's. Instead, they found themselves driven from God's presence and cut off from what knowledge they had previously enjoyed. Soon they and their descendants had lost all but a fading memory of the face-to-face knowledge of God that Eden had provided.

But although the Fall resulted in the plunging of the human race into spiritual and moral darkness, God began almost immediately to re-enlighten the world concerning Himself. Little by little, and in various ways, God began to reveal Himself. This process of progressive revelation stretched over many centuries, until finally it was time for God to take upon Himself the form of flesh and blood and reveal Himself to the world in the person of Jesus Christ (Galatians 4:4; Colossians 1:15).

The writer of Hebrews said, "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" (Hebrews 1:1,2). As God Incarnate, Jesus Christ is "the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person" (Hebrews 1:3). The apostle John wrote, "No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him" (John 1:18). And Jesus Himself said, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). Through Christ we can come to know God.

Yet even in Christ, it is still not possible for us right now to see and know God as Adam and Eve did. But Jesus said, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:8). The hope of Christianity is that, through Christ, what was lost in the Fall can actually be regained. The time comes when those who have truly sought God "shall see His face" (Revelation 22:4).

Today I am one day nearer home than ever before. One day nearer the dawning when the fog will lift, mysteries clear, and all question marks straighten up into exclamation points! I shall see the King!

VANCE HAVNER

May 22

ABLE TO SEE GOD'S GLORY

And [Moses] said, "Please, show me Your glory." Then He said, "I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim the name of the LORD before you. I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion." But He said, "You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live." *Exodus 33:18-20*

HUMAN BEINGS LONG TO SEE THE GLORY OF THEIR CREATOR. This longing may be buried beneath many layers of self-will and confusion, but it is there. To see the radiant face of our God would be the most profoundly fulfilling joy our minds could imagine, or our hearts could experience. To receive this glory from God and then reflect it back to Him in love and gratitude — these are the very purposes for which we were created.

But we live in a broken world where this joy is not fully possible. Even those who are willing to receive redemption from the sins that have cut them off from God can only enjoy in this world a fellowship that is a foretaste of heaven. The joy of this preliminary fellowship is great (1 John 1:1-4), but at best it is only a foretaste. We long for something more, and we long for it so intensely that we can be said to "groan" for it. Comparing our earthly bodies to a tent, the temporary dwelling of a nomad, Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth, "For we know that if our earthly house, this tent, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed with our habitation which is from heaven" (2 Corinthians 5:1,2). In this body, we groan, longing for God!

"Please show me Your glory," Moses begged God. And while God knew that Moses in his present condition could not survive such an experience, He was sympathetic to Moses' desire, for that is the desire of all who've been created in His image. To those who are willing to come to Him in His Son, ready to trust Him and obey His word, God is willing to grant as much of Himself as can be granted in our frailty. But we desire more. And much more will be possible, in His time. When we've been made able to see His glory, His face we shall behold. This is what will make heaven, heaven. We "rejoice in hope of the glory of God" (Romans 5:2).

Come, Lord, when grace has made me meet, thy blessed face to see;
For if thy work on earth be sweet, what will thy glory be!
My knowledge of that life is small, the eye of faith is dim;
But 'tis enough that Christ knows all, and I shall be with him.

RICHARD BAXTER

May 23

LOVE, OBEY, WORSHIP

But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him.

John 4:23

THERE ARE THREE KEY CONCEPTS THAT SUMMARIZE OUR PRIVILEGES AND OUR RESPONSIBILITIES WITH RESPECT TO GOD: WE ARE TO LOVE HIM, OBEY HIM, AND WORSHIP HIM. Each of these is a powerful concept — but we must be careful about their power. Given our tendency to focus on some important things to the exclusion of others that are equally important, we need to be warned against cutting any of these off from the others. It is only when we pay healthy attention to all three that they move us toward the relationship with God that we desire.

Love. Here is the heart of the matter, as Jesus defined it (Matthew 22:34-40). It would be hard to overstate the importance of having love as our motive in dealing with God and others. In language that is almost astonishing, the apostle Paul wrote, “And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing” (1 Corinthians 13:3). Such is the radical necessity of love.

ObeY. As important as love is, all the love that a person might have for God would be of little use without obedience. John encouraged his fellow Christians, “My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth” (1 John 3:18). And Jesus said, “If you love Me, keep My commandments” (John 14:15). If our love does not show up in obedience, it can hardly be called love. We must always comply with our conscience and obey however much of His will we know at the present time.

Worship. Both love and obedience must come together in our worship of God. He is seeking those who will worship Him, as Jesus said, in “spirit” and in “truth” (John 4:23). We must offer our reverence to God from the heart, with genuine love, and we must also honor Him by obedient actions that are consistent with His truth. But when real love and real obedience come together in real worship, we get a taste of what real life would be for a creature made in God’s image.

To worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God, to feed the mind with the truth of God, to purge the imagination by the beauty of God, to open the heart to the love of God, to devote the will to the purpose of God.

May 24

BEYOND CONFORMITY

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

WHAT DOES IT TAKE FOR OUR CHARACTER TO BE CHANGED AT ITS DEEPEST LEVEL? Christianity has always held that radical change in human character is possible, but Christians themselves have not always kept their thinking clear about what is involved in this change. Certainly there must be a decision to cease from sin and to start doing God's will. Reverent obedience to God's requirements is by no means optional (1 John 1:6). But if real change is to take place, our compliance with God's law must be enlivened and empowered by our gratitude for His grace.

In the New Testament, the Pharisees are a case study in what can happen when we try to conform to the precepts of God's law without any devotion to God Himself or any honest appreciation of our need for His grace. The Pharisees emphasized obedience with a zeal that was legendary (Philippians 3:5,6), and yet Jesus said to His followers, "Unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20). What does this mean? If it merely means that we must be more careful or exert more effort than the Pharisees, then we have little hope, for they worked at commandment-keeping about as hard as anyone can. Instead, we must take a different *approach* to righteousness. Our efforts must be of a different *kind* (Romans 10:3; Philippians 3:8,9).

Beyond conformity, deep inner change requires an actual reliance upon God Himself. If all we do is conform to biblical precepts, that does not by itself guarantee that we'll experience the richness and power of a transformed heart. In fact, if we don't throw ourselves into an honest love affair with the God of real grace, our obedience will feed our pride and actually worsen the condition of our heart. The truth is, we can't be more than imperfect instruments of God's glory right now. The change we need is one more radical than we can undergo just yet, and we must be willing to wait for our perfection in Christ. In the meantime, being a "new creation" in Christ requires that we accept, however painfully to our pride, what grace really means.

Grace is a certain beginning of glory in us.

THOMAS AQUINAS

May 25

WHEN SORROW TURNS TO SELF-PITY

And Cain said to the LORD, "My punishment is greater than I can bear! Surely You have driven me out this day from the face of the ground; I shall be hidden from Your face; I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond on the earth, and it will happen that anyone who finds me will kill me." *Genesis 4:13,14*

ALL WHO LIVE IN THIS WORLD WILL HAVE TO DEAL WITH SORROW. It is inevitable. In an environment where sin is a reality, the temporal consequences of sin are unavoidable — and since sorrow is one of those consequences, we shall have to deal with it sooner or later. The only question is how we shall do so. It's important to keep our sorrow from turning into what is called "the sorrow of the world" (2 Corinthians 7:10). This is the sorrow that wallows selfishly in its own misery. It does not confront sin in a godly way.

Two things are needed to keep our sorrow from turning into self-pity: *reverence* and *gratitude*. When we are passing through any bitterness of spirit, we must maintain a humble respect for the greatness of God as our Creator, and we must not cease to thank Him for all that is right, despite whatever has gone wrong. Even when the sun is shining, we find it challenging to be as reverent and as grateful as we ought to be. However, when the darkness closes in, keeping our thinking clear about God can seem so difficult that we despair. We give in to "the sorrow of the world."

Failures of reverence and gratitude should be seen as failures of perspective. When pain focuses our attention on some small part of reality, we tend to lose touch with the larger truths. This is no trivial thing, however. If we refuse to acknowledge the *whole* truth about God, that refusal can cost us our souls (Romans 1:18-21). God is greater than our woes, and whatever the immediate cause for our sorrow, we simply can't afford to forget the clear tokens of God's greatness and goodness in the wider world.

Edmund Spenser wrote of the miserable fellow who finds himself "dying each day with inward wounds of Dolour's dart." The sorrow of the world is deadly because it indulges in self-justification. It fuels resentment and resistance to God. Like Cain, the self-pitying soul feels no genuine remorse for evil. He merely whines, "My punishment is greater than I can bear!"

He lies pitying himself, hoping and moaning to himself; he yearneth over himself; his bowels are even melted within him, to think what he suffers; he is not ashamed to weep over himself.

CHARLES LAMB

May 26

FREEDOM FROM THE FEAR OF SUFFERING

Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. *Revelation 2:10*

BECAUSE OF CHRIST'S TRIUMPHANT RESURRECTION, IT IS POSSIBLE FOR US TO EMBRACE OUR OWN SUFFERING WITH ACCEPTANCE AND COURAGE. To those who have made the choice to be faithful to Him, Christ is able to say, "Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer." This freedom is truly a great gift.

Similar admonitions to courage, often put in the form of a command, are found on many pages of Scripture. For example, God said to Israel, "Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand" (Isaiah 41:10). And the exhortation to courage is always grounded in the sovereign greatness of God. He is greater than any earthly thing that may threaten to overthrow us. "In God I have put my trust; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?" (Psalm 56:11).

There is, however, a tendency for us to react with shame when we read in the Scriptures what our attitude toward suffering should be. We know that we have on many occasions been afraid to suffer, and we feel ashamed and frustrated that our confidence in God is not any stronger than it is. What can help us? One suggestion is to think in terms of "releasing" our fears. Rather than seeing courage as a burden we must pick up and carry, we can think of fear as a burden we're free to lay down. We don't have to be held back by fear. We can let go of the weight of anxiety we've dragged around with us for all these years.

Christ having conquered the cause of our suffering, we can be strengthened, rather than broken, by whatever we suffer. He did not die to prevent us from being hurt, but to free us from fear, tasting death that He might "release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage" (Hebrews 2:15). So we need not hesitate to drink any cup that life sets before us. We have better things to do than to be constantly running away from pain.

The truth that many people never understand, until it is too late, is that the more you try to avoid suffering the more you suffer because smaller and more insignificant things begin to torture you in proportion to your fear of being hurt.

THOMAS MERTON

May 27

INNER STRENGTH, INNER LIGHT

... that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, for all patience and longsuffering with joy. *Colossians 1:10,11*

THE BEAUTY OF STRONG INNER CHARACTER IS MOST CLEARLY SEEN DURING TIMES OF DIFFICULTY. Just as it is true that hardship builds character, it is also true that hardship demonstrates character that has already been built. And one of life's most refreshing experiences is to see someone show unexpected dignity and strength in the face of pain, demonstrating far more character than we ever thought they possessed. Most people are stronger than we think they are — and often stronger than *they* think they are. Difficulty gives us a glimpse of what people are actually made of.

But how is “difficulty” to be defined? It should be seen as any circumstance in which honor calls on us to think, say, or do something that requires extra effort. When the right thing and the easy thing are not the same thing, “difficulty” is what we face. And looking at it this way, we can see that there are many more difficulties in life than the obvious ones, such as pain, grief, and fear. Indeed, comfortable circumstances face us with some of life's most difficult choices. Living in an age when there is more ease to be enjoyed than ever before, we probably have to deal with more “positive” difficulty than we do that of a “negative” nature. It takes just as much character to deal honorably with affluence as it does with poverty, and there is much to be said for learning “how to abound” (Philippians 4:12). But whether confronted with the difficulties of prosperity or pain, our character is shown by the choices we make between the easy and the honorable.

Interacting superficially with people as we often do, we don't know what real strength of character they may have. Perhaps we don't know ourselves in this respect either. It may take some adverse experience for us to learn how strong we are and how strong we wish to be. Our desire should be to acquire such true strength of inward character that difficulty will not defeat us but only make us more decisive.

People are like stained-glass windows; they sparkle and shine when the sun is out, but when the darkness sets in their true beauty is revealed only if there is light from within.

ELISABETH KÜBLER-ROSS

May 28

OUR STEWARDSHIP OF GOD'S HELP

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. *2 Corinthians 1:3,4*

ALTHOUGH GOD'S GIFTS ARE GIVEN FOR OUR OWN BENEFIT, THEY'RE ALSO GIVEN FOR THE BENEFIT OF OTHERS. There is an important sense in which the good things of God have been given to us as a stewardship or a trust. We've been entrusted with these things on the assumption that they're to be used to accomplish His purposes. It is a serious misappropriation of God's grace to spend it all on endeavors that are simply self-centered.

Even when we see the importance of seeking God, we often don't see the importance of our *motives* in seeking Him. Yet this is a matter that must be carefully considered. When we seek God, why do we do so? Is it, first and foremost, in order to be rightly related to Him so that we can make the contribution He wants us to make within the web of relationships we're a part of? Or is it simply to get what we want for ourselves so we can have the kind of life we prefer? No matter how diligently we seek God, the outcome will always hinge on our motives. God's blessings must be seen as furthering His purposes, not our own agenda.

One of the most impressive things about the apostle Paul was the purity of his motives in helping others. Toward the end of his life he wrote to one church, "For I am hard pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better. Nevertheless to remain in the flesh is more needful for you" (Philippians 1:23,24). And to another church, he simply said, "I will very gladly spend and be spent for your souls" (2 Corinthians 12:15). It's no coincidence that a man with this kind of motivation found himself endowed with great resources from God.

Concerning Himself, Jesus said, "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28). As He carried out His mission, there were times when He needed support and sustenance. We read of a time when "angels came and ministered to Him" (Matthew 4:11). He never failed to be helped when He needed help, because He never failed to use His Father's gifts for their proper purpose.

God comforts us not to make us comfortable but to make us comforters.

JOHN HENRY JOWETT

May 29

THE DOOR IS CLOSED TO THE UNFORGIVING SPIRIT

For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. *Matthew 6:14,15*

IN ORDER TO SEEK GOD WITH HONESTY AND INTEGRITY, WE MUST REMOVE ANGER AND RESENTMENT FROM OUR HEARTS. There is nothing that will keep us away from God more certainly than a failure to forgive those who have wronged us. Jesus said simply, “If you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matthew 6:15). It is only the merciful who will receive mercy (Matthew 5:7; James 2:13).

A truly merciful spirit involves more than the grudging forgiveness of others when they come to us and beg for grace. Jesus called upon us to be people of such character that we will not rest until broken relationships are mended, even if we have to be the ones who take the initiative. Whether the relationship has been broken by our own sin, the other party has sinned against us, or there are sins on both sides that need to be forgiven, in all cases we are to seek out the other person and do all we can to repair the breach (Matthew 5:23,24; 18:15). Paul wrote, “If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men” (Romans 12:18). And mark it well: “if it is possible, as much as depends on you” requires the doing of much more than we think is “necessary.” If God had thought of nothing more than what He “had” to do, He certainly would not have given His Son’s life to make possible the mending of our relationship with Him. It was, after all, we who had broken the relationship, yet His love did not complain about having to do more than was “necessary” to fix it.

But we should be extremely careful. In our conflicts with others, *we may be wrong about who it is who actually needs forgiveness*. If we think we’re generous enough to confer forgiveness, we need to beware of pride and faulty judgments. Our view of what needs to be fixed may be seriously out of sync with the way God sees it. So having a forgiving spirit means not only that we’re willing to forgive the other person; it may mean adjusting our concept of what is actually broken about the relationship. Humility may mean reversing the direction of the forgiveness — *seeking the forgiveness of the very person that we, at first, thought needed our forgiveness*.

No prayers can be heard which do not come from a forgiving heart.

J. C. RYLE

May 30

ON NOT SEEKING MORE THAN WE NEED

Give us this day our daily bread.

Matthew 6:11

FAITH MEANS HAVING THE CONFIDENCE TO ASK GOD FOR OUR NEEDS — AND THE TRUST TO ASK HIM FOR NO MORE THAN WE NEED. We must resist the hoarding instinct. It is enough that He gives us just the help we need today; we need not demand that today's storehouse also be stocked with everything we *might* need tomorrow. Tomorrow's needs will be tended to when the time comes, and faith is willing to leave all of that in God's hands.

In the story of God's provision of manna for Israel during their wilderness wandering, we get an interesting picture of how faith is supposed to work. Enough manna was provided for them to eat each day, but they were strictly forbidden to gather more than one day's supply (Exodus 16:16-21). In this way, God was teaching them to trust Him for all their needs, spiritual as well as physical, one day at a time (Deuteronomy 8:3).

When tomorrow finally gets here, what we often find is that the resources we end up needing are not nearly as great as those we thought we'd need. Most of the troubles we worry about never materialize. It was Mark Twain who had the honesty to say, "I am an old man and have known a great many troubles, most of which never happened." What if God had gone ahead and paid the premiums yesterday on all the insurance we thought we'd need against today's problems? The truth is, we would have been supplied with resources far in excess of those we actually needed when today came. God is not so wasteful of His grace as to spend it in this way, heaping blessing upon blessing simply to satisfy our shortsighted demands for "security."

To take each day as it comes requires a trust that is truly child-like. This youthful *willingness to be dependent* is so simple, and yet as tough-minded adults, it is so hard for us to maintain. We lose far too many of today's advantages worrying about the imagined disadvantages of tomorrow. Yet in our quest for security, God is still asking us to *trust* Him. He desires that we relish the momentary joys and savor the supply of just *this* day's needs.

Be content to be a child, and let the Father proportion out daily to thee
what light, what power, what exercises, what straits, what fears,
what troubles he sees fit for thee.

ISAAC PENINGTON

May 31

SOMETHING GREATER THAN GREATNESS

Buy the truth, and do not sell it,
Also wisdom and instruction and understanding.
Proverbs 23:23

THERE IS AN OUTWARD-REACHING IMPULSE SOMEWHERE IN THE HEART OF EVERY PERSON. It is less evident in some people's lives, but it is never completely absent. Even when a person's circumstances have stifled this urge, it often takes only a slight change to release it. By nature, we desire to move toward things we've not yet reached, even if we're not sure what those things should be. We are beings who aspire. We stretch outward, seeking to make some sort of connection to realities outside of ourselves.

But even as we reach for a greater experience of life, we discover an irony: the harder we strive for the good things in this world, the more they elude us (Ecclesiastes 1:2,3). The more we make these things our main pursuit, the more their goodness seems to slip out of our grasp. What we need, as Stephen R. Covey suggests, is not a map, but a compass. Instead of seeking this or that predetermined path to happiness, we need to seek *truth*, aiming in all situations to align ourselves with true-north principles. As we do this, we find that our path turns out to be more satisfying and more interesting than any we had imagined.

Human greatness consists not of any specific set of endowments or accomplishments, but of a life based upon truth. Such a life is within the reach of every human being, whether one is "great" or "small" in the eyes of the world. Historically, those who've lived life in its authentic fullness have always been distinguished by two traits, both related to truth: (1) they've been thankful for the truth about who they were as unique creatures of God, and (2) in their relationship to everything else God has created, they've honored the truth about those things also. God has placed within us the desire to reach outside of ourselves and to be connected both to Him and to what He's created. If what we most desire is a *truthful* connection to Him and to our surroundings, then there will be for us a quite comfortable sense of genuine greatness: the pleasure of filling precisely the role God had in mind for us, within the larger scheme of His great creation.

If any man seeks for greatness, let him forget greatness and ask
for truth, and he will find both.

HORACE MANN

June 1

ONE THING WE MUST ALWAYS DO

This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. So when I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard a voice of One speaking. And He said to me, "Son of man, stand on your feet, and I will speak to you." *Ezekiel 1:28-2:1*

NO MATTER WHAT UNCERTAINTY MAY ASSAIL US, WE MUST NOT FAIL TO LISTEN TO GOD IN EVERY CIRCUMSTANCE. We do not know what tomorrow will bring or how God's purposes will unfold. What may come to pass even five minutes from now is largely beyond our foresight. Yet when we are bewildered and when fear threatens to obstruct our obedience, we can listen to what God has said. Even if we see no connection between what we think we need to hear and what God has actually said, we can choose to maintain reverence. We can listen to God.

Fear can be looked at from many different perspectives, but one thing we should never forget is that fear is basically a feeling or a mood. Like all other feelings, fear grows out of our thinking; it is an emotional response to the way we are looking at a given subject. Sometimes fear is a reasonable, understandable response, and sometimes it is not. But in either case, fear is a feeling that should not be allowed to overthrow our faith. Our faith should be based on careful thinking (in perhaps less emotional moments) about what is most likely true, and this foundation should be solid enough to withstand the emotional waves that are sure to beat against it from time to time. "Faith," C. S. Lewis said, "is the art of holding on to things your reason has once accepted, in spite of your changing moods." We can make choices concerning our faith that will make it more durable and stable.

There will be many days when unanswered questions seem to hinder us. God's silence can be unsettling, it is true. And yet, God has spoken on every issue which *He* deems needful for us, and this should make a difference in the management of our emotions. "In the midst of your doubts, don't forget how many of the important questions God *does* answer" (Verne Becker). Our response both to fear and to our ignorance in certain areas should be simple *reverence* — reverence that is determined and decisive. Whatever may happen or not happen, whatever we may know or not know, we must always say, "Speak, Lord, for Your servant hears."

Even in the grip of a terror rooted in our ignorance of God's design for our lives, we can resolve to hear the message every time we have to hear it.

PAUL CIHOLAS

June 2

A FAITH STRENGTHENED BY DOUBT

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." *Luke 22:31,32*

DOUBT IS NOT NECESSARILY THE ENEMY OF FAITH. When we pass through the wastelands of doubt and our faith falters, or perhaps even fails, it is possible to respond to doubt in such a way that our faith later becomes more vibrant. And a faith that has been invigorated in this way is not only of more value to ourselves; it is of exceedingly more value to those around us.

Kahlil Gibran, the Syrian-born mystic poet, said, "Doubt is a pain too lonely to know that faith is his twin brother." When we reflect on the matter, we realize that this is true. Both faith and doubt deal with the unseen. They both confront questions that, at least for the time being, have no complete answer. In the face of these questions, faith mellows our doubt with reverence and gratitude, and doubt makes our faith more experienced and mature. It is doubt, properly dealt with, that takes our faith out of the nursery and into the real world.

The person who has never doubted may have a faith that is quite genuine; his or her faith may, in fact, please God. But relatively speaking, that person's faith requires less *trust* than that of the one who has survived seasons of doubt.

To see this point, compare faith to courage. Courage is not the absence of fear, but rather the doing of what is right while one is experiencing fear. While it may be possible to speak of the courage of one who has never faced any significant danger and therefore has never had much reason to be afraid, how much more admirable is the bravery of the person who has really struggled (and not always successfully) against both danger and fear! Similarly, those who know the most about faith are often those who have had the most experience with doubt.

Real faith has no need to pretend or run away from difficulty. Instead, faith embraces doubt with honesty, recognizing that troubling questions are inevitable in a world where our sins have hidden God's face from us. Doubts are what make faith, faith.

Isolation has led me to reflection, reflection to doubt,
doubt to a more sincere and intelligent love of God.

MARIE LENÉRU

June 3

THE GOD WHO WAITS FOR OUR RETURN

Thus says the LORD: "Will they fall and not rise?
Will one turn away and not return?" *Jeremiah 8:4*

ONE OF THE WONDROUS ASPECTS OF GOD'S CHARACTER IS THE LOVE WITH WHICH HE WAITS FOR US TO TURN BACK TO HIM. Only He could have made it possible for us to return, of course, but since He has done so, a failure to return is contrary to all wisdom, and even to common sense. Listen to the words with which God implored Judah in Jeremiah's day: "People of Jerusalem, when you stumble and fall, you get back up, and if you take a wrong road, you turn around and go back. So why do you refuse to come back to me? Why do you hold so tightly to your false gods?" (Jeremiah 8:4,5 Contemporary English Version).

The God who waits for our return is a God who has promised us *forgiveness*. We can't fathom the value of what He had to sacrifice to make this forgiveness available, but we can stand in awe of the sacrifice and its underlying love. More than that, we can determine that our gratitude will be shown in our deeds. We can turn back to God, grounding all our hopes in the goodness of His character and living out the balance of our days in commitment to His truth. However foolishly we have forsaken Him, God remains the God He has always been. Long ago He revealed Himself to Moses as "the LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin . . ." (Exodus 34:6,7). "To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness, though we have rebelled against Him" (Daniel 9:9).

But the God who waits for our return is also a God who has promised us *rest*, and rest is surely what we need. Although we were designed for joy, most of us have worn ourselves out in counterfeit pleasures and substitute satisfactions. Hardly even knowing what we were looking for, we've been looking for joy in all the wrong places, and with truly tragic results. Our foolishness has worn us out. But God has made possible our return to Him, and it's only in such a return that the prospect of real joy can spring to life. Here is where our homesick hearts should come to rest. Here, at last, is where we find a perfect Friend.

There can be no happiness equal to the joy
of finding a heart that understands.

VICTOR ROBINSOLL

June 4

LONGING FOR LOST FELLOWSHIP

This I know, that in my flesh I shall see God,
Whom I shall see for myself,
And my eyes shall behold, and not another.
How my heart yearns within me!
Job 19:26,27

SIN SEPARATES US FROM ALL WE WERE MEANT TO LOVE, AND IN OUR SEPARATENESS WE LONG FOR WHAT WE'VE LOST. Alienated from God, from other people, and even from the natural world around us, we live within the walls of a lonely prison. We faintly "remember" walking in the garden with our God, Friend with friend — and we vaguely dream of doing that again.

Satan tempted us to believe that self-rule was a wise choice. He said it would lead to a better life than God's law would allow. But Satan lied, and things didn't work out as he said they would. We are the victims of a cruel hoax, a lie concerning God's law. That law does not interfere with anything that could accurately be called life. To the contrary, it's the very thing that would have made real life possible! It was meant to connect us to God and our fellow creatures in ways that would truly fill us up and provide all we were designed to enjoy. When we rebelled against God's law, we disconnected ourselves from the possibility of any real relationship. And in doing so, we said good-bye to every good thing that comes from real relationship.

So for now, even the best of our relationships fall short and we can only imagine what it would be like to be perfectly related to everyone around us. Even if we allow Christ to bring us into a redeemed earthly relationship with God, our connections in this world will only be a foretaste of the fellowship that waits for us later. Yet this hope is the single thing in life most worthy of our pursuit, no matter what lesser things we have to let go of. Hell will be a writhing mass of lonely beings, utterly cut off by their own choice from anything outside of themselves. None of us really want that, and yet we drift toward that destiny by refusing to let God lead us out of our isolation and into real relationship. When we decide what, if anything, to do about our loneliness, we are deciding between life and death.

The deepest need of man is the need to overcome
his separateness, to leave the prison of his aloneness.

ERICH FROMM

June 5

A TRUTH THAT EACH ONE MUST DEAL WITH

Whom have I in heaven but You?
And there is none upon earth that I desire besides You.
My flesh and my heart fail;
But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.
Psalm 73:25,26

WHEN WE LOOK AT THE MATTER HONESTLY, WE CAN SEE THAT EVERYTHING COMES DOWN TO ONE SIMPLE TRUTH. The time comes when every other reality drops away and we're confronted with the stark simplicity of this fact: *we have no one but God, and because of our sin, we are cut off even from Him.* This is a truth each one of us must deal with sooner or later. We may or may not deal wisely with it, but deal with it we must. God is waiting for us to do so. True religion has a chance to arise in our hearts when, as solitary beings, we confess how empty we are without God.

Most of us spend our lives leaning on props. We instinctively sense the need for "relationship" to other beings, but we foolishly build our relationships on the shifting sands of false principles. Feeling the urge to "do" something, we throw ourselves into a fury of daily activity. And driven to "acquire," we heap up for ourselves a horde of assets and possessions. Our *relationships*, our *activities*, and our *possessions* — these become our props. And despite their undependability, they become the sum and substance of our lives. After a while, we can hardly see how totally we've come to lean on these things. We're hiding from the truth, of course, but as long as our props are in place, we don't worry about our alienation. Deep down, our hearts are a lonely void, but we're simply too busy to think about it very much.

But what do we do when all the props are taken away? What do we do when we stand alone, nakedly individual before our God, with every other choice stripped away from us except our choice concerning God Himself? Do we choose to turn even more selfishly *inward*, or do we desire God and turn penitently *upward*? When the laughter has died down, the party is over, and all the guests have gone home, a human being finally has no other choice. The brutal fact is that we are cut off from everything we were ever meant to be connected to. And what we choose to do about that fact makes all the difference.

Religion is what the individual does with his solitariness.

ALFRED NORTH WHITEHEAD

June 6

WORLDLINESS

Now these are the ones sown among thorns; they are the ones who hear the word, and the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things entering in choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. *Mark 4:18,19*

WORLDLINESS IS THE SIN OF BEING SO WEDDED TO THIS WORLD THAT WE PAY TOO LITTLE ATTENTION TO THE WORLD TO COME.

It means being preoccupied with temporal matters to such an extent that spiritual concerns are crowded out of our thinking. To fellow Christians, Paul wrote, "Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth" (Colossians 3:2). This is not easy to do, given the strong pull this world can have on our hearts. If we're not careful, worldliness will "choke" God's word and cause it to be "unfruitful" as far as we are concerned.

When some people think of worldliness they think of sins which violate the tradition of conservative social values, particularly those of the Victorian era. When preachers inveigh against worldliness, for example, they often have in mind things like drinking, gambling, and the wearing of immodest clothing. But there is more to worldliness than this. Certainly any outward action which violates the principles of godliness and purity is sinful, and we're in a dangerous position if we think we're so much more enlightened than our grandparents that we don't have to be concerned about such things. But worldliness is a problem of the heart. It afflicts all who are moved primarily by worldly motives, perhaps even the preacher who takes a condescending attitude toward "sinners." Despite outward appearances, the drunkard and the prostitute may be closer to the kingdom of heaven than some others. In truth, their hearts may not be tied as tightly to this world as those of their more "respectable" contemporaries.

In the parable of the rich fool, God said to a certain prosperous man, no doubt a good fellow in many ways and one whose life might even be called admirable, "Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?" (Luke 12:20). And Jesus concluded this worldly man's story by saying, "So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God" (Luke 12:21).

Worldliness is excluding God from our lives and, therefore, consciously or unconsciously accepting the values of a man-centered society.

ERWIN W. LUTZER

June 7

MATERIALISM

If the dead do not rise, "Let us eat and drink,
for tomorrow we die!" 1 Corinthians 15:32

HOW MUCH DIFFERENCE WOULD IT MAKE IN OUR LIVES IF WE KNEW FOR CERTAIN THAT NOTHING OF A SPIRITUAL NATURE EXISTED? Sad to say, in many of our lives it wouldn't make much difference at all. Although we pay lip service to the priority of spiritual realities, on many days it must be said that materialism is the real governing force in our lives.

Materialism is more of a problem than many churchgoers like to admit. Just as we define "worldliness" too narrowly, we also define "materialism" in a way that is too restricted. The person who has an inordinate affection for money and earthly possessions is obviously materialistic (1 Timothy 6:6-10,17-19). But the problem goes well beyond the sin of outright covetousness, as harmful as that may be. We are being materialistic any time we live *as though physical things were our most important consideration*. Esau, for example, was being materialistic when he sold his birthright for a bowl of soup (Hebrews 12:16).

As a philosophy, materialism holds that there is no reality except material reality. Materialists deny that spiritual realities have any objective existence. Such things, according to the materialist, are simply the products of our imagination, which itself is no more than the product of our brain's biochemistry. As practical people, few of us would subscribe to the philosophy of materialism, and indeed, few philosophers would go so far as to be radical materialists. But many of us end up being materialists anyway. No matter what our philosophy may be, we seem to live as if the only things that are real are material. Judging from the way we live, one would think we believe the material world is all there is.

When we allow our lives to be driven by materialism, it must be admitted that we lead very hollow lives. Whether we face the fact or not, our hearts were made to experience much more than anything the material world can provide. We have needs that are deeper by far than our physical ones, and when these needs are not fulfilled, or when we try to fulfill them illegitimately, we find life to be difficult and our hearts to have holes in them.

Materialism is organized emptiness of the spirit.

FRANZ WERFEL

June 8
WEAKNESS

I have seen all the works that are done under the sun;
and indeed, all is vanity and grasping for the wind. *Ecclesiastes 1:14*

IT IS A BITTER TRUTH TO ACCEPT, BUT WE SIMPLY DO NOT HAVE, ON OUR OWN, WHAT IT WOULD TAKE TO DO WHAT LIFE CALLS UPON US TO DO. No matter how intelligently and energetically we press onward, sooner or later we find ourselves frustrated, unable to meet life's demands and unable to find the real fulfillment of our own desires. Unaided by anything outside of time and space, we discover that despite short-term successes, the long-term verdict is that we've been "grasping for the wind."

Our culture generally responds to the realities of human weakness by suggesting that we adopt a "positive mental attitude." Our bookstores are stocked with best-selling volumes that, in one way or another, show us how to create a positive "vision" of reality and then live upon the basis of that thinking. And this is wise advice, as far as it goes. There is much value in thinking positively if it motivates us to respond to external reality in more creative ways. But we should not forget that most of reality is independent of our thinking. If we face ultimate problems greater than our human efforts can solve, thinking positively will not change that fact. Facts are stubborn things, and simply believing we can survive will not make it so.

Positive mental attitude often amounts to little more than "whistling past the graveyard." Like the young boy walking past the scary graveyard on a dark night, we whistle cheerfully to try to convince ourselves we're not afraid. But who are we fooling? All the courageous pretense in the world won't change the truth that this world is doomed, along with all its efforts and accomplishments. Unlike the boy walking past the graveyard, we have real cause to be afraid. Our fears are not imaginary.

We should not, however, think about all of this merely in terms of the human race or even of our own society. These are very personal matters. Apart from God, our own personal collapse is inevitable. If we walk alone, our steps will someday stumble.

Eventually, we will come to say to God, "Whom have I in heaven but You?
And there is none upon earth that I desire besides You" (Psalm 73:25).
Anything else is doomed to failure. Life is too short, strength too limited,
competition too fierce. The long road wears us out.

June 9
STRENGTH

Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marveled. And they realized that they had been with Jesus. *Acts 4:13*

OUR WEAKNESS WHEN WE ARE WITHOUT GOD IS MORE THAN MATCHED BY THE STRENGTH WE CAN HAVE WHEN WE ARE WITH HIM. If we can manage to avoid interfering with what God wants to do through us, wonderful things can be accomplished, things both great and good. We can be persons of extraordinary strength.

The key is our connection to God. Jesus said, "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing" (John 15:4,5). We begin to be strong only when we humbly acknowledge God's sovereign right to set the terms of our fellowship with Him. It is God who determines what the gospel will require of us, and true strength on our part comes from respecting His requirements.

One of our deepest fears is that of insufficiency. We worry that when the time comes, we won't have enough of something we truly need. We fear the prospect of having to do without any of life's basic requirements, including those intangible necessities like love, appreciation, and understanding. If it's true that we've been created by God, however, any adequacy apart from Him is simply unthinkable. If we're creatures, there is no such thing as being sufficient without our Creator. Speaking of his apostleship, Paul enunciated a principle that holds true for all human beings: "Our sufficiency is from God" (2 Corinthians 3:5).

The glorious truth is that, if God is in us and we are in Him, we can do much more than just get by. Through us God can sweep away every obstacle that stands in the path of His purposes. "In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us" (Romans 8:37). To be rightly related to God is to believe that He "has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind" (2 Timothy 1:7).

A wise Hebrew proverb says, "The soul of man is the lamp of God." Man is a weak and miserable animal until the light of God burns in his soul.

But when that light burns . . . man becomes the most powerful being in the world. Nor can this be otherwise, for what then acts in him is no longer his strength but the strength of God.

LEO TOLSTOY

June 10

ETERNAL PERFECTION

The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms.

Deuteronomy 33:27

IN OUR PRESENT CONDITION, WE ARE FRAGMENTARY CREATURES WHO LONG FOR THE WHOLENESS WE HAVE LOST. We are driven by deep desires to find some kind of “fulfillment.” Yet our hopes for perfection must not be set on the outcome of our own efforts, but on the completeness of our God, a God whose perfection is eternal. He is the “goal” of our existence.

The eternity of God may be hard to comprehend, but it is strengthening to consider. “The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms.” Bogged down as we are in all the limitations and frustrations of the temporal world, we need the hope that can only come from faith in a God who transcends time. The Scriptures present us with the soul-nourishing truth that God had no beginning and will have no end. Immortal, eternal, and infinite in all His attributes, He is able to deal in perfect wisdom with every one of the short-term problems that plague our mortal world, including the problem of our own sinfulness. God is not limited by time or space or worldly difficulty in any way. He is a God whom we may trust.

We are goal-striving creatures who always seem to be reaching for something in one way or another. In our moments of greatest courage, we reach *forward*. And in our moments of greatest hope, we reach *upward*. When we reach toward God, we are moving along the only path that holds any real promise for us. If it is not in our Creator, where else can we find the pieces that are missing from our created nature? “For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power” (Colossians 2:9,10).

The only arms strong enough to support us are the “everlasting arms.” And those arms are, in fact, waiting for us. Our eternal God waits for us to confess our weakness and come home to Him. The story contained in the Scriptures is the story of how God made this homecoming possible. It is the story of an infinite God in whose perfection we may find our sustenance and support.

And I smiled to think God's greatness flowed
Round our incompleteness,
Round our restlessness, His rest.

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING

June 11

THE FOUNTAIN OF LIFE

How precious is Your lovingkindness, O God!
Therefore the children of men put their trust under the shadow of Your wings.
They are abundantly satisfied with the fullness of Your house,
And You give them drink from the river of Your pleasures.
For with You is the fountain of life; in Your light we see light. *Psalm 36:7-9*

IN THE SCRIPTURES, "LIFE" IS THE WORD OFTEN USED TO DESCRIBE THE GIFT WE HAVE LOST AND CAN FIND AGAIN ONLY IN GOD. Underneath all our other longings, we long to "live." Desiring much more than the dry bones of mere existence, we want to be keenly and joyously alive. Although our sins have kept from us the full measure of life our Creator intended for us, they have not completely done away with our longings and aspirations. Even when our desire is less than it should be, there is still some residue of the will to live and not die.

In contrast to "life," the word "death" denotes separation, a breaking apart of things that were meant to be unified. The worst kind of death, obviously, is spiritual death, the condition of being estranged from God. But the shattering of our connection to God means that many other things have been broken as well. Each of us suffers from this brokenness in a somewhat different manner. One person is wracked by disturbing contradictions in his thinking. Another is torn apart by conflicting emotions. Yet another is pulled in opposing directions by a will that can't make up its mind. The symptoms will vary from one person to the next, but all of us suffer the ill effects of conflict in important places. Even on our very best days, we find that we fail to balance all the various things that real life would harmonize.

To be frank, most of us would have to admit that the thing we live can hardly be called "life." We plod through our days hardly touching the edges of what real life would be. Yet with every step, we are being called to pay more attention to God and taste a deeper life. We are being invited to "take hold of the life that is truly life" (1 Timothy 6:19 NIV). There is no good reason why our God can't be the God whom David knew: "You will show me the path of life; in Your presence is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore" (Psalm 16:11).

If God be really what our faith assumes, we shall find him
unifying our thinking, satisfying our sense of beauty or wonder,
opening out to us an enlarging and enfranchising life.

WILLIAM ADAMS BROWN

June 12

THE GIFT OF GOD

And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God." *Revelation 21:3*

WHATEVER SECONDARY BLESSINGS FLOW FROM GOD, WE OUGHT TO SEEK NONE OF THESE AS DILIGENTLY AS WE SEEK GOD HIMSELF. We must be those who seek God primarily for His sake, because He is our God and we long to give ourselves to Him.

Selfishness and manipulation are nowhere more out of place than in our relationship with God. And selfishness here would be quite self-defeating, as it always is. If we're concerned only with the other things God can give us, we'll miss the greatest Gift of all. "God's chief gift to those who seek him is himself" (E. B. Pusey).

When we speak of "the gift of God," we should think of God as both the Giver and the Gift. Jesus, for example, said to the Samaritan woman at the well, "If you knew *the gift of God*, and who it is who says to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water" (John 4:10). What is the living water which only God can give? Paul would later write that "*the gift of God* is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23). But concerning eternal life, Jesus had gone to the heart of the matter on the night of His betrayal when He prayed: "This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent" (John 17:3). God gives us life by giving us Himself. Other blessings may flow from a right relationship with God, but that relationship itself is God's greatest gift to us. If we have God and His Son, we have the highest thing to which we can aspire. "He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son" (2 John 9).

Even when we try to appreciate what God should mean to us, we can hardly grasp the glory and grace of a God who would give Himself to such people as we are. But it would take a hard heart indeed not to be moved by Jesus' simple words: "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him" (John 14:23). This seems much too good to be true. Only God could make it true.

God, of your goodness, give me yourself for you are sufficient for me. I cannot properly ask anything less, to be worthy of you. If I were to ask less, I should always be in want. In you alone do I have all.

JULIAN OF NORWICH

June 13

FRUIT-BEARING DISCIPLESHIP

By this is My Father glorified, that you bear much fruit;
so you will be My disciples. *John 15:8*

WHAT DOES GOD DESIRE FROM US? Surely He desires our hands, as well as our hearts. He confronts us with this searching question: "Why do you call Me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do the things which I say?" (Luke 6:46). There is no such thing as true discipleship without fruit-bearing. The two ideas are inseparable. "You will be My disciples," Jesus said, in the bearing of "much fruit." In the Sermon on the Mount, He had said, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). We can hardly make a greater mistake than to think of the faith as something simply to be "experienced." Those who are *saved* are those who must *serve*.

To become a Christian is to become involved in an active undertaking. Almost every scriptural analogy used to illustrate the relationship of God's people is one that implies work or activity. Disciples are useful *members* in the *body*, productive *branches* in the *vine*, dependable *servants* in the *household*, etc. "Let our people," Paul wrote, "learn to maintain good works, to meet urgent needs, that they may not be unfruitful" (Titus 3:14). Jesus Christ did not go to the Cross merely to confer an honorary status upon those who believe in Him. The text probably quoted most often to emphasize that our salvation is by God's grace is immediately followed by this statement: "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10).

Our God has plans for us. His will is to weave us into the great pattern of His purpose in Jesus Christ and make us participants in the outworking of His intentions. If we seek God truly, we will not wander aimlessly in the realm of spirituality, but we will pursue a path that goes toward the doing of definite good things. The discipleship He seeks from us is not merely one that we enjoy, but one that produces results. We can be sure that whatever we do within God's will, He is more than able to bring something good out of it. And so He tells us: "Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days" (Ecclesiastes 11:1).

Our Father, You come seeking fruit. Teach me, I pray You, to realize how truly this is the one object of my existence, and of my union to Christ.

ANDREW MURRAY

June 14

HALFHEARTEDNESS

I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth. *Revelation 3:15,16*

GOD IS STEADFASTLY PATIENT WHEN OUR HEARTS ARE WEAK, BUT WHEN WE INDIFFERENTLY GIVE HIM ONLY HALF OUR HEARTS, WE INSULT HIS LOVE AND INVITE THE FURY OF HIS JUDGMENT. Of all the things we may do, perhaps none is more serious than to drift into complacency and carelessness concerning God. If God were our enemy, we would at least give Him our full attention, but when we are halfhearted, we simply don't care enough to make up our minds whether we love Him or not. As conditions of the heart go, lukewarmness is one of the very worst.

There is more hope and more possibility for us when we're actively fighting against God than when we're only halfhearted. God saw, for example, more potential for good in Saul, the firebrand and persecutor of the church, than in his more complacent colleagues, most of whom were probably so wrapped up in their respectable routines that they saw nothing about Jesus Christ to get excited about one way or the other. When Christ appeared to him on the Damascus Road, He said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads" (Acts 9:5). As long as he was kicking against the goads, Saul had a chance to feel the sharp consequences of his deeds. But those who neither devote themselves to God nor kick against Him are content. They feel nothing and are dead in the very worst sense of the word.

In the end, of course, there is no such thing as indifference to God. Jesus said, "He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me scatters abroad" (Matthew 12:30). When it comes to God, there is no safe territory between love and hatred. Halfheartedness is simply one form of hatred, and it is the most repulsive as far as God Himself is concerned. For this reason, Jesus wishes to disturb us. "I did not come to bring peace but a sword" (Matthew 10:34). He came into the world not only to comfort the afflicted but to afflict the comfortable.

God will have all, or none; serve him, or fall
Down before Baal, Bel, or Belial;
Either be hot or cold. God doth despise,
Abhor, and spew out all neutralities.

ROBERT HERRICK

June 15

THE DIFFICULTY OF INDECISION

Therefore He says: "Awake, you who sleep, arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light." *Ephesians 5:14*

LIKE THOSE WHO LIE IN BED NOT SUMMONING THE WILL TO ARISE, WE SOMETIMES MAKE OUR LIVES MORE DIFFICULT, AND OURSELVES MORE MISERABLE, BY NOT DECIDING WHAT TO DO ABOUT GOD. Shrinking from the difficulty of this great decision, we plunge ourselves into the much greater difficulty of indecision.

It has been said that we face a basic choice in life: either we accept the pain of *discipline* right now, or we suffer the pain of *regret* later on. If we take what seems to be the course of least resistance, ducking our difficult choices when they come up, what we find in the long run is that our lives sink in a swamp of discouragement and deep sadness. Rather than accumulating a treasury of memories that enrich our later years, we find that we've built a museum of regrets. We live out our last days plagued with the pain of decisions unmade and duty undone. Contrary to the devil's lie, there is nothing easy about laziness. It turns out to be the hardest taskmaster of all. The most troubled person in the world is often the one whose highest aim was to avoid trouble.

There is no use denying that life in the real world makes demands of us, some of which are difficult. If we are to make any worthwhile progress, we must deal with our daily decisions straightforwardly. If they seem difficult this morning, they will be more so this afternoon — and by this evening, they may have become practically impossible. Concerning progress, Albert Schweitzer made this observation: "Progress always consists in taking one or another of two alternatives, abandoning the attempt to combine them." The question of our commitment to God is hardly a trivial matter. To delay dealing with this issue is dangerous, and perhaps even disastrous. Do we not see the dishonor that is done to God by our procrastination? If it turns out that God is God and we are indeed His creatures, we will want to have done more than stagger through life in a stupor. We will want to have lived, and lived decisively.

I had two wills: one old, one new; one carnal, one spiritual.
Their conflict wasted my soul. I was like a sleepy man unable to get up.
God convinced me that his words were true, but the only answer
I could give was the groggy word: "soon."

AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

June 16

LETTING GO OF OUR LIABILITIES

But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard this, they tore their clothes and ran in among the multitude, crying out and saying, "Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men with the same nature as you, and preach to you that you should turn from these useless things to the living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and all things that are in them." *Acts 14:14,15*

THE TURNING THAT GOD REQUIRES OF US IS A MATTER OF HUGE IMPORTANCE, BUT VERY FEW OF US LOOK AT IT IN THE WAY IT SHOULD BE LOOKED AT. Turning to God is something we view with reluctance. We see it as being difficult and probably quite unpleasant. Some even seem to see it as unnatural. In truth, however, the God who calls us to repentance is calling us simply to let go of the "useless things" that have been holding us back. The things we're being asked to leave out of our lives are merely our liabilities, things that in the long run can never do anything but hurt us. What kind of fools are we to refuse God, the ultimate source of all satisfaction, in order to hold on to "empty things which cannot profit or deliver" (1 Samuel 12:21)?

One reason we're so reluctant to let go of our sins is that we fail to see the depth of satisfaction that is available to us in God. Our sins are like the water from the well in Samaria. "Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again," Jesus said, "but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst" (John 4:13,14). Next to the empty things in which we invest ourselves, God is a satisfaction so superior as to defy comparison. If we ever saw, even for an instant, what it might mean to "never thirst," we would give all the world to have that gift.

Yet we have no adequate appreciation of what God can be to us. "Divine Love, if we were satisfied with You, we would climb to the highest heavens. If we were smart enough to leave everything to You, we would achieve the summit of holiness" (Jean-Pierre de Causade). God has never required anything but what will do us good, and what He forbids is only what will disappoint us. Before it's too late and the time for our turning is past, we need to open our eyes to what can be ours. Can we not see the astounding wonder of the "exchange" we're being offered?

We find it difficult to give up our desire for things that can never satisfy us in order to purchase the One Good in whom is all our joy — and in Whom, moreover, we get back everything else that we have renounced besides!

THOMAS MERTON

June 17

THE PURSUIT OF CHRIST'S LOVE

Therefore be imitators of God as dear children. And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma. *Ephesians 5:1,2*

WE ARE CALLED TO LOVE OUR LORD. Indeed, we are commanded to love Him. Yet this is no ordinary command. While it requires us to do something, our duty is not so much the doing of something strenuous as it is the allowing of something wonderful. In the matter of love, we should see God as taking the initiative and ourselves as having the opportunity to respond to Him.

The apostle John wrote, "In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:9,10). When we're tempted to doubt God's intentions toward us, we need look no further than the Cross to see what His desire for us really is.

In one way or another, sin always amounts to a refusal to let God love us. It's a pushing away of the good that He desires us to enjoy, a selfish resistance to His goodwill. And this is great folly. Nothing in life is more foolish than to reject our Creator's love because we think we can get a better deal somewhere else. The wiser we are, the sooner we'll let Him love us.

Paul's prayer for his Christian friends in Ephesus was this: "that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height — to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God" (Ephesians 3:17-19). To "know the love of Christ" and to be "filled with all the fullness of God" ought to be our highest aspiration. And we come closest to this aspiration when we're "rooted and grounded in love."

So then, what does it mean to pursue the love of Christ? More than our pursuing Him, it means allowing ourselves to be pursued *by* Him. It's the choice to accept His benevolent will, ceasing to run away from the great love that He has desired to give us for so long. To learn what real love is, we must lay down our rebellion.

Surrender to the love of that heart which was
pierced to purchase your redemption.

CHARLES HADDON SPURGEON

June 18

FIRE

For love is as strong as death, jealousy as cruel as the grave;
Its flames are flames of fire, a most vehement flame.
Many waters cannot quench love, nor can the floods drown it.
If a man would give for love all the wealth of his house,
It would be utterly despised. *Song of Solomon 8:6,7*

LOVE IS A “DANGEROUS” THING. It is the most powerful force that can operate on our character, and it leaves nothing unchanged. For better or worse, love shapes our character and determines our destiny. Either it lifts us to heaven or it drags us to hell. We may be moved toward God or we may be driven into miserable exile, but love will not leave us where we are.

Two things determine what love will do to us. One is the choice we make as to the *objects* of our love. If we focus our love upon God and our fellow human beings, love will purify us. But if we allow our love to settle upon either ourselves or the merely material things of creation, then the effect of love will be to destroy us. For example, to those driven mainly by the love of money, James wrote, “Your gold and silver are corroded, and their corrosion will be a witness against you and will eat your flesh like fire” (James 5:3). The fire of love will bless us or blight us, depending upon whether the objects of our love are higher or lower.

But also, our *motives* for love are critical. If we love primarily for what we can get in return, we will find that love turns out to be a destructive force. But if we learn to love for what we can give, the outcome will be radically different. Jesus taught that it is “more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). And this difference in motive is decisive even when it comes to God. The love of God has a positive effect only when we give our love to Him for His own sake. Whatever benefits we hope to receive, our love for God Himself must run deeper than our desire for any of His blessings. We must not love God for what we can get out of Him.

So let us be careful — very, very careful — about what we love and why. The freedom to choose these things is a part of our glory as personal beings. We’re made in the image of a God who is perfect love, and we flourish only when we love Him rightly. If we fail to love Him rightly, we may still know some sort of love in this world. But that love will be our undoing.

Love is the fire of life; it either consumes or purifies.

ANONYMOUS

June 19

THE GOOD THAT DILIGENCE WILL DO

The soul of a lazy man desires, and has nothing;
But the soul of the diligent shall be made rich.
Proverbs 13:4

WE MUST DO SOMETHING ABOUT OUR DESIRE FOR GOD, AND THE THINGS WE DO MUST BE DONE WITH DILIGENCE. “You have need of endurance,” we are told, “so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise” (Hebrews 10:36). In regard to God, diligence is not merely advisable — it is necessary.

Of course, diligence alone will not result in a right relationship with God. We may tackle the question of God with desire and determination, but if we’re acting on the basis of misinformation, our hard work will only produce a more diligent form of idolatry. As A. W. Tozer pointed out, “Wrong ideas about God are not only the fountain from which the polluted waters of idolatry flow; they are themselves idolatrous. The idolater simply imagines things about God and acts as if they were true.” And as Stephen R. Covey has suggested, if we’re guided by a mistaken map, diligence will just get us to the wrong place more quickly. So wherever intellect is concerned, our seeking of God must be steered by a real commitment to objective truth.

But make no mistake about it: intellect and emotion will not get the job done either, if they’re not accompanied by an active will or volition. We may know that certain things ought to be done and we may even desire to do them, but it is a decisive, hard-working will that separates the dreamers from the doers. Knowledge is a serious thing. James even went so far as to say, “To him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin” (James 4:17).

Jesus distinguished true worship from false worship in these memorable words: “The hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him” (John 4:23). So worship that is deficient in either spirit or truth is something less than true worship. But even so, God must still be *worshiped*. Intellectual truth and emotional desire can carry us only so far. At some point, a commitment must be made. And not only must it be made; it must be carried out. Thinking and feeling alone are not enough.

Reason comes to the foot of the mountain; it is the industrious will urged by the passionate heart which climbs the slope.

EVELYN UNDERHILL

June 20

ONLY THE LOVING HEART TRULY WORSHIPS

... to love Him with all the heart, with all the understanding, with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is more than all the whole burnt offerings and sacrifices. *Mark 12:33*

IF WE SEEK GOD DILIGENTLY, WE WILL FIND WORSHIP TO BE ONE OF OUR LIFELONG CHALLENGES. Even when our desire is to improve the quality of our worship, it is not easy to get the emphasis in the right place and keep it there. We tend to lose our balance.

One mistake we often make is presuming that God will be honored by anything we choose to define as worship. Unfortunately, our age is characterized by a bold, self-centered approach to worship, one that feels free to offer God whatever is currently fashionable in religious circles, however devoid of scriptural precedent that may be. But God has always retained the right to say what honors Him and what does not. It is urgent that we regain the kind of reverence that will bow before God and wait for Him to tell us the actions by which He desires to be worshiped. True worship centers on the perfect glory of the King, not on the changing tastes of His somewhat rebellious subjects, and we dare not try to create God in our own image.

But having said that, we must hasten to say this also: even the scriptural actions by which God has instructed us to worship Him mean virtually nothing if they don't proceed from a heart of true love. And here is where we quite often fail, despite our sometimes scrupulous attention to the details of worship. We see worship simply as a set of respectful motions God has required us to go through, and we forget that it is our heart He is really after. If our hearts are not warmed by gratitude and love, our worship will fall short of real reverence.

Even in our human relationships, we understand that the highest kinds of honor are those where respect is combined with love. We may appreciate the respect of casual friends, but we're much more deeply touched when it comes from the heart of those who know us best and love us most. In the case of God, He not only loves us; He desires to be loved by us. What He seeks from us is perhaps best described by an old word that we don't hear much anymore: *adoration*. Our praise grows toward perfection when the King before whom we bow is also the Father whom we love.

I never knew how to worship until I knew how to love.

HENRY WARD BEECHER

June 21

THE POVERTY OF OUR FAITH

... the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe. *Ephesians 1:18,19*

WHY DO WE CONTENT OURSELVES WITH ONLY A SIP FROM THE LIMITLESS OCEAN THAT IS GOD? It must be a source of sadness to our Creator that we don't even desire to know Him more fully nor to enjoy a greater measure of His goodness and glory. As the God who "is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think" (Ephesians 3:20), He must surely marvel at our failure even to *want* the greater things He is able to give us. Our hearts have become pitifully small receptacles for His grace.

As finite creatures, we can never experience all that God is, but that fact is no excuse not to *grow* in our experience of Him. And if we're not growing in this way, we should look first at our own expectations. James diagnosed our problem when he wrote, "You do not have because you do not ask" (James 4:2). Since God is greater than even our greatest dreams, it is the meagerness of our true desires that holds us back. We're far too easily satisfied, and we "do not know what we should pray for as we ought" (Romans 8:26). So Charles Spurgeon gave good advice when he said, "We are poverty itself, and only All-Sufficiency can supply us ... Be great in your experience of His all-sufficiency."

When it comes to seeing and experiencing more of God, we are certainly hindered by too little *desire*. But we're also hindered by too little *ability*. We don't have the spiritual vision to see any more than the smallest fraction of God's power, and so we see very little of what could be ours if we truly sought Him. This failure of vision should be on our minds when we pray. Nothing we can ask of God is more important than for the "eyes" of our understanding to be enlightened. We simply will not seek Him as we should until we see more clearly "what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe." These are things of such glory that when we see them, we'll want hearts and hands more capable of receiving them.

If we be empty and poor, it is not because God's hand is straitened, but ours is not opened.

THOMAS MANTON

June 22

ORDEALS MAKE SOME THINGS OBVIOUS

Do not lay your hand on the lad, or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me. *Genesis 22:12*

FROM TIME TO TIME WE ARE TESTED IN WAYS THAT MAKE IT CLEAR WHAT KIND OF PERSONS WE ARE. When, for example, Abraham's faith was tested by the command to offer his son Isaac, God could say, "Now I know that you fear God." This is not an easy statement to fathom. But whatever may have been manifested to God by Abraham's ordeal, we can be sure of this: Abraham learned a good deal about himself. After his agony, Abraham would have known his own faith in ways that were impossible before.

When we face difficulty, we find out what we are really made of. In times of ease, we think we know ourselves and we say what we believe in words that sound right to our own ears. And we're not being deliberately deceptive. But A. W. Tozer probably had it right when he said, "Only after an ordeal of painful self-probing are we likely to discover what we actually believe about God."

There are two things about us that need to be tested. One is *the validity of our principles*. It is something to have meditated on our principles, but it is something else to have field-tested them. We need the value of a faith that has found its beliefs to be consistent with reality, on the battlefield as well as in the church pew. And God invites us to test His truths in this very way. "Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good" (Psalm 34:8). But also, *our allegiance to our principles* needs to be tested. And frankly, this often requires a trial by fire. "Adversity is the trial of principle. Without it, a man hardly knows whether he is honest or not" (Henry Fielding).

If it is through suffering that we learn our own mettle, then suffering is not altogether undesirable. James said, "My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials" (James 1:2). Perhaps most of us will find that we can't actually welcome difficulty, but we can at least give thanks for its usefulness. There are some very practical, as well as eternal, reasons why we need to understand ourselves, and if it takes hardship to help us understand, then so be it. Even if an ordeal shows that we're less than we've made ourselves out to be in the past, the sooner we face the truth, the better we can make godly choices for the future.

Adversity introduces a man to himself.

ANONYMOUS

June 23

THE DESPERATE DESIRE FOR DELIVERANCE

Then Saul arose from the ground, and when his eyes were opened he saw no one. But they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank. *Acts 9:8,9*

WE MUST PASS THROUGH DREADFUL DARKNESS BEFORE WE ARE ABLE TO ENJOY WHAT IT MEANS TO LIVE IN THE LIGHT. So Saul had to confront the reality of being without God and without hope before he was ready to have his sins washed away (*Acts 22:16*).

It is through seasons of hunger that God teaches us to relish the feast He has for us. Moses reminded Israel of this when he reviewed the difficult days of their wilderness wandering: "So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord" (*Deuteronomy 8:3*). However, few in Israel learned the lessons their hunger might have taught them, and we err in just the same way when God withdraws His presence from us and we think no higher thoughts than those of complaint and self-pity.

Darkness is scary. But those who never leave the false light of self-sufficiency doom themselves to a darkness that only grows more dark as eternity stretches on. It is only to those who have learned what reverence means that God says, "The Sun of Righteousness shall arise with healing in His wings" (*Malachi 4:2*).

A deepened sense of our own sin is not a thing to be regretted, even though it is attended by terrible pain. The gospel means little to so many because so few have passed through any dark night of the soul that would enable them to appreciate the light. So few love God because so few have any depth of gratitude for forgiveness, and this is simply because they have never known what it is like to desperately desire deliverance. Night is, after all, that which should guide us toward the daylight, and for this night — this awful, blessed night — we should give humble thanks.

In that happy night, in secret, seen of none, seeing nought myself, without other light or guide save that which in my heart was burning. That light guided me more surely than the noonday sun to the place where He was waiting for me . . .

O, guiding night;
O, night more lovely than the dawn . . .

JOHN OF THE CROSS

June 24

UNCONDITIONAL REVERENCE

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego answered and said to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up." *Daniel 3:16-18*

WE SHOULD REVERE GOD FOR WHO HE IS, AND NOT MERELY FOR WHAT HE DOES THAT MAY BE OF BENEFIT TO US PERSONALLY. It is right to worship God because He is God, period. There need be no other consideration. Whatever serves the greater glory of God's wise purposes, that should be our desire, even in cases where His glory might require Him to refrain from saving us (1 Samuel 3:18).

It's a sad truth that much of our seeking amounts to a subtle form of bargaining with God. We'll agree to do this or that aspect of His will . . . as long as He is willing to do this or that to make it worth our while. All too often, that which we call our "obedience" is contingent on some sort of payoff — if not in the short term, at least in the long. And if God doesn't do as we wish, then we're tempted to complain, "What good is God?"

But can we not see how offensive this utilitarian approach to God is? We would hardly limit our earthly friendships to those who can be of "use" to us, yet this is what we seem to do with God. James Houston comments on this when he says, "Just as the pragmatist has no friends because he simply 'uses' people, so pragmatic Christians — and they are indeed numerous today — use God and do not realize the need to know Him intimately."

When Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35), He pointed to a principle that is as applicable to God as to our fellow human beings. Even with God, we should derive more joy from giving than from getting. And even when we are giving, it should not merely be because that is the way to "get" more blessedness. God was not created for us; we were created for Him. Yet many of us "are expecting Jesus Christ to quench our thirst when we should be satisfying Him! We should be pouring out our lives, investing our total beings, not drawing on Him to satisfy us" (Oswald Chambers). To seek God truly we must desire, simply and purely, to fill His heart with gladness.

If we seek God for our own good and profit, we are not seeking God.

MEISTER ECKHART

June 25

LETTING THE LORD DECIDE

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name.
Your kingdom come. Your will be done
on earth as it is in heaven. *Matthew 6:9,10*

IF OUR INTENT IS TO SEEK GOD, THEN WE MUST LEARN HOW TO SEEK HIS WILL. We all have a tendency to think we're seeking God when what we're really seeking is His ratification of our own will. It takes a lot of spiritual growth to be able to pray with integrity, "Your will be done."

Whatever specific requests we make of our Lord ought to be made with great reverence and humility. It is true that we are encouraged to come to God with the confidence that comes from love (Matthew 7:7-11), but in our love for God we must not forget to love His *wisdom*. Letting the Lord decide what is best should not be something we do reluctantly or grudgingly. If we're thinking as we should about God, we'll rejoice and revel in whatever His will is, knowing that the accomplishment of His purposes will result in ends that are not only wiser, but ultimately more joyful than any our own desires would have produced. If our reverence for God is real, however, we'll show that reverence by yielding to His will in every instance, whether what happens next seems to be joyful or not. When faced with choices between good, better, and best, sincere seekers make these choices by deferring to God. "Lean not on your own understanding" (Proverbs 3:5), the wise man said.

So the purpose of our praying should be to put ourselves in the Lord's hands and trust His judgment. Yet He has taught us to ask Him for what we think we need. He has promised to grant our requests when they don't interfere with His larger purposes. And when the Lord does yield to what we ask, He does more than merely say "yes." He not only gives what we ask; He gives a better version of the thing than we had envisioned. Did Mary not find this out at the wedding feast in Cana (John 2:1-12)? It is as Elizabeth Barrett Browning said in the *Sonnets from the Portuguese*: "God's gifts put man's best dreams to shame." J. K. Maclean said it well: "If our petitions are in accordance with His will, and if we seek His glory in the asking, the answers will come in ways that will astonish us and fill our hearts with songs of thanksgiving."

O Lord, you know what is best for me. Let this or that be done, as you please.
What you will, how much you will, and when you will.

THOMAS À KEMPIS

June 26

SEEKING GOD AND SEEKING TRUTH

[Love] rejoices in the truth. *1 Corinthians 13:6*

MOSES DESCRIBED GOD AS “A GOD OF TRUTH” (DEUTERONOMY 32:4). If we think we can seek Him and love Him without seeking and loving truth, we are tragically mistaken. We can’t have God except on the basis of the truth about Him. Some refuse the truth about God willfully, of course. Jesus said, “This is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light” (John 3:19). But fortunately, there are some who courageously “rejoice in the truth” — even when it requires painful adjustments in themselves.

When we are considering something that has been presented as being true about God, we sometimes act as if our preferences were the supreme tribunal before which all ideas must be brought for judgment. It is not uncommon nowadays to hear people say, “I could never believe in a God who _____,” as if God could not possibly be anything other than what is congenial to our thinking. If a laboratory scientist took such a cavalier attitude toward *physical* reality, he’d be laughed out of his profession. If he said something like “I could never believe in a phenomenon as destructive as nuclear fission,” his foolishness would be obvious. The truth would still be true whether he approved of it or not. Why then, when the realities are *spiritual*, do we think we can predetermine what we’ll allow to be true and then judge God accordingly? Facts are hard things. They rarely shape themselves to fit our feelings. Whatever God is, that is what He is — and the sooner we lay aside our brash demands concerning what His nature “must” be, the sooner we can get on with real religion.

None can deny that false notions about God can be powerful, at least in a plodding kind of way. But as the Roman philosophers said: *candor dat viribus alas*. “Truth gives wings to strength.” When the vigor of our religious impulse is powered by *truth* about God, something happens that is very fine. We can soar high enough to begin tasting the freedom that Jesus spoke of: “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32).

All the problems of heaven and earth, though they were to confront us together and at once, would be nothing compared with the overwhelming problem of God: that He *is*; what He *is like*; and what we as moral beings must *do* about Him.

A. W. TOZER

June 27

BETWEEN DISILLUSIONMENT AND DENIAL

These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace.
In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer,
I have overcome the world. *John 16:33*

ON EITHER SIDE OF REAL FAITH THERE ARE DANGEROUS EXTREMES. On the one hand, there is the foolish idealism which pretends that the Christian life is problem-free. Those who have been led into this way of thinking can only stay there by refusing to deal with life's unpleasant realities. They tend to be superficial, and often self-righteous, toward those who admit to struggling with sin in their lives. But on the other hand, there is the unfortunate cynicism that spreads bitterness in the name of honesty. Those with this outlook tend to be fatalistic, and often condescending toward those they deem to be less honest about life.

It is possible, however, to have a balanced faith that is both realistic and hopeful. Peter spoke of such a possibility when he said, "Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:13). Given the death-dealing realities that surround us, it is hazardous to have anything less than a sober mind, a mind which is girded for clear thinking and decisive action. But although the difficulties are real, they are not the totality of what is real. Let us not lose our bearings.

A day draws near when the entire sum of all that has ever opposed God will be seen to have been a reality far less weighty than even the least part of His glory (2 Corinthians 4:16-18). If this is our confidence, the quandaries of this broken life will still break our hearts, but we can meet them with a mind refreshed and firmly fixed on "the grace that is to be brought to [us] at the revelation of Jesus Christ." There is no need to deny our pain. But neither need we deny that the problem of pain was dealt with at the Cross. A King died there "that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage" (Hebrews 2:14,15).

Very few older men face their lives realistically and still cling passionately to Christ. Most are either realistic and disillusioned or believing and defensive. Because [my father] is both honest about life and rich in faith, I listen when he speaks.

LARRY CRABB

June 28

FAITH, DARKNESS, AND DOUBT

Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went home. And in his upper room, with his windows open toward Jerusalem, he knelt down on his knees three times that day, and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as was his custom since early days. *Daniel 6:10*

IT IS IN TIMES OF NEED AND PAIN THAT WE TURN TO GOD MOST DILIGENTLY, YET IRONICALLY, THOSE ARE THE VERY TIMES WHEN WE'RE MOST DISTURBED BY DOUBT. We need to grow in the direction of a faith like that of Daniel, whose many years in this world had taught him to go ahead and trust God, no matter what seemed to be happening at the moment. As a human being, Daniel would have known as much about doubt as any of us. But he also knew a thing or two about the *management* of doubt.

There is no such thing as a truth so clear that no circumstance can call it into question. In the practical living of daily life, we all understand that doubt can creep into our minds concerning even the things we're most sure of. However rock-like the things may be that we believe in, our *feelings* of security and confidence are not set in stone. They fluctuate, often rather quickly. And so, common sense tells us not to throw away our faith at the first sign of trouble. If our principles have been carefully acquired and lovingly nurtured, then they're too valuable to be discarded when momentary doubt raises its head. When difficulty must be dealt with, that is when we need our principles the most.

Oswald Chambers wisely said, "Believe God is always the God you know Him to be when you are nearest to Him." When darkness sets in and doubt makes its expected assault, we must not throw away the confidence that has been granted to us in the sunlight. Like Daniel who remembered to pray and give thanks even on the darkest day of his life, we must remember that the great reality of God does not change. The light that is visible to us in this realm may rise and fall, and with it our feelings of courage or despair, but He does not ever cease to be the eternal "I AM." This must be our faith. This is our Father's world, and let us "ne'er forget, that though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the Ruler yet" (Maltbie D. Babcock).

I believe in the sun even when it isn't shining.
I believe in love even when I am alone.
I believe in God even when He is silent.

A WORLD WAR II REFUGEE

June 29

WELL-PLACED FAITH

He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things? *Romans 8:32*

AS OUR FATHER, GOD ASKS US TO BELIEVE IN THE GOODNESS OF HIS FATHERHOOD. For many of us, faith in God's character requires growth in our own character. To believe that God exists is a step in the right direction. To believe that He is "a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him" (Hebrews 11:6) is an even further step. Yet this is a step we can take responsibly. Based on what happened at the Cross, our confidence in the love of God is not wishful thinking; it is well-placed faith.

In practical terms, what does God's goodness mean? First, we should be *sobered* by it. The very worst thing would be for us to presume upon the grace of our Father. Paul asks the pertinent question when he says, "Do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?" (Romans 2:4). And he urges us to consider not only God's "goodness" toward those who obey Him, but also His "severity" toward those who refuse to do so (Romans 11:22). But having determined to seek God reverently and obediently, we should also be *encouraged* by the fact that God is gracious to those who take Him seriously. If we are willing to relate ourselves rightly to God, we need not doubt that a right relationship is what He gave His Son to make possible for us.

In all that God has spoken, we must believe He has told us the truth. Most of all we must believe Him when He says He loves us. "Faith is nothing else than trust in the divine mercy promised in Christ" (Philipp Melancthon). We can't claim to have read the Bible thoughtfully if we've not noticed its emphasis on God's goodness. And we can't claim to have taken its claims seriously if we've not been touched by the tenderness of God's invitation to trust Him. "For He Himself has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.' So we may boldly say: 'The LORD is my helper; I will not fear'" (Hebrews 13:5,6). We may have learned many things since we were young, but none of our adult thoughts is more profound than the simple one that we sang in our childhood: *Jesus loves me! this I know, for the Bible tells me so.*

Faith is a knowledge of the benevolence of God toward us,
and a certain persuasion of His veracity.

JOHN CALVIN

June 30

WITHIN THE CIRCLE OF GOD'S CARE

The LORD bless you and keep you;
The LORD make His face shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
The LORD lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace.

Numbers 6:24-26

GOD LONGS TO KEEP US, HIS CREATURES, WITHIN THE SPHERE OF HIS LIFE AND HIS LIBERTY. Yet we will not always allow Him to keep us within His will, and our waywardness costs us more than we can properly appreciate, given our worldly-mindedness. When we live outside the realm of God's will, we live outside the promise of His protection. And to be without His protection is to be without anything that can truly be called safety or security. We were made to live within the circle of God's care, and without His keeping, we cannot long survive.

It was Moses who exhorted Israel with these words: "I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live" (Deuteronomy 30:19). And it was upon those who would choose the way of life that the priests were to pronounce this amazing blessing: "The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make His face shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace."

We would have to stretch our imagination to understand even the least of these blessings. What must it mean to be watched over by the very God of heaven? What person could be more fortunate than to enjoy the kindness of God's mercy and the radiance of His smile? What would we not give for God to turn His face toward us, to befriend us, and to give us wholeness and peace?

The decision to walk with God, disavowing any path except that of His will, is a choice of high and ancient wisdom, and yet it is a choice that can be made even by the most lowly. Indeed, it seems to be the lowly, more often than the mighty, who recognize this wisdom, and these folks find that although they sometimes live without worldly well-being, they walk in safety because they walk with God. May each of us seek this same safety, this being our daily prayer: O Father, as we learn to love Your will, help us keep to Your path alone, and on that path keep us in Your care.

The will of God will not take you where the grace of God cannot keep you.

ANONYMOUS

July 1

GOD IS ALL THAT WE LACK . . . AND MORE

Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men,
and the weakness of God is stronger than men. *1 Corinthians 1:25*

AS OUR PERFECT AND INFINITE CREATOR, GOD IS EVERYTHING THAT WE ARE NOT. He is the Answer to every question we have, the Sufficiency who can supply all our needs. Perhaps our greatest need, then, is to recognize our need and to seek in God the perfection that we don't find in ourselves. He is all we lack . . . and He is even much more than that.

If there is one thing that is obvious about us, it is that we are incomplete. Whether we speak of our needs and our longings or we put it in terms of our tendency toward growth and development, somehow we are always using language that implies our imperfection. We are, as we say, "works in progress." There are things about us that we need but do not yet have.

Whatever these things are that we need, God is all of these. There is no necessity He cannot meet; there is no hole in our hearts He cannot fill. God is everything we lack.

But in a sense, God is also the only thing we lack. There is nothing we really need except God. Whatever other needs we may think we have, these are but manifestations and reminders of that which is our only true need. We were made for fellowship with our Creator. Without that, we wouldn't be content even if we had all the rest of the world combined. But if we have that, we find that we're able to do without, if necessary, any of the other things we thought we had to have, including even physical life itself. Our having been created by God means simply this: God is all that we truly have to have. Anything else is a bonus.

But there is, in fact, a great deal of bonus in God's dealings with us. As we've said, He is all we lack, and He is also much more. One of the most marvelous aspects of God's nature is His bounty. He is a God whose grace super-abounds and overflows. When we drink at His fountain, He not only quenches our thirst, but He gives us additional gifts. We are told that He is "able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think" (Ephesians 3:20). Our Maker is a God who takes great delight in surprising us with the riches of His infinite goodness.

How completely satisfying to turn from
our limitations to a God who has none.

A. W. TOZER

July 2

FRIENDS OF GOD

Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends. You are My friends if you do whatever I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you. *John 15:13-15*

THE MAGNITUDE OF GOD'S GRACE IS NOWHERE SEEN MORE CLEARLY THAN IN HIS DESIRE FOR US TO BE HIS FRIENDS. We, of course, may reject the terms of His friendship. And when we refuse to remain within His purpose for us, we put ourselves in a place where our Friend's goodwill can do us no ultimate good. "You are My friends," Jesus said, "if you do whatever I command you." A choice must be made between the world's friendship and God's (James 4:4), and the statement in John 1:11 is a sad one: "He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him." Yet as long as life lasts, God is still inviting us to be His friends. No one has ever rejected God without breaking the heart of a Father who wishes to show us His love. We are staggered by this love when we hear Jesus say, even to Judas who led the mob when they came to arrest Him, "Friend, why have you come?" (Matthew 26:50).

So God's desire to be friends with us is a truly amazing fact. But we should respond to this fact with more than mere amazement. We should *seek* God in a way that shows our gratitude for His offer, and our seeking should be characterized by the same faithfulness and obedience that God saw in His old friend Abraham. "Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.' *And he was called the friend of God*" (James 2:22,23). All these many years later, friendship with God must work the same way in our own lives. To be His friends, through His Son Jesus Christ, is no passive or slothful thing. It is the active enjoyment of all the thoughts and words and deeds that flow back and forth between those whose love is strong enough to govern their character and their conduct. It is in His gentle friendship that our Greatest Friend is always asking, "*I gave My life for thee, what hast thou giv'n for Me?*" (Frances R. Havergal).

All the best qualities of friendship begin in Christ,
advance through Christ, and are perfected in Christ.

AELRED OF RIEVAULX

July 3

WALKING WITH GOD

After he begot Methuselah, Enoch walked with God three hundred years, and had sons and daughters. So all the days of Enoch were three hundred and sixty-five years. And Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him. *Genesis 5:22-24*

EVEN THOUGH OUR SURROUNDINGS IN THIS WORLD HAVE BEEN MARRED BY SIN, GOD HAS MADE IT POSSIBLE FOR US TO WALK WITH HIM. We can yield our decisions and our deeds to Him in such a way that we actually become companions of the very God who created us. The possibility of such a thing suggests some important truths about God Himself, does it not?

For one thing, it is remarkable that God offers to every one of us the possibility of walking with Him. No matter how badly we have wrecked our past, God is willing for us to walk with Him the rest of the way home, if we'll accept His pardon on His terms. This privilege is not limited to those born into any certain class of humanity, nor does it require any special intellectual powers. Walking with God just means we faithfully follow whatever truth becomes clear to us. "What we need in religion is not new light, but new sight; not new paths, but new strength to walk in the old ones; not new duties, but new strength from on high to fulfill those that are plain to us" (Tryon Edwards).

But if there can be such a thing as walking with God, there must also be such a thing as not walking with Him. If, for example, the lifestyle of Enoch's degraded contemporaries constituted just as much a walk with God as that of Enoch himself, then the statement "Enoch walked with God" would mean very little. But surely this is not a meaningless statement. We are being told that Enoch made certain choices concerning God and that these choices had their consequence in a walk that would have been impossible otherwise. To realize this is to be sobered in our thinking.

Neither the freedom of walking with God nor the destination can be ours without radical repentance and redirection of our hearts. "Father, set me free in the glory of thy will, so that I will only as thou willest. Thy will be at once thy perfection and mine. Thou alone art deliverance — absolute safety from every cause and kind of trouble that ever existed, anywhere now exists, or ever can exist in thy universe" (George MacDonald).

When we walk with God, we get where He is going.

ANONYMOUS

July 4

MADE TO BE FILLED

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.

Psalm 107:8,9

ONE OF LIFE'S MOST IMPORTANT INSIGHTS IS THE UNDERSTANDING THAT WE WERE CREATED TO BE THE RECIPIENTS OF GOD'S GLORY AND GRACE. We are vessels. We are instruments. We are personal beings to whom and through whom God intends to communicate the benevolence of His own character. When we learn to see ourselves in this way — *as existing for the purpose of receiving God's goodness* — we are then able to glorify Him in a higher way than we ever could have done in the past.

There is, as the old saying goes, a God-shaped hole in our hearts that only God can fill. Philip James Bailey said it this way: "Naught but God can satisfy the soul." Most of us recognize that God is perfectly able to fulfill our needs, just because He is our Creator. What we perhaps don't recognize as well is that God is the *only* adequate fulfillment of our needs. Having been made for this very purpose, if our hearts are not filled with Him, we can only die. Between life and death, there is no middle way.

It marks a huge step in the growth of any person when he or she learns the truth of Jesus' statement, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35). It is also important, however, for us to see that what we're to give is that which we're intended to receive from God: *His goodness*. We were created not merely to be receptacles of God's grace, but channels through which that grace would be conveyed to our fellow human beings.

Paul's prayer for his Christian friends in Rome was typical of his wish for Christians everywhere else: "Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit" (Romans 15:13). There is simply no higher request we can make, at least insofar as our human needs are concerned. When we see that this is the meaning of life — to be filled with God ourselves, and then to communicate Him to others — we can begin to fulfill the potential for which we were made.

It is the goodness of God, and a desire to communicate this good,
that inspired creation. We are designed to receive God's goodness.

WILLIAM LAW

July 5

WILLING TO BE FILLED

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they shall be filled. *Matthew 5:6*

ALTHOUGH IT IS GOD'S PURPOSE TO SHOW FORTH HIS GOODNESS THROUGH US, WE MUST MAKE THE CHOICE TO YIELD TO HIS PURPOSE. Having been given a free will, we have a decision to make as to whether we'll *accept* what a human being was meant to be. We've been created to receive God's goodness, but that won't happen unless we choose to let it happen. God will not force us against our will to be filled up and satisfied with Him.

There is a sense, of course, in which God will ultimately accomplish His intentions whether we accept those intentions or not. If we say yes to God and allow ourselves to be made vessels for His honor, God's glory will be demonstrated by showing forth His goodness through us. If we say no, however, He will demonstrate His glory by punishing our rebellion. Either way, God will maintain the majesty of His own glory, but it is obviously in our interest to accept God's original purpose rather than reject it. If we're thinking rightly, we'll want to avoid the fate of ancient Pharaoh, in whose case God had to gain His glory by the punishment of a hardened heart. Pharaoh's defiance sealed his own personal doom, but it fell far short of thwarting God's purpose. "Indeed for this purpose I have raised you up," God said, "that I may show My power in you, and that My name may be declared in all the earth" (Exodus 9:16). Anyone who disregards God as Pharaoh did unleashes a tragic train of consequences.

Godly character comes down to doing the very thing Pharaoh was unwilling to do: *opening ourselves up to God and His will*. The posture of reverence is the posture of voluntary receptivity, an eagerness for everything about God. By virtue of our creation, all of us have a built-in hunger for God; humility and gratitude mean acknowledging that hunger and doing what is right about it. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness," Jesus said, "for they shall be filled." And shouldn't this always be the spirit in which we pray? "Prayer is essentially man standing before his God in wonder, awe, and humility; man, made in the image of God, responding to his maker" (George Appleton).

Behold, Lord, an empty vessel that needs to be filled. My Lord, fill it.

MARTIN LUTHER

July 6
A MOTHER'S LOVE

As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you;
And you shall be comforted in Jerusalem. *Isaiah 66:13*

WE ARE WATCHED OVER BY A GOD WHOSE LOVE FOR US IS THE UNIQUELY TENDER LOVE OF A MOTHER FOR HER CHILDREN. Within the Trinity of God's divine being there is to be found the perfect summation of all of the qualities that were divided between masculinity and femininity at our creation (Genesis 1:26,27). The complementary nature of men and women in our world is a reflection of the perfect communion that exists within the triune personality of God's own being. Thus none of the unique endowments of men and women are insignificant. Each has its counterpart in God's character, and each needs to be taken seriously in our own character and in our own interactions with others. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the matter of love. The familiar texts that speak of God as having a father's love are complemented by those that describe the divine love in motherly terms. The fatherliness of God's love is perfected by its motherliness.

If God loves us with a mother's love, this is more than a theoretical point. In day-to-day practice, we should not fail to have the same kind of love for one another. Even Paul, the strong soldier of the faith, understood the need for *tender* love. To the church in Thessalonica, he wrote, "But we were gentle among you, just as a nursing mother cherishes her own children. So, affectionately longing for you, we were well pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God, but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us" (1 Thessalonians 2:7,8).

A mother is able to touch her children with a special tenderness because she understands them in a special way. God's perfect love for us, of course, is possible because of an infallible understanding of our hearts, and we shall not be able to reach that level of empathy for one another. What we certainly can do, however, is to make a more conscious *effort* to understand the kinds of things a mother understands — and to love accordingly. If we seek God, we will seek to love as God loves. In our love and in our dealings with God's children, we will include not only the productiveness of a father, but the tenderness and insight of a mother.

A mother understands what a child does not say.

JEWISH PROVERB

July 7

THE DIVINE COMPASSION

Can a woman forget her nursing child,
And not have compassion on the son of her womb?
Surely they may forget, yet I will not forget you. *Isaiah 49:15*

JUST AS GOD'S LOVE IS AS TENDER AS A MOTHER'S LOVE, IT IS ALSO AS COMPASSIONATE. A mother would sooner forget her nursing child than God would fail to act with compassion. "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called My son . . . I drew them with gentle cords, with bands of love, and I was to them as those who take the yoke from their neck. I stooped and fed them" (Hosea 11:1,4). Even if unrepentant rebellion requires our final banishment from God, we can be sure that the sentence will be pronounced with nothing less than a broken heart. We will have rejected a compassionate love very much like a mother's.

Robert Fulghum once made an interesting comment about Teresa of Calcutta. Arguing that she was one of the most powerful people in the world at the time, he wrote, "No shah or president or king or general or scientist or pope; no banker or merchant or cartel or oil company or ayatollah holds the key to as much power as she has. None is as rich. For hers is the invincible weapon against the evils of this earth: the caring heart. And hers are the everlasting riches of this life: the wealth of the compassionate spirit." It is compassion, far more than any other quality, that encourages people to be *willing to be influenced*. People really do not care how much we know until they know how much we care.

This is precisely why the story of the Cross is so powerful. It is from first to last a story of compassion, and those who refuse to be touched by compassion would only be hardened by any other means of influence. If God's chosen means of influence is compassionate love, we should be slow to use any "stronger" or "more effective" means. Moreover, if we truly hope to see others influenced by compassion, we must be ready to do the same difficult thing that God did. We must be ready, when the time comes, not only to suffer *with* others, but also to suffer *for* them. It has always been mothers, more than anyone else, who understand this.

Let us not underestimate how hard it is to be compassionate. Compassion is hard because it requires the inner disposition to go with others to the place where they are weak, vulnerable, lonely, and broken. But this is not our spontaneous response to suffering. What we desire most is to do away with suffering by fleeing from it or finding a quick cure for it.

HENRI J. M. NOUWEN

July 8

GOD HAS NEVER TRIFLED WITH US

... I have loved you with an everlasting love;
therefore with lovingkindness I have drawn you. *Jeremiah 31:3*

WHEN WE SEEK GOD, WE CAN BE SURE THAT HE HAS ALWAYS BEEN SEEKING US, AND IT IS WITH DILIGENCE THAT HE HAS DONE SO. Knowing of God's earnestness toward us, we should turn toward Him with all the more gratitude and carefulness. "If God is diligent, surely we ought to be diligent in doing our duty to him. Think how patient and how diligent God has been with us!" (Oswald Chambers).

Lest there be any misunderstanding, it needs to be emphasized that we can never reciprocate God's love in any way that would be complete or even adequate. Our best efforts to respond to God's diligence are broken and marred. Even if we were sinless, as creatures we would still not be able to attend to our Creator in the same way that He attends to us. And having sinned, we surely cannot *deserve* the earnestness of the love He has shown to us. In one sense, all of our human deeds are trifles.

Yet the frailty of our condition should not keep us from doing what we *can* do, and that is to be *moved* by God's love. We can choose to be responsive rather than unresponsive. We can hear His voice. We can answer His call. And knowing that God has never trifled with us ought to make us determine, out of sheer gratitude, to take Him seriously. Knowing what our atonement cost Him, how can we simply dabble in religion? Trifling with God is the most horrible form of ingratitude.

Words are interesting things, and we can often be enlightened by their history. Originally the word "trifle" meant trickery or deceit. To trifle was to say or do something that one did not really mean, pretending to be serious. Today the verb "trifle" means (1) to deal with something as if it were of little significance or value, (2) to speak or act with little seriousness or purpose, or (3) to play or toy with something. When we trifle with God, is there not a bit of the old meaning of the word in our actions? When we pretend to love Him dearly but give Him no more than our leftovers, is it some trick we are trying to play on God? Do we think He does not notice our lack of seriousness?

God is earnest with you. Why are you not so with Him?
Why trifle with God?

OSWALD CHAMBERS

July 9

THE PASSIONATE PURSUIT OF GOD

How lovely is Your tabernacle, O LORD of hosts!
My soul longs, yes, even faints for the courts of the LORD;
My heart and my flesh cry out for the living God. *Psalms 84:1,2*

GOD SHOULD BE NOT ONLY OUR HIGHEST PRIORITY BUT ALSO OUR MOST FERVENT PASSION. Love and desire for Him should stir so deeply within us that we seek Him at all costs. If God is indeed our Creator, no less than this is required. It would be the greatest folly imaginable to treat God as one of our peripheral interests.

Some years ago, there was a theologian who defined religion as a person's "ultimate concern." While this is true in a certain sense, the concept of "ultimate concern" may be misleading. Ultimate concerns may be equal in that everybody has one, but they are not equal with regard to validity or value. To be of value, ultimate *concern* needs to be aligned with ultimate *reality*. But more to the point, not every person's ultimate concern is equally strong. We all have something that we care about more than anything else, relatively speaking, but we don't all give ourselves with equal passion to our priorities, even our highest ones. Some people simply don't pursue anything with passion. And when it comes to God, none of us can say we pursue Him as passionately as we should. God deserves more than we usually give Him.

To put it bluntly, in our present spiritual condition we are weak. And overcoming our weakness is a process that requires focus and dedication. As artist Thomas Kinkadee, the "painter of light," wrote, "You don't get into physical shape by wishing you were a better athlete, and you don't get into better spiritual condition by harboring some vague spiritual yearnings." In the Beatitudes, Jesus said it with pointed clarity: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled" (Matthew 5:6). "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:8). Those who shall be filled are those who hunger for God with a hunger that is desperate. And those who hunger are those who long for Him with a passion — we may even call it a *determination* — that will not be denied.

For many of us a right relationship with God is seen as an important part of "the good life" which every well-rounded individual should address, but it is certainly not the whole of things. Jesus says it must be more than a vital interest — it must become the reigning passion of our existence.

All that truly hungry people can think of is food.

PAUL EARNHART

July 10

POWERFUL PRAYER

Then [Jesus] turned to the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave Me no water for My feet, but she has washed My feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head. You gave Me no kiss, but this woman has not ceased to kiss My feet since the time I came in. You did not anoint My head with oil, but this woman has anointed My feet with fragrant oil." *Luke 7:44-46*

IF OUR LOVE FOR GOD WERE TO BE JUDGED BY THE INTENSITY AND THE PERSISTENCE OF OUR PRAYING, HOW APPARENT WOULD IT BE THAT WE ARE GRATEFUL TO HIM? The woman who washed Jesus' feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head had an obvious love for Him. As she literally clung to the Lord, her actions showed that she appreciated what forgiveness meant. On the other hand, Simon, the Lord's host on that occasion, paid far less personal attention to Jesus. He failed to see the depth of his need for what Jesus had to offer.

We are taught not only to pray, but to pray with persistence, fervently expressing our desires. In teaching His disciples about prayer, Jesus "spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart" (Luke 18:1). Persistence in prayer is not for God's benefit but for ours. We need, as someone has said, to "batter the very gates of heaven with storms of prayer." It must be with conviction of heart that we approach our King: "Alone to God with faith draw near, approach His courts, besiege His throne with all the power of prayer" (Charles Wesley).

No doubt one of the main reasons we get so little out of prayer is that we put so little into it. The anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* long ago advised: "Attempt to penetrate the darkness above you. Toss sharp darts of desiring love at that thick cloud of unknowing." The God whom we worship will not be manipulated by the prayers of those who are merely curious. He is a rewarder of those who seek Him diligently (Hebrews 11:6), not of those who seek Him casually or conveniently.

Out of all the things we do, praying is surely one of the most significant. In prayer we are actually speaking to our Creator. And the manner in which we pray, perhaps more than anything else, indicates how diligent we are in our love for God.

It is only when the whole heart is gripped
with the passion of prayer that the life-giving fire descends,
for none but the earnest man gets access to the ear of God.

EDWARD MCKENDREE BOUNDS

July 11

SINGLE-MINDED LOVE

Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. *James 4:8*

TO LIVE GODLY LIVES, IT IS NECESSARY FOR US TO CONCENTRATE OUR ATTENTION AND OUR AFFECTIONS ON GOD HIMSELF. If we try to discipline ourselves to do what is right outwardly, we'll probably have great difficulty if we don't also discipline our love. "Purify your hearts, you double-minded," said James. What we need to do is develop a more single-minded love for God. We need to eliminate any concerns that compete for our allegiance to God and resolve to give Him nothing less than our whole hearts.

"The basic lesson of the Sermon on the Mount," Oswald Chambers wrote, "is to narrow all your interests until your mind, heart, and body are focused on Jesus Christ." In another place, he wrote similar words concerning sanctification: "Sanctification means to be intensely focused on God's point of view. It means to secure and to keep all the strength of our body, soul, and spirit for God's purpose alone." These are perceptive comments, and they reflect an important reality. We must not only learn to look at everything from God's perspective; we must learn to look at everything *only* from His perspective. When we do so, we'll find ourselves living a life that is consistently dedicated to Him.

Jesus said something of great practical importance when He said, "Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment" (John 7:24). This is the key to both godly character and godly conduct. To look past the worldly appearance of things and see things as they really are — to see them, in other words, as God sees them — this is the essential ingredient in our work and in our worship. Whether our mental maps are correct makes all the difference in whether we get where we need to go.

A worthy and fruitful relationship with God must be more than simply one item on a crowded agenda. It must be the central focus and aim of our lives, the only thing that really matters. And when we're making decisions, we must do more than simply consider God's viewpoint as helpful input. In every case, God's way of looking at things ought to be *decisive*. A unique, concentrated desire for God's glory ought to move our every action.

Healthy eyes are eyes that are focused on a single aim: the kingdom of God.

RICHARD FOSTER

July 12

HEAD AND HEART

He who says, "I know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him. *1 John 2:4,5*

IN SEEKING GOD, HOW SHOULD "REASON" AND "EMOTION" BE RELATED? What does knowledge have to do with love, and what do both knowledge and love have to do with obedience?

Since God is the ultimate perfection of love, our understanding of love should come from Him. We must allow God's character to show us what love is and His conduct to show us what love does. Cut off from the knowledge of God, the thing that we call "love" soon becomes weak and misguided. If what we know of God is not accurate, we'll not be able to put real love into practice. Our attempts to show love will do more harm than good.

But also, it is the knowledge of God that causes us to *want* to love. He is not only the "what" of love; He is also the "why." The knowledge of God is our most powerful motivation to love, and no one can really say that he knows God if he has not been moved to greater love. The apostle John said it very simply: "He who does not love does not know God, for God is love" (1 John 4:8).

This helps us to see how obedience is connected to both knowledge and love. To know God is to love Him, and to love Him is to want to *show* that love. Worldly knowledge and love may be lethargic, but godly knowledge and love are active. And not only active, they are willing to be governed by God's rule. Knowledge and love are, in a word, *obedient*. And again, John said it simply: "This is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3).

In practice, of course, all of this requires a serious study of the Scriptures. Our obedience to God must be grounded in our love for Him. Our love must be determined by our knowledge of God. And our knowledge of God must come from His own self-revelation in the Scriptures. Each of these reinforces the other, resulting in spiritual growth. The more we know of God, the more we'll love Him. And the more we love Him, the more we'll want to know of Him. When all is said and done, that is why we want to go to heaven.

We must *know* before we can *love*. In order to *know* God, we must often *think* of him. When we finally love him, we shall automatically think of him all the time, because our heart will be with our treasure.

BROTHER LAWRENCE

July 13

STEWARDSHIP OF THE EMOTIONS

Keep your heart with all diligence,
for out of it spring the issues of life. *Proverbs 4:23*

GOD HAS GIVEN US MANY GOOD GIFTS THAT NEED TO BE HANDLED CAREFULLY, AND THE ONE THAT PERHAPS NEEDS THE GREATEST CARE IS THE MIND. We know that the mind, or heart, is made up of three basic faculties: the *intellect*, the *emotions*, and the *will*. Ideally, all three of these should work together to promote the good things for which we were created. The roles of the intellect and the will are commonly acknowledged, and they are a bit more easily understood. But the role of the emotions is another matter. Exactly how our feelings are to work is a subject of great debate. And in this confusion, it's unfortunate that we lose the help our emotions should give us in life's most important undertaking.

It is always a risky thing to try to serve God with only part of our minds. We are warned, for example, about the danger of zeal without knowledge (Romans 10:2), obedience without love (1 Corinthians 13:1-3), and love without obedience (John 14:15). We are encouraged to carry out with our will the things our intellect tells us we ought to do (James 4:17). On virtually every page of the Scriptures, we are encouraged to give God our "whole heart," and to do less than this is not only unwise; it is deadly.

But even in the short run, we are the losers when we leave out of our godliness something as important as our feelings. The practical truth of the matter is simply this: we are fighting a losing battle when we try to do what is right without the help of our emotions. Our affections are meant to aid us in our relationship to God, and without their help, it is unlikely that we shall get very far. But to help us as they should, our emotions need to be *managed* wisely. If the "issues of life" spring from the heart, then the heart, including the emotions, must be "kept" with all diligence. Faithful discipleship often comes down to good stewardship of such things as our feelings. Discipline does not mean denying our emotions. It means training them — to help us live for God's glory!

For God has given affections to man for the same purpose that He has given all the faculties of the human soul, namely that they might serve "man's chief end," which is the great business for which God created him . . . If the Creator has wisely made human nature in this manner, why then misuse our affections?

JONATHAN EDWARDS

July 14

THE SERVANT'S OPPORTUNITY

When pride comes, then comes shame;
but with the humble is wisdom. *Proverbs 11:2*

PRIDE IS THE ARCHENEMY OF WISDOM. For that reason, anything that stirs up our sense of pride and self-sufficiency is something that will hinder our wisdom, while those things that humble us and remind us of our dependence on God are those that increase our wisdom. Whatever increases pride, contributes to foolishness.

Ironically, even our learning can get in the way of our wisdom. The more we learn and the wiser we think we are in comparison to ordinary people, the less wise we become in actual fact. Paul wrote, "If anyone thinks that he knows anything, he knows nothing yet as he ought to know" (1 Corinthians 8:2). And he advised, "Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you seems to be wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise" (1 Corinthians 3:18). Charles Haddon Spurgeon caught this insight with a vivid metaphor: "The doorstep to the temple of wisdom is a knowledge of our own ignorance."

We tend to think wisdom is the thing that enables people to "climb the ladder" in this life. Thus we generally expect the "master" to be a wiser person than his "servant." If it wasn't by working smarter as well as harder, how did he get to be the master in the first place? There may be some truth to that, but whatever may be wisdom's role in enabling people to climb the ladder, it's still a fact that the higher we go, the harder it is to hold on to our wisdom. The servant has some obvious disadvantages, but he does have one thing going for him: he has a better chance than his master to *learn* from life, simply because the humbler circumstances of life are those from which we can learn the most (Deuteronomy 8:3). Not only that, the humbler circumstances are those that keep us in a more open and teachable frame of mind.

In Ecclesiastes, there is this relevant observation: "Better a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who will be admonished no more" (Ecclesiastes 4:13). If wisdom is a priority with us, let us be careful about the things we aspire to in this temporary world. Wisdom comes from washing the feet of others, not from having our own feet washed by others.

Wisdom is oftentimes nearer when we stoop than when we soar.

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

July 15

WHERE GOD'S LOVE IS BEST LEARNED

Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches,
in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake.
For when I am weak, then I am strong. *2 Corinthians 12:10*

GOD'S LOVE IS A STRONG THING, AND STRONG THINGS ARE NOT FULLY APPRECIATED UNTIL WE ARE SURROUNDED BY WEAKNESS. The ugly, painful hardship of human experience does not contradict or call into question the love of God. To the contrary, that is where we learn God's love the best. The way to God is not over, under, or around our difficulties — it is *through* them.

Job is the classic example of how this works. He was not anything less than a godly man before his sufferings began (Job 1:8), but it was only afterward that he could say, "I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You. Therefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:5,6). God's trustworthiness had become so much more real to Job that he was ashamed to think how little faith he'd had before. Likewise, when Paul prayed for the removal of his "thorn in the flesh," God's answer was, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

But if God's love for us is best learned in hardship, the same is also true of our love for God. We value most highly those things that have cost us something significant, and it is not likely that we'll love God deeply until we've passed through some serious suffering with His love as our guide. When Jesus explained to Peter that Satan would sift him as wheat, He said, "But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren" (Luke 22:32).

When we live for no higher goal than to be pain-free, supposing that God "loves" us too much to let anything "harmful" happen to us, what happens is something very harmful indeed: *we lose our best chance to learn what God's love really means*. The best things in life get away from us when we grasp them too tightly. Life is found in the losing of it. "Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake," Paul said. "For when I am weak, then I am strong."

The love of God is the ultimate reality, the deepest and strongest force in the universe; and it is revealed to the man who resolutely girds himself to the conflict.

DAVID SMITH

July 16

WHAT FAITH MAKES POSSIBLE, LOVE MAKES EASY

So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed only a few days to him because of the love he had for her. *Genesis 29:20*

LIFE CAN BE HARD NO DOUBT, BUT WE OFTEN MAKE IT HARDER THAN IT HAS TO BE BY ATTACKING OUR PROBLEMS IN THE WRONG WAY. By the brute power of will, we try to force doors open that would yield quite easily to desire and affection and love. Driven only by “have to,” we lose the boundless energy of “want to.”

One of the most cherished of all Jesus’ sayings is the one in Matthew 11:28-30: “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.” But how many of us really do find this to be true? Do we truly experience Jesus’ yoke as being “easy” and His burden “light”?

Loving God is the key to the easiness of His yoke and the lightness of His burden, because if we love God, we’ll also love to do His will. Even the concept of God’s law will be one we find congenial. “I delight to do Your will, O my God, and Your law is within my heart” (Psalm 40:8).

What John wrote is true: “This is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome” (1 John 5:3). Those who love God will be diligent to keep His commandments, certainly. But more than that, it is only those who genuinely love God who will find His commandments easy. That which would be burdensome to willpower alone is found by love to be light indeed.

As we seek God, let us be sure that our seeking is energized by love. Our adversary will surely place obstacles in our path, and these will be difficulties that have been crafted by his shrewd intelligence. But while it is sobering to realize how much the devil knows about our strengths and weaknesses, the one thing he does not understand is love, and his strong-arm tactics are simply no match for that patient power. Just as the seven years Jacob served for Rachel “seemed only a few days to him because of the love he had for her,” the years of our pilgrimage in this difficult world will hurry by if it is love that moves us forward.

Love has the power to give in a moment
what toil can scarcely reach in an age.

JOHANN WOLFGANG VON GOETHE

July 17

THE PROBLEM OF HEARTLESS PRAYER

May He grant you according to your heart's desire,
And fulfill all your purpose. *Psalm 20:4*

DAVID WISHED FOR A SIGNIFICANT BLESSING FROM GOD WHEN HE SIMPLY SAID, "MAY HE GRANT YOU ACCORDING TO YOUR HEART'S DESIRE." We must learn to look deeply into our own hearts and be careful about our desires, for God is quite likely to grant us our "heart's desire." Ultimately, that is the only thing He will grant. In the long run, that which we receive from God will turn out to be the thing we've most honestly and deeply wanted, not the various things we've pretended to want. Our Creator is not to be manipulated by whims and impulses and superficial requests. Rather, He acts on the basis of what He sees when He looks into the very depths of our true will.

If we are sometimes disappointed in the results of prayer, the explanation is often that God has yielded to the course we're *actually* demanding to follow, rather than give us what we're "praying for." We pray, for example, for spiritual strength and don't seem to receive it. Does God know that, despite our request, we're not willing to make the sacrifices that real strength would require, and that we're only praying for a little "character" to be conveniently tacked on to our unchanged lifestyle? If so, God is not in the business of granting such wishes. Because He loves us, He will probably leave us in the school of selfish hard knocks awhile longer, until we learn to truly desire something better. On the judgment day, there will be only two classes of people, as C. S. Lewis remarked: those who have said to God, "Your will be done," and those to whom God will say, "Your will be done." Even now, there are only these two classes of people. Whatever comes from our praying, the results will reflect this reality.

This, I believe, is the principal reason God desires us to pray persistently, continuing to make our requests even when it seems He is not listening (Luke 18:1-8). The point is not that God has to be begged to be good to us. It's that He desires us to learn for ourselves, perhaps through a long agony of prayer, what it is that we really want. He waits for us to want with our hearts what we have prayed for with our lips.

When you pray, rather let your heart be without words
than your words without heart.

JOHN BUNYAN

July 18

FRIENDSHIP AS AN INGREDIENT OF LOVE

There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love. We love Him because He first loved us. 1 John 4:18,19

NOWADAYS, IT MAY NOT BE UNUSUAL TO THINK OF GOD IN TERMS OF LOVE AND FRIENDSHIP, BUT THESE ARE RADICAL, EVEN REVOLUTIONARY, THOUGHTS INDEED. We should never lose our sense of wonder at this fact: our Creator, though awesomely powerful, is One whom we may contemplate with love rather than fear. The truth that God has moved toward us in love and that we are able to respond to His initiative in love is a thought worth more than all our worldly possessions combined.

The Bible uses the word “friendship” to describe the relationship we can have with God through Jesus Christ (James 2:23; 4:4). Sin having created “enmity” between us and our loving Creator, He has made possible our “reconciliation” to Himself (Romans 5:10,11; 2 Corinthians 5:18-21; Colossians 1:19-23). Our rebellion can be forgiven. We can come back home. And when we do, we come back home to a God who desires us to think of Him as a beloved Friend. These thoughts are nothing less than marvelous.

In our love for God, I believe it is important for us to love Him as a Friend. It’s obvious that, wherever God is concerned, our concept of friendship must be tempered with reverence. But still it is important that we see Him as our Friend. God is not only lovable; He is also likeable. We may not only adore Him; we may also trust Him. It is not only our duty to worship Him; it is our privilege to spend time with Him. We must come before Him with profound respect, certainly, and also with penitent humility. But in addition to respect and humility, God also desires our friendship. He offers us a friendship unlike any we’ve ever had.

Which comes first, our love for God or our friendship with Him? Perhaps much could be said about the priority of love. But it may also be helpful to think of it the other way around. God has proven His kindly intentions toward us, and He has demonstrated His trustworthiness. In Christ, a friendship can be restored that was lost by our sin. That having been accomplished, the God who has become our Friend can also become our Lover. In Christ, friendship has a chance to grow into something even finer.

Love is friendship set to music.

ROBERT POLLOCK

July 19

WHAT GOOD IS GOD'S FRIENDSHIP?

Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ. *Philippians 3:8*

COULD WE POSSIBLY PUT A PRICE TAG ON GOD'S FRIENDSHIP? Even among all the good things that are available to us, is there anything that a wise person wouldn't give up in order to have God? The privilege of knowing God through Christ so far surpasses the value of everything else that Paul said he would gladly "count all things loss" in order to have this one thing.

God's friendship is good not because it "pays" us to be His friend, but simply because of God Himself. Whatever blessings may flow from God (and there are many indeed), these are only secondary benefits or by-products of our friendship with Him. If such things ever take center stage and become our primary motivation, they cease to be good things and become idols. Nothing must be allowed to take the place of God in our hearts, not even God's own gifts to us. To have God alone is to have wealth untold, and to be without Him is the very definition of poverty.

But although God's friendship surpasses the worth of anything else in existence, we not only fail to value it as we should, but there are times when we go so far as to trade it away. Faced with a choice between God's friendship and that of our worldly peers, we often seek the favor of our peers by doing things that greatly damage our relationship with God. Maybe we suppose that we can have it both ways, or maybe we're just being thoughtless. But in any case, we're being quite foolish when we try to maintain equal measures of God's friendship and the friendship of the world. James put it bluntly: "Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God" (James 4:4).

"Thus says the LORD: 'Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, nor let the rich man glory in his riches; but let him who glorifies glory in this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD, exercising lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth. For in these I delight,' says the LORD" (Jeremiah 9:23,24).

We regard falling from God's friendship as the only thing dreadful and we consider becoming God's friend the only thing worthy of honor and desire.

July 20

WHAT ARE WE SEEKING?

... always learning and never able
to come to the knowledge of the truth. 2 Timothy 3:7

THERE IS A CERTAIN SATISFACTION IN COMING TO KNOW THINGS WE'VE NEVER UNDERSTOOD BEFORE. Whether it's pride (the perverse pleasure that comes from knowing things not widely known by others) or it's simply the natural pleasure we feel when we make progress, it feels good to learn new things. We need to be careful, however. If our intent is to seek God, we must seek more than the simple pleasure of knowledge by itself.

We live in an age that seems uncertain about the whole idea of truth. The very word "truth" is often placed in quotation marks, as if it were a quaint notion no longer taken seriously, except by old-fashioned folk and fundamentalists. In such an age, it is interesting that we still prize "learning" as much as we do. One can't help but remember Paul's description of certain ones who were "always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth." When we seek to learn, we must seek more than the acquirement of various perspectives. It is actual *truth* that we seek, and if our minds are open (as they certainly should be), it is only that we may close them again on something solid.

But it is even more than truth that we should seek. We should seek to *obey* whatever truth we acquire. A real relationship with God is an active affair that involves not merely knowing but doing. On one occasion, Jesus brought His listeners up short with this statement: "Why do you call Me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do the things which I say?" (Luke 6:46). True seekers are not content until their knowledge has moved them to godly action. What is learned in the library must be lived in the neighborhood.

One of the best antidotes to pride is the sobering fact that knowledge involves both greater responsibility and greater accountability. The more we know, the more God will expect of us. "For everyone to whom much is given," Jesus said, "from him much will be required" (Luke 12:48). Even if we've sought to unlock every subtle mystery in the world, that will not exempt us from what God has always required: a faith that *acts*.

You can be sure of this: when the Day of Judgment comes,
we shall not be asked what we have read, but what we have done;
not how well we have spoken, but how well we have lived.

THOMAS À KEMPIS

July 21

GETTING THE RIGHT ANSWERS

The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved. 2 *Thessalonians* 2:9,10

NOT ONLY IS OBEDIENCE MORE IMPORTANT THAN UNDERSTANDING; IT IS ALSO THE KEY TO UNDERSTANDING. If we approach the discovery of truth with any intent other than to obey the truth once we discover it, it is not likely that we'll find the truth we're looking for. Getting the right answers to our questions depends greatly on our reasons for asking those questions.

In the above text, Paul wrote of those whose minds were confused and deceived by the "lying wonders" of Satan. Our adversary is indeed a crafty deceiver, and those who'll perish in the battle against him will be those who "did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved." But notice what Paul said in the two verses that immediately follow: "And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness" (2 *Thessalonians* 2:11,12). These words are a wake-up call, are they not? To study with anything other than *the honest intent to act on the truth* is to doom ourselves to being deceived. In the quest for spiritual truth, as in most important endeavors, very much depends on our motive.

When Jesus of Nazareth appeared in Galilee, proclaiming that His teaching was God's word to humankind, some saw the sense in what He said and others did not. What made the difference? Was it simply that some were more insightful than others? No, Jesus Himself said it would be those who desired not simply to know but to *do* God's will who would discern that it was God's word they were hearing. "If anyone wants to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or whether I speak on My own authority" (*John* 7:17). Even on such a fundamental question as that of Jesus' identity, getting the right answer depends on what we intend to do with the answer once we find it. Seeking the knowledge of God is a very serious business.

Anyone who attempts to read the Bible should begin with a genuine respect for God. Then there needs to be a firm desire to reform one's life according to its teaching.

THOMAS CRANMER

July 22

THE IDEAL LIFE

... strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power,
for all patience and longsuffering with joy. *Colossians 1:11*

WHEN WE ENVISION THE KIND OF LIFE WE WOULD MOST LIKE TO HAVE IN THIS WORLD, WHAT KIND OF LIFE IS IT THAT WE IMAGINE? In a culture where “feeling good” is the unquestioned criterion by which all things are judged, we usually assume that the “good life” would be one free of any significant pain or unpleasantness. But in terms of biblical values, wouldn’t the ideal life be one in which we were drawn every day toward a richer taste of God? And far from being inconsistent with the good life, wouldn’t some degree of pain and unpleasantness be a part of the good life, if these things helped draw us toward God?

In medical practice, an “analgesic” is a medication that relieves pain, and “analgesia” is the state of being free from the feeling of pain. Figuratively speaking, most of us spend a good portion of our lives seeking what might be called “analgesia” in our lifestyles. As modern people, we simply take it for granted that pain is to be avoided at all costs, and we’re willing to sacrifice much higher values, sometimes even our highest ones, to eliminate its presence. But however natural it may be to move away from pain, it is often foolish for us to do so. When we sacrifice everything else to avoid pain, we lose touch with the very thing that could teach us a deeper appreciation of God’s grace.

What we desperately need to understand is that having a broken heart is not inconsistent with real joy. If that were true, God Himself would have little joy, for He certainly experiences far more things that are heartbreaking than we do. “If our joy is honest joy, it must somehow be congruous with human tragedy. This is the test of joy’s integrity: is it compatible with pain?” (Lewis B. Smedes). Joy is the thing we were created for, and that is what God wishes to restore to us in His Son. For the Christian, the ideal life is the joyous life, whether it is attended with what the world calls “happiness” or not. Indeed, it may only be through unhappiness that a person’s joy in Jesus Christ can be found and fulfilled. “Joy,” as Paul Tillich wrote, “has something within itself that is beyond joy and sorrow. This something is called blessedness.”

Joy is the gigantic secret of Christianity.

G. K. CHESTERTON

July 23

AWED BY GOD'S GRANDEUR

How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven! *Genesis 28:17*

ON SOME LEVEL, EVERY HUMAN BEING CAN UNDERSTAND THE AMAZEMENT OF JACOB WHEN HE REALIZED WHAT HE WAS SEEING. As he slept that night at Bethel, fleeing from his brother's wrath and with a stone as his pillow, he dreamed of "a ladder [that] was set up on the earth, and its top reached to heaven; and there the angels of God were ascending and descending on it" (Genesis 28:12). Above the ladder was God Himself, who spoke to Jacob words of promise and hope. And having grasped this portion of God's greatness, Jacob was a man changed for the better.

Like Jacob, we need to contemplate the majesty of God and the marvel of His communication with His creation. Nothing is more healthy for us spiritually than to be struck by the wonderful lightning of God's grandeur. It is a truly transforming experience.

It was Immanuel Kant who said, "Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing wonder and awe — the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me." The connection between these two sources of wonder is more than coincidental. We can't give serious consideration to God's greatness without being appalled by the huge chasm between His perfection and our imperfection. To be awed by God's grandeur is to be moved to turn away from anything inconsistent with His glory. Thus for fallen creatures like us, there must always be strong elements of *humility and repentance* in worship. "Repentance is the process by which we see ourselves, day by day, as we really are: sinful, needy, dependent people. It is the process by which we see God as he is: awesome, majestic, and holy" (Charles Colson). For us, godly sorrow should be a quite natural part of our reverence.

God's grandeur . . . our need . . . unutterable awe. These things are the very heartbeat of religion. If we really live in God, we'll lose ourselves in wonder before Him.

For worship is a thirsty land crying out for rain,
It is a candle in the act of being kindled,
It is a drop in quest of the ocean, . . .
It is a voice in the night calling for help,
It is a soul standing in awe before the mystery of the universe, . . .
It is time flowing into eternity, . . .
[It is] a man climbing the altar stairs to God.

DWIGHT BRADLEY

July 24

PARTICULAR PEOPLE

By the grace of God I am what I am. *1 Corinthians 15:10*

ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT STEPS WE EVER TAKE TOWARD WISDOM AND MATURITY IS TAKEN WHEN WE ACCEPT THE SPECIFICS OF OUR OWN INDIVIDUALITY. Much of the first half of life is spent in the luxury of limitless possibilities. There is no place we might not go before we die, no accomplishment we might not achieve, and no virtuous trait we might not develop. As we turn toward life's latter stages, however, it becomes obvious that we'll not live long enough to actually do any more than a fraction of the things we've imagined. Some choices will have to be made. And for each thing we choose to grasp, there'll be many others we have to let go of. We can do nearly *anything* we want, but not *everything* we want.

Human beings are not infinite. We are "particular" people, each defined by our own specifics. We are born into *this* particular family, and not the millions of others we *might* have been born into. We have *this* set of personal characteristics, and not the millions of others we *might* have acquired. Before life is done, we will have had *this* set of experiences, and not the millions of others we *might* have had. The older we get, the more comfortable we need to become with our own personal particulars. We should never quit dreaming and working, of course, and while life lasts we should always be pressing toward new possibilities. But when all has been said and done, even the most varied life will still consist of a limited set of particulars. Some people pack more into their lifetimes than others, but there are limits beyond which no one can go. It's impossible to be a brown-eyed person born in Mississippi and also be a blue-eyed person born in Minnesota. And even in matters of choice, it's impossible to have our cake and eat it too.

Wisdom suggests that we should not only accept our particulars, but we should be grateful for them. Even if we've made poor choices in the past and wasted much of our potential, we can be thankful for the unique opportunities that now lie before us. There is good work yet to be done — work that can be done best by a person who has just our set of particulars. Warts, scars, and all.

Let us be contented with what has happened to us and thankful for all we have been spared. Let us accept the natural order in which we move.

Let us reconcile ourselves to the mysterious rhythm of our destinies, such as they must be in this world of space and time.

WINSTON CHURCHILL

July 25

SOLID SELF-RESPECT

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race,
I have kept the faith. 2 Timothy 4:7

FEW THINGS ARE GIVEN ANY MORE ATTENTION IN OUR CULTURE THAN THE QUESTION OF SELF-IMAGE. We use a variety of terms to discuss it — self-esteem, self-worth, self-respect, etc. — but our basic point is usually the same: a person ought to be able to view himself or herself in a positive way. We believe this to be very important, and there can be little doubt that it is. But at this point our thinking often jumps the track, with unfortunate results: significant corrections that need to be made in our lives don't get made.

The truth that we ought to help every human being grasp is that no matter who we are, we are each of great and equal *inherent worth* as creatures of God. Our external circumstances may be horribly demeaning, and our own conduct may have been seriously dysfunctional — but even so, we are still the creatures of a God who has conferred great worth upon us by making us in His image. And no matter how we've marred His making of us, we are still of such value to God that He was willing to sacrifice His Son to redeem us. That's the truth of the gospel, and we should spare no effort to help others be uplifted by its hope.

But despite our equal inherent value as God's creatures, it is also true that people differ widely in *the value of their chosen character and conduct*. Much of our self-esteem talk seems to imply that no matter how irresponsible one's actions, there should still be nothing negative in his self-image. We often sound as if we believed that behavior has nothing to do with self-respect. But in truth, it has a great deal to do with it. A positive self-image doesn't come from being stroked by the affirmations of others, or even from talking positively to ourselves. It comes from doing our duty.

But what if we have to admit that we've *not* done our duty? Is it impossible for us ever again to enjoy this solid kind of self-respect? No, it's not impossible. We can at any moment *begin to be* the person we always should have been. We can — starting right now — choose to deal with reality in an honorable way.

[Self-respect] comes to us when we are alone, in quiet moments,
in quiet places, when we suddenly realize that, knowing the good,
we have done it; knowing the beautiful, we have served it;
knowing the truth, we have spoken it.

WHITNEY GRISWOLD

July 26

SEEKING GOD, SERVING OTHERS

For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates

His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. *Romans 5:6-8*

WHEN WE SEEK GOD, WE MUST ALSO SERVE OTHERS. These two things are always tied together in the Scriptures. When Jesus was asked what was the most important part of the Law of Moses, He said, "'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 22:37-40).

And yet there is a problem, is there not? God is obviously worthy to be loved with all our hearts, but our fellow human beings are often unworthy. God, for example, has never done anything to harm us. He appreciates everything we do for Him. He acknowledges and reciprocates our love. Others, however, have hurt us, often without so much as an apology or an acknowledgment of the wrong. What we do for them is frequently met with criticism, rather than gratitude. And when we try to do good for others, we don't always find good deeds coming back to us in return. Consequently, we give up. Or worse, we begin to attach self-protective "conditions" to our service. Or worst of all, we become secretly proud of ourselves for having served the "unworthy."

Without question, there are many frustrating things that make it difficult to serve others. Satan will see to it that other lifestyles appear more easy and natural, and we'll certainly not live lives of service if all we do is follow the course of least resistance. The truth is, doing both of these things — seeking God and serving others — requires that we overcome obstacles, push past resistance, and simply determine that we're going to love God and help others. Self-sacrificial love is a choice, and making the choice takes more than a positive mental attitude. It takes keeping ourselves reverently and gratefully at the foot of the Cross, where our Lord determined to serve us — despite our resistance.

Once we realize that Jesus has served us even to the depths of our meagerness, our selfishness, and our sin, nothing we encounter from others will be able to exhaust our determination to serve others for His sake.

July 27

CONTINUANCE

... eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality. *Romans 2:7*

PATIENT ENDURANCE IS AN UNDERRATED VIRTUE. Qualities like love, courage, and wisdom get most of the attention, but the simple willingness to keep on moving ahead is no less grand. And continuance — that plain, workmanlike ability to keep at our task — happens to be in short supply in these days of frantic change and constant uncertainty. But if we intend to seek God seriously, we must not forget how to hold a steady course. It may not seem like a very great accomplishment just to “continue,” but how many of us can say we’ve excelled in this area? Those who do this one thing well may turn out to be greater heroes than the rest of us, and in the end, the brightest crowns may rest on the heads of those who simply refused to give up.

Numerous scriptural texts urge those who are Christians to continue patiently in the faith. Paul wrote, “Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you *continue in His goodness*. Otherwise you also will be cut off” (Romans 11:22). He spoke of those who would be presented holy and blameless to God “. . . if indeed you *continue in the faith*, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the gospel which you heard” (Colossians 1:23). The writer of Hebrews said that Christians are the “house” of Christ “. . . if we *hold fast* the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm *to the end*” (Hebrews 3:6). And again, “We have become partakers of Christ *if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end*” (Hebrews 3:14).

Such texts could be multiplied many times over, and we should not fail to be impressed with this consistent emphasis in God’s word. He is on our side. He is the truest Friend we’ve ever had. But God deals in long-term solutions, not in quick fixes. His purpose is not to relieve the superficial symptoms of sin but to eradicate the very root of evil. When the time is exactly right, this purpose will be gloriously consummated and those who have obediently entrusted themselves to Him will share in His triumph. Until then, the message to His people is always this: *continue!*

Never think that God’s delays are God’s denials.
Hold on; hold fast; hold out. Patience is genius.

COMTE GEORGES DE BUFFON

July 28
CAPTIVATED

For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God that pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. *2 Corinthians 10:4,5*

IN THE WARFARE BETWEEN GOOD AND EVIL, IT IS THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD THAT IS AT STAKE. And the truthfulness and fervency of our beliefs about God will determine our destiny, either as the slaves of Satan or the subjects of God.

The quality of our lives is governed by the quality of our principles. In the short run, circumstances beyond our control may push us this way or that, but eventually the “law of the farm” will prevail and we’ll reap what we’ve sown. It is universally accepted that a person who lives on the basis of principles like trustworthiness, diligence, and truth will get different results from another who lives on the basis of treachery, negligence, and error. Whatever kind of life we end up with, it will be something that has grown from the principles we chose to adopt. No one can break this law; when we try, we only break ourselves. And if this law governs our temporal life, it also governs our eternal destiny (*Romans 2:5-11; Galatians 6:7-9*).

But while the validity of our principles is crucial, the quality of our lives is also governed by the *passion* with which we live out our principles. Those who, armed with knowledge, are also fired with zeal will experience life at a dramatically different level than those who are lukewarm. It is not enough to choose our principles wisely. We must live them fervently — and, yes, *diligently*.

But make no mistake, we’re not talking here about moral principles that produce quality of life in the here and now, regardless of what we believe about God. It’s true that our personal principles must be of the highest quality and they must be held with the greatest passion. But much more important, these principles must be *properly focused on the majesty of God Himself*. Here is the single greatest determinant of human life. No other issue we deal with is of as much consequence as our reverence and relationship to God. And when we find ourselves not merely “interested” in God but profoundly *captivated* by belief in Him, we are ready to leave behind the shadows of “life” and pass into the realm of life indeed.

You’re not free until you’ve been made captive by supreme belief.

MARIANNE MOORE

July 29

FAILING TO TAKE GOD INTO ACCOUNT

Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit"; whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that." But now you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. *James 4:13-16*

WHEN WE DISREGARD THE REALITY OF GOD IN MAKING PLANS FOR OUR OWN ADVANCEMENT, WE COMMIT A SIN OF TRAGIC PRIDE. As the Tower of Babel illustrates (Genesis 11:1-9), it is disastrous to pursue human achievement without factoring God into our projections. God is the ultimate consideration in any decision we'll ever need to make, and it is nothing short of sinful pride to pretend otherwise. "All such boasting is evil," says James.

Herein lies what must be called the "arrogance" of human culture. When we simply leave God out of our calculations — whether philosophically, economically, scientifically, or otherwise — we "boast" of something that human beings, on their own, do not actually possess: the ability to discern what is ultimately good and bring it to pass. It only takes a moment's reflection on the havoc wrought by human "progress" to see how powerless we are to predict what the human race will really need.

Centuries ago, a wise man made this observation: "I returned and saw under the sun that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to men of understanding, nor favor to men of skill; but time and chance happen to them all" (Ecclesiastes 9:11). This doesn't mean that we should simply give up and go with the flow, for the wise have always known that we should do the best we can in each situation, based on what calculations we can make. But many vital things are beyond our vision, and we'd be fools if we failed to heed this advice also: "Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding" (Proverbs 3:5). To fail to take God into account is to commit the ultimate human error. It is also to fall short of our greatest human glory: the reflection of God's wisdom.

The future is not yet ours; perhaps it never will be. If it comes, it may come wholly different from what we have foreseen. Let us shut our eyes, then, to that which God hides from us, and keeps in reserve in the treasures of his deep counsels. Let us worship without seeing;
let us be silent; let us abide in peace.

FRANÇOIS FÉNELON

July 30

THE EMPTINESS OF AUTONOMY

Hell and Destruction are never full;
So the eyes of man are never satisfied. *Proverbs 27:20*

WHEN GOD DOES NOT OCCUPY HIS RIGHTFUL PLACE IN OUR HEARTS, ONE RESULT IS THAT WE SPIN OUR WHEELS IN A FRUSTRATING SEARCH FOR SATISFACTION. Independence and autonomy seem like they would be more satisfactory than a constant state of neediness, but their promise turns out to be empty. The more we take control of our own fulfillment, the more fulfillment seems to slip away from us. What began as an adventure becomes an exhausting grind. "All things are full of labor; man cannot express it. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing" (Ecclesiastes 1:8). Apart from God, our desires are insatiable.

One of the great ironies of our existence as created beings is that our completeness requires that we keep in touch with our incompleteness. One would think that by dispensing with "unrealistic" needs for anything infinite or supernatural we would find the finite and the natural to be more rewarding. After all, less can often be more. But to our surprise, we find that the single greatest requirement for deep earthly enjoyment is an admission that the most important piece of this world's puzzle is missing. We think we'd like to do away with our neediness, but we discover that *we need to need God*. "The more complete our sense of need, the more satisfactory is our dependence on God" (Oswald Chambers).

God is always inviting us to acknowledge our emptiness and come back to Him. He is waiting for us to seek Him. "Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat. Yes, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend money for what is not bread, and your wages for what does not satisfy? Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good, and let your soul delight itself in abundance" (Isaiah 55:1,2). Our attempted self-rule has been a sad experiment. The results have been shockingly disappointing. At last, is it not time for honesty to open a new path?

The vast neurotic misery of the world could be termed a neurosis of emptiness. Men cut themselves off from the root of their being, from God, and then life turns empty, inane, meaningless, without purpose. So when God goes, goal goes. When goal goes, meaning goes. When meaning goes, value goes, and life turns dead on our hands.

CARL GUSTAV JUNG

July 31

A DIFFICULT THING FOR GOOD PEOPLE TO DO

And to the angel of the church in Sardis write, "These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars: 'I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.'" *Revelation 3:1*

IT IS DIFFICULT FOR GOOD PEOPLE TO SEE THAT THEY NEED TO SEEK GOD BEYOND THE BOUNDARIES OF THEIR COMFORTABLE LIFESTYLE. The church in Sardis, for example, was made up of people who saw themselves as respectably good. And others also saw them as praiseworthy. We ourselves would probably have seen them as such, if we'd had the chance to know them. And yet, their hearts were not as close to God as they supposed. Because of the "satisfactory" nature of their religious practice, it was not easy for them to see how far they still had to go in seeking God.

The story of Job illustrates what needs to happen to many of us who've lived our whole lives in religious respectability. Job was a good man. Even God commended the devoutness and devotion with which he lived (Job 1:8; 2:3). There was nothing wrong with Job's approach to God, as far as it went. The problem was that it didn't go as far as it needed to. Job himself would probably have had difficulty, as a good man, seeing the gaps in his relationship to God. It was only after an unexpected storm of tragedy blew down his house of cards that Job could see how far he'd previously been from where he needed to be: "I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You. Therefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:5,6). This statement is striking because it is not the penitent cry of a reformed "sinner" — it comes from a man who had never been anything but "good."

Do we come from a devoutly religious tradition? That is a good thing for which we should be grateful; its advantages are obvious. Have we managed to acquire personal habits that are respectable? That also is to be commended, certainly. But let us not be deceived. That which passes for "religion" can delude us into thinking that we're closer to God than we are. It may even be that we are dead, though we have a reputation for being alive. It happened at Sardis; it can happen to us. And like Job, we may need to be broken by sorrow before God becomes real to us.

This is the hazard. Our eyes are blinded by self-love. We do good things and then become proud . . . Outright sinners can be reformed with less difficulty than those who hide under a cloak of false virtue.

August 1
NOT WHAT I WILL

And He said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible for You. Take this cup away from Me; nevertheless, not what I will, but what You will." *Mark 14:36*

WHEN WE PRAY FOR GOD'S WILL TO BE DONE RATHER THAN OUR OWN, WE SHOULD DO THAT WITH A POSITIVE ATTITUDE TOWARD HIS WISDOM AND LOVE. "God is perfect love and perfect wisdom," wrote William Temple. "We do not pray in order to change his will, but to bring our own wills into harmony with his." Because the benevolence of God is perfect, subordinating our will to His is more a privilege than a duty. Rather than come to God with a demanding spirit, we should pray with a buoyant trust, grateful that we can simply put ourselves in His hands. It can be a delight to let Him decide what is best.

Too often we see prayer as the unpleasant, and usually unsuccessful, begging of God to do some specific thing that we want done. But as Richard Trench once wrote, "Prayer is not overcoming God's reluctance; it is laying hold of his highest willingness." We are taught to come to God confidently with our requests, and prayer that doesn't do that is not really honest prayer. But when we pray, it is helpful to pray with what might be called a "listening" attitude. As we make our supplications to God, we are to be open to the possibility that He may have a better plan, a higher purpose. If we pray as we ought, seeking to lay hold of God's "highest willingness," we will come away refreshed, confident that we've spoken honestly with Him about our requests, but confident also that if He knows a better path for us to follow, then we've made some progress in discerning what that path might be.

Praying for God's will to be done can be an agonizing experience, without question. It was so for our Lord in Gethsemane. And yet an agonizing experience is not necessarily a negative one. To let God choose which path we are to follow is, at least for us, to grow in our spirits. It is to be made more wise. "To pray is to expose the shores of the mind to the incoming tide of God" (Ralph Washington Sockman). Thus when we pray, we must seek more than some particular blessing from God; we must seek Him and whatever His will may be. True prayer is not simply about what we want; it's about learning to want what we *should* want.

Let not that happen which I wish, but that which is right.

MENANDER

August 2

SURRENDERING TO GOD'S INTENTION

Then Mary said, "Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her. *Luke 1:38*

TRUE GREATNESS OF CHARACTER IS MEASURED BY THE MANNER IN WHICH WE DEAL WITH GOD'S WILL FOR OUR LIVES. No greater human character is possible than that of the person who humbly puts "self" at the disposal of God's purposes, yielding to His will without reservation. Unfortunately, our frame of mind sometimes fails to show this kind of respect for God.

Conditions. Confronted with what we know to be God's will, it often happens that we try to bargain with Him on the terms. We are willing to do what is right — but only if God will guarantee an outcome that is acceptable to us. If obedience is going to require some significant sacrifice, for example, we may agree to obey as long as God makes it up to us in some other way.

Complaining spirit. Our obedience is sometimes characterized by resentment and grumbling. We may do what we have to do, but we may also let it be known that we don't like doing it. To be honest, much of the talk that goes on inside our heads on an average day is a kind of "muttering under our breath" about the unpleasant aspects of following God. Mental complaining can become a habit.

Martyr spirit. It's an unfortunate fact that if the devil can't get us any other way, he can frequently get us through pride. In the act of obeying God — perhaps doing something that goes beyond the ordinary call of duty — we often give ourselves a secretly satisfying pat on the back. If others just knew how much we've sacrificed, they'd know how truly special we are!

What God desires, however, is the attitude of Mary: "Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word." No conditions or bargaining with God. No murmuring or grumbling. No self-pitying martyrdom. Just a humble, and therefore noble, willingness to be used at God's discretion. Can we not see that this is the only path toward peace for our souls? We can't have peace without our God, and we can't have God without His will. "In his will is our peace" (Dante Alighieri).

Self-will should be so completely poured out of the vessel of the soul into the ocean of the will of God, that whatever God may will, that at once the soul should will; and that whatever God may allow, that the soul should at once willingly embrace, whether it may be in itself sweet or bitter.

August 3

SECOND-STAGE SPIRITUALITY

And if anyone thinks that he knows anything,
he knows nothing yet as he ought to know. *1 Corinthians 8:2*

WHEN WE'VE JUST GOTTEN PAST THE BEGINNING STAGE OF SPIRITUAL LIFE, THERE IS A PARTICULAR DANGER WE FACE. It is the danger always encountered in the second stage of any endeavor: *the danger of thinking we know more than we do*. If we don't deal with this danger in the proper way, we will find ourselves blocked from any further progress.

The greatest barrier to gaining greater knowledge is the illusion of knowledge, the mistaken notion that we already know much, when in reality we know very little. This barrier is often met by the "sophomore" in any field of learning. This is the individual, hardly more than a beginner himself, who looks down on others who are just starting out. The sophomore has gone far enough to have just a little wisdom (*sophos*, wise), but he's a fool (*moros*, foolish) for failing to see how far he has yet to go.

One measure of our attitude with respect to knowledge is the amount of listening we do compared to the amount of talking. If those who know us best observe that we're more eager to talk than listen, then we've probably overestimated how much we know. It's good to have learned a thing or two, but it's not good to see every person we meet as a potential audience. Solomon said, "A fool has no delight in understanding, but in expressing his own heart" (Proverbs 18:2). And James advised, "Let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak . . ." (James 1:19).

There is so much more of God than any of us have ever experienced, even in our moments of greatest maturity. His bounty is beyond what any of us have ever sought from Him. Let us not be so proud of what we know that we keep ourselves from learning what we still need to know. If the truth be told, most of us are not yet even in the second stage of spiritual understanding. There are many leagues yet to travel before we leave the first. Let us be humbled at the thought of our ignorance. And having been humbled, let us have a grander vision of what there is yet to know about our great God. The half has not yet been told.

If you have lived far from God, you may think you are very near him when you finally start a life with him. The peasant thinks he has been to court because he saw the king pass by one day.

FRANÇOIS DE FÉNELON

August 4

ARE WE AWAKE TO GOD'S WONDERS?

Therefore they said to Him, "What sign will You perform then, that we may see it and believe You? What work will You do?" *John 6:30*

SOMETIMES WE ADOPT AN ALMOST DEMANDING ATTITUDE TOWARD GOD, INSISTING THAT HE DECLARE HIMSELF TO US MORE OPENLY. The problem, however, is not that God has not shown enough of Himself to us, but that we've not opened our eyes to the wonders He has shown. We need to learn to be more open and attentive to God's marvelous work in at least three areas.

Creation. Promising deliverance to the people of Judah, God spoke of His creative power: "I will open rivers in desolate heights, and fountains in the midst of the valleys; I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water. I will plant in the wilderness the cedar and the acacia tree, the myrtle and the oil tree; I will set in the desert the cypress tree and the pine and the box tree together, that they may see and know, and consider and understand together, that the hand of the LORD has done this, and the Holy One of Israel has created it" (Isaiah 41:18-20). We too need to "see and know" what God's hand has done.

Redemption. What we see of our Creator's work ought to make us eager to see His greater work as our Savior. "Remember me, O LORD, with the favor You have toward Your people; Oh, visit me with Your salvation, that I may see the benefit of Your chosen ones, that I may rejoice in the gladness of Your nation, that I may glory with Your inheritance" (Psalm 106:4,5).

Revelation. Nowhere, except in the very person of His Son, has God shown His glory any more than in His word. But we study the Scriptures drowsily and much of the wonder of God's word is lost on us. We need to wake up and pay attention. "Open my eyes, that I may see wondrous things from Your law" (Psalm 119:18).

Our fervent prayer ought to be for help in taking in what God has delivered to us. Our shrunken vessels are too small to hold a worthy portion of His glory. "Grant us, we pray thee, a heart wide open to all this joy and beauty, and save our souls from being so steeped in care, or so darkened by passion, that we pass heedless and unseeing when even the thornbush by the wayside is aflame with the glory of God" (Walter Rauschenbusch).

Only that day dawns to which we are awake.

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

August 5

THE REVELATION OF GOD

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 [is] the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person . . . *Hebrews 1:1-3*

IN SURROUNDING US WITH HIS GLORY, GOD'S PURPOSE IS TO REVEAL HIMSELF TO US IN ORDER THAT WE MIGHT OBEY THE GOSPEL AND HAVE FELLOWSHIP WITH HIM. The fact that God's purpose is to reveal Himself is a marvelous truth to think about. Contemplating this truth ought to have a powerful practical effect on our lives.

Having rebelled against God, Adam and Eve were banished from God's presence (Genesis 3:22-24). The consequence of sin is that we are cut off from the God whom we were made to desire. But no sooner had sin taken place than God began to reach out to us and to work toward a restoration of what had been lost. The God who made us is not a God who hides from us. He has moved toward us, making it possible for us to know Him again.

If God's purpose is to reveal Himself to us, this must mean that He is *mindful* of us. It must mean that we — yes, even *we* — are of concern to Him. And this in itself is marvelous. "When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have ordained, what is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You visit him?" (Psalm 8:3,4). Our Creator desires that we be encouraged and refreshed by this knowledge. At our moments of greatest weakness or rebellion, even then God is thinking of us and wanting to reveal Himself to us. Not any of us is a lost cause, as far as He is concerned. Our ignorance of Him is a matter of active, personal concern to God.

On our part, we must more deeply desire to know Him. We must determine to stay more awake and more alert, eager to receive every bit of truth that is available about God as He really is. As He restores to us the knowledge of His character and His will, it is God's intention to lead us back to His immediate presence. "No one ever graduates from Bible study until he meets the author face to face" (E. T. Harris). The Bible is a book, but it is a book at the end of which God Himself is waiting for us.

[God's] very work from the beginning is revelation — a casting aside of veil after veil, a showing to men of truth after truth. On and on from fact divine he advances, until at length in his Son, Jesus, he unveils his very face.

GEORGE MACDONALD

August 6

JESUS CHRIST IS NOT A DOCTRINE

In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. *1 John 4:9*

IF LOVE IS A SUBJECT THAT CAN BE STUDIED, IT IS CERTAINLY THE MOST PERSONAL SUBJECT IN THE WORLD. We are taught that God loved us so much He was willing to take upon Himself our fleshly form and die for our sins. This is no abstract thought or theory. This is a personal transaction if there ever was one. God, the only perfect *personal* Being in existence, has done the most *personal* thing imaginable for *personal* beings whom He created. Isn't it astonishing that we can take this, the most stupendous act of love, and reduce it to little more than a doctrine to be believed? And yet, that is what we do. We talk about Christianity as if it were just an ideology, a body of ideas. And we find that what we're devoted to is not really God, but various ideas about God.

As Paul spoke of his own faith to his younger friend Timothy, he spoke not only of what he believed but of whom he believed: "For this reason I also suffer these things; nevertheless I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day" (2 Timothy 1:12). Granted, we can't believe in God without accepting a certain amount of factual information about Him. But ultimately our faith is not in the information. However essential the doctrine of God may be, its purpose is always to foster a personal faith in God Himself. As an old man who had suffered much, Paul could say that his confidence, and therefore his ability to withstand hardship, were firmly rooted in God. It was not merely a true philosophy that Paul was willing to die for. It was a beloved Person.

In our study of God, it's easy to get lost in the details and forget what the whole thing is about. Satan would surely like to pull our focus away from God and turn our religion into nothing more than a subject to be studied or a proposition to be debated. We must resist this temptation. And even if we're more actively inclined and we see religion as a cause to be supported or a service to be rendered, it's still important for us to keep our heads and our hearts in the right place. Christianity is not a dogma. Jesus Christ is not a doctrine. It is a real kingdom, and He is its real King.

Christianity is not devotion to work, or to a cause, or a doctrine,
but devotion to a person, the Lord Jesus Christ.

August 7

KNOWING MORE OF GOD

And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life. *1 John 5:20*

WE CAN'T KNOW ALL OF GOD, BUT WE CAN STRIVE TO KNOW MORE OF HIM THAN WE KNOW AT PRESENT. The fact that we are limited in our ability to comprehend God shouldn't keep us from learning as much as we can. And we shouldn't underestimate how much of God can be learned by a human being. God created us in His image, He designed us for fellowship with Him, and He intends us to know Him deeply and joyously. It would be a mistake to be content with anything less.

In any realm of human activity, it's important to remember that the value of our work does not depend upon total perfection. Just because a thing is imperfect doesn't mean that it has no significance at all, and this is certainly true of our knowledge of God. Some things about God can be known *truly*, even though He can't be known *completely*. And whatever the limits may be on our knowledge of God, we need to be eagerly trying to reach those limits. We ought to want to know all that we can know of God.

At the practical level, of course, learning more of God comes down to learning more of Jesus Christ, in whose life God illustrated Himself in ways we can understand. It was to one of His disciples that Jesus said, "Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, 'Show us the Father'?" (John 14:9). If we wish to know more of God, we must saturate our minds with the Scriptures which tell us of Jesus Christ.

Coming to a greater knowledge of God is a thing we would have no right to do if it weren't for God's grace. But because of grace, knowing God is a goal that deserves the very best of our courage, our diligence, and above all, our love. "Eternity will not be long enough to learn all he is, or to praise him for all he has done, but then, that matters not; for we shall be always with him, and we desire nothing more" (Frederick William Faber).

Is there any greater need than that we get to grips with the living God,
that we understand the discipline of God, that we learn the truth of God,
that we accept the will of God, that we fulfill the purpose of God,
that we know the resources of God, that we realize the power of God,
and that we radiate the peace and love of God?

TRAVERS V. JEFFERS

August 8
ALWAYS UPWARD

... but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
To Him be the glory both now and forever. Amen. 2 *Peter 3:18*

GROWING IN THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD IS THE OPPORTUNITY OF A LIFETIME, LITERALLY. No matter how much we learn and are enriched by what we know, God's greatness offers still more. Our whole lifetime should be spent seeking these greater things. Coming to know our Creator more richly is, in a positive sense, life's greatest challenge. It is also our greatest joy and our greatest reward. This is what makes life worth living.

A. W. Pink observed that most Christians "expect little from God, ask little, and therefore receive little and are content with little." If this is a problem today, it is by no means a new problem. The writer of Hebrews found it necessary to exhort his readers with these words: "Though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food" (Hebrews 5:12). Too few of God's people have ever grown as they should "in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." Arrested development is often the norm.

We would surely be shocked if we could see how wide the gap really is between what God knows Himself to be and what we know Him to be. But there is also quite a gap between what we know God to be and what we could know Him to be. We should be sorrowful when we reflect on our complacency. "God's treasure is like an infinite ocean, and yet a little wave of emotion, passing with the moment, is enough for many" (Brother Lawrence). Our desire to know our Heavenly Father is all too small.

Perhaps it is daunting to think of the magnitude of such a thing as coming to know God. We may shrink from the very thought. But looking at it from another point of view, what could we undertake that would hold more promise? Is this not the greatest adventure, the ultimate undertaking in this otherwise disappointing world? How bracing to climb a little way up the slope and feel the air freshen, to climb even further and catch a thrilling glimpse of the distant summit! The finest qualities of our created nature are called forth when we reach upward, always upward.

When I am at my best the Word still towers high above me.

BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX

August 9

THE WISDOM OF GODLY CHARACTER

But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil. *Hebrews 5:14*

AS WE SEEK GOD AND GROW IN OUR KNOWLEDGE OF HIM, WE FIND OURSELVES ASPIRING TO THINGS OF HIGHER AND HIGHER QUALITY. Every human being has longings and desires of one sort or another. We spend our days seeking the things we desire, whatever those might be. But not all the goals a human being might seek are of equal value. The challenge in life is to be able to identify the best things to seek and then fix our desire on these.

One of the dangerous things about spiritual immaturity is that while we're in that state, we're hampered by a lack of discernment. In the important areas in life, we can't tell the difference between good quality and poor. We may find it difficult to distinguish the good from the better and the better from the best. In some cases, we may not even be able to judge between outright good and evil. The writer of Hebrews pointed out that those who are "of full age" are those who "have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil." The difference between a wise course of action and a foolish one is sometimes so slight that it takes a person of some maturity to tell the difference. Until we develop that ability, we're always in danger of making poor decisions about what is "good."

If being able to judge between shades of goodness is important in the ordinary affairs of life, it is certainly important when the time comes to decide our highest aspirations. The things we choose to desire are the things that ultimately determine our character and our destiny. When God can see that a certain thing is of good quality, it's important that our own powers of judgment be sharp enough to see at least some of the value that God sees. This is what Paul meant when he spoke of learning to "approve the things that are excellent" (Philippians 1:10).

We can't set good goals without good judgment, and good judgment is more than a quick technique. It comes from good character. And where does good character come from? It comes from godliness and spiritual maturity, which in turn come from seeking God and knowing Him more fully. The more we know of God, the wiser we'll be about what is best for us to desire.

Wisdom is a taste for goodness.

BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX

August 10

LOVE AND NOT OBEY?

I delight to do Your will, O my God,
And Your law is within my heart. *Psalm 40:8*

GROWTH IN OUR KNOWLEDGE OF GOD MEANS MAKING PROGRESS TOWARD REAL DELIGHT IN DOING WHATEVER IS PLEASING TO GOD. Spiritual maturity must include this element of joyful conformity to God's will. It is not enough to be able to identify what is good, or even to appreciate its value. If godly wisdom has given us a taste for the good, then we must *do* the good which we've come to appreciate. This is what constitutes devotion to God.

The person whose love for God does not result in obedience is practicing a religion that amounts to idolatry. Thomas Cranmer wrote, "Love God with your whole heart. Do everything for his sake. And above all, obey God. For if we merely revere, love, and trust — but do not *obey* — God, we are making God into what we want; we are making him into a false god." This is an important point, worth sober consideration by every seeker of God.

If we say to God, "We love you, but we'll only obey you if your will meets our approval," we're not bowing before the God who objectively exists. Instead, we're engaging in a subjective exercise: whittling God down, smoothing Him out, and making Him into something more agreeable to our preference. We're adjusting God to our will, perhaps expecting Him to obey us rather than us obeying Him. To do this, of course, is to worship not God but a figment of our imagination. And in its lack of reverence, this kind of idolatry is not far behind that of the ancient worshiper who made a physical object to his liking and then bowed down before it (Isaiah 44:9-20). The idolatry of disobedience, whether ancient or modern, is a mistake we must be careful to avoid.

It cannot be said too often: *religion is primarily about God, not about us*. In an age when many feel free to conceive of God in any way that pleases them personally, we need frequent reminders that the objective reality of God cannot be bent to fit the shape of our philosophy. The important thing is not whether He pleases us, but whether we please Him, and reverence means adjusting ourselves to Him lovingly. Let us pray for the good sense to recognize what God's will is, and let us not hesitate to act accordingly.

True devotion is a constant, determined, prompt,
and active will to do what we know is pleasing to God.

FRANCIS DE SALES

August 11

HEARTS IN TUNE

And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ.

Philippians 1:9,10

OUR GOAL IS TO ALLOW GOD'S DESIRES TO BECOME OUR OWN. We want to "approve the things that are excellent," allowing God's truth to fill our minds, yielding our will to His purposes, and rejoicing in the sheer goodness of all things that are good. There is within each of us, perhaps buried under layers of lesser concerns, a longing for hearts that are in tune with God's heart, hearts that want nothing but what He wants. Coming to have such a heart (and helping others to do so) is what spiritual growth is about. This is why we study and meditate upon God.

It is impossible to grow in likeness to God's character without learning to love Him, and it is impossible to love God without learning to love what He loves. Thus one of the wisest things we can do is to make a commitment to love only the things that are highest and best, as judged by God's criteria. Frances de Sales wrote, "Love is the strongest passion of the soul. We become like what we love. Guard against loving wrongly."

Thomas à Kempis put it in the form of a prayer: "O Lord, let me know what is worth knowing, love what is worth loving, praise what pleases you, honor what is worthy in your sight, and avoid all that is evil." In our present state of mind, putting ourselves in God's hands is not always easy. It's a test not only of our trust but also of our courage. Our desires are so often going in the opposite direction, to let God define what is desirable can seem almost insane. From our vantage point in the here and now, the life of radical faith may seem to involve more sacrifice than serenity. But in the end, the hearts that will have found peace will be those that have come to rest in the purposes of God. On this side of the Cross, there can surely be no doubt as to the benevolence of those purposes. Whatever He desires, it is our privilege to desire the very same things, just because He desires them.

Lord Jesus, help me to want what is most pleasant to you. You know what is best for me. Give what you will, when the right time comes, and in the quantity you prefer. Do with me as you please. Put me where you will. I am in your hands. I am your servant. I am ready to do whatever you command.

You are the true peace of my heart and the perfect rest of my soul.

CATHERINE PARR

August 12

RESOLUTION

And behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to his work. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last. *Revelation 22:12,13*

EVEN WHEN OUR LIVES ARE AT THEIR BEST, WE ARE STILL PERPLEXED BY UNCERTAINTIES. We look back at many things we would do differently if we could start over. We spend more than a few of our earthly moments silently sighing, "If only . . ." And yet, in God there is this glorious hope: *all that now seems contradictory is going to be cleared up.* It will someday be clear that even our sorrows and our mistakes were "just right." Had any detail of our experience been different, we'd have become something less than the unique creatures that God finally turned us into.

It is in Jesus Christ that God is working toward this grand resolution. "For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell, and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross" (Colossians 1:19,20). And when the time comes, all that has been reconciled to Christ's rule will be offered back to the Father. "Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power" (1 Corinthians 15:24). God, the Source of all things, will have become the Destination.

This does not mean that God's will cannot be opposed. And it does not mean that those who persist in doing so will be with God in eternity. It simply means that God can take whatever opposes Him and bring about a better result for Himself, and for those who've come home to Him, than if He had not been opposed.

It was with this kind of confidence in God that Robert Louis Stevenson could write: "Help me, O God, to look back on the long way you have brought me, on the long days in which I have been served, not according to my deserts, but my desires; on the pit and the miry clay, the blackness of despair, the horror of misconduct, from which my feet have been plucked out. For my sins forgiven or prevented, for my shame unpublished, I bless and thank you, O God." If we seek God, all that happens is either happy or useful.

When the end comes and we are taken for judgment above, we will then clearly understand in God the mysteries that puzzle us now. Not one of us will think to say, "Lord, if it had been some other way, all would be well."

JULIAN OF NORWICH

August 13

WHEN FORESIGHT FAILS

In the morning sow your seed, and in the evening do not withhold your hand; for you do not know which will prosper, either this or that, or whether both alike will be good. *Ecclesiastes 11:6*

ALTHOUGH WE CANNOT SEE FAR, WE CAN JUDGE RIGHTLY WHAT IS NEAR. One of my favorite quotations from J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is the reply made by Aragorn when Gimli suggested that Gandalf's advice had been wrong because it had resulted in the loss of Gandalf's own life: "'The counsel of Gandalf was not founded on foreknowledge of safety, for himself or for others,' said Aragorn. 'There are some things that it is better to begin than to refuse, even though the end may be dark.'"

The fact that we have so little ability to foretell the future is not an accident. It was God who chose to limit our field of vision to that which is immediately in front of us. It should be evident that if this was God's choice, then no more foresight than what we have is needed to fulfill the purpose for which we were created. However interesting or helpful we may think it would be to see further ahead, God apparently knew that such an ability would hinder us. We were made to work productively in the present moment, and the equipment we were given is exactly the right equipment for the business of human living.

But wouldn't it help us deal more wisely with the present if we could know the future? Probably not. Most of us will have to admit that even on those occasions when we do know what's going to happen, we tend to do very little about it. If we've been poor stewards of our time, it's probably not fair to blame that problem on a shortage of information about the future. But be that as it may, we do not really need to know any more about tomorrow than we do. The various pieces of our lives need to be connected to one another in a pleasing pattern, certainly. But God has chosen that the most pleasing pattern is achieved not when we foresee the whole thing from start to finish but when we deal with each day's piece as if that were the only one.

If a man lay himself out to do the immediate duty of the moment, wonderfully little forethought, I suspect, will be found needful. That forethought only is right which has to determine duty, and pass into action. To the foundation of yesterday's work well done, the work of the morrow will be sure to fit. Work done is of more consequence for the future than the foresight of an archangel.

GEORGE MACDONALD

August 14

WE NEED BOTH DESIRE AND TRAINING

... exercise yourself toward godliness. For bodily exercise profits a little, but godliness is profitable for all things, having promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come. *1 Timothy 4:7,8*

IT IS IMPORTANT TO HAVE A PASSIONATE DESIRE FOR GOD AND ALSO TO UNDERGO THE TRAINING NECESSARY TO FULFILL THAT DESIRE. Both of these things are needed in the spiritual life, and either without the other will leave us short of our goal. In fact, if either of these is isolated from the other, the result can be disastrous.

First, consider the necessity of *desire*. The writer of Hebrews tells us that God is a “rewarder of those who diligently seek Him” (Hebrews 11:6). If Jesus taught anything at all, it was that God must be deeply desired. Those who will be “filled” are not the indifferent, nor are they those who happen to get in a religious mood once in a while. They are, as Jesus said, those who “hunger and thirst for righteousness” (Matthew 5:6). We must be moved by a desire for God that stirs deep within us. If we are not so moved, there is every likelihood that we’ll be “choked with cares, riches, and pleasures of life, and bring no fruit to maturity” (Luke 8:14).

But also, consider the vital importance of *training*. Growing in the worship of God and in the acquirement of godly character is the highest endeavor to which we may commit ourselves. But the pursuit of godliness is like many other pursuits in that it requires the learning of certain skills and the adoption of certain habits of daily living. It is not a thing we find ourselves doing accidentally or haphazardly. Because it is a discipline, it takes training. Paul was not wasting words when he urged Timothy to exercise himself toward godliness. Our godly desires will simply not be fulfilled if we don’t do anything more than what comes naturally.

Desire and training interact with one another and complement one another. Like the serious athlete, we train because of our desire. But when our training begins to bring positive results, that increases our desire. For this reason, it is critical that we pay attention to both. To make spiritual progress, we must deal decisively with anything that threatens either our desire or our training. “Meditate on these things,” said Paul. “Give yourself entirely to them, that your progress may be evident to all” (1 Timothy 4:15).

Know well that thy enemy laboureth in all wise to stay thy desire in good and to make thee void of all good exercise.

THOMAS À KEMPIS

August 15

WHERE WE'RE MOST VULNERABLE

Search me, O God, and know my heart;
Try me, and know my anxieties;
And see if there is any wicked way in me,
And lead me in the way everlasting. *Psalms 139:23,24*

ONE OF LIFE'S GREATEST DECISIONS IS WHETHER TO PAY MORE ATTENTION TO OUR OWN FAULTS OR TO THOSE OF OTHERS. It's an undeniable fact that much of our life in this world will be spent dealing with problems. And the quality of our lives is greatly determined by this basic question: which will be our main focus from day to day, correcting our own faults or correcting those of others? Much that is important in life depends on our decision.

It doesn't take very sharp eyesight to see that sinfulness is harmful. We are surrounded by human wreckage. The dramatic evidence of what sin can do is everywhere we look. And living in such a world, it's quite obvious that we're vulnerable. There is no way to live in the here and now without the likelihood of being hurt. So it's understandable that we become preoccupied with problem-solving and error-correction. Although we can't eliminate sin, we'd like to minimize it as much as possible. We'd like to protect ourselves to whatever extent we can.

But where is it that we're the most vulnerable? With our answer to this question we show ourselves to be either wise or foolish. Warning His disciples that they would be persecuted, Jesus said, "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28). It's virtually certain that others will do us wrong from time to time. But whatever damage we may suffer at their hands, that damage does not go nearly as deep nor last nearly as long as the damage we do to ourselves by our own sins.

Given the danger of the flaws in our own character, it is amazing how casually we can ignore these while trying to help other people. We gag at the gnat of our neighbor's sin while swallowing the camel of our own (Matthew 23:24). And the mote that we remove from our friend's eye is as nothing compared to the beam that's in our own (Matthew 7:3). We make ourselves nearly ridiculous bothering about "threats" that are nowhere near our most serious dangers. It would be comical if it were not so serious.

Flee from your own faults. The flaws in others will not hurt you.

GUIGO I

August 16

THE CALL OF THE WORLD

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. *James 1:14,15*

WHATEVER OUR GREATEST DESIRES ARE, THOSE WILL DETERMINE THE DIRECTION OF OUR LIVES. Thus decisions about our desires are extremely important. As we begin to desire God, one of the challenges we face is that of purifying our desires and making them whole. Satan is endlessly creative in his enticements, and we can be sure that learning to truly and completely want what God wants is not going to be easy. Frankly, it is hard to purge our hearts of the remnants of our old desires.

Even after committing ourselves to greater holiness and purity, we are sometimes like the people of Israel after they had been delivered from Egyptian slavery. In some ways they were glad to be free, but they quickly began to complain against Moses. Somewhere in their hearts, they seemed to resent the loss of certain former pleasures. "And in their hearts they turned back to Egypt" (Acts 7:39). Like Israel, we will not be truly free from bondage until we stop murmuring against our Deliverer and quit looking over our shoulder. Even if we keep from outwardly returning to Egypt, it's dangerous even to long for that land!

What we need is not only to desire God but to desire Him single-mindedly and wholeheartedly. We cannot afford to love God with the "religious" part of our minds and still allow illicit desires to make themselves at home in the "other" part. These desires must be evicted from our thinking, for if we are hospitable and allow them to remain, they will eventually burst out of the back room and return to the front porch.

As the old-timers used to say, "Whatever's in the well, will come up in the bucket sooner or later." And as one of the *real* old-timers used to say, "Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life" (Proverbs 4:23). Most of us would say that we'd like to be something other than "worldly" people. But worldliness is a curiously subtle thing. Depending on what we desire, there may be more of the world left in us than we suppose.

Worldliness is not only doing what is forbidden but also wishing it were possible to do it. One of its distinctives is mental slavery to illegitimate pleasure. Worldliness twists values by rearranging their price tags.

ERWIN W. LUTZER

August 17

ZERRISSENHEIT

But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd. *Matthew 9:36*

LIFE IN A BROKEN WORLD EXACTS A PAINFUL TOLL ON US EMOTIONALLY. We long to feel whole, but we feel torn apart. We desire integrity and oneness of mind and character, but we are pulled in many different directions. Outward conflict is never very far away, and the consequences of sin are such that we have to labor night and day to keep from disintegrating inwardly. The outward turmoil is terrible enough, but it is the lack of inward peace that hurts us most. And the Germans have a word that describes this inner strife or brokenness that we're so familiar with these days. It is the word *Zerrissenheit*, which literally means "broken-to-pieces-hood." It would be hard to find a better word for the state of our minds in the present generation.

If they could speak to us now, however, Adam and Eve would probably say that the "broken-to-pieces-hood" we feel today is not very different from what they felt. In Eden, they had enjoyed an environment where everything they ever had to deal with fit together in perfect harmony. Outside of Eden, however, they would have experienced the very same thing we do: the sickening uncertainty of trying to get from one day to the next in a world that is breaking apart. In fact, never having known Eden, we have less basis for comparison than they did. If we think that life feels "out of joint" today, how "disconnected" must they have felt standing outside the gates of the garden — with a flaming sword guarding the way back to the tree of life.

But what about God? Is He unconcerned about all that we suffer as a result of having ruined our world and our relationship with Him? The wonderful truth is that He is not only concerned; He is compassionately concerned. He knows that we are "weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd." At a cost that we cannot count, He has made it possible for us to seek Him, find Him, and find in Him every bit of the wholeness we have lost.

Drop thy still dews of quietness,
Till all our strivings cease;
Take from our souls the strain and stress,
And let our ordered lives confess
The beauty of thy peace.

JOHN GREENLEAF WHITTIER

August 18

BONDAGE TO SELF

But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there. *James 3:14-16*

AS OUR LIVES UNFOLD, WE WILL EITHER ENJOY THE FREEDOM OF SEEKING GOD OR SUFFER FROM THE CONSEQUENCES OF SEEKING OURSELVES. There is no in-between. We will either long to please our Creator or demand to please ourselves. And if we choose to make self our primary concern, the farther down that road we travel, the more that choice will bind us and enslave us. We are never less free than when we declare our independence from God.

James tells us that self-seeking is a hellish thing. It engenders strife, and the wisdom that recommends this choice “does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic.” Satan’s murderous lie has always been that we can do whatever we want, regardless of anything God may have said, and no harmful consequences will come. In fact, he insinuates that seeking our own will is the only way we can be free (Genesis 3:1-6).

But even while our enemy is urging us in this direction, he is preparing the chains that will bind us. And once we’ve disregarded the wise, life-protecting will of our God, we begin almost immediately to realize how little freedom there is in our self-centered demands. The farther we go without turning back, the more our choices begin to feel like compulsions, and the less hope we have of ever knowing freedom again. If we maintain any honesty about ourselves at all, the time will come when we understand the desperate cry of Paul: “O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Romans 7:24).

The desire to be free from our self-will should be one of our most powerful motivations. But if we hope to be free, we must be honest about where we are. Even if we’re seeking God right now, our seeking may be more about what we want than about what He wants. There are few of us who don’t need to repent of that.

Sever me from myself that I may be grateful to you;
May I perish to myself that I may be safe in you;
May I die to myself that I may live in you;
May I wither to myself that I may blossom in you;
May I be emptied of myself that I may abound in you;
May I be nothing to myself that I may be all to you.

DESIDERIUS ERASMUS

August 19

LEARNING TO WORSHIP GOD

Thus I will bless You while I live; I will lift up my hands in Your name.
My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness,
And my mouth shall praise You with joyful lips.
When I remember You on my bed, I meditate
on You in the night watches. *Psalms 63:4-6*

IF WE ARE SEEKING GOD, WE WILL WANT TO REACH THE POINT AT WHICH WE HONESTLY ENJOY THE WORSHIP OF GOD. Making the choice to engage in worship on set occasions is wise, of course, and as far as Christians worshipping together is concerned, the New Testament certainly shows that the earliest followers of the Lord did that every week (Acts 20:7; Hebrews 10:25). To be spiritually mature, however, is not only to engage in acts of worship regularly but also to have the kind of character that delights in doing so, even when there is no special occasion.

The true joy of worship is a joy that must be learned. No doubt there are people who find it easy to enjoy some of the superficial aspects of worship, but most of us will find that worship is an acquired taste. The regrettable modern tendency to turn worship into something that is naturally enjoyable, and even entertaining, should not blind us to the fact that true worship is the spiritual adoration of God, a thing that does not come naturally to carnally-minded people. We will not enjoy worship as God wants us to enjoy it until we have come around to His way of thinking, and this is work that takes more than Sunday morning. It requires regular attention to God, and perhaps the passing of many years.

As the above selection from Psalm 63 shows, David was a man whose highest happiness was the worship of God: "My mouth shall praise You with joyful lips." It's unlikely that David's arm had to be twisted to get him to the tabernacle at the various times prescribed in the Law of Moses. But those special times at the tabernacle would have meant so much to David because of what happened in his life every day and every night: "When I remember You on my bed, I meditate on You in the night watches." We, like David, need to learn the pleasure of everyday devotion — and then we also will enjoy the exaltation of special worship.

We — or at least I — shall not be able to adore God on the highest occasions if we have learned no habit of doing so on the lowest. At best, our faith and reason will tell us that He is adorable, but we shall not have found Him so, not have "tasted and seen."

C. S. LEWIS

August 20

PRAYERFUL LIVING

If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. *Colossians 3:1,2*

DO WE HAVE DIFFICULTY KEEPING OUR MINDS PEACEFULLY FOCUSED ON GOD WHILE WE ARE PRAYING? If so, a part of the reason may be that we have not cultivated the habit of thinking about God throughout the day. Minds that do not normally think of God at other times will find it hard to stay focused on Him during occasional periods of prayer. Thus it will help us, when we are praying, to be people who are accustomed to living prayerfully.

There is such a thing as a prayerful state of mind even when we're not actually praying. We can think about God as we fulfill the routine of our daily activities. We can be mindful of Him in a general sort of way. Historically, those who have tried to take the spiritual life seriously have always reported that they found it beneficial to live consciously in the "presence" of God, being aware of His reality at each moment. Doing this is hard at first, simply because our minds are undisciplined. They are used to wandering wherever they wish: here, there, and everywhere. But with serious intent and the discipline that is acquired in living the spiritual life, we can learn to live in a constant state of mindfulness about God. He can become our preoccupation.

When we're not specifically thinking about God, we can at least be thinking about the higher and better things in the world that He has made. Paul wrote, "Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy — meditate on these things" (Philippians 4:8). To think on these things is to bring ourselves closer to God and to make our minds more inclined to the act of prayer.

God is pleased with those who seek Him diligently. And seeking Him surely means that, amid the welter of our worldly concerns, our minds will always be seeking Him out.

Another way to stay with prayer is to keep your mind from wandering too far at other times of the day. Keep it strictly in the Presence of God.

If you think of him a lot, you will find it easy to keep your mind calm in the time of prayer.

BROTHER LAWRENCE

August 21

TO KNOW IT IS TO WEEP

Jesus wept.
John 11:35

ALTHOUGH GOD HAS MADE FORGIVENESS POSSIBLE, THE WORLDLY CONSEQUENCES OF SIN ARE STILL SORROWFUL TO CONTEMPLATE. This is still our Father's world, as the words of the familiar hymn point out, but it is a world tragically broken by our own folly. God is dealing with the reality of sin so that His purposes will be gloriously consummated, but between now and then there is much that breaks even the heart of God. Every day millions of those whom He lovingly created suffer the ravages of "death," even while they live. To know this is to weep. We may be, as Paul put it, "sorrowful, yet always rejoicing" (2 Corinthians 6:10), but the fact remains that our joy is not without its sorrow.

Blaise Pascal pointed out that there is nothing in the world that does not show either our wretchedness or God's mercy, either our weakness without God or our strength with God. Although we naturally prefer to dwell on God's mercy, it is the wretchedness of our plight without God that makes His mercy meaningful. We can't enjoy the latter very deeply if we haven't thought about the former very honestly. Like the woman who washed Jesus' feet with her tears (Luke 7:37,38), we'll be truly grateful for forgiveness only after we've come to grips with what our sin has cost God. It is only the self-righteous who are not moved to tears.

Solomon, a man who had pondered "every work that is done under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 8:9), finally drew this sober conclusion: "In much wisdom is much grief, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow" (Ecclesiastes 1:18). The more we know of what goes on in the world, the more we'll be struck by the sadness of what has happened to God's creation.

Sadness is not the whole story, of course, and it's certainly not the end of the story. It's only a part of the story, but its part is not unimportant. Isaiah described the Messiah as "a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3). If we intend to follow this kind of Leader, then let us go to Golgotha and be ready to taste His tears. "The cross of Christ destroyed the equation religion equals happiness" (Dietrich Bonhoeffer).

It is impossible for one to live without tears
who considers things exactly as they are.

GREGORY OF NYSSA

August 22

EACH VESSEL IS UNIQUELY BROKEN

O wretched man that I am!
Who will deliver me from this body of death?
Romans 7:24

THE SADDEST, MOST CRUSHING DISILLUSIONMENT IN LIFE ALSO HAPPENS TO BE THE DOOR TO LIFE'S GREATEST HOPE. This disillusionment, of course, is the realization that we've ruined our own dreams by the sins that we've committed. Our expectations have been killed, assassinated by our own hand. And the result is deep regret. We have created problems that are impossible for us to fix.

Each of us is broken. The unfortunate truth about life applies not just to some of us but to each of us. We are truly "tragic" figures: we've been brought to ruin by extreme qualities that were both our greatness and our downfall. Each of our characters is flawed in such a way that we've sowed the seeds of our own undoing. Given by God the noble freedom of our will, we have dishonored that nobility and destroyed ourselves. And the important thing to realize is not just that "we" (in the human race) have done this; we have each done it individually. As children, we started out to write happy stories, but our choices have made all the stories turn out to be profoundly disappointing. This is the foulest-tasting tonic in the world, but it's one we have no choice but to swallow.

But also, each of us is broken uniquely and irreversibly. Although each of our stories is a tragedy, each story is unique and personal. We've all ruined ourselves, but our roads to ruin have all been slightly different. Somehow, we've each found our own way to be unhappy. But not only that, what we've done cannot be undone. It is too late. There is nothing we can ever do to make up for the mistakes we've made. The bell has tolled; it can't be unrung.

But if coming to terms with these sickening truths is life's most miserable experience, how can we possibly say that the experience is good or hopeful? The answer, of course, is this: when we have finally let go of our illusions, that is when God is able to redeem us from our reality. There is no other way for the gospel to save us. *We must realize that we are ruined.* "How else but through a broken heart may Lord Christ enter in?" (Oscar Wilde).

Each life must hold [a great tragedy], I think: one pain
that overarches and observes all others, one haunting irreversible fault
for which one can never atone.

NANCY MAIRS

August 23

WHEN WE REALIZE WHAT MERCY MEANS

The righteous cry out, and the LORD hears,
And delivers them out of all their troubles.
The LORD is near to those who have a broken heart,
And saves such as have a contrite spirit. *Psalm 34:17,18*

MERCY IS A MUCH MISUNDERSTOOD CONCEPT. It is the central idea of the gospel of Christ, but even as important as it is, the idea of mercy is often misconstrued. What mercy means is that God is willing to do for us what *we do not deserve to have done*. But we tend to make two mistakes: we suppose (1) that God extends His mercy to those who deserve it and withholds it from those who don't, or (2) that after receiving God's forgiveness we are somehow more deserving in His sight than we were before.

It is wrong to think of the gospel of Christ as a means of earning back what we now wish we'd never thrown away. It is not an insurance plan for our pride. Neither is it an insurance plan for our sense of self-sufficiency and self-worth. What the gospel asks us to accept is the fact that having sinned, we are permanently and forever afterward *unworthy* of life in God. Our vessels are broken, and we can never, ever be what we were before we sinned. When Paul said, "I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God" (1 Corinthians 15:9), he was not using his tenses carelessly. The sins he referred to had truly been forgiven, but Paul was still unworthy to be called an apostle. The thing about the gospel that enraptured him was not the reinstatement of his self-esteem but the contemplation of a Mercy that received him despite his ongoing unworthiness. Paul had to obey the gospel to be forgiven (Acts 22:16), but having done so, he was still a person with a very sad story.

Are these words overly pessimistic? Are we denying the deep joy and the thirst-quenching fulfillment that await us in God? No, our point is simply that we need to be careful about what we expect from God. The joy that is available to us is not the happiness of restored pride, but the thrill of pure, undiluted *mercy*. And that is why the Lord has never been sought by the self-righteous but only by the ragged and the ruined. "The LORD is near to those who have a broken heart, and saves such as have a contrite spirit."

Open thy gate of mercy, gracious God!
My soul flies through these wounds to seek out thee.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

August 24

ONE PRAYER THAT WILL NEVER BE ANSWERED

And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life. *1 Timothy 1:14-16*

THERE IS AT LEAST ONE PRAYER THAT WILL NEVER BE ANSWERED, AND THAT IS THE PRAYER TO BE SOMEBODY ELSE. Just as we suppose the grass must be greener somewhere else, it is tempting to think life would be easier if we were somebody else. And while we know it's impossible to change places with any other person who has actually lived, we do seem to hope for something that is not really much different: we hope that God might transform us in such a way that our past is erased, our personal circumstances are altered, and we are given a life-situation in which it will be much easier to serve God faithfully.

As for our past, God can do wonders, but He cannot make our past anything other than what it is. He can do things in the present that are greater than anything that has happened in our past, but He having done so, the past will still be the past. And we will still be who we are. If we're praying to be anything other than the unique package of problems and possibilities that *we* are, that is a prayer that will never be answered. It is not allowed for us to be somebody else. The sooner we give up on that false hope, the sooner we can get busy cooperating with God's plan for *us*.

After Paul became a Christian, having previously persecuted the church, he marveled the rest of his life that God could have been so merciful to a person like him. In his preaching, he cited himself as a prime example of just how patient and longsuffering God can be. But Paul wasted no time praying to be released from being Paul. He served thankfully and diligently within the limits of his own life, such as it actually was. Would that we could see what this great man seemed to see. It is not necessary to be somebody else; it is only necessary to make the choices that *we ourselves* should make. Whoever we are, we have scars and we have limitations. It is impossible for it to be otherwise. God is not the God of imaginary beings, but of real people in all their flawed variety.

If a man cannot be a Christian in the place where he is,
he cannot be a Christian anywhere.

HENRY WARD BEECHER

August 25

MORE FULLY OCCUPYING OUR OWN HOUSES

And say to Archippus, "Take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it." *Colossians 4:17*

EACH OF US IS A PACKAGE OF PARTICULAR HUMAN ATTRIBUTES. Some of these are birth-gifts from God, while others are specifics we have brought into being by using (and sometimes misusing) the raw materials that were available to us. A human life is "a mixed bag," a curious assortment of things good and not-so-good. And the challenge is to take our own individual specifics, which are always less than perfect, and get all the good out of them that we can in the time allotted to our stewardship.

In the text above, Paul wanted the Colossian Christians to relay an interesting message to a brother named Archippus: "Take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it." We don't know what Archippus's particulars were, but whatever they were, God wanted him to understand the importance of doing the work that he, Archippus, had been given to do. In the end, the only person's work we will be held accountable for is our own. But what an accounting that will be!

In another of his letters, Paul described Christians as the Lord's "body," and he asked these searching questions: "If the foot should say, 'Because I am not a hand, I am not of the body,' is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear should say, 'Because I am not an eye, I am not of the body,' is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where would be the smelling?" (1 Corinthians 12:15-17). God intended the body to be as it is.

Wishing we had someone else's circumstances (a tendency many of us have) seems all the more childish when we recognize how much room for expansion and growth there is within our own circumstances. Few of us have ever done more than explore the edges of our own territory. All of our individual regrets and hindrances notwithstanding, we each have gifts we've never used. And while we are busy wishing we could serve God within the framework of someone else's ministry, He is no doubt saying to every one of us: "Take heed to the ministry which *you* have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it."

Men resemble great deserted palaces: the owner occupies only a few rooms and has closed off wings where he never ventures.

FRANÇOIS MAURIAC

August 26

GODLY GOALS ARE ALWAYS GREATER

With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith. 2 *Thessalonians 1:11 NIV*

GOD IS NOT INDIFFERENT TO OUR GOOD INTENTIONS. He will honor the goals of our godliness and help us bring them to fulfillment. It is critically important, of course, that our goals be consistent with God's will, but if that is the case, we need have no doubt about where He stands with respect to their accomplishment. We are not simply on our own, trying as best we feebly can to do God's will. We are His beloved creatures, and He has a vested interest in our success. If there is any question whether we are going to "make it," our Heavenly Father is certainly not neutral on that question. As the writer of Hebrews reminded his readers, "God is not unjust to forget your work and labor of love which you have shown toward His name" (Hebrews 6:10).

Paul's prayer for the Thessalonians was that "[God] may fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith" (NIV). Consider a few other translations and paraphrases of this text. "We pray for God's power to help you do all the good things that you hope to do and that your faith makes you want to do" (*Contemporary English Version*). "[We pray] that his power may bring to fulfillment every good purpose and every act inspired by faith" (*Revised English Bible*). "[We pray that God] by his power may fulfil all your good intentions and every effort of faith" (J. B. Phillips). And Kenneth Taylor renders it: "[We pray that God will] make you as good as you wish you could be!"

Speaking of the dream that keeps the athlete going despite difficulty and defeat, sports announcer Bob Costas once said at the opening of the Olympic Games, "We are beaten only when we quit believing in what we wish we could be." If this is true in athletic endeavor, it's even more true in our godly endeavors. What we wish we could be — in God — is very, very important. We dare not give up these dreams. And we dare not underestimate God's interest in making these dreams come true. Godly goals are greater than any other because He is their object — and because He Himself is the help that will carry us where we need to go.

Lord, grant that I may always desire more than I can accomplish.

MICHELANGELO

August 27

TESTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

We ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure, which is manifest evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you also suffer.

2 Thessalonians 1:4,5

SEEKERS OF GOD CAN HARDLY DO WITHOUT QUALITIES LIKE PATIENCE, ENDURANCE, AND FORTITUDE. That is why periods of persecution have tended to separate the true seekers from the merely curious. Faith either learns how to deal with difficulty or it dies a miserable death. The Christian has no greater practical need than to learn how to handle hardship successfully.

When there is something we must endure, we are faced with a crisis: do we have the character to meet the difficulty or do we not? But the *manner* in which we endure difficulty is every bit as important as the question of whether we'll endure it. We are called upon not only to bear our burdens, but also to bear them with a Christ-like spirit. We must resist bitterness and resentment and maintain gratitude and reverence. Deciding which spirit we'll have as we tackle our problems is one of life's key decisions.

Motivational speakers have often pointed out the link in the Chinese language between *crisis* and *opportunity*. Denis Waitley puts it this way: "The Chinese symbols for *crisis* are identical to those for the word *opportunity*. Literally translated it reads, 'Crisis is an opportunity riding the dangerous wind.'" Situations that we see as merely "dangerous" (in other words, "difficult") should often be welcomed as occasions for growth and service. If we take all the risk out of life, we also take out the opportunity. The course of least resistance leads only one direction: downhill.

When we pillow our heads at night, we need to have things that give us peace. Many such things are available, but one of the best is the simple peace of knowing that we've done things that day that were not easy for us to do. If we can see ourselves as people who are learning little by little to master the hard parts of life, we will live with a greater confidence and be able to serve those around us more helpfully. The ancient adage is true which tells us, "A ship in a harbor is safe, but that is not what ships are built for."

The greater the difficulty, the more glory in surmounting it.
Skillful pilots gain their reputation from storms and tempests.

EPICURUS

August 28

ORDINARY TRIALS, EXTRAORDINARY RESULTS

He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. And I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God. And I will write on him My new name.

Revelation 3:12

IF WE CHOOSE TO DEAL WITH THEM WISELY, THE DAILY ROUND OF ORDINARY DUTIES AND COMMON DIFFICULTIES CAN BE THE SOURCE OF SOMETHING THAT IS TRULY MAGNIFICENT. The greatness of human character is often refined from seemingly unimportant and worthless materials. Before we despise any of our days or any of our decisions as inconsequential, let us think again. As God sees things, something of tremendously great consequence is in the making. It would be tragic to lose out on what is coming by failing to pay attention to its very plain preparation.

Just as God's standards of greatness are different from ours, the process through which He produces greatness is also different. Who but God would have thought to prepare Moses or David to lead the nation of Israel by sending them off for years to herd flocks of animals? And who but God would have seen that His own Son, the King of Kings, should be born in a stable and raised in one of the poorest homes in Galilee, far from the usual training grounds of leadership? It was in a simple carpenter's shop that Jesus "increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men" (Luke 2:52). How is it that we think our own hardships have to make the evening news before they are significant?

Whatever our daily troubles in this world may be, they are "light" compared to the "weight" of the glory that will eventually result if our lives have been lived in fellowship with God (2 Corinthians 4:17). The dazzling glory that is up ahead will be out of all proportion to the often dull and unexciting affliction that will have produced it. So we should be careful not to underestimate ourselves. The humdrum appearance of our lives very likely conceals the fact that something great is going on.

In what strange quarries and stoneyards the stones for the celestial wall are being hewn! Out of the hillsides of humiliated pride; deep in the darkness of crushed despair; in the fretting and dusty atmosphere of little cares; in the hard cruel contacts that man has with man; wherever souls are being tried and ripened, in whatever commonplace and homely ways — there God is hewing out the pillars for his temple.

PHILLIPS BROOKS

August 29

WOULD GOD SAY OUR ENEMIES ARE RIGHT?

Then one from the crowd said to Him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." But He said to him, "Man, who made Me a judge or an arbitrator over you?" And He said to them, "Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses." *Luke 12:13-15*

WHEN WE HAVE DISPUTES WITH OTHERS, AND ESPECIALLY WHEN WE FEEL WE'VE BEEN MISTREATED, WE OFTEN ASSUME THAT GOD IS ON OUR SIDE AND THAT HE WILL EVENTUALLY VINDICATE US. Whether there is even one other person who understands us, it helps our feelings to know in our own minds that we occupy the high ground morally and that the time is coming when God will set the record straight. Then, if not before, our enemies will be forced to admit that we were right all along.

Perhaps we are correct. If indeed our cause is just, we surely do have God's word that He will stand up in our defense and deal with our enemies as they should be dealt with (2 Thessalonians 1:6,7; Revelation 6:9-11). Truth is stronger than untruth, and if there is ever any action taken against us that is not based on truth, that action will not stand the test of time. In the short term, misrepresentations and mistreatments may go unopposed, but the truth will eventually come out. In the meantime we are simply to entrust ourselves to God (2 Timothy 1:12; 1 Peter 4:19).

But we need to be exceedingly careful here. William James correctly observed that "the God of many men is little more than their court of appeal against the damnatory judgment passed on their failures by the opinion of the world." When the whole truth comes out, as it surely will, are we absolutely sure that it will show *us* to be in the right? Self-honesty is not an easy thing for most of us, and it may turn out that *we* were the ones hiding from the truth. It may be that when God stands up to defend whoever is right, He will say our enemies were right and *we* were wrong. It's always good to appeal to truth, but truth is a tough witness. Let's be sure we're ready for all that the truth will have to say.

Very few people in this world care to listen to the real defense of their own characters. The real defense which belongs to the Day of Judgment, would make such damaging admissions, would clear away so many artificial virtues, would tell such tragedies of weakness and failure, that a man would sooner be misunderstood and censured by the world than exposed to that awful and merciless eulogy.

G. K. CHESTERTON

August 30

THE PRINCE OF PEACE BROUGHT A SWORD

Now as [Paul] reasoned about righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and answered, "Go away for now; when I have a convenient time I will call for you." *Acts 24:25*

DOES THE TRUTH ABOUT GOD DISTURB US? It should. This is so because the truth about God will have to include an account of our rebellion against Him, and this part of the story can't be anything but disturbing to anyone who loves God.

The "good news" of the gospel is not that we are fine in our present condition and that we simply need to accept our "authentic" selves. No, it is rather the good news that pardon is available at the justice bar of God, a pardon that justice itself would have said was impossible. But the news of pardon can only be good news if we're first willing to accept the painful reality that we need to be pardoned! The gospel has to do with the forgiveness of our sins (*Acts 26:18*), and it is not so frivolous as to suggest that we can be forgiven without repentance (*Acts 17:30*). Repentance, the decisive turning-away from our sins, is not a warm and fuzzy procedure. It is a soul-wrenching process produced by a thing the Scriptures call "godly sorrow" (*2 Corinthians 7:10,11*).

Even if we were not deeply disturbed by the truth about what we've done to our God, how could we not be disturbed to hear of the price He had to pay to atone for what we've done? How can we deal with the gospel of Christ and not be "cut to the heart" (*Acts 2:37*)? Either we are not listening or the preacher is not preaching. When Paul explained the truth to Felix, this Roman official was not moved out of his complacency enough to do anything about the truth, but Paul's presentation of the gospel was such that when Felix even listened to it seriously, he was "afraid" (*Acts 24:25*).

How different Paul's preaching must have been from what has become fashionable today. Malcolm Muggeridge was not exaggerating when he said, "The church, like most institutions of our society, is scared and is anxious to ingratiate itself with people, rather than to tell them the truth." We preach the Prince of Peace, and it's entirely right that we emphasize the peace that He wants to give us. But this Prince brought a sword (*Matthew 10:34*), and among its other functions, this sword must sever us from our self-righteous selves — a most disturbing thing indeed.

If Christianity has never disturbed us, we have not yet learned what it is.

WILLIAM TEMPLE

August 31

MANAGING MULTIPLE PRIORITIES

And Jesus answered and said to her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things." *Luke 10:41*

EVEN IN THE SIMPLEST LIFE ONE CAN LIVE, THERE ARE STILL MANY THINGS TO BE DONE. Those who would grow strong spiritually must learn to work energetically and productively without being eaten up by the time pressures that characterize so many of our lifestyles. We must discover how to manage multiple priorities without sacrificing that which is our highest priority: the glorification of God. This is a discipline we can learn, but learning it will be anything but easy in this age of the world.

It is possible to be very busy and not suffer from the corrosive stress that most of us feel when we're busy. Jesus, for example, was extremely busy, and He certainly knew what it was to be tired (John 4:6), but His activities were always surrounded by the peacefulness of complete surrender to the will of God. Although He was busy, He was never frantic. He felt no need to "make things turn out" according to selfish demands. Our anxiety, on the other hand, is often the result of an urge to control certain outcomes. It springs from the desire that things should happen as we wish, rather than as God wills. Yet if we can let go of this desire, much of the compulsiveness that drives our activities will disappear.

Having said that, however, we should also say that most of our lives would profit from some serious simplification. As a people, we are over-committed and strung out. We try to do more than one human being can do effectively. And the result is one that ought to alarm us greatly: we are at a disadvantage when it comes to the devil. Richard J. Foster, who has written perceptively on the value of the simple life, has said, "Our adversary majors in three things: noise, hurry, and crowds. If he can keep us engaged in 'muchness' and 'manyness,' he will rest satisfied." Spiritually, we are never more vulnerable than when we are, like Martha, "worried and troubled about many things." Thus one of the most constructive spiritual steps we can take is to simplify our interests and our activities. But even when we do, there will still be many matters to claim our attention. We must learn the art of God-centered restfulness.

Lord Jesus, make my heart sit down.

AFRICAN PROVERB

September 1

THE HAZARD OF THE HEADLINES

Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, to God who alone is wise,
be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. *1 Timothy 1:17*

WE ARE LIVING IN WHAT HAS COME TO BE CALLED THE “INFORMATION AGE.” The sum total of human knowledge is growing exponentially. The industrial age has come to an end, and the principle product of our economy is no longer manufactured wares but information. And computer technology has made the storage and sharing of information so fast and easy, we find ourselves inundated by a daily flood of factual (and sometimes not-so-factual) data. Couple these phenomena with the fact that human society itself is changing at a dizzying rate, and many people begin to feel a frustration that borders on panic. How do we keep up? How do we even begin to sort through the avalanche of information and make sense of what is happening in the world?

For one thing, there is no need even to try to keep up with all the instant information that surrounds us. We should not let ourselves be pressured, by either the media or our peers, into making the attempt. It can't be done, and the stress of trying to do so is hazardous to human health. But in addition, if we spin our wheels trying to keep up with every current event, we'll not have the time we need to learn and ponder the historic deeds and ageless truths that are much more needful to know. There are surely some things happening today that will be of importance three hundred years from now, but it will be a long time before anyone will have the perspective to know what these are. Meanwhile, why do we think we have to know everything that happens and to know it instantaneously? Don't we have the courage to admit that most of the information that comes to us is simply unimportant?

It is not unreasonable for us to want to understand the world in which we live. And it does take a certain amount of information to do that. But if we're not careful, we'll be drowned in a sea of useless “news.” If we wish truly to make sense of what is happening right now, we'll need to acquaint ourselves with what is old as well as what is new. And more important, we'll need to meditate on what can be known of the God in whom the entire history of our cosmos will one day find its fulfillment.

Read not the times. Read the eternities.

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

September 2

SEEKING GOD WITH OUR FAMILIES

And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. *Deuteronomy 6:6-9*

MUCH CAN BE LEARNED ABOUT A FAMILY FROM ITS TABLE TALK. And if God is as important to us as we say He is, it is remarkable that we so rarely talk about Him at the table. Why do we relegate the discussion of God to church services, Bible study groups, and other special occasions? If we were to let God out of the box we keep Him in, what do you suppose would happen?

As the text from Deuteronomy illustrates, God wanted Israel's parents to think of Him and talk of Him as they went about their normal daily routine. It is not likely that faith in God will be passed from one generation to another if He is not woven into the fabric of a family's regular life. And what God wanted in Israel is no more than what He wants today. As Henry Drummond said, "The family circle is the supreme conductor of Christianity." If our faith is to be shared, God must be important enough to us that we talk about Him! How truthful is it to say that He is the supreme passion of our existence if He never shows up in our conversation? Can we seek God and keep that a secret from our families?

But there is another reason why we should involve our families in our seeking of God. Not only is it right to talk of God in our homes, but it is in the commonplace activities of our domestic life that we are most likely to find our Lord. Although the Scriptures are the single most important guide to God, seeking God can never be a totally intellectual pursuit. Having thoughtfully read what God reveals of Himself in the Scriptures, we then have to take those truths and investigate them in our most practical relationships, especially those within our home and family. We must not only think about God in the privacy of our own minds; we must talk about Him with those who mean the most to us. And we must not only talk about Him; we must discover Him and deal with Him in the places where our lives are really lived. Wherever we live, that is where the Lord lives too.

Christ moves among the pots and pans.

TERESA OF AVILA

September 3

HARDER . . . BUT MUCH EASIER

And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the LORD and His statutes which I command you today for your good? *Deuteronomy 10:12,13*

THROUGHOUT THE SCRIPTURES, WE ARE CALLED UPON TO MAKE A COMPLETE COMMITMENT OF OURSELVES TO GOD. Texts like the one above challenge us to make up our minds whether to give ourselves up to His government or to declare our independence from Him. If we ask what it is that God requires of us, the answer is that He requires our very hearts. He asks that we give *ourselves* to Him — in total reverence, obedience, and love. And if we're inclined to give Him less than this, then we should at least be straightforward about what the alternative is.

In a sense, the "all" that God requires of us is a harder thing to give than the partial gifts we sometimes offer. For a while, real godliness may involve doing without some things we've grown accustomed to calling our own. But in another, more important sense, what God requires is easier. When we try to conform ourselves externally to some of His will without giving Him our whole hearts, the attempt will be frustrating, sooner or later. Halfway measures and piecemeal approaches are tempting, but they involve far more grief than wholehearted efforts. The benefits of commitment simply can't be enjoyed by the uncommitted.

Much of the inner turmoil we experience comes from our never having fully made up our minds what to do about God. We desire Him, but not with all our hearts. Perhaps we'd say that we've committed ourselves to Him, but all that many of us have done is try to inject a measure of spirituality into a lifestyle that is still very much our own. We attempt to juggle God's will and our own, and we find this trick not only very difficult to perform, but also very unpleasant and burdensome. Yet how much greater our spiritual progress and joy would be if we took Jesus' words with real seriousness: "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it" (Luke 9:23,24).

What does God require? Everything!

ERWIN W. LUTZER

September 4

TO SEEK TRULY WE MUST SEEK PENITENTLY

... if My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land. *2 Chronicles 7:14*

WHEN SOLOMON HAD BUILT THE TEMPLE TO GOD IN JERUSALEM, MANY FERVENT PRAYERS WERE OFFERED AT ITS DEDICATION. Solomon implored God to be merciful to His people. If in the future Israel acted unfaithfully toward God, Solomon prayed that God would hear their prayers for forgiveness. God then appeared by night to Solomon and said that, yes, He would indeed hear the prayers of the people, but He made clear the manner in which those prayers would have to be made: "... if My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land." When the wayward seek God, they must do so with genuinely penitent hearts. There must be a respectful commitment to do differently.

It is a great wonder that we are able to come before God at all and request His forgiveness. That we are allowed to "seek His face" can only be attributed to His compassion and mercy. Under these conditions, it is unthinkable that we would approach Him with anything less than a humble, contrite spirit. If we have any inkling of how serious our sins really are, we will make every effort to show respect to the King against whom we have so foolishly rebelled. Given our inexcusable actions, any sort of pride or arrogance on our part would be profoundly insulting to God.

But in our humility, there is something we must be careful about: we must make sure that our penitence is not simply self-pity. The humility that befits the seeker of God is focused on God, not on self. To be sure, our contemplation of God's goodness will remind us of our own lack of goodness. But if we are thinking rightly, the result of this reminder will not be a wallowing in remorse for what we have lost. It will be a penitence — at once reverent and grateful — that lifts up its head lovingly to the God whose love has been offended. Godly sorrow is a cleansing, purifying sadness that takes full responsibility for its error and longs for the opportunity once again to show its love for God.

Penitence does not grow by our looking gloomily on our own badness,
but by looking up to God's loveliness, God's love for us.

WILLIAM CONGREVE

September 5

THE GROANING HEART

I am weary with my groaning;
All night I make my bed swim; I drench my couch with my tears.
My eye wastes away because of grief;
It grows old because of all my enemies. *Psalms 6:6,7*

THERE IS SUCH A THING AS GOOD GRIEF. It is not good because it is pleasant, but because it opens up our hearts more lovingly to God. When we groan in prayer, perhaps hurting so deeply that we can scarcely find any words to say, we are experiencing something we desperately need to experience: the unavoidable realization of our need for God. Thus while we look forward to praying the prayer of joyous thanksgiving, it is the prayer of downcast sorrow that pushes us more strongly down the path of inner growth. Perhaps it shouldn't be true, but it is: when our blessings are withdrawn, that's when the Source of those blessings means the most to us. The groaning heart is the one that clings to its God.

The same wise man who said, "[There is] a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance" (Ecclesiastes 3:4) also said, "[It is] better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for that is the end of all men; and the living will take it to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter, for by a sad countenance the heart is made better. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth" (Ecclesiastes 7:2-4). Although it seems to be written in the laws of our culture, it is nowhere written in the laws of the universe that unpleasantness is an unqualified evil. There are times when groaning deeply within ourselves is exactly the right response to what has happened.

So all things considered, which would we rather have the opportunity to pray: the prayer of thanksgiving or the prayer of groaning? If we live a normal life span, most of us will get some experience with both. But while it's natural to hope that the times of gladness outnumber those of grief, let us not despise the purity that can come out of grief. And when our hearts hurt so badly that words fail us as we try to speak to God, let us not be afraid simply to shed our tears, if they will come, and to let our groanings be a sufficient prayer. The God to whom we make our plea not only hears what we say, but He feels what we feel.

The best prayers often have more groans than words.

JOHN BUNYAN

September 6

THE HUMBLE HEART OF THE SEEKER

The wicked in his proud countenance does not seek God;
God is in none of his thoughts.
Psalm 10:4

IF THERE IS ONE QUALITY THAT IS MORE NEEDFUL THAN ANY OTHER FOR SEEKING GOD, IT IS THE QUALITY OF HUMILITY. Pride is the power that lured us away from God in the first place, and it is the power that will, if we let it, keep us from returning to Him. If God must be dealt with on His terms, then proud people simply will not deal with God. "The wicked in his proud countenance does not seek God; God is in none of his thoughts."

Pride keeps us from enjoying so many good things, it is a pity we don't reject it any more decisively than we do. It is a heavy, soul-wearying bag of rocks we drag around with us wherever we go. Rather than seeing humility as an unpleasant burden we must somehow learn to bear, we'd do better to see pride as an unnecessary burden we need not bear any longer. Those who have finally let go of their pride always report enjoying such a sense of freedom that they wish they'd made the decision sooner. We pay a high price for holding on to our ego.

Pride can be so subtle, however, that we may not see how much we have been affected by it. Few of us see ourselves as being "proud" people. And yet few of us are as humble as we need to be in our seeking of God. The deep changes that have to be made in our hearts require that we adopt a more receptive, teachable attitude than we've had up to now. Whether we call it by its right name or not, it's pride that prevents our repentance.

God is always appealing to us to lay down our prideful rebellion and come back home to Him. But while we may see some of the good that would come from doing that, we don't find it an easy thing to do. Reconciliation to God is appealing, but if it means having to humble ourselves, we're reluctant to go that far. It may have been a long time since we deferred to God on any question that really mattered to us, and the thought of openly admitting how poorly we've lived our lives is embarrassing, to say the least. Pride dies a hard death.

Not irreverently we may say that God has no easy time of it to smash the bridgeheads of our clever self-sufficiency, to break down the fortified walls of our self-defenses, and capture the inner stronghold of our pride.

PAUL STROMBERG REES

September 7

THE OPEN MIND OF THE SEEKER

The LORD looks down from heaven upon the children of men,
To see if there are any who understand, who seek God.

Psalm 14:2

GOD IS LOOKING FOR THOSE WHO UNDERSTAND THE IMPORTANCE OF SEEKING HIM. To understand this importance, we must at least open our minds to two basic facts: that God exists and that we're accountable to Him. If we reflect on these two truths with serious minds and reverent hearts, we will want to seek God.

There are, to be sure, many who know the basic truths but do not seek God any further. Their progress in the knowledge of God is blocked by a resistant attitude toward what they already know. In contrast, those who *seek* God are genuinely open to Him. Whatever knowledge of God these individuals may hold, they hold it eagerly and appreciatively. And what they seek is not only to know more of God; they long to have fellowship with Him.

The intriguing evidence of Himself that God has left in His creation was meant to move us deeply and stir up our desire. To the citizens of Lystra, Paul said that God "did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good, gave us rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness" (Acts 14:17). And to his listeners in Athens, he said that God's sovereignty over the nations is such "that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us" (Acts 17:27).

Perhaps the greatest decision we ever make is deciding what to do about the tokens of God's existence that we discover in His creation. Do we ignore them or welcome them? Do we deny them or deal with them gratefully? If we understand even a little of what the creation has already said about the Creator, then the serious seeking of God will become our goal.

It has been said that there are two classes of people who please God: those who serve him with all their hearts because they know Him, and those who seek him with all their hearts because they do not know Him. As far as God is concerned, open-mindedness on our part is more than intellectual curiosity. It is the delight with which the sincere embrace everything they can learn about their Father. When such people seek God, He is sure to be found.

God reveals himself unflinching to the thoughtful seeker.

HONORÉ DE BALZAC

September 8

SELF-SATISFACTION

An oracle within my heart concerning the transgression of the wicked:

There is no fear of God before his eyes.

Psalm 36:1

ONE OF THE DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS OF SIN IS THAT IT IS SELF-CENTERED. The fact that sin destroys our relationship to God is not surprising when we consider the self-centeredness that is at work. How can we not be cut off from God when we turn inward, cease to take Him into serious account, and dismiss Him from our decision-making? Fellowship with God requires, at the very least, that our attention be turned in His direction.

We perhaps do not see ourselves as being angry, deliberate rebels against God — we simply disregard Him. We may even “worship” Him on Sunday morning, but His will is of little real concern to us on Monday morning. In deed if not in word, we declare our independence and demand the right to satisfy our own longings in our own way. And having given us the freedom of our will, God will allow us to do this. But we cannot have it both ways at once. We cannot disregard God and still maintain our fellowship with Him. This will not work even on Sunday morning.

“Concerning the transgression of the wicked,” David observed that there is “no fear of God before his eyes.” The person described here is one we’ve all met many times, perhaps even in the mirror. This is the person who knows little about real reverence. He or she is self-sufficient, content to satisfy self in whatever way seems best at the moment. Reverence may be acceptable in theory, this person would say, but in practice it shouldn’t stand between us and the things we really desire.

And so it happens that we cease to seek God and we come to be people who are primarily occupied with ourselves. If any vestige of religion is left in our lives, that too becomes self-centered, a personally-designed spirituality that conceives of God in whatever ways are most congenial to our own lifestyles. But even as we do this, God is patiently waiting for us to return to Him and begin taking Him seriously. He is ready to begin undoing the damage that we’ve done in the headlong pursuit of our “selves.”

Sin has four characteristics: self-sufficiency instead of faith;
self-will instead of submission; self-seeking instead of benevolence;
self-righteousness instead of humility.

E. PAUL HOVEY

September 9

GOOD, CLEAN GODLESSNESS

For when they say, "Peace and safety!" then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape.

1 Thessalonians 5:3

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A "GODLY" LIFE AND ONE THAT IS "GODLESS"? Are the godly those who live "good, clean lives," and the godless all the rest: the drunkards and the prostitutes, the thieves and the murderers? If we ourselves are among those with "good, clean lives," it's especially tempting to define godliness as the living of a decent, respectable life. But isn't more involved in godliness than the maintenance of moral decency? Might there not be such a thing as *good, clean godlessness*?

It is a mistake to think of godliness in purely negative terms. Godly people certainly do not lie, steal, murder, etc., but godliness is more than the mere absence of these things. To be godly, we must not only refrain from what is evil; we must actively do that which is good. Jesus' statement was worded positively: "Whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them" (Matthew 7:12). Sins of "omission" are no less serious than those of "commission."

But it would be possible to do many of the things God desires us to do, actively and positively, and still not be godly persons. In a society that maintains fairly decent moral standards, it is likely that many people will choose to live respectable lives, at least outwardly. But the very respectability of these lives may mask the self-will and self-sufficiency of those who live them. Godliness means that we do what we do "as to the Lord" (Colossians 3:23), and there is a considerable distance between the life of self-governed goodness and the life of God-governed faith.

The radical claims of God upon our hearts will one day come as a surprise to those who have been living "good, clean lives" on their own. "For when they say, 'Peace and safety!' then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman . . ." While we are celebrating lives in which the concept of a supernatural Creator didn't seem necessary, the King whom we've left out of our calculations will be revealed in His glory.

Nothing blinds the mind to the claims of Jesus Christ more effectually than a good, clean-living, upright life based on self-realization. For a thing to be satanic does not mean that it is abominable and immoral. The satanically-managed man is moral, upright, proud, and individual; he is absolutely self-governed and has no need of God.

September 10

THE POSSESSIVE LIFE

Life is more than food, and the body is more than clothing.

Luke 12:23

WHATEVER POSSESSIONS WE MAY ACQUIRE IN THIS WORLD, THESE WERE NEVER MEANT TO BE ANYTHING MORE THAN TOOLS TO BE USED IN THE SERVICE OF SPIRITUAL PRIORITIES. As mere “things,” our possessions were intended to be defined by our character. But we tend to let the tail wag the dog. We attach so much significance to our things that they begin to define us and our character begins to be determined by our possessions, rather than vice versa. We find ourselves living “possessive” lives, as if the main object of our existence was to stockpile belongings.

Over and over again, Jesus appealed to His listeners to lift their sights to the higher concerns. “Life is more than food,” He said, “and the body is more than clothing.” “Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses” (Luke 12:15). Then as now, the average person needed to be reminded that the main concern of human life is the Creator, and not the possession of any of those things the Creator has made. Whatever has been created is for our use, but the Creator alone is for our devotion.

When we drift away from a worshipful concern for God, we soon lose our way searching for something else to take His place. We desperately need to have *something* that defines our identity and determines the value of our lives, and if God’s deeds are not allowed to do these things, then it’s only a matter of time before we begin looking to our own deeds to fill the gap.

The consequences of living possessively are fraught with pain, not only for ourselves but for those around us. “A life without a quiet center easily becomes destructive. When we cling to the results of our actions as our only way of self-identification, then we become possessive and defensive and tend to look at our fellow human beings more as enemies to be kept at a distance than as friends with whom we share the gifts of life” (Henri J. M. Nouwen). In the age of the affluent, upwardly mobile “consumer,” there is no harder lesson to learn. Our possessions pull on our hearts so powerfully, the Giver of all good gifts is easily forgotten.

Theirs is an endless road, a hopeless maze,
who seek for goods before they seek for God.

BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX

September 11

SHORTCUTS TURN OUT TO BE DISAPPOINTING

The blessing of the LORD makes one rich,
And He adds no sorrow with it.
Proverbs 10:22

IF WE DO NOT KEEP A PROPER PERSPECTIVE ON OUR POSSESSIONS, THE TIME MAY COME WHEN THEY GIVE US MUCH GRIEF. However tempting it may be to set aside our spiritual priorities and go straight for the monetary rewards of “life under the sun,” we should resist that temptation. Shortcuts to destinations like “pleasure” and “fulfillment” often turn out to be disappointing, and that is certainly the case with material wealth. Possessions gained at the expense of higher values have an uncanny way of turning against their owners and breaking their hearts.

We probably don’t have as much control as we’d like over the process through which wealth is acquired. But there is something else we don’t have much control over, and that is the circumstances that will allow us to enjoy our wealth once we’ve acquired it. We all know of individuals who have managed to acquire a fortune and then, perhaps through some serious family problem or other unexpected tragedy, have found that they were not in a position to derive any pleasure from the fruits of their labor. It is naive to think we have enough control of our circumstances to keep the sweet taste of our possessions from turning bitter.

For this reason, Solomon spoke of the individual “to whom God has given riches and wealth,” and added that it was also God who had “given him the power to eat of it, to receive his heritage and rejoice in his labor” (Ecclesiastes 5:19). Both the ability to gain wealth and the freedom to enjoy it are “the gift of God,” and we should never allow ourselves to forget that fact. Even if God allows us, in the short term, to disregard Him and still gain great wealth, it is well within His power to surround us with circumstances that turn our joy into sorrow. John Jewell said it bluntly: “What God does not bless will waste and consume you. It will do you no good.” But let us be careful on this sensitive issue: even if our possessions have been gained with God’s blessing, *in no case whatsoever are we to allow them to displace our desire for God Himself.* He is the one and only desire that will never disappoint us.

It is a mistake to love things that will inevitably decay,
and to be annoyed when they do.

GUIGO I

September 12

QUALITY OF LIFE

Who is the man who desires life, and loves many days, that he may see good?
Keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit.
Depart from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.

Psalm 34:12-14

ONE OF THE MOST FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS THAT WE FACE IS THE QUESTION OF THE “GOOD LIFE.” What sort of life would most truly be “good” for a human being to pursue? And more practically, what are the things that a person would need to do in order to experience such a life? The above text from Psalm 34, quoted by Peter in the New Testament in 1 Peter 3:10,11, is in many people’s minds one of the most beloved texts in the Psalms. In it, David said that if we desire life and if we love many days that we may “see good,” then we should tell the truth, depart from evil and do good, seek peace and pursue it. We should, in short, properly orient our thoughts and deeds toward God.

What kind of advice is this? What path to peace is being recommended? It is interesting that in speaking of the good life, David says nothing about health, wealth, social status, or civil rights, and he does not allude to any sort of human achievement or accomplishment. He says nothing, in fact, about any of the prizes that most of us spend most of our time trying to obtain (apparently in pursuit of the good life). Can we fail to get the point? David’s concept of the good life was that it had to do with human *character*. His primary concern was with what a person is, and not with what that person might have or accomplish.

David was a man who, despite a very hard life, knew as much about real joy as anyone who has ever lived except Jesus Christ. And he understood a principle we would do well to recover: if we do not carry our joy within us, we will not be able to find it anywhere else, no matter where we look. “Joy is not in things; it is in us” (Richard Wagner). And even within our own characters, real joy is not possible — and the good life will not be ours — if our characters are not in the process of being conformed to *our Creator’s character*. And this is what life in Jesus Christ is primarily about. It is about becoming “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4). Whatever other circumstances we may enjoy or endure, to be on this path of inward growth is to live the good life.

Joy is the echo of God’s life within us.

JOSEPH COLUMBA MARMION

September 13

IF WE'RE HUNGRY FOR GOODNESS

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.

Psalm 107:8,9

WE SHOULD STAND AMAZED AT GOD'S PATIENCE WITH US. In Malachi's day, for example, the people complained about the scarcity of God's blessings, but God invited them to take Him seriously and then see what would happen: "'Bring all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in My house, and try Me now in this,' says the LORD of hosts, 'if I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you such blessing that there will not be room enough to receive it'" (Malachi 3:10).

One of our difficulties is that we fail to recognize the depth of goodness that is available to us in God. "Oh, that men would give thanks to the LORD for His goodness!" Marvelous satisfactions are waiting for us, but we don't have the eyes to see how truly satisfying these things can be. Nor do we have the character to be grateful for what is available to us. We are like a complacent people who live just a few miles from the shore of a vast ocean. Others have told us what great things await us there, but if we've even bothered to go see what lies so near us, we've done little more than dip our toes into the most convenient edges of the water. We've come back complaining: "The water was cold. It was too far to travel. And we had to miss our favorite television program."

The thing we are lacking is a hunger for what God has to offer: *goodness*. If our taste runs in other directions, we shouldn't be surprised that what God offers is unimpressive. But for those who "hunger and thirst for righteousness" (Matthew 5:6), there simply are no words to describe the depth of our fulfillment. In fact, while it is obviously true that God "satisfies the longing soul, and fills the hungry soul with goodness," there is another sense in which God's satisfaction of our needs only enlarges our capacity to enjoy Him even more. For those who've progressed a little way down the path of spiritual growth, one of the most intense delights of life in God is that just when we think He has filled our cup to the brim, He gives us a bigger cup.

That they are never satisfied makes all the saints rejoice.
Oh, what a happy hunger! Oh, what a blessed thirst!

ANGELUS SILESIVS

September 14

LONGING FOR WHATEVER GOD SAYS

How sweet are Your words to my taste,
Sweeter than honey to my mouth!
Psalm 119:103

THERE IS A STRONG, VIBRANT LINK BETWEEN LOVING GOD AND LONGING FOR HIS WORD. If Scripture study is nothing to us but an obligation or chore, we ought not to be so bold as to say we love God or take Him seriously. It is no less true with God than with anyone else: we are delighted to receive communications from those whom we love. "This is the love of God," John wrote, "that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3).

The problem that many religious people have, however, is that while God's words are sweet to our taste in general, we shrink away from the parts of His word that we ourselves most need to hear. Thus our three goals should be: to long for God, to long for what He says, and to long for *whatever* He says!

There happens to be a quite practical reason why we should be open to whatever God says. As J. I. Packer has pointed out, "One of the many divine qualities of the Bible is this: that it does not yield its secrets to the irreverent or censorious." If we find some of God's words less than sweet because our hearts are not open and receptive to our responsibilities, then it's not likely that we'll even understand the meaning of the words we need to understand. Adopting a resistant attitude is a sure way to cut ourselves off from the comprehension of God's words (John 8:43,44).

If we are eager to hear what God has to say, however, and if we are also eager to do as He instructs (James 1:21,22), then we will certainly be able to understand all we need to understand. And not only that, but we will become hard-working, thorough students of the Scriptures. We will be more than dabblers in God's word. Perhaps we shall even be able to identify with the well-known words of Martin Luther: "I study my Bible as I gather apples. First, I shake the whole tree that the ripest might fall. Then I shake each limb, and when I have shaken each limb, I shake each branch and every twig. Then I look under every leaf."

Make it the first morning business of your life to understand some part of the Bible clearly, and make it your daily business to obey it in all that you do understand.

JOHN RUSKIN

September 15

MUSIC TO OUR EARS

Blessed are the people who know the joyful sound!
They walk, O LORD, in the light of Your countenance.
Psalm 89:15

WHEN THE TRUMPET OF GOD SOUNDS, IT IS A WONDERFUL THING TO BE AMONG THOSE WHO KNOW THAT SOUND AND UNDERSTAND JUST HOW JOYOUS IT IS. The Psalmist said, "Blessed are the people who know the joyful sound!"

In Israel, the priestly trumpets were to be blown on several important occasions. One of these was the onset of war. Through Moses, God had said, "When you go to war in your land against the enemy who oppresses you, then you shall sound an alarm with the trumpets, and you will be remembered before the LORD your God, and you will be saved from your enemies" (Numbers 10:9). In this instance, the joyful sound would be that of *victory*.

Also, the trumpets were to be blown at various times of sacrifice. "Also in the day of your gladness, in your appointed feasts, and at the beginning of your months, you shall blow the trumpets over your burnt offerings and over the sacrifices of your peace offerings; and they shall be a memorial for you before your God: I am the LORD your God" (Numbers 10:10). At these times, the people would rejoice to hear the sound of *worship*.

But there was another occasion also, and that was the Day of Jubilee, that great day every fifty years when slaves were released and debts were canceled. "Then you shall cause the trumpet of the Jubilee to sound on the tenth day of the seventh month; on the Day of Atonement you shall make the trumpet to sound throughout all your land. And you shall consecrate the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout all the land to all its inhabitants" (Leviticus 25:9,10). This trumpet-sounding might have been the most joyous of all. It was the welcome sound of *freedom*.

To those whose hearts are turned toward God today, there are no more joyous sounds than those that emanate from His throne: the sounds of victory, of worship, and of freedom! Do we have ears to hear? Do our hearts resonate to the sounds of God's joy? The "people who know the joyful sound" are a fortunate folk.

The trumpet shall be heard on high,
The dead shall live, the living die,
And music shall untune the sky!

JOHN DRYDEN

September 16

SPIRITUAL "REALITY"

By faith Moses, when he became of age, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward. By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured as seeing Him who is invisible. *Hebrews 11:24-27*

IT IS IMPORTANT TO RECOGNIZE THAT THERE ARE TWO REALMS OF REALITY, THE SPIRITUAL AND THE TEMPORAL, AND THAT NEITHER OF THESE IS ANY MORE REAL THAN THE OTHER. In the Scriptures, the willingness to deal responsibly with spiritual realities is what is called "faith." It is a virtue powerfully illustrated in the life of a person like Moses, who not only recognized spiritual reality but was also willing to act on that recognition. The invisibility of God to Moses' physical eye did not keep him from dealing responsibly with God, and he is only one of many biblical examples of people who acted with a courageous confidence in the spiritual realm.

Today, however, we tend to see the faith of a Moses as little more than a relic of the pre-scientific age. As far as our own decisions are concerned, we are reluctant to trust anything that can't be examined by empirical science. We tend to think that if anything of a spiritual nature exists at all, it is somehow less real than the visible things that surround us. And this tendency has two results: (1) we refuse to allow any sense of the word "knowledge" to be applied to religious or spiritual truth, and (2) we take a somewhat condescending view of people who are dedicated to the spiritual life, as if they were wasting their time on idealistic things that are less practical than those of the "real world."

Well, if the God of the Scriptures does not really exist, then we'd be better off to dispense with the pretense that He does. Yet if He does exist then we need to take Him with all the seriousness our minds can muster. There is no need to relegate spiritual truths to a secondary status. To be people of faith does not mean we're making things up. It means we're committed to the massive continents of truth that lie beyond our present horizons.

Commitment to the spiritual reality is simply commitment to reality and it is the way to really appreciate the wonder of all life. It is the way to come to understand the extraordinary fact of the mystery of life itself, the inner hidden secret of life that gives it its real excitement. Entering on the spiritual path is coming to appreciate our life as a voyage of discovery.

JOHN MAIN

September 17

WHEN WE LOSE WHAT WE WERE MADE FOR

Do not hide Your face from me; do not turn Your servant away in anger;
You have been my help; do not leave me nor forsake me, O God of my salvation.

Psalm 27:9

AS PERSONAL BEINGS, WE WERE CREATED FOR FELLOWSHIP BOTH WITH OUR CREATOR AND OTHER PERSONS, AND THE LOSS OF THAT FELLOWSHIP AS A RESULT OF SIN IS A MOST GRIEVOUS LOSS INDEED. When we lose the very thing we were made for, we suffer a void that can't be filled with any lesser fulfillment. There is no honest way to deny that we hurt. We've been cut off from a contact and communion that are essential to our nature.

Our need for deep, significant relationship with God and other personal beings is so profound that we ourselves do not fully understand it. We sense that we need to be connected in some way to other personal beings, including God, and we suffer pain when our connections fall short of happiness. But we find it hard to articulate the loneliness we feel. As finite creatures broken by sin, we hurt and we don't even have the ability to understand how deeply we hurt. Our need for personal relationship is deeper than we ourselves can fathom.

But our pain does not come from simply being alone. It comes from being *left* alone. Following the murder of his brother, Cain was to be sent into lonely lands to live by himself. As God pronounced his sentence, Cain cried: "Surely You have driven me out this day from the face of the ground; I shall be hidden from Your face; I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond on the earth, and it will happen that anyone who finds me will kill me" (Genesis 4:14). Can any of us say we've never feared what Cain feared?

Having been created for personal relationship, there can be no greater agony than to know that we, like Cain, have *lost* this thing that is so essential to us. Because of our own choices, those whom we need to be connected to, especially God, have turned their backs to us — and not without justification. We are not only alone; we are alone because we've been abandoned. And we've not only been abandoned; we've been abandoned because of our own misdeeds. Thus, it is the triple combination of *loneliness*, *regret*, and *rejection* that twists our hearts into such sorrowful shapes.

Over the years I've come to realize that my greatest fear in life
is a dread of a certain kind of solitude, of abandonment.

FRANCINE DU PLESSIX GRAY

September 18
AT ALL COSTS

For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?

Matthew 16:25,26

THERE IS NOTHING OF MORE VALUE TO US THAN OUR SOULS, AND WE ARE NOT WISE IF WE HANG ON TO OTHER THINGS THAT JEOPARDIZE OUR SOULS. Jesus went so far as to say that if we were ever faced with a choice between our souls and the entire rest of the world, we would be foolish not to let go of the world and preserve our souls. When the ship is sinking, we must swim away from it.

It is not easy to keep in mind that our intangible, invisible possessions are of greater value than those of a more visible nature. A man, for example, will sometimes be willing to put his entire reputation, his career, his family's happiness, and many other invisible things at risk for the momentary pleasure of one immoral trinket that is so immediately present to his physical senses that he thinks he can't possibly do without it. Tangible treasures and physical pleasures can seem so valuable in a moment of temptation that we completely forget about the much greater value of the things we'll throw away if we yield to the temptation. When we're hungry enough, we'll trade our birthright for a bowl of soup. And like Esau, we later regret having done so (Hebrews 12:16,17).

Jesus used some of His starkest language to warn us about the danger of confused values. Do whatever it takes, He said, to sever yourself from anything that endangers your spiritual welfare: "If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell" (Matthew 5:29).

Much of the wisdom of life consists in knowing what to let go of and when to let go of it. Nowhere is there an exhaustive list of all the things that can potentially put our souls at risk. The truth is, there are few things in the world that might not do so under certain circumstances. But *whatever* threatens to cut us off from God, we should cut ourselves off from that thing. Immediately.

Imagine a burning house. A few occupants run naked from the house.

They abandon everything else to save their lives. Others in that house attempt to save some furniture and other precious possessions. They return into the blazing structure several times in order to bring things out.

Ultimately they die in the smoke and flames. This is misplaced attachment.

September 19
FIRST LOVE

Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love.
Revelation 2:4

IT IS GOOD FOR US TO RECALL THE ARDENT LOVE WE HAD WHEN OUR GREAT DESIRE FOR GOD WAS NEWLY DISCOVERED. As time goes by, the demands and difficulties of earthly existence keep us busy and wear us out. If we don't frequently tend the fire of our love for God, it will die down. It is not impossible for the flame to flicker and go out altogether. Our first love for God is a fire that must be kept burning and if necessary, be rekindled.

Jesus Christ sent this message to the church in Ephesus: "Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love." These were hardworking Christians who had made considerable sacrifices to maintain the integrity of the gospel. Yet so much time had passed since their conversion, they seemed not to remember the way they had loved the Lord at first. But the Lord remembered. And His words of warning to them recall the words that God spoke through Jeremiah to the people of Jerusalem: "I remember you, the kindness of your youth, the love of your betrothal, when you went after Me in the wilderness, in a land not sown" (Jeremiah 2:2). It is not a good thing to let slip from our memory something that God still remembers about us!

To those in Ephesus who had left their first love, Christ said, "Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place — unless you repent" (Revelation 2:5). The words "remember" and "repent" should tell us that the love which the Lord desires from us is more than an elusive emotion. Ultimately, it is a love that springs from the will. And if we don't love Him as we used to, there are specific things we can do to rectify that problem. One of these would be to take some time off, go to a restful place, and remember — really *remember* — how we used to love God. This memory will be a refreshing, nourishing, energizing reflection on what once was and on what still can be.

O God, the God of all goodness and of all grace, who art worthy of a greater love than we can either give or understand: Fill our hearts, we beseech you, with such love toward you that nothing may seem too hard for us to do or to suffer in obedience to your will; and grant that thus loving you, we may become daily more like you, and finally obtain the crown of life which thou hast promised to those that love you; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

September 20

BEING WISE IS NOT WHAT IT'S ABOUT

So they asked Him, saying, "Teacher, but when will these things be? And what sign will there be when these things are about to take place?" *Luke 21:7*

PERHAPS IT IS THE NATURE OF DISCIPLES TO ASK QUESTIONS. But don't we sometimes ask too many questions of God? And don't we often betray by our questions that the things we'd most like to know about are not the things He would most like to see us be interested in? Compared to the big issues that should be at the forefront of our minds, the subjects that our questions deal with are often trivial. It is a good thing God is patient with us.

What do we think life in God is about anyway? Is it about satisfying our curiosity or increasing our likeness to His character? Are we seeking to become wise for our own sake or to become like Him for His sake? If we intend to seek God diligently, what we're interested in will largely determine what we end up with.

There is perhaps no better example than Abraham of a person who understood what life is about. "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going" (Hebrews 11:8). Abraham had enough confidence in the *person* of God that he required little in the way of information about the *plans* of God. When called to leave his birthplace, "he went out, not knowing where he was going." Many would have demanded to know the destination, the itinerary, the timetable, and the purpose of the journey, but this great man was content to wait and see. Abraham's overriding interest was in showing reverence to God Himself, not in figuring out what God's next move might be. As for God's next move, Abraham would wait and see.

God is not obligated to explain everything to our satisfaction. "He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end" (Ecclesiastes 3:11). Some things are, to be quite candid, none of our business. What God has revealed to us, however, is the truth about His character, His heart, and His values. He patiently waits for us to become more interested in these things and less interested in specific scenarios. "You're wanting a map," He says, "but I'm trying to give you a Compass."

Have you been asking God what He is going to do? He will never tell you. God does not tell you what He is going to do — He reveals to you who He is.

September 21

NOTHING BETWEEN US?

Behold, the LORD'S hand is not shortened, that it cannot save;
Nor His ear heavy, that it cannot hear.
But your iniquities have separated you from your God;
And your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear.
Isaiah 59:1,2

IF ANYTHING AT ALL STANDS BETWEEN US AND THE FULLNESS OF OUR FATHER'S FELLOWSHIP, THE REMOVAL OF THAT HINDRANCE OUGHT TO BE A MATTER OF GREAT CONCERN TO US. On any scale of importance or urgency, our relationship to God must rank first. If we're cut off from Him, how can we concentrate on anything else?

It is sin, of course, that alienates us from God. We can be thankful that by the atoning death of His Son, God has made it possible for us to be forgiven. By virtue of His Son's death for us, He is able to justify us without being unjust Himself (Romans 3:26). But God has moved as far in our direction as He can without overriding the freedom of our will. As things stand now, the next move is ours. The process of reconciliation can't go any further until we openly acknowledge, without excuse, that we *need* to be forgiven. And God's requirement of repentance (Luke 13:3) means that we must make a radical turn, not just feeling sorry for our sin but actually committing ourselves to its removal from our lives. We can't have our sin and be forgiven of it too.

In Isaiah's day, the spiritual conditions in Jerusalem were deplorable. Continuing to practice flagrant sin, the people still came to the temple to worship. But their sins, unacknowledged and unrepented of, stood between them and God: "When you spread out your hands," God said, "I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not hear" (Isaiah 1:15). The problem lay not in God's inability to forgive but in their unwillingness to repent. So Isaiah said, "The LORD'S hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; nor His ear heavy, that it cannot hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear." Who among us can read these words and not think of penitent steps we need to take so that God can show His love to us?

Nothing has been capable, dear Lord, to hinder you from being all mine,
neither heaven, nor your divinity, nor the gibbet of the cross;
grant me the grace, that nothing may hinder me from being all yours,
to whom I owe myself both for creation and redemption.

LUCY HERBERT

September 22

WHEN THE ROAD FORKS

Now it came to pass after these things that God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." Then He said, "Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." *Genesis 22:1,2*

THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS LIVING A HUMAN LIFE WITHOUT BEING TESTED. Every decision any of us makes is a test, from the little choices all the way up to the major decisions. When the road forks and one path or the other must be chosen, we are in each instance being asked what kind of character we have. If we make our choice on the basis of which path is easiest or most personally satisfactory, we indicate that our character is of one sort. If, on the other hand, we choose the path we judge to be the most honorable and pleasing to God, we indicate that we have another kind of character. As life moves along and our decisions begin to multiply, it becomes more and more obvious what kind of stuff we're made of. When the end comes and we stand before our Maker for His judgment, the evidence will be irrefutable. We will have chosen our own destiny.

Do we understand what a "crisis" is? Our English word comes from the Greek verb *krinein*, which meant to separate, to decide between, or to judge. A crisis, then, is a situation in which a crucial decision must be made. It is a turning point, a pivotal circumstance in which we have to make a choice. Abraham faced such a crisis when God called on him to choose whether he would comply with His instruction to give up Isaac, his only son. In making the choice that he did, Abraham showed himself to be a man of faith and godly integrity (Hebrews 11:17-19).

In every human life there eventually comes an ultimate crisis, some single test larger than all the others combined. This fact should not frighten us. It should move us to work on our character a little bit each day, building strength by practicing the discipline of good decision-making. The most foolish fellow in the world is the one who supposes that he can waste the little decisions and still pass the big test when it comes.

So we will be brought one by one to the testing place, and we may never know when we are there. At that testing place there will be no dozen possible choices for us — just one and an alternative — but our whole future will be conditioned by the choice we make.

A. W. TOZER

September 23

IS REGRET GOOD FOR US OR BAD?

Then Judas, His betrayer, seeing that He had been condemned, was remorseful and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." And they said, "What is that to us? You see to it!" Then he threw down the pieces of silver in the temple and departed, and went and hanged himself. *Matthew 27:3-5*

HOW SHOULD WE DEAL WITH THE PAINFUL REALITY OF REGRET IN OUR LIVES? When we reflect on the errors we've committed and the damage those errors have done, there is at least a momentary stab of remorse. If we know we've been forgiven, the sharpness of the remorse is perhaps softened by the passage of time, but it never seems to go away entirely. There are those who believe that any such lingering regret is inherently unhealthy and that some psychological expedient must be found to get rid of it. But is regret always a bad thing?

The evidence would suggest that those who ask us to get past the feeling of *any* regret are asking, if not the impossible, then at least the unnatural. If the mistakes we've made are relatively minor, it might be possible to forget about them or feel no pain when we think about them. But in the case of the truly heinous sins we've all committed against God and against other people, it would be a villain with an especially hard heart who felt no regret at all when he remembered what he'd done.

But apart from the question of whether we *can* forget our sins, there is a serious question whether we even *ought* to do so. Regret, like all the other sadder emotions, can serve a useful purpose. It need not be an unhealthy thing. If we think of regret as we should and respond to it in the right way, it can be an important part of what keeps us moving in God's direction.

If, like Judas, our regret is filled with the poison of selfish concern it will drive us away from God. That sort of regret shows no evidence of a penitent heart. In fact, it is a self-pity no less sinful than the deed that produced it. But our regret need not come from a selfish heart. If our hearts are turned toward God, then pure regret can be a gently poignant reminder of our continuing need for His grace. It can be a part of the hunger that brings us to Him.

If your regret results in greater humility and increases your desire to serve God, receive it with gratitude as a gift from heaven. If it creates anxiety, makes you sad, depressed, fearful, and slow to do your duty, then we can be sure it has been suggested by the enemy. Disregard it.

LAWRENCE SCUPOLI

September 24

POWERFUL TRUTH

Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. *James 1:21,22*

NOTHING IS MORE POWERFUL THAN GOD'S WORD, AND YET ITS POWER IS LOST ON THOSE WHO DO NOTHING MORE THAN THINK ABOUT IT. James encouraged his readers to "receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls," but he quickly followed that with a reminder that we must "be doers of the word, and not hearers only." It's a sad fact that those who have the most to say about the power of God's word often exhibit the least of its power in their own lives.

Our hope should always be that others will be influenced by God's truth as they come into contact with us. But Oswald Chambers posed a keen question when he asked, "Is the Word of God tremendously penetrating and sharp in me as I hand it on to you, or does my life betray the things I profess to teach?" If what we believe about God is not *real* to us, if it is flat and dry and colorless, then it is only to be expected that others will find it uninteresting. What could be more unappealing than to be "evangelized" by someone whose Monday-morning lifestyle shows that he doesn't take his Sunday-morning convictions seriously?

We must not let God become a mere subject to be studied and debated academically. Our ideas about God certainly do matter, and we need to understand that God is honored by worship that is based on truth as well as spirit (John 4:23,24). But even so, the truth about God must not be confined to the intellect. It must command the will and exhilarate the emotions. Godliness is more than a subject to think about — it is a life to be lived. If God is not real, then "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die!" (1 Corinthians 15:32), but if He is real, then His reality must be allowed to cut down into the very quick of our conscience. We must be moved. We must be transformed. We must pay more than lip service to the truth that God's word is "living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword" (Hebrews 4:12).

Many who cry out against sin can live comfortably with it in their heart, home, and business. It is possible to learn all about the mysteries of the Bible and never be affected by it in one's soul. Great knowledge is not enough . . . Talkers and boasters enjoy knowing something. God is pleased when it is done.

JOHN BUNYAN

September 25

BECOMING ADEPT AT DEVOTION

Now may the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God
and into the patience of Christ. *2 Thessalonians 3:5*

IN A WORLD FULL OF DISTRACTIONS, IT IS NOT EASY TO KEEP OUR HEARTS LOVINGLY AIMED IN GOD'S DIRECTION. Our minds are tugged this way and that by multiple concerns, and when we try to keep them centered on God, we find that our minds wander. Consistent and easy devotion to God is a habit that must be acquired, a skill that must be learned. Like most other good things, godliness takes training, discipline, and regular practice over time.

If we're not where we want to be in our devotion to God, how do we get there? The answer is hardly surprising: *we get there a little at a time*. If a person has been confined to a hospital bed for several weeks, that person may aspire to running a twenty-six mile marathon at some point, but that is not going to happen the first day home from the hospital. The person will first have to sit up, then stand up, and then walk across the room. With daily discipline, the person will then walk around the block, then run around the block, and then run around many blocks. The marathon will come in due course, but only after a regimen of training that *progressively* builds strength and skill over time. And in our spiritual lives, the very same "law of progressive strength" is in operation. We can get to the point where our hearts stay easily and naturally centered on God, but we can't get there overnight.

We need to be realistic enough to accept this fact: we won't become adept at devotion if we don't engage in the activities that are conducive to that. It is silly to suppose that we can neglect the means through which devotion is increased and still enjoy the results of those means. If we don't regularly take the time to engage in such disciplines as Bible study, prayer, and meditation, then we'll remain spiritually immature and it'll not get any easier for us to keep our hearts in the right place. As an older man, Paul knew what he was talking about when he said to his younger friend Timothy, "exercise yourself toward godliness" (1 Timothy 4:7).

Ostriches are not flying birds, chickens fly short distances with much effort, but eagles, doves, and swallows fly high and far. Sinners are like the ostrich and are earthbound. Good people who have not quite reached devotion are like the chicken; they fly in God's direction, but inefficiently and awkwardly. The devout soar to God with regularity. Devotion, then, is a natural agility of the soul.

September 26

GOD WILL ALWAYS LOVE US MORE

We love Him because He first loved us.

1 John 4:19

IT SHOULD BE STRENGTHENING TO US TO KNOW THAT WE ARE SURROUNDED BY THE LIMITLESS LOVE OF GOD. As our Creator, He is able to love us with a love that is infinite. We cannot understand it completely or respond to it fully. Even if, like our antediluvian ancestors, we were to live hundreds of years upon the earth and love God as Enoch and Noah did, we could not learn to love God with the same love that He has for us. But this fact should not discourage us. It should challenge us in a most delightful way. Although we can't love God as He loves us, we can learn to love Him more and more as time goes by. No matter how much of God's love we learn to enjoy, there will always be much more waiting for us up ahead. His love is boundless and inexhaustible.

One thing we should try to keep clear is that whatever love we show toward God is always a *response*. It is God who has taken the initiative. As John wrote, "We love Him because He first loved us." This means that our love for God must always be offered in profound humility. If He had not first reached across the chasm and extended love to us, it would be futile for us to love Him. As Paul said, Christ died for us "when we were still without strength" (Romans 5:6). And so John could say, "In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10).

The surest way for us to grow in our love for God is to meditate on the depth of His love for us. The knowledge of God's love is a compelling force: "For the love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died; and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again" (2 Corinthians 5:14,15). In the end, faithful service must always spring from fervent love. If we have even the smallest fraction of the love for our Lord that He has shown toward us, we will not be content to love Him with anything less than all our hearts.

Our soul is Christ's bride and loves him ardently. But even when she thinks she is completely in love, she feels that her love is inadequate because she is loved so much. And that is true. How could she love as much in return? God loves with all his being.

BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX

September 27

THE TRUST THAT TAKES GOD SERIOUSLY

By faith Noah, being divinely warned of things not yet seen, moved with godly fear, prepared an ark for the saving of his household, by which he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness which is according to faith. *Hebrews 11:7*

NOAH TRUSTED GOD ENOUGH TO TAKE HIM SERIOUSLY, AND HE TOOK HIM SERIOUSLY ENOUGH TO OBEY HIS INSTRUCTIONS. The particular kind of righteousness that Noah demonstrated is the only kind God has ever accepted from human beings: “the righteousness which is according to faith.” And the distinguishing characteristic of this type of righteousness is not that it de-emphasizes obedience but that it produces an obedience based on trust.

We can tell to what extent we trust God by looking at how much risk we’re willing to take in order to obey Him, particularly in situations where God’s instructions go against our instincts. In this respect, there is a difference between “faith” and “trust.” Many people say they have faith, but not many are willing to put their trust where their faith is. James Dobson has illustrated it this way: “Faith in God is like believing a man can walk over Niagara Falls on a tightrope while pushing a wheelbarrow. Trust in God is like getting into the wheelbarrow!”

The “righteousness which is according to faith” is a scary thing. It requires that we cling to God alone and let go of any other means of support or security or safety. It isn’t easy to “get into the wheelbarrow,” and for all those who say they’ve done it, very few actually have. It takes humble, courageous trust to let go of all our self-sufficient safety ropes and let God determine the means by which we’ll get to the other side. It just seems so often that God’s plans for our righteousness involve the possibility of dangerous (and perhaps even embarrassing) consequences!

But if we’re willing to trust God, faith can open a door that must otherwise remain forever closed. Do we wish to please Him? Then faith — the radical trust that will take God seriously and obey Him readily — is the only key that will open that desirable door: “But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him” (Hebrews 11:6).

The Spirit-filled life is no mystery revealed to a select few, no goal difficult of attainment. To trust and to obey is the substance of the whole matter.

VICTOR RAYMOND

September 28

OUR UTILITARIAN APPROACH TO GOD

So Jonah went out of the city and sat on the east side of the city. There he made himself a shelter and sat under it in the shade, till he might see what would become of the city. And the LORD God prepared a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be shade for his head to deliver him from his misery. So Jonah was very grateful for the plant. *Jonah 4:5,6*

ALTHOUGH WE UNDERSTAND THE SCRIPTURES TO TEACH THAT WE ARE GOD'S VESSELS, WE SOMETIMES LOOK UPON HIM AS A VESSEL FOR OUR OWN USE. We tend to take a utilitarian approach to God, as if He were an instrument that exists to accomplish our purposes, rather than vice versa.

The degree to which we delight in God is too often determined by how "useful" He is to us. In our own minds, we have a concept of how we would like our lives to be, and to the extent that God helps us move toward having this sort of life, we are delighted with Him. We look for the "practical" benefits of the spiritual life, and if these are not found, then we tend to become angry with God. Perhaps we reject Him altogether. We might not say it in so many words, but we have little use for a God who doesn't come through for us in the clutch.

In the heat of the blazing Assyrian sun, Jonah was pleased when God prepared a plant that would provide welcome shade and "deliver him from his misery." He was not so pleased the next day when the plant was destroyed and he had no choice but to sit in the sun again. "It is better," he said, "for me to die than to live" (Jonah 4:8). Just so, our estimate of how well God is doing often depends on how satisfactorily He is providing what we desire.

Yet if our relationship with God is based upon love, we can ill afford to let self-centered (though we would simply call them "practical") motives enter in. Our enjoyment of God cannot depend on whether some desired payoff is being received from Him. Love does not calculate or bargain for personal benefit; it gives out of the sheer joy of giving to one who is beloved. "The only reward love seeks is someone to love" (Bernard of Clairvaux). And if there is any question of benefit, we exist for His benefit: our glory is to accomplish His purposes and to show forth His goodness.

That which cannot be explained or made useful tends to be rejected as contrary to our purpose. Under those circumstances, we lose the ability to remain instruments of God's will. We would rather inform God of our needs in the hope that he will comply with our conceptions of what life ought to be.

September 29

IS IT PRAISE THAT WE SEEK AFTER ALL?

Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

Matthew 6:1

IF WE ARE COMMITTED TO DOING WHAT IS RIGHT FOR ITS OWN SAKE, IT WILL BE ENOUGH FOR US TO HAVE THE APPROVAL OF GOD. There are strong warnings in Jesus' teaching against doing our good deeds in order to be seen by others. But while most of us would say we reject such pretense and hypocrisy, what would happen to our relationship with God if we were to receive nothing but criticism for our obedience to Him? Would we continue to serve God if no one appreciated us for it, no one recognized us for our goodness, or no one did good to us in return? And if we do good mainly to avoid criticism for *not* doing it, is that any better than doing it to be seen? And what are the implications of doing good primarily to enjoy the self-satisfaction of our *own* approval?

Benefits like approval, praise, significance, acceptance, and gratitude are powerful motivators. Few of us can honestly say these things do not matter to us. There may be many people out there whose approval is of little importance to us, but for virtually every human being there is at least *someone* whose acceptance it is important for that person to have. And the difficult question is this: what if doing God's will does not result in *that someone's* acceptance and approval? Will we obey anyway?

In all honesty, however, there is another problem that must be avoided, and that is the problem of smugness. Perhaps we do have the spiritual strength to do what's right whether anyone else on the planet appreciates it or not. Perhaps it does not matter to us what anyone else thinks. What then? It would be a rare individual who could feel that way and not be a little bit proud of himself or herself for being so above it all. But the moment we begin to feel (however secretly) a little superior to those who are motivated by petty concerns, we need to take stock. "Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Corinthians 10:12).

In any and every circumstance, we must simply be careful about our focus. If it is truly God whom we seek — and if it is God whom we *love* — then our focus will be on Him, not on ourselves.

Your purpose is not to be seen or known or loved or admired or praised.
Your purpose is to see, know, love, admire, and praise God.

September 30

ON NOT MISSING THE MOMENT

And see, now I go bound in the spirit to Jerusalem, not knowing the things that will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies in every city, saying that chains and tribulations await me. But none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. *Acts 20:22-24*

CAREFUL STEWARDSHIP MUST BE MAINTAINED OVER THE MINDS THAT GOD HAS GIVEN US, OR ELSE WE WILL LOSE THE ABILITY TO LIVE PRODUCTIVELY. The twin gifts of memory and anticipation, for example, are dangerous. Like all other good things, both the ability to look backward and the ability to look forward have the potential for great harm if they are not managed wisely. We can only do with the present moment what God would want us to do if we hold to a productive view of the past and the future.

As the above text indicates, the apostle Paul maintained a steadfastly practical view of the present moment and its opportunities. As a former persecutor of the church, looking to the past would have been painful, and for the greater part of his ministry as an apostle, looking to the future would have filled him with trepidation. "But none of these things move me," he said. Many things lay sorrowfully behind him, and many lay dreadfully before him, but more important than any of his memories or his anxieties was the privilege of doing in the present that which would serve the purposes of God. His goal? It was simply this: "that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God."

Jesus often gave less than a complete answer when His disciples asked about when certain future events were going to occur. On almost every occasion, He brought their attention back to the more practical matter of doing the daily work they'd been given to do, regardless of what may have happened yesterday or what might happen tomorrow. What our Lord always wants is to find His servants busy doing each day's ordinary work: "Blessed is that servant whom his master finds so doing when he comes" (Luke 12:43). Ideally, our minds should be enriched with both the memories of God's grace and the hopes of God's glory. But in any case, we must not miss what the present moment means.

Let us not look back in anger or forward in fear, but around in awareness.

JAMES THURBER

October 1

UNCLUTTERING OUR LIVES

... that you also aspire to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you, that you may walk properly toward those who are outside, and that you may lack nothing.

1 Thessalonians 4:11,12

LIFE HAS A WAY OF BECOMING MORE AND MORE COMPLICATED, AND THERE IS A NEED FOR US TO STEP BACK PERIODICALLY AND SIMPLIFY THE WAY WE ARE LIVING. Like a garage or an attic, life tends to pick up clutter. We add activities and possessions and concerns to ourselves so frequently that it's hard for us to see how piled up and confused our affairs are becoming. As far as our spiritual lives are concerned, one of the most helpful things we can do is go through the "attic" of our lifestyles, perhaps once or twice a year, and deliberately clean out the clutter. We should get rid of anything that does not helpfully and actively contribute to what is really important. This means having the courage to get rid of many "things" we've acquired because we thought they might be useful. If, however, they've not actually been useful to our priorities after a reasonable time, we need to get rid of them.

In her wonderful *At Home in Mitford*, novelist Jan Karon has Homeless Hobbes, a hermit who lives Thoreau-like in the woods, say, "Sometimes you have to gag on fancy before you can appreciate the plain, th' way I see it." Hobbes had been a high-powered advertising executive before he "gagged on fancy" and discovered the value of the plain life in his simple cabin. "For too many years," said Hobbes, "I ate fancy, I dressed fancy, I talked fancy. A while back, I decided to start talkin' th' way I was raised t' talk, and for th' first time in forty years, I can understand what I'm sayin'." The point here is not that the fancy or sophisticated lifestyle is wrong or inherently undesirable, but rather that there are some real values to the simple life that we often fail to recognize until we've overdosed on the complications that go with "fancy."

The very worst disadvantage of the cluttered life is that being at peace and growing in our relationship with God become almost impossible. Perhaps there are a few who could manage such a juggling act, but not many of us can do so. God's work requires us to be engaged in life's activities, but growing deep roots in God's character requires solitude and silence.

Devotional progress comes best to those who live a plain, simple life.

LAWRENCE SCUPOLI

October 2

FEELING OUR PAIN, FACING OUR SIN

For I acknowledge my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.
Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight;
That You may be found just when You speak, and blameless when You judge.

Psalm 51:3,4

TWO PAINFUL TRUTHS MUST BE CONFRONTED IF WE ARE TO LONG FOR GOD DEEPLY: OUR EMPTINESS AND OUR SINFULNESS. Somehow we'd like to convince ourselves that we can get all we need in this life and that our problem with sin is at least manageable. In truth, however, our deepest longings can never be satisfied in this world, and the sin in our hearts is worse than we've been willing to admit. The sooner we face these facts, the sooner we can learn what grace really means. We only "get" God when we "give up" in both of these areas.

Larry Crabb has written concerning these important matters in his book *Inside Out*. There he argues that an acceptance of both our thirst and our selfishness is necessary if we are to begin growing toward God. "We are not psychologically disordered," Crabb writes, "we are sinful people who believe lies about what must be ours in order to experience fulfillment." Real change for the better is possible only when we confess the pain of our disappointed longings and the sinfulness of our self-protective motives. These are the keys that open the door to the only joy worth having.

In regard to our emptiness, we need to just go ahead and admit that we hurt. As long as we live in this world, our groaning is inescapable. In God it can be diminished, but in this life it will not go away completely. And in regard to our sinfulness, we need to just go ahead and admit that we are broken. In God our sins can be forgiven and our lives can be improved, but if we are to be saved, God must save us despite our continuing failures.

Honesty about both our yearnings and our guilt is not easy. But the good news is that it leads to an appreciation of grace that will allow God to enter us deeply. Hope can only be ours when we admit that our hearts will never be completely healed in this world. And forgiveness can only be ours when we admit that our crutches and our carnal coping mechanisms are selfish.

Very few Christians feel their disappointment with life deeply enough to fix their hope on what is yet to come. Even fewer face their sin so thoroughly that forgiveness becomes their most valued blessing.

LARRY CRABB

October 3

A LABOR OF LOVE

... remembering without ceasing your work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the sight of our God and Father.
1 Thessalonians 1:3

IT IS SOMETIMES ASTONISHING TO SEE WHAT RESULTS COME FROM THE EFFORTS OF THOSE WHO ARE POWERED BY LOVE. When Paul wrote to his Christian friends in Thessalonica, he was writing to people who had begun to suffer persecution as soon as they had become Christians. And yet their love for their new Lord was such that they were not only surviving but thriving. Paul was delighted to pray for them and give thanks for the good things that were coming from their love: “We are always thankful to God as we pray for you all, for we never forget that your faith has meant solid achievement, your love has meant hard work, and the hope that you have in our Lord Jesus Christ means sheer dogged endurance in the life that you live before God, the Father of us all” (J. B. Phillips’s paraphrase of 1 Thessalonians 1:3). The work of these disciples was a work of faith, their labor was a labor of love, and their patience was a patience of hope. These are the true springs from which the highest kind of effort and sacrifice always flow.

We need to bring genuine love for God more to the center of our own motivation. Yet we must be careful. In the warm glow of our love for Him, we must not conceive of God as a doting grandfather, willing to accept anything our sincerity chooses to offer Him. Being moved by love does not mean being presumptuous. God is still God, and it is still His prerogative to say what is required from us. If the true worship of God comes from a spirit of love, it also comes from a respect for truth (John 4:23,24).

Yet as our reverence causes us to take God with utter seriousness, how much difference it will make if our love causes us to seek Him with utter thankfulness. Let us never trifle with our responsibilities, but let us also never forget the manifold goodnesses of God that have made us want to accept those responsibilities. When the final tally is made, our labor will matter little if it was not a labor of love. “For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind” (2 Timothy 1:7).

Love is a far better sustainer than fear. Fear enslaves, but love persuades. Love takes possession of our soul, and we begin to want goodness for itself. God is a kind and faithful friend to those who sincerely become his friend.

FRANÇOIS DE FÉNELON

October 4

TRACES OF GOD

For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse. *Romans 1:20*

EVERYWHERE IN GOD'S CREATION THERE ARE TRACES OF GOD HIMSELF. The *American Heritage Dictionary* gives this as the most basic meaning of the word "trace": "A visible mark or sign of the former presence or passage of a person, thing, or event." Surely, we are surrounded by traces of God. God has not left Himself without marks or signs that He has been here. So telling are the tokens of His creativity, we can hardly come into contact with anything God has done without being reminded of the power of His existence and the richness of His love.

God's existence. The all-important fact that "God is real" is announced to us by the marvels He has left behind. If we fail to see this truth, it is not because it has not been made plain to us: "For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse."

God's benevolence and beauty. As important as it is for us to recognize the traces of God's existence, it is even more important for us to see what the creation says about His nature. Just as surely as any work of art ever revealed the heart of the artist, God's creative work tells us that He is a God of love. A world like the one we live in could not have been made by a God who did not take delight in beauty and joy and even good humor. The Alps and the Grand Canyon surely make some kind of comment on God's nature. But so do the dandelion and the duckbilled platypus!

Our purpose as vessels to receive God's joy. Surrounded by so many traces of *God*, how can we take in the wonders of the world and miss what these wonders say about *us*? The very fact that we have the ability to meditate rationally on these things and appreciate their significance ought to persuade us that we were made for something more than mere existence. We were made to be receptacles: vessels into which our Father wishes to pour His delight.

As the hand is made for holding and the eye for seeing, You have fashioned me for joy. Share with me the vision that shall find it everywhere: in the wild violet's beauty, in the lark's melody, in the face of a steadfast man, in a child's smile, in a mother's love, in the purity of Jesus.

A GAELIC PRAYER

October 5

THE HEART CAN HELP

The king shall have joy in Your strength, O LORD;
And in Your salvation how greatly shall he rejoice!
Psalm 21:1

SINCE IN ANY CONTEST BETWEEN THE “HEAD” AND THE “HEART,” THE HEART ALMOST ALWAYS WINS, IT IS VERY IMPORTANT THAT OUR HEARTS BE GIVEN TO GOD. God gave us all three of the parts of our minds — our intellect, our emotions, and our will — and our emotions cannot be safely neglected. If we don’t bring the positive power of our emotions to bear upon our spiritual lives, we will find it difficult, if not impossible, to serve God faithfully and consistently. If our feelings have gotten out of hand, they can be our enemy and pull us away from God. But that need not be so. There is no good reason why our feelings can’t be our ally. Working with the intellect and the will, the heart can help us.

In his prayer, David said that “the king shall have joy in Your strength, O LORD; and in Your salvation how greatly shall he rejoice.” It is a joyous thing indeed to contemplate God’s strength. But there is another side to this truth. The very joy we are able to have in God’s strength is also the main source of our own strength! As Nehemiah said to the people of Jerusalem, “Do not sorrow, for the joy of the LORD is your strength” (Nehemiah 8:10). Strength of character is always more than the product of raw intellect or brute willpower. Our affections must be involved also. And if it is spiritual strength we’re interested in, then the feeling of joy is especially important. There is no stronger person than the one who fully feels the joy that can be found in God.

There will certainly be times when commitment to God will require us to say “No” to unworthy thoughts and words and deeds. But the key to doing this consistently is not simply the development of a stronger will. In the long run, we won’t be able to say “No” to what is wrong if we don’t have a bigger “Yes” burning within us for what is right. We must *want* what is good, and we must want it with all of our hearts. Like our Lord who “for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross” (Hebrews 12:2), we must be moved primarily by joy and hope. The prospect of one day seeing God’s face must be the main part of our strength.

It is vain to contend with anything that hath the power
of our affections in its disposal; it will prevail at the last.

JOHN OWEN

October 6

OPEN TO GOD

For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe. *1 Thessalonians 2:13*

BEING TRULY OPEN TO GOD MEANS NOT ONLY THAT WE ARE WILLING TO ACCEPT THE TRUTH ABOUT HIM BUT THAT WE ARE EAGER TO WELCOME HIM INTO OUR HEARTS AND LIVES. The Thessalonians to whom Paul had preached the gospel were not gullible, but there is no denying that they were favorably disposed toward the possibility that what they had heard might be the truth. And when they were shown sufficient evidence to convince them that the message was indeed true, they did not hesitate to respond to it obediently. "When you received the word of God which you heard from us," Paul wrote, "you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God."

The thing that often makes us less than receptive to God, of course, is the fact that He calls upon us to "put off the old" and "put on the new" (Ephesians 4:20-24). We cannot have God without turning away from the things that separated us from Him in the first place. He requires us to let go of our sinful self-will, give up the ill-gotten gains of our disobedience, and make a radical commitment to yield to His will for the rest of our lives.

Decisions about repentance and obedience are always difficult. In many cases they turn out to be quite painfully difficult. But there is no other cure for what ails us. And if turning away from our sins is something we're not willing to do, for whatever reason, then it's not likely that God will find a welcome reception in our hearts. On the other hand, if we've caught any glimpse of the joy that fellowship with God would bring to us, then no price will be too great to pay to learn that love. We'll not even balk at the requirement of repentance. Our hearts and our minds will be open to Him. We will be ready to receive whatever He has for us.

Come, my Light, and illumine my darkness.
Come, my Life, and revive me from death.
Come, my Physician, and heal my wounds.
Come, Flame of divine love, and burn up the thorns of my sins,
kindling my heart with the flame of your love.
Come, my King, sit upon the throne of my heart and reign there.
For thou alone are my King and my Lord.

DIMITRI OF ROSTOV

October 7

KAIZEN

... but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things
into Him who is the head — Christ. *Ephesians 4:15*

LIFE IN GENERAL IS ABOUT GROWTH, AND LIFE IN JESUS CHRIST IS ABOUT GROWTH TOWARD THE PERFECTION OF OUR CHARACTER. Much of the happiness and joy that are available to us can only be ours if we know we're making progress in the direction of godly character and conduct. When we give in to the forces of evil "inertia," we fail to move ahead, and the result is that we stagnate. Eventually, our choice comes down to a choice between improvement or death. There is really no other option.

The Japanese word *kaizen* refers to the concept of "continuous improvement over time." This concept is a part of what has made so many Japanese businesses successful, and it has made these businesses a model of effectiveness for corporations around the world. *Kaizen* says that while we may not get it perfect on the first attempt, what we want to do is continuously *improve* what we do in a never-ending spiral of positive growth. Businesses that employ the concept of *kaizen* find some way to improve everything they deal with — every time they deal with it. And over time, the results are nothing short of stunning.

Wouldn't the results be even more stunning if we practiced *kaizen* in our spiritual lives? Surely they would, and it is no compliment to us that people striving for worldly goals in the business environment work harder at improving what they do than is often the case with those who are striving for heavenly goals. Jesus said a long time ago that "the sons of this world are more shrewd in their generation than the sons of light" (Luke 16:8).

Yet here is an intriguing thought: can we not improve our track record in the matter of improvement? Can we not "do better about doing better"? Yes, we can. And when we exercise even one ounce of initiative to make progress in even one area of our spiritual lives, the devil has cause to worry. It is by steps like these, seemingly small but taken regularly, that our adversary loses his prey. Improvement is not a concept that he's comfortable with.

We must praise your goodness that you have left nothing undone to draw us to yourself. But one thing we ask of you, our God, not to cease to work in our improvement. Let us tend towards you, no matter by what means, and be fruitful in good works, for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord.

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

October 8

GROUNDED IN GOD

Lead me in Your truth and teach me,
For You are the God of my salvation;
On You I wait all the day.

Psalm 25:5

IF OUR THINKING IS NOT SOLIDLY GROUNDED IN GOD, THEN OUR OUTWARD LIVES CAN NEVER BE WHAT THEY OUGHT TO BE. We will be like a ship with no anchor unless we tether ourselves to the truth about our Creator. As A. W. Tozer said on the very first page of his classic *The Knowledge of the Holy*, “[T]he gravest question before the Church is always God Himself, and the most portentous fact about any man is not what he at a given time may say or do, but what he in his deep heart conceives God to be like. We tend by a secret law of the soul to move toward our mental image of God.”

It would be impossible to overemphasize the importance of thinking truthful thoughts about God. “Lead me in Your truth and teach me,” prayed David, “for You are the God of my salvation.” Paul wrote of those who “exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator” (Romans 1:25). Thinking about God at all is better than not doing so, but it’s vital that we think about Him as He has revealed Himself to be and not as we may have imagined Him to be. If we worship something other than God as He is, then we are worshipping an idol, a subjective creature that we ourselves have made. And nothing is more disastrous spiritually than to worship a creature (whether one of God’s or one of our own) rather than the Creator Himself. Thus we must never cease improving our thoughts about God, seeking in every instance to bring our concepts into conformity with what He has revealed of Himself in the Scriptures.

Actually, it is important that we think truthfully about whatever we think about. Each of us is an individual part of an inter-related cosmos. We can’t relate ourselves rightly to what is around us if our thinking is based on erroneous perceptions. So our highest commitment must always be to objective reality and never personal opinion. “A faith that cannot survive collision with the truth is not worth many regrets” (Arthur C. Clarke).

In your spiritual life, guard against *illusion*. Beginners in faith are extremely vulnerable. It is not surprising that they mistakenly accept illusion as truth. Many who seek God succumb to this.

GREGORY OF SINAI

October 9

THE PRINCIPAL PART OF FAITH

But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you. *1 Peter 5:10*

GEORGE MACDONALD, A WRITER WHOSE OBSERVATIONS SHOULD NOT BE QUICKLY DISREGARDED, ONCE SAID THAT "THE PRINCIPAL PART OF FAITH IS PATIENCE." Our first reaction might be to disagree and say that trust is the principal part of faith. But on closer examination, MacDonald does have a point. Every example of faith in the famous eleventh chapter of Hebrews is an instance of someone whose trust in God made him or her *willing to work and wait and endure hardship*. Because it has confidence in God, real faith does not give up. It will hold a steady course for a long, long time.

Sometimes we grow impatient because we have unrealistic expectations of life. We imagine that the good life would surely be one without any significant difficulty, and so we hasten as quickly as possible through periods of struggle. Taking it for granted that a person should "retire" as soon as possible, we are eager to get past our obstacles and reap the rewards of our work. But we're not wise if we put such an emphasis on our destination that we fail to appreciate the journey itself. "The most glorious moments in your life are not the so-called days of success, but rather those days when out of dejection and despair you feel rise in you a challenge to life, and the promise of future accomplishments" (Flaubert). In the spiritual realm, this is the very outlook that is called "faith."

When a person turns to God there is often the expectation that all problems will soon disappear and that following the path of obedience will be both easy and pleasant. The reality, of course, is that the journey toward God often takes us through canyons of darkness and difficulty. Especially in the beginning of our spiritual lives, it is often true that things appear to get worse before they begin to get better. Frankly, it is hard to keep from getting impatient. But here is where faith comes in. The principal part of faith is its ability to bear a heavy burden and still keep going. What most of us need to hear every day is what the Hebrew writer said to his doubtful, discouraged readers: "You have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise" (Hebrews 10:36).

Are we there yet?

EVERY CHILD'S QUESTION

October 10

IF?

Then Samuel told him everything, and hid nothing from him. And he said,
"It is the LORD. Let Him do what seems good to Him." *1 Samuel 3:18*

OUR LOVE FOR GOD AND OUR DOING OF HIS WILL OFTEN INVOLVE AN UNSPOKEN BARGAIN. We will do "this" . . . if He will do "that." Our bargaining may be so subtle that we ourselves do not see what we're doing, but the expectation is nevertheless in our minds that if we do what is right, God will act in certain ways. And if not, we ask, "Then what is the point of serving God?"

It is not wrong to have deep desires, nor is it wrong to make fervent supplications of God. But our desires must be humble, and our supplications must not be demanding. Our doing of what is right must never be contingent on whether God sees things our way in regard to how the universe should be run. It may challenge our faith to do so, but we must always acquiesce in God's will regardless of how His will may affect us personally. In the familiar words of Eli: "It is the LORD. Let Him do what seems good to Him." God's sovereignty over His creation is absolute. He is worthy to be worshiped just because He is our Creator, even when His purposes don't fit conveniently into our own plans.

Much has been written about the importance of unconditional love in human relationships. We acknowledge, for example, how important it is for parents to love their children unconditionally, thus affirming their inherent worth and dignity as human beings. Nowadays, "performance-based" love is seen as something quite undesirable. But is it any less important for us to love God unconditionally? Should our love for Him be based on His "performance," as measured by the frequency with which He meets our expectations in this world? And not only love, shouldn't the following things also be unconditional with respect to God: our reverence, gratitude, obedience, service, and allegiance?

The love to which we should aspire is one that loves God for His own sake, worships Him without compensation, and serves Him without self-interest. These things aren't easy in a world where most of us listen to station WIFM (What's In It For Me?).

Some people want to see God with their eyes as they see a cow, and to love Him as they love their cow — for the milk and cheese and profit it brings them. This is how it is with people who love God for the sake of outward wealth or inward comfort.

MEISTER ECKHART

October 11

FAITH AND LOVE FIRMLY FIXED

... keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life. *Jude 21*

STABILITY IN OUR ATTITUDE TOWARD GOD IS ONE OF OUR GREATEST SPIRITUAL NEEDS. Most of us have some degree of love for Him, and we're willing to follow His lead in at least some circumstances. But our devotion to God is too variable; it is too much at the mercy of up-and-down external circumstances. We need to acquire the kind of hope the Hebrew writer described as an "anchor of the soul" (Hebrews 6:19), so that at least the more extreme fluctuations are taken out of our devotion.

It is interesting, and maybe even embarrassing, to consider the kinds of things that cause our love for God to diminish. It is somewhat understandable that we lose our spiritual focus during times of stress, sickness, and so forth. But isn't it a fact that we also tend to forget God during times of ease and comfort? It almost seems that the more we have to be thankful for, the more we forget to be thankful. One reason for this is probably that when our earthly goals are being met and we're enjoying the kind of lives we want to have, we tend to attribute this to the effectiveness of our own efforts. We don't recognize our need for God's help as long as we're getting along comfortably "without" Him. In any case, however, we need to be aware of the danger posed to our devotion by both the good times and the bad. Whether a particular day is good or bad, we do not need God any more or less on that day than on any other. And the constancy of our need for God should be reflected in the constancy of our love for Him.

Without any doubt, the single greatest thing that can stabilize our attitude toward God is meditation on the constancy with which He loves us. His faithfulness to us does not wax and wane. He continues to love us faithfully even on our worst days. By rebellious choices we may remove ourselves from the benefits of His love, to be sure, but when we turn back toward Him penitently, He is there waiting for us with a love that is no less than it ever was before. Since He is so faithful to us, how can we not be moved to be firmly fixed in our faith and love for Him who is "the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Hebrews 13:8)?

Write Thy blessed name, O Lord, upon my heart, there to remain so indelibly engraven that no prosperity, no adversity shall ever move me from Thy love.

THOMAS À KEMPIS

October 12

WHAT THE SON OF GOD CAME TO GIVE US

All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him. *Matthew 11:27*

AS GOD INCARNATE, JESUS CHRIST REVEALS GOD TO US IN A MANNER THAT SURPASSES ANY OTHER MEANS OF REVELATION. God had spoken in a variety of ways before (Hebrews 1:1-3), but it was in His Son that God revealed Himself fully. The apostle John wrote, "No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him" (John 1:18). In Jesus Christ, God was "spelling himself out in language that man can understand" (Samuel Dickey Gordon).

But God did not reveal Himself to us merely that we might have a better intellectual understanding of His nature. The main aspect of His nature that needs to be reinstated in our minds is His trustworthiness. When Adam and Eve fell into transgression, it was only after the tempter had broken their confidence in God that they were willing to set aside His will, and if the damage of sin is to be repaired in us, we must learn how to trust God again. In Jesus Christ, what we see is that God can indeed be trusted. He can be counted on to die for us rather than betray us! "He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?" (Romans 8:32).

Let us not, however, be naive about this matter. God did not show Himself to be dependable just so that we might sleep better at night. The demonstration of God's perfect power and love leads us to trust Him, but we are led to trust Him so that we might once again obey Him. "You are my friends," Jesus said, "if you do whatever I command you" (John 15:14). In His Son, God is restoring what was lost in the Fall. He is inviting us to follow where He leads, perhaps through dangerous territory, to a realm where once again we can know Him and enjoy Him and eat of the tree of life.

The mission undertaken by the Son, was not to show Himself as having all power in heaven and earth, but to reveal His Father, to show Him to men such as He is, that men may know Him, and knowing, trust Him.

It were a small boon indeed that God should forgive men, and not give Himself. It would be but to give them back themselves, and less than God just as He is will not comfort men for the essential sorrow of their existence. Only God the gift can turn that sorrow into essential joy: Jesus came to give them God, who is eternal life.

GEORGE MACDONALD

October 13

WHAT IS THE POINT OF LIFE IN CHRIST?

Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. *Philippians 3:8-11*

THE POINT OF LIFE IN CHRIST IS THAT WE MAY “KNOW HIM AND THE POWER OF HIS RESURRECTION.” The value of knowing Christ so far excels the value of anything in this world that we are willing to suffer the loss of all else, if need be, in order to “gain Christ and be found in Him.” Life in Christ is not primarily about relief right now from the trauma of living in a broken world. Indeed, to be in fellowship with Christ means to know “the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death” in order that we may “attain to the resurrection from the dead.”

To the ears of the Christian these truths should sound self-evident. Unfortunately, the concept of Christianity that has come to be dominant in our day is one that runs in a different direction. According to this concept, emotional pain relief is the basic, overall concern of life in Christ. Offering health, wealth, and complete emotional bliss, it promises to take away the deep ache of our needy, broken souls and to do so in the here and now. The new gospel is fundamentally about “feeling better.” It is about us.

But the historic gospel is not first and foremost about feeling better; it is about glorifying God through Christ and coming to be like Him. Christ did not die for the mere betterment of our feelings, and seeking God through Him is not mostly about pain relief. It is about *character transformation*. And even more than character transformation, it is about *the glorification of God*. Far from eliminating the possibility of pain, the glorification of God may *require* the suffering of pain, even to the point of death. Our expectation should be no less than that of Paul, whose only hope was that “with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:20,21).

Modern Christianity, in dramatic reversal of its biblical form, promises to relieve the pain of living in a fallen world.

LARRY CRABB

October 14

GOD IS NOT THE SAME AS HIS CREATION

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.
Genesis 1:1

THE FIRST STATEMENT IN THE BOOK OF GENESIS AFFIRMS THAT THE COSMOS WAS CREATED BY GOD. From that point forward, the Scriptures make it clear that this God was not merely the universe creating itself nor simply a “creative life-force” pervading nature, but rather a personal God who is distinct from the nature that He created. God is presented to us in the Scriptures as a transcendent God: He is radically “other” than His creation. And if that is the truth, then it is a serious mistake to give to the creation the reverence that ought to go to the Creator alone.

Contemporary thinkers and writers tend to be generic rather than specific in their concepts of God. There is often very little distinction among terms like “spirit,” “the universe,” and “the creator.” God is conceived as simply everything that exists or as a force that animates nature. The way in which “spirituality” has come to be distinguished from “religion” suggests the shift that has taken place with respect to God. Spirituality now encompasses an extremely broad range of philosophies, attitudes, and lifestyles, very few of which have anything to do with a personal God who is distinct from the universe. The adoration of nature, or even political participation in the environmental movement, is now enough to qualify as “spirituality.” Indeed, in some circles respect for the “web of life” would be seen as a much more enlightened spirituality than that of the religious person who believes in a transcendent, personal Creator. The creation is now firmly ensconced on the throne that once belonged to the Creator.

The apostle Paul wrote of those who long ago “exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen” (Romans 1:25). But whether in its ancient or modern form, the tendency to confuse God with His creation is an intellectual mistake — indeed a spiritual mistake — fraught with the most tragic consequences. When nature is worshiped at God’s expense, not only is God dishonored, but nature is dishonored also. As long as we are false to God, we can never be true to nature.

Nature has perfections in order to show that she is the image of God,
and defects to show that she is only his image.

BLAISE PASCAL

October 15

LOGOS

In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. *John 1:1*

GOD HAS REVEALED HIMSELF TO US IN SUCH A WAY THAT WE CAN UNDERSTAND CERTAIN THINGS ABOUT HIM. There are no doubt many things about God that He has not revealed to us, and of the things that He has revealed, there are many that surpass our ability to comprehend fully. Not only that, but the same thing is true of God that is true of any other personal being: the heart must be employed, as well as the mind, in order to know Him. But even so, *the use of our rational minds* is an important part of the process through which we come to know God.

From the beginning, God has spoken to the human race using actual words that can be understood rationally. This is a remarkable thing when we stop to think about it, but it is nevertheless true that God has adopted human language, with all its limitations, to convey His will to humanity. Ultimately, of course, God revealed Himself in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ. In this perfect and final revelation, we learn of God not only through the words that Jesus spoke but through the deeds that He did. Yet even though Jesus taught much by His example, He was still referred to as the Word of God. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Jesus is the Logos, the cognitive Word by which the Creator communicates with His creatures. "He whom God has sent speaks the words of God" (John 3:34).

As an apostle, Paul claimed to speak words that had been revealed to him directly by God (Galatians 1:11,12). But when Paul spoke those words, the process through which others understood the message was not much different from the process through which any other verbal communication is understood. Writing to the Ephesians, he spoke of a previous letter he had written: "by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ" (Ephesians 3:3,4). Through real words that we can understand, God allows us to know something of His mind. Thus the "incomprehensible" God is not totally incomprehensible. "God would not be God if he could be fully known to us, and God would not be God if he could not be known at all" (A. G. Wood).

It was those luminous words of his, sealed with his death on the cross,
that led to his being recognized as God.

MALCOLM MUGGERIDGE

October 16

SHOULD GOD WAIT?

Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth,
before the difficult days come, and the years draw near when you say,
"I have no pleasure in them." *Ecclesiastes 12:1*

SOLOMON, A KING WHO WAS HARDLY NAIVE ABOUT WHAT THE WORLD HAS TO OFFER, COUNSELED THAT WE SHOULD REMEMBER OUR CREATOR WHILE WE ARE YOUNG. To defer dealing with God until we are out of our youth is a costly error. And if we've not yet decided whether we're going to take God seriously, there is something we need to know: *the question only gets tougher the longer we put off answering it.* We're only deceiving ourselves if we think we need to take care of more important matters first. There is no such thing as a more important matter than God.

Particularly in our youth, the thing that tempts us to postpone dealing with God is the myth that godliness requires us to give up all pleasure. Because the life of serious spirituality seems so dull, it's only natural to defer doing anything about it until after we've drunk as deeply from the world as we want to drink. Our Adversary would like us to think that the only young folks who follow God are the losers who don't know what they're missing. But one of the saddest things about this myth is that it misrepresents a God who has never wanted anything but our good and who has never forbidden anything except what would hurt us or degrade us. We'd do well to go back and reconsider Ecclesiastes. The very God whom Solomon advised us to remember is also the God who said, "Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth" (Ecclesiastes 11:9).

Many of the reasons for taking a responsible approach to God in our youth are powerfully practical. One of the most practical (and also one of the most important) is that the basic shape of our personal character is set while we're in our younger years. The ideal time to commit ourselves to godly principles and begin adjusting our lifestyles to those principles is when our minds and hearts are still open and we've not yet begun to suffer "hardening of the categories." If we say no to God at the time when it is most crucial to say yes, it is not likely that our minds will be changed by anything later on — except circumstances that are truly tragic.

If you refuse to be made straight when you are green,
you will not be made straight when you are dry.

AFRICAN PROVERB

October 17

IT ALL COMES DOWN TO THIS

Everything you were taught can be put into a few words:

Respect and obey God! This is what life is all about.

God will judge everything we do, even
what is done in secret, whether good or bad.

Ecclesiastes 12:13,14 Contemporary English Version

WHEN LIFE HAS BEEN SOBERLY CONSIDERED, THE CONCLUSION OF THE WHOLE MATTER IS THAT WE SHOULD PROPERLY RELATE OURSELVES TO GOD. In other words, we should (1) adopt a posture of real reverence toward Him, and (2) commit ourselves to carrying out His instructions in every area of life. "Respect and obey God! This is what life is all about." Compared to this priority, nothing else even tips the scale. This is our all, our everything.

Daniel Webster, a statesman who moved in the highest circles of temporal power and consequence, once said, "The most important thought I ever had was that of my individual responsibility to God." This is a statement of pure insight. It penetrates the complicated appearance that many things are important and touches the one and only thing that is really important after all (Luke 10:41,42). The quality of our lives would increase dramatically if we could accept this insight before the burden of years finally forces us to recognize our mortality. By the time most of us see what Webster saw, we've already misspent most of our life-resources, and there is little to give God but our leftovers.

The philosophical work to which Ecclesiastes 12:13,14 is the conclusion is a work that ought to be of considerable interest to us at the present moment in history. Never before have so many issues (and so much commerce) crowded around us, clamoring for our attention. Somewhere in our brains we know that most of these things are of nothing more than passing interest. Today's front-page news moves to the back page tomorrow and is completely forgotten the day after that. Solomon used the word "vanity" to describe the wispy, fleeting nature of all this frantic worldly business: "I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and indeed, all is vanity and grasping for the wind" (Ecclesiastes 1:14). Do we not desperately need to hear this wise old king recall us to what is solid and substantial?

Ah! For a vision of God!
For a mighty grasp of the real,
Feet firm based on granite in place of crumbling sand!

RODEN NOEL

October 18

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO MOURN

Blessed are those who mourn,
For they shall be comforted.
Matthew 5:4

WE ALL MOURN FROM TIME TO TIME, BUT THE BLESSING OF JESUS UPON “THOSE WHO MOURN” HAS TO DO WITH A VERY SPECIAL KIND OF MOURNING. In this text, those who mourn are the penitent, those who grieve for their sins. And the grief of the penitent is not just over what their sins have cost them personally; it is a sorrowful recognition that they have selfishly insulted God’s love and also His honor. God is seeking those whose inward character moves them to tears when they become aware that they’ve sinned. His blessing is upon those who are still responsive to their conscience in this way — and not upon those who deny the painful ugliness of their sins in order to eat, drink, and be merry.

This “beatitude” is a hard saying to accept for those of us living in an age when most individuals have no higher objective in life than to “feel good.” We don’t like to hear our preachers dwell on the issue of sin for more than a respectable moment; we’d rather hear something cheery. Like the people of Isaiah’s day who said to the prophets, “Do not prophesy to us right things; speak to us smooth things” (Isaiah 30:10), we shift uncomfortably in our seats when the subject of the sermon is godly sorrow.

But the “glad tidings” Jesus came to bring can never be seen as truly good news until we have first digested the painful truth about ourselves. Even after we come into a right relationship with God and our past sins have been forgiven, our love for God will never be what it ought to be unless we remember the seriousness of the sins we’ve been forgiven. Years after becoming a Christian, Paul could write, “[I] am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God” (1 Corinthians 15:9). If it is honest, the remembrance of our sins can never be anything but sorrowful, but it is a necessary part of our humility and our gratitude. And strange though it seems, it is also a part of our joy. “The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain. Joy and sorrow are inseparable” (Kahlil Gibran).

The difference between true and false repentance lies in this:
the man who truly repents cries out against his heart;
but the other, as Eve, against the serpent, or something else.

JOHN BUNYAN

October 19

BLESSED ARE THE PURE IN HEART

Blessed are the pure in heart,
For they shall see God.
Matthew 5:8

THERE ARE MANY THINGS THAT MUST BE PURGED FROM OUR HEARTS IF WE ARE TO SEE GOD. Some of these things must be eliminated because they are impure. Others, while not morally unclean, must be removed simply because they draw our affections away from God. We must learn to love God with hearts that are whole and minds that are single. Our hearts must be *purely* given to God, without mixed motives or competing loyalties. Without a pure passion to see God, we will not see Him (Matthew 5:8).

Purity. Even in our day-to-day lives, there is a wonderful freedom that comes from pure devotion to God. We may not realize how much we've been weighed down and held back by the multitude of our lesser concerns until we finally put these things in their place and focus wholeheartedly on God. There is really nothing in the world quite as liberating as purity.

Power. Samuel Johnson observed that those "who attain to any excellence spend life in some one single pursuit, for excellence is not often gained on easier terms." In a similar way, those who attain spiritual excellence are those who make God their "single pursuit." Our focus must be the laser-like concentration of the devout, not the weak glimmer of the indifferent.

Promise. The fervent hope of those who are pure in heart is that they "shall see God." As goals go, this is the greatest one we can contemplate. The enjoyment of God's presence is the very purpose for which we were created. According to Jesus Christ, this promise can only be obtained by the pure in heart, but if anything is worth the price of purity, this is it. "Everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure" (1 John 3:3).

Each of these good things — the purity, power, and promise of single-minded devotion — is available to every person. The truth by which God enables us to lead this kind of life is not so hard to understand that it is beyond our reach. If we forfeit the privilege of seeing God someday, it will not be for a lack of ability or opportunity. It will be for a failure to make life's basic choice.

Spiritual truth is discernible only to a pure heart, not to a keen intellect.
It is not a question of profundity of intellect, but of purity of heart.

October 20

THE IMPOSSIBLE PATH IS THE MOST POPULAR

No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon. *Matthew 6:24*

ALTHOUGH IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO KEEP ONE FOOT IN GOD'S CAMP AND THE OTHER FOOT IN THE CAMP OF GOD'S ENEMY, THIS IS AN IMPOSSIBILITY THAT MOST OF US HAVE ATTEMPTED AT SOME POINT. We find the dominion of Satan to be extremely oppressive, but we're not quite willing to let go of life in him in order to live life in God. And so we nod in God's direction, hoping that when the end comes we will have given enough of ourselves to Him that He won't mind that we kept a great deal back. We attempt to be God's servant without really serving Him, and by trying to do the impossible, we find frustration rather than fulfillment. Yet however frustrating it may be, this is by far the most popular path. We've been led to believe that we can grasp the hope of heaven and still retain all of the world that we care to keep.

There can be no seeking of God, however, without taking a stand that is both for Him and against anything that is opposed to Him. As we make our decision, it may help us to recognize that when we fail to make a positive choice in His favor, we do actual damage to the Lord's interests. We perhaps would not want to be classified as an enemy of Jesus Christ, but there is really no alternative if we fail to serve Him actively. Jesus Himself said it unequivocally: "He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me scatters abroad" (Matthew 12:30). In the real world, there is no neutral stance we can take with regard to God. The only right place to stand is shoulder-to-shoulder with Jesus Christ.

It would take a larger perspective than we have at present to see how much we lose when we temporize and fail to take decisive action. Real life awaits us — "abundant" life is what Jesus called it (John 10:10) — but if we don't summon the courage to reject its opposite, that life cannot be ours. Like all other good things, the joys of life in God are the consequences of having a character that is not afraid to make big sacrifices.

The well-defined spiritual life is not only the highest life, but it is also the most easily lived. The whole cross is more easily carried than the half. It is the man who tries to make the best of both worlds who makes nothing of either. And he who seeks to serve two masters misses the benediction of both.

HENRY DRUMMOND

October 21

NO SUCCESSFUL DEFIANCE

Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life. *Galatians 6:7,8*

MOCKERY IS SERIOUS BUSINESS, AND TO MOCK GOD BY DEFYING THE MORAL LAW OF THE UNIVERSE IS THE MOST SERIOUS BUSINESS OF ALL. There are, sad to say, many earthly parents who allow themselves to be mocked. It is not uncommon to see children in public places openly defy their parents, knowing they can do whatever they please and their parents will do no more than issue threats. These children have learned by experience that any sort of real punishment is not likely to be handed out. But our Heavenly Father is not so easily mocked. To believe that one can disregard Him and somehow evade the consequences is not the mark of an intelligent person. The rule is both simple and unavoidable: whatever we sow, that is what we will reap.

Because the laws of moral cause and effect operate over the long term, their power is not always obvious to us in the short term. But we should not be fooled by the sometimes confusing evidence of our immediate circumstances. There is a Dutch proverb that says, "God does not pay weekly, but he pays at the end." Eventually, things do come full circle, and so Paul is quite right to warn us: "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked."

None of us can claim exemption from the law of sowing and reaping. Even now, whatever harvest is coming in is, for better or worse, the harvest that we have planted and cultivated in days gone by. As the saying goes, many a *have* and *have-not* of today are the *did* and *did-not* of yesterday. But with each hour that passes, we are hastening toward an even greater harvest: our final one. And that will also be a harvest that we have created by our own choices, again for better or worse. The same natural laws that have always governed the universe will govern the declaration of our final destiny. There is no successful way to defy these laws. Not even God Himself is at liberty to set them aside.

The judgment of God is the reaping that comes from sowing and is evidence of the love of God, not proof of His wrath. The penalty of an evil harvest is not God's punishment; it is the consequence of defying the moral order which in love he maintains as the only environment in which maturity of fellowship and communion can be achieved.

October 22

HEEDLESS HEARING

Not everyone who says to Me, "Lord, Lord," shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. *Matthew 7:21*

WHATEVER WE KNOW OF GOD'S WORD, WE MUST CARRY OUT THAT KNOWLEDGE IN OUR ACTUAL DEEDS. That may sound like a worn-out cliché, but all of us need to be reminded about the connection between hearing and doing. Because copies of the Scriptures are easily available and the media of communication have become so efficient, most of us know far more about the contents of the Scriptures than many of our most studious ancestors. But what is the result? If we hear what God has said but do nothing about it, our superior knowledge will be of little profit in the long run. "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven," Jesus said, "but he who does the will of My Father in heaven." We must not be heedless hearers.

If our response to God's truth is not as prompt as it should be, it will hardly help to say that we've merely been neglectful. The problem of neglect happens to be one of the worst problems in the world. While it may seem relatively harmless in comparison to some vices, neglect is responsible for some of the most awful suffering in the human race. The damage that is done by simply failing to act may grow so slowly that we don't see it increasing, but in the end, the cumulative effect is devastating. Solomon said, "Because of laziness the building decays, and through idleness of hands the house leaks" (Ecclesiastes 10:18). And however sad it may be to observe a house that has fallen into ruin, it is even sadder to see a human life that has caved in because of neglect.

Is it any wonder we don't find our spiritual lives more rewarding than we do? When we fail to act on our knowledge, there is little we can experience except the flat, dull taste of "what might have been." Dorothy Kerin was exactly right when she said, "Obedience is the key that unlocks the door to every profound spiritual experience." Nominal Christianity has proliferated in the modern era. Many are those who wear Christ's name. But to all who have "accepted" Christ, Paul's words are a sobering reminder concerning real discipleship: "As you have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him" (Colossians 2:6).

What we think of, what we know, or what we believe is, in the end, of little consequence. The only thing of consequence is what we do.

JOHN RUSKIN

October 23

JESUS CHRIST IS NOT OUR LORD IF . . .

But why do you call Me "Lord, Lord,"
and do not do the things which I say? *Luke 6:46*

THE WORDS "CHRIST IS LORD" ARE EASIER TO SAY WITH OUR LIPS THAN TO DEMONSTRATE WITH OUR DEEDS. But Christ calls us to do more than talk about His lordship. It is not His purpose to attract a host of talkers or even admirers; He desires a people who will love Him with an active, responsive, and obedient love. "Why do you call Me 'Lord, Lord,'" He asked, "and do not do the things which I say?" Contrary to widespread opinion, there is more to Christianity than simply listing it as our religious preference. Whatever we may say, Jesus Christ is not really our Lord if we don't do the things He says.

Even if we're among those who take the will of Christ most seriously, it's a common occurrence for us to overrate the level of our own obedience. We very likely make the same mistake with Christ that we make with our friends: we expect to be judged solely on the basis of our ability and our intentions. We have high principles, we know what we should do, and we really do intend to get around to it — we just haven't done it yet. So despite the relatively low level of our actual performance, we still wish to be seen as superior persons; we just happen to be running a little behind on our "To Do" list. Christ, however, does not see us in terms of what we plan to do (and the truth is, our friends probably don't either). He sees us in terms of our real obedience. "Why do you call Me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do the things which I say?"

Complete candor might compel us to admit that we really think some parts of the Lord's will are insignificant. We may take Him seriously in the areas that seem to be important, but we feel free to dissent from His opinion on other matters. Truly to have Jesus Christ as our Lord, however, means that we honor the significance of all of His will. We may know less than we'd like to know about our Lord's rationale in some cases, but we certainly know enough to trust that He never issues commands carelessly. The real test of whether we've actually accepted His lordship is whether we yield to His will when it comes into conflict with our own. The person whose will we obey, that person is our real lord.

Never think that Jesus commanded a trifle,
nor dare to trifle with anything he has commanded.

DWIGHT LYMAN MOODY

October 24

THE IMPORTANCE OF DISCERNMENT

Therefore do not be unwise, but understand
what the will of the Lord is. *Ephesians 5:17*

IN OUR SPIRITUAL LIVES, WE SHALL HAVE LITTLE OPPORTUNITY TO MAKE PROGRESS IF WE DON'T DEVELOP THE VIRTUE OF "DISCERNMENT." We must learn, as Paul puts it, to "understand what the will of the Lord is." This is no mysterious, better-felt-than-told process. It is a matter of training ourselves to think as the Lord thinks, basing our perspective on what the Scriptures reveal His perspective to be. We must learn to want whatever He wants, not just in general but in specific relation to our own personal lives.

We are naive if we think that knowing the right thing to do is always easy, for discerning the path Christ would want us to follow often requires prayerful concentration over a long period of time. But we can improve our ability to discern the Lord's will, and if we're at all serious about seeking God, then we'll surely set that as a high priority. Indeed, the only higher priority would be improving our doing of the Lord's will after we discern it.

One of the foundational principles of Christianity is given to us in Paul's letter to Colossae: "And whatever you do," he wrote, "do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men" (Colossians 3:23). To do all that we do "as to the Lord" means we do everything out of deference to Him. Whatever other considerations may come into play, our greatest concern is always to do the thing that would please Him most (Philippians 1:19-26). His will is always the factor that decides our deeds. If we are to do this, however, we must acquire the ability to see what His will is in specific situations. It takes training and discipline, but we can acquire this ability. We can come to be like those "who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil" (Hebrews 5:14).

In developing our discernment, we are not totally on our own, of course. God will give us whatever help is necessary. But we must first acknowledge that we need help. We must see the importance of gaining greater skill in our understanding and then make a commitment to our own growth. Like so much else that concerns our spiritual lives, the great prerequisite on our part is an honest, no-strings-attached commitment to obedience.

All heaven is waiting to help those who
will discover the will of God and do it.

J. ROBERT ASHCROFT

October 25

THE KEY TO DISCERNMENT

If anyone wants to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or whether I speak on My own authority. *John 7:17*

MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE, THE THING THAT DETERMINES OUR DISCERNMENT OF GOD'S WILL IS OUR INTENT TO DO HIS WILL. It is an honorable and necessary thing to love the truth (2 Thessalonians 2:10), but our love for God's truth must be active rather than passive. We must not only desire to know the truth; we must actually intend to obey it. And when we study the Scriptures, this motive is the main thing that determines whether we get the right answers to our questions. If we're honestly looking for information that will help us improve our own obedience, then we have God's assurance that we'll get the information we need. On the other hand, if we're looking for any other reason, then we'll probably not discern the Lord's will even when it's right in front of us. Paul wrote, "And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness" (2 Thessalonians 2:11,12).

Obedience is not something that can safely be put off until we've learned everything there is to know about God's will. In fact, if we don't do what we should about what we know at present, it is not likely we'll learn anything beyond that. As Louis Cassels observed, "Obedience leads to faith. Live faithfully by the little bit of light you now have, and you will be given more."

But there is something else we need to understand, and that is the role of obedience in helping us to understand what we've already learned. It is one thing to know something in theory; it is quite another to know it in practical experience. With regard to God's truth, it is only in obedience that we pass from theoretical knowledge to practical understanding. By going ahead and doing what God says, we come to see that His truth is really true after all, and the wisdom of the right path commends itself to us not as we sit and think about it, but as we get up and walk in it. "We learn more by five minutes' obedience than by ten years' study" (Oswald Chambers). If we would be discerners of His will, we must "taste and see that the LORD is good" (Psalm 34:8).

Obedience is the eye of the spirit.
Failure to obey dims and dulls the spiritual understanding.

SAMUEL DICKEY GORDON

October 26

DEFINED BY OUR LOVE FOR GOD

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one!
You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart,
with all your soul, and with all your strength. *Deuteronomy 6:4,5*

OUR LOVE FOR GOD OUGHT TO BE OUR DEFINING CHARACTERISTIC AND THE THING THAT DETERMINES OUR ACTION. If there is to be a fixed center point around which all our other characteristics revolve, the love of God should be it. There is no statement of more fundamental, far-reaching importance than the famous statement of Moses to Israel: "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength." No less an authority than Jesus quoted this text when He was asked what was the greatest commandment in God's law.

In any person's life, the object of that person's love makes some kind of comment as to his or her character. As Arsene Houssaye said, "Tell me whom you love, and I will tell you what you are." But if this holds true in general, it is also true with respect to God. In assessing the quality of our character, all anyone ever needs to know is the answer to this question: how deep is our love for our Creator? When that question has been answered accurately, the very root of our personal being will have been discovered. And if the truth is that we do not love God, then nothing else can compensate for that deficiency.

Our love for God is to be an all-encompassing, consummate love. To love Him with all our heart, all our soul, and all our strength means that many other concerns (some of which by themselves are quite important) must be subordinated to our love for God. And this is not a thing we can do once (on some "great" occasion) and then forget about it. Putting the love of God at the center of our hearts and keeping it there is a matter of *daily decision*. When we neglect this daily decision to love God, it doesn't take more than a few days for the chaos to begin creeping back in. So we must resist this tendency at all costs. We must draw the lines of demarcation where they ought to be drawn — and thereby "define" ourselves as people who truly do love God.

We must spiritually renounce all other loves for love of God or at least so hold them in subordination to this that we are ready to forego them for its sake; yet when we find God . . . we find in and with him all the loves which for his sake we had foregone.

WILLIAM TEMPLE

October 27

FOUNTAINHEAD

Jesus said to him, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

Matthew 22:37-40

IF WE LOVE BOTH GOD AND OTHER PEOPLE AS WE SHOULD, EVERY OTHER DUTY WILL FLOW FROM OUR HEARTS VERY NATURALLY. "On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets," Jesus said. Paul expressed this truth by saying that "love is the fulfillment of the law" (Romans 13:10). It is not that love is our only obligation; it is that we will be happy to fulfill the other aspects of God's law if we first love Him and then love other people also. Love is the fountainhead from which all good obedience flows.

This primary importance of love is often acknowledged, but it is not as often recognized that the love of which Jesus spoke is something we *decide* as well as something we *feel*. As M. Scott Peck wrote, "Love is an action, an activity. It is not a feeling." We will not find the whole of God's law being fulfilled in us until we quit waiting for the arrival of loving feelings and start deciding to act in ways that are consistent with love. Not only that, but we must allow God's word to dictate what is and is not consistent with love. Our intuitions as to what would be a loving thing to do are somewhat prone to error. We must allow God to define what love is and what it should do in various circumstances. As any parent knows who has ever had to discipline children, one can't always tell what love's duty is by simply taking a vote.

Yet properly defined and consistently carried out, love is the most potent force available to the human heart. If we truly wish to seek God, it is an absolute necessity. Without love, our efforts are doomed to failure. As the Russian writer Turgenev said, "Love produces a certain flowering of the whole personality that nothing else can achieve." So if we find ourselves failing consistently to obey God and to enjoy the good things that come from obedience, then it's time to stop trimming the leaves of the tree and strike at the taproot of the problem. It's only when we learn the primary law of love that the other laws begin to make sense.

In the triangle of love between ourselves, God, and other people, is found the secret of existence, and the best foretaste, I suspect, that we can have on earth of what heaven will probably be like.

SAMUEL M. SHOEMAKER

October 28

ANSWERING GOD'S CALL TO SEEK HIM

When You said, "Seek My face," My heart said to You,
"Your face, LORD, I will seek." *Psalm 27:8*

SINCE GOD DESIRES US TO SEEK HIM AND IS EAGER TO BE FOUND BY US, WE SHOULD RESPOND TO HIS CALL WITH GREAT DESIRE. Since God has said, "Seek My face," our fervent answer should always be, "Yes, that is what we *long* to do. That is what we *will* do."

In creating us, God envisioned beings who could relate to Him at a high level: creatures who would be personal in nature as He is (Genesis 1:27) and who would use their freedom to respond to His love positively. When we chose instead to use our freedom rebelliously, our personal link to God was broken. We were alienated from the very Source of our existence. The result is that now, instead of the "fellowship" that could have been enjoyed, there is only "death," or separation from God.

God, however, was not willing to abandon us to death. It took nothing less than the sacrifice of His own Son to do it, but God has made it possible for our sins to be forgiven. This means that the door is open to reconciliation with God. Having been created for fellowship with Him, we would have sought Him anyway; but if God had not opened the door to reconciliation, our seeking would always have been in vain. As it is, God can now say to us, "Seek My face," and there is actually the possibility that we may find Him! Indeed, He desires for us to do just that. He longs for the fellowship that has been lost, and He will even *help* us find our way back to Him . . . if that is what we desire to do.

But the question of *our desire* is really the decisive question, is it not? If we don't desire fellowship with God, then surely we should. Nothing would be more tragic than for us not to see that this is our greatest need (Matthew 23:37-39). But what if we don't see our need? If our hearts tell us that our desire is less than it should be, what can we do? We can begin by "desiring to desire" God. We can at least make the choice to lay down our rebellion against Him. And if our intent is honest, God will surround us with circumstances that will help us to be more open to Him.

Tune me, O Lord, into one harmony
With thee, one full responsive vibrant chord;
Unto thy praise, all love and melody,
Tune me, O Lord.

CHRISTINA GEORGINA ROSSETTI

October 29

WHILE GOD'S PATIENCE WAITS

Seek the LORD while He may be found,
Call upon Him while He is near. *Isaiah 55:6*

ALTHOUGH GOD INVITES US TO SEEK HIM AND FIND HIM, WE DON'T HAVE FOREVER TO TURN IN HIS DIRECTION. God's patience is great, but it is not open-ended. Sooner or later, our opportunity for repentance will be interrupted. Such an interruption is not a matter of "if" — it is only a matter of "when." We are encouraged, therefore, to seek God while He may be found.

The writers of the Scriptures occasionally refer to God's patience as something that "waits" for us. Peter, for example, spoke of those "who formerly were disobedient, when once the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared" (1 Peter 3:20). When the Flood finally came, many who perished may have felt that God owed them just a little more time to do what was right, but in truth the time already past was more than sufficient for repentance if they'd had any inclination to change their ways. If God is not sought while He may be found, we'll have no grounds to complain against Him later on.

It is God's desire, of course, that we say yes to Him. He is anything but neutral with regard to our decision. As Peter says in another place, "The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). And Paul asks, "Do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?" (Romans 2:4).

What we choose to do while God's patience is waiting for us is one of the greatest indicators of our character. To continue putting Him off says one thing about us, and to seek Him while He may be found says quite another. *In matters of this importance, our integrity is at stake with every decision we make.* In God, we are being offered the very gift of life itself. Our integrity is defined by our choice when we face this, the ultimate fork in the road. A human being cannot fail more tragically than to fail at this juncture — nor can we succeed more greatly than to pass this test.

To fall in love with God is the greatest of romances!
To seek him is the greatest of all adventures!
To find him is the greatest human achievement.

RAPHAEL SIMON

October 30

SPIRITUAL TREASURE

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Matthew 6:19-21

JESUS ENCOURAGES US TO LAY UP FOR OURSELVES “TREASURES IN HEAVEN” RATHER THAN “TREASURES ON EARTH.” These two treasures are related to one another in an interesting way. As Erwin W. Lutzer wrote, “Treasures in heaven are accumulated by our attitude to our treasures (or lack of them) on earth.” It is impossible to appreciate heavenly things if we don’t have a proper perspective on those that are earthly, and vice versa. However many or few treasures on earth we may have, if we don’t use these in the service of spiritual priorities then we won’t have any treasures in heaven. We may bankrupt ourselves spiritually by “saving” too much of what we have materially.

There is an old adage that says “Better rich in God than rich in gold.” Jesus explained why this is true when He said, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” If our heart is going to be where our treasures are, then it’s obviously desirable to have God as our treasure! The difficulty, however, lies in seeing the truth about ourselves when we’ve grown richer in gold than in God. No doubt, the prosperous Christians in Laodicea would have said that they were rich in God as well as in gold, but they were self-deceived. Christ said, “[You] do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked” (Revelation 3:17).

There probably aren’t many people who wouldn’t *say* that God is their most valuable treasure. And yet in our own lives, just as at Laodicea, the evidence may be contradictory. The real location of our treasure is most easily discovered by looking at where we invest most of our *energy* and *enthusiasm*. When we have a moment or two of discretionary time, if our thoughts, our conversation, and our activities are attracted more energetically and enthusiastically to earthly things, then there’s no use saying that our treasure is in heaven. The wonderful thing, however, is that we can change. If we need to, we can adjust where our treasure is!

Where your pleasure is, there is your treasure.

Where your treasure is, there is your heart.

Where your heart is, there is your happiness.

AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

October 31

NO GREATER DISADVANTAGE

Then Jesus said to His disciples, "Assuredly, I say to you that it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." *Matthew 19:23,24*

MATERIAL WEALTH BY ITSELF CAN'T KEEP US AWAY FROM GOD, BUT THERE CAN BE NO DOUBT THAT IT IS A GREAT DISADVANTAGE TO US SPIRITUALLY. Wealth draws our attention and our affection away from God. The more we have, the harder it is to remember our need for Him (Deuteronomy 8:10-18). And the more comfortable our lifestyle, the less incentive we have to seek Him. Our reverence dissipates, our worship disappears, and at last we discover that we've become proud and ungrateful.

Ours is a capitalistic society, however, and warnings about the disadvantages of wealth sound unpatriotic, unambitious, and possibly even irreligious. All in all, it would be hard to imagine a more counter-cultural statement than Paul's remark to Timothy that "those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition" (1 Timothy 6:9). In these words, Paul does not denounce wealth per se, but what he does say is not to be taken lightly: (1) wealth is dangerous, and (2) those who long for it are not thinking wisely about their spiritual welfare. For those trying to get to heaven, there is no greater disadvantage than wealth.

But what if we find ourselves, as most of us do, already among the affluent? Then we need to be honest about the difficulties and dangers that face us, and we need to do whatever it takes to compensate for the disadvantage of our possessions. "Command those who are rich in this present age," Paul continued, "not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy. Let them do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share, storing up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life" (1 Timothy 6:17-19). Yes, it is possible to be an Abraham, a man who kept his faith despite the possession of great wealth. But how many Abrahams are there in the world? Realistically, how many of us have his faith?

Few people have the spiritual resources needed
to be both wealthy and godly.

ERWIN W. LUTZER

November 1

WHEN OUR SEEKING GOES ASTRAY

Jesus answered them and said, "Most assuredly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled. Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set His seal on Him." *John 6:26,27*

AT THE HEIGHT OF HIS POPULARITY, JESUS HAD NO LACK OF SEEKERS, BUT MANY OF THOSE WHO SOUGHT HIM DID SO FOR WORLDLY REASONS. After He miraculously fed the five thousand, the multitude came back the next day. On that day, however, Jesus did not feed them with loaves and fishes. Rather than another meal, what the crowd got from Jesus was an encouragement to elevate their concept of what He had come into the world to give them. He exhorted them, "Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life."

What this tells us is that even when we are seeking God, our seeking can go astray. Just when we begin to believe that we are seeking Him, we may look into our hearts and see that what we're really seeking is the procurement of certain physical blessings. He has blessed us in the past, and we've greatly enjoyed His blessings. And so we return just as the multitude did, seeking Him the next day. But is it God whom we seek or have we returned to Him because we "ate of the loaves and were filled"?

The danger of concentrating on "the food which perishes" is that too little of our hearts is left over with which to focus on God Himself. As Charles Spurgeon said, "A man's heart has only enough life in it to pursue one object fully." To whatever extent we seek the food that perishes, that much less energy will be available for seeking the food which endures to everlasting life.

It simply cannot be said too often: we must seek God with our whole hearts. It is a single-minded focus on our Heavenly Father that will ultimately get us where we want to be. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:8). So however tempting it may be to devote ourselves to temporal needs and enjoyments, we must not let our seeking go astray. If it is not God whom we seek, then our seeking is bound to come to a bad end.

God designed the human machine to run on himself. He himself is the fuel our spirits were designed to burn, or the food our spirits were designed to feed on. There is no other. That is why it is just no good asking God to make us happy in our own way.

C. S. LEWIS

November 2

CHRISTIANITY IS NOT A DETOUR

I do not pray that You should take them out of the world,
but that You should keep them from the evil one. *John 17:15*

WHEN JESUS PRAYED FOR HIS APOSTLES, HE PRAYED THAT THEY MIGHT HAVE THE HELP THEY NEEDED TO SURVIVE THE ATTACKS OF THE EVIL ONE. Christianity was never meant to be a detour *around* the world — instead it is a particular path *through* the world, the only one that finally turns out to be safe. So Jesus prayed that while His apostles lived “in the world” (John 17:11) they might not be “of the world” (John 17:14). Would He not pray the same for us? Since the world is the environment in which we must live, there is nothing much we can do about that. However, there is one thing we must do, and that is to reject the spiritual values of the world. We can refuse to give these principles any place in our hearts. As an old sailor would say, a ship’s place is in the sea, but if the sea gets into the ship then there is serious trouble.

Devotion to God does not mean we dispense with any regard for the world that God has created. The more reverent our regard for God, the higher will be the quality of our connection to the world. “Far from turning us away from the world, Christ directs us to it. He awakens within us an altogether new concern for it” (Paul Tournier). As we live in the world without being of the world, we will look more respectfully upon all things that God has made, even upon those that have been broken and marred by sin. Like our Lord Himself, we will be moved by compassion to enter the world on our own missions of mercy.

Let us also remember that sanctification does not require secluding ourselves in private, though it would surely be a good idea for us to do that more often nowadays. To be sanctified, or set apart, does not mean *physical* separation as much as it means *moral* separation. Even more than that, it means separation from any *use* of ourselves other than the Lord’s use. To be His people, we must be distinct from the world, but it is in the world, after all, that the Lord intends to make use of His people.

Consecration is not wrapping one’s self in a holy web in the sanctuary and then coming forth after prayer and twilight meditation and saying, “There, I am consecrated.” Consecration is going out into the world where God Almighty is and using every power for His glory.

It is taking all advantages as trust funds.

HENRY WARD BEECHER

November 3

MOVING TOWARD IMMORTALITY

Meditate on these things; give yourself entirely to them, that your progress may be evident to all. Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you. 1 *Timothy* 4:15,16

IT IS A FACT THAT WE ALL MOVE IN SOME DIRECTION EVERY DAY OF OUR LIVES. As far as our inner character is concerned, there is no standing still. We are either growing or declining every day. And if we are seekers of God, our most powerful desire will be to make progress *spiritually*. However important physical, mental, and emotional growth may be, it is even more important that we grow in the spiritual dimension of our nature. We need — every day — to be moving away from the mortality of the body and toward the immortality of the spirit.

But this kind of progress doesn't come to the lackadaisical or the haphazard. It is the result of a concentrated *focus* on God, and this focus itself is the result of a decisive *commitment* to spiritual growth. If we have anything less than a committed focus on God, the importance of our growth will get trampled by the urgency of today's "To Do" list. This is something we must not allow to happen. Paul urged his younger friend Timothy to "meditate" on the truths of God that he'd been taught. "Give yourself entirely to them," Paul wrote. To improve, Timothy needed to "take heed" to himself and the body of doctrine that could move him toward God. But not only would Timothy need to focus his mind and concentrate on the teachings of God; he would also need to "continue in them." Significant improvement in our lives is not the work of one day. It is by patiently continuing our concentration on spiritual things that we find ourselves making progress.

Genuine spiritual progress, however, is worth every sacrifice, every ounce of effort, and every moment of concentration that go into it. Even in the here and now, there is no contentment in the world any more peaceful than knowing we're getting better spiritually. To experience this progress is to get a foretaste of greater things to come. As William Blake has reminded us, the very joy of heaven is "improvement of the things of the spirit."

I am wrapped in mortality, my flesh is a prison, my bones the bars of death.
What is mortality but the things related to the body, which dies.
What is immortality but the things related to the spirit, which lives eternally.
What is the joy of heaven but improvement of the things of the spirit.

WILLIAM BLAKE

November 4

LEST WE FORGET THE GOAL

Now the purpose of the commandment is love from a pure heart,
from a good conscience, and from sincere faith. *1 Timothy 1:5*

AMID THE WELTER OF OUR SPIRITUAL THOUGHTS, WORDS, AND DEEDS, THE MAIN THING THAT SHOULD BE PRODUCED BY ALL OF THIS ACTIVITY MAY END UP BEING NEGLECTED. Paul wrote that the purpose (in other words, the “goal” or “end”) of the commandment is *love*. This is the object in view — it is the thing that is supposed to be produced by instruction in God’s word. If we profess to be those who seek God, we need to be aware that one of the truest tests of our seeking is the test of love. If we are missing love, then we’ve missed the “purpose of the commandment.”

The word “love,” of course, means many things to many people, and the kind of love that God desires is no ordinary love. According to Paul, it comes “from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith.” A “pure heart” is clean and wholly devoted to God, a “good conscience” is carefully protected and consistently obeyed, and a “sincere faith” is genuine and without pretense. When these qualities combine, they produce a love that is remarkable. It is certainly distinct from the emotional feeling that is called “love” in the world, but it is also different from the intellectual orthodoxy that is called “love” by many Christians. The love that distinguishes the people of Christ is nothing less than the love Christ had: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34,35).

When we think about it, the reason for love’s importance is obvious. If God is love, how could we possibly draw near Him without growing in love? But what if we’re seeking God and love is not increasing in our lives? We may not like to hear it, but one of two things must be true: either our “seeking” is not a serious seeking or our “God” is not the real God. If we truly seek and it is the true God whom we seek, then real love must result. John’s words are clear and to the point: “He who does not love does not know God, for God is love” (1 John 4:8). If we lose sight of this fact, then we’ve somehow gotten off the road that leads to God.

With the knowledge of God comes love.

CATHERINE OF SIENA

November 5

A GOD OF BOTH MERCY AND JUSTICE

Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God:
on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue
in His goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off. *Romans 11:22*

KNOWING OF BOTH THE "GOODNESS" AND THE "SEVERITY" OF GOD, WE OUGHT TO SEEK HIM WITH REVERENCE AS WELL AS GRATITUDE. Even though He is a God of love, God is not to be trifled with. Our love for Him must be tempered with sobriety. Indeed, it would not be right to say we loved God if we failed to take Him seriously. A love that presumed upon His grace and treated Him as if His commandments were inconsequential would be something less than real love. Thus it is our gratitude for God's goodness, just as much as our respect for His severity, that causes us to be careful about His instructions.

As has often been pointed out, it is the justice of God that makes His mercy meaningful. Just as our love for God would mean little if we were robots who had no choice but to love Him, God's mercy toward us would be meaningless if punishment were an impossibility. And it would be hard to have much respect for a God who never did anything about the wrongs and the injustices that are in the world. In his speech in Athens, Paul affirmed that God "has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness" (Acts 17:31). And the question that Abraham had asked in his day is a question that answers itself: "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Genesis 18:25).

The alternatives are set before us in Paul's letter to Rome. God, wrote the apostle, will render to each one according to his deeds: "eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality; but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, indignation and wrath" (Romans 2:7,8). And in John's writings, Jesus Christ is pictured as both the "Lamb of God" (John 1:29) and the "Lion of the tribe of Judah" (Revelation 5:5). There is no conflict between the Lamb and the Lion. The Son of God is both, and both should govern our faith, our hope, and our love.

The vague and tenuous hope that God is too kind to punish the ungodly has become a deadly opiate for the consciences of millions. It hushes their fears and allows them to practice all pleasant forms of iniquity while death draws every day nearer and the command to repent goes unregarded. As responsible moral beings we dare not so trifle with our eternal welfare.

A. W. TOZER

November 6

CHOOSING TO LIVE

I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live. *Deuteronomy 30:19*

WE HAVE A CHOICE WHETHER TO LIVE IN GOD OR TO DIE APART FROM HIM, AND AS LONG AS OUR EARTHLY SOJOURN CONTINUES HE IS ALWAYS URGING US TO CHOOSE LIFE. "Life and death" and "blessing and cursing" are set before us. Therefore, God says, "Choose life." And we are encouraged to do this not only for our own sakes but also for the sake of our descendants.

Life and death are not fates that are forced upon us; we have the freedom to choose between them. In giving us our freedom, God apparently desired beings who could respond voluntarily to His love. There would be no significance to our love for Him if we were merely programmed to behave lovingly. So rather than compel us, God invites us. He calls upon us to *choose* life. And the life that can be chosen is a far finer thing than any force of nature.

But as important as the word *choose* is, the word *life* is even more important. The thing that we can choose to have in God is not merely a period of service but an eternity of *life*. What God wants for us is our highest good. Speaking of Himself, Jesus said, "God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved" (John 3:17). And He told His disciples, "I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly" (John 10:10).

Although there is some difficulty in choosing the life God offers, it is no difficulty at all compared to that which is encountered on the path to death. And choosing life over death is also easier than living in the limbo that results from not deciding. The person who won't make a choice or take a stand is going to get the most difficult of all lives. Nothing is more exhausting than procrastination, and nothing is more destructive than indecision. So when the God who created us calls upon us to "choose life," it's time to determine our course. "God has no need of marionettes. He pays men the compliment of allowing them to live without him if they choose. But if they live without him in this life, they must also live without him in the next" (Leon Morris).

Be entirely tolerant or not at all; follow the good path or the evil one.
To stand at the crossroads requires more strength than you possess.

HEINRICH HEINE

November 7

THE PLEASURE OF PLEASING GOD

Therefore we make it our aim, whether present or absent,
to be well pleasing to Him. *2 Corinthians 5:9*

WE SHOULD BE WILLING TO DO WHAT IS RIGHT BECAUSE IT'S RIGHT, BUT WE SHOULD ALSO DO IT BECAUSE IT BRINGS PLEASURE TO OUR GOD. If we perceive God to be nothing more than a tyrant who has the power to make us miserable when we get out of line, yet who remains displeased no matter how hard we try, then we have an unfortunate misconception of Him. We should rather see Him as a benevolent Father who is eager to be pleased by His sons and daughters. And we should be enthusiastically motivated by this very prospect, the prospect of *pleasing* Him.

The text which speaks most clearly to this point is the one in Hebrews where the faith of Enoch is mentioned: "By faith Enoch was taken away so that he did not see death, 'and was not found, because God had taken him'; for before he was taken he had this testimony, that he pleased God" (Hebrews 11:5). Here is the record of an individual who actually did what many believe is impossible to do: *he pleased God*. A mortal being no more infallible than we are, Enoch still pleased God. The point of the text, of course, is that it was "by faith" that he did this, and if we intend to please God, then we shall have to go about it in the same way. For sinful creatures, no other door is open to God's pleasure. "Without faith," the text continues, "it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him" (Hebrews 11:6).

Doing the things that please God will obviously give us the sense of having done our duty, and that is no slight benefit. As someone has said, there is no pillow as soft as a clear conscience. But doing what pleases God will also fill us with *pleasure*. Our hearts are happiest when we want the same things God wants and when those things are granted to us by His grace. To know that our deeds have been harmonized with our Father's will is a wonderfully refreshing feeling. It is a pity that we look for pleasure in so many of the wrong places when real pleasure is right before us. The very best kind of pleasure is available to us at every moment of every day, and that is the pleasure of pleasing God.

The only path to pleasure is in pleasing God.

RICHARD OWEN ROBERTS

November 8

GOD'S KINGDOM, GOD'S WILL

In this manner, therefore, pray: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Matthew 6:9,10

GOD'S KINGDOM IS THE "REALM" WHERE HE RULES. We should learn this truth and meditate on its significance. Rather than thinking of the kingdom in terms of an institution, we should train ourselves to think of it in terms of God's kingship or sovereignty.

Those who have submitted to God's rule are certainly "citizens" in His kingdom, and they can even be thought of collectively as a group. But we would do better to put the emphasis more on the King who rules and less on those who are ruled over. The kingdom that was established in the New Testament period is one that shall never be destroyed (Daniel 2:44). The thing that "went forth" from Jerusalem at that time was not an institution but *the principles of God's truth* upon which fellowship with Him may now be obtained (Isaiah 2:1-3; Acts 1:4-8). Having been revealed, those principles will always be available in the world to any who choose to accept them (1 Peter 1:22-25). God reigns upon His throne. His kingdom is a reality, and He invites one and all to accept it on His terms. But God's kingdom does not depend for its existence upon its subjects. Whether those subjects be many or few at any moment in history, God's kingdom (that is, His rule) is everlasting. In the words of the writer of Hebrews, God's kingdom is one that "cannot be shaken" (Hebrews 12:27,28).

The "territory" over which God reigns is not any physical region; it is a spiritual kingdom that exists in the hearts of those who have yielded to His authority (Luke 17:20,21). "Wherever God rules over the human heart as king, there is the kingdom of God established" (Paul W. Harrison). Thus when Jesus taught His disciples to pray that the kingdom might "come," He was teaching them to desire not only that it be inaugurated but that many people might accept it. Having now been established, the kingdom "comes" to us individually when we submit to God's will. Thus we cannot speak of God's kingdom without speaking of His will. "Your will be done," Jesus prayed, "on earth as it is in heaven."

The kingdom of God does not exist because of your effort or mine.
It exists because God reigns. Our part is to enter this kingdom
and bring our life under his sovereign will.

T. Z. KOO

November 9

THE INTEGRITY OF TRUE WORSHIP

The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD,
But the prayer of the upright is His delight. *Proverbs 15:8*

IN ORDER FOR OUR WORSHIP TO HONOR GOD, IT MUST BE CONSISTENT WITH THE LIVES WE LEAD WHEN WE'RE NOT WORSHIPING. There must be *integrity* in our worship: unity or consistency between our worship and our character. If we disregard God in our hearts so that our daily lives are disobedient, then our worship is nothing but offensive to God. As the text above indicates, "The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD." A similar proverb puts it this way: "One who turns away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer is an abomination" (Proverbs 28:9). These and all other such statements in the Scriptures should arrest our attention. God is not pleased by the mere mechanical performance of certain acts of worship. Such acts are acceptable only when they are part of a life that is consistently obedient.

It is perhaps difficult to see when there is inconsistency between our own lives and our worship, but we are often shocked when we see in the lives of others just how inconsistent human beings can be. In Isaiah's day, for example, the people of Judah had become morally degenerate. Social injustice was rampant. God was being dishonored in every possible way. And yet the people were continuing to come to the temple and offer their sacrifices, evidently supposing that these would be pleasing to God. Perhaps they even thought these sacrifices would compensate for their disobedience and would make them "religious" people.

God made it clear, however, that His people's worship would be rejected until they chose to repent of their iniquity: "When you come to appear before Me, who has required this from your hand, to trample My courts? Bring no more futile sacrifices . . . I cannot endure iniquity and the sacred meeting . . . When you spread out your hands, I will hide My eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not hear. Your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean" (Isaiah 1:12,13,15,16). Thus true worship requires a good deal more than ritual; it requires the true turning of a penitent heart toward its God.

If worship does not change us, it has not been worship.
To stand before the Holy One of eternity is to change.
Worship begins in holy expectancy; it ends in holy obedience.

RICHARD J. FOSTER

November 10
OFFERINGS

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart;
These, O God, You will not despise. *Psalm 51:17*

ONE OF THE HARDEST TRUTHS FOR US TO REMEMBER IS THE IMPORTANCE OF TRUE PENITENCE. Even when we're conscious of a desperate need for God, we often seek His favor by offering Him nothing more than the outward actions of worship. But what God is more interested in is the condition of our hearts, and if our hearts are not truly given to Him in godly sorrow, then there is nothing else we can offer Him that will be acceptable.

However, when David said that the sacrifices God desired were those of a contrite heart, he did not mean that the physical acts of worship which God had commanded could be disregarded. It would be a mistake to use this text to support the view that it does not matter how, or even if, we worship God outwardly as long as we love Him in our hearts. The familiar "not . . . but" construction in the Scriptures simply means that the "not" is less important than the "but," and that the former has little meaning apart from the latter. For example, when Jesus said, "Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life" (John 6:27), we do not understand Him to mean that working for our physical food is wrong or unimportant; rather we understand Him to be saying that our efforts in the physical realm are less important than those in the spiritual and that the former has very little significance if it is not connected to the latter.

Similarly, David is teaching us in Psalm 51 that the outward aspects of worship are relatively meaningless by themselves. If these deeds don't come from a humble heart that is conscious of its own sin, then God is not pleased by them. This, as we have said, is not an easy truth to remember. The temptation is always to give God this or that physical "offering" and suppose that He surely must look upon us favorably for having worshiped Him as we were commanded to do. But such "worship" does not honor God. The thing that He desires us to offer Him, far more than anything else, is "a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart."

Give me a pure heart — that I may see thee,
A humble heart — that I may hear thee,
A heart of love — that I may serve thee,
A heart of faith — that I may abide in thee.

DAG HAMMARSKJÖLD

November 11

SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS

The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, "God, I thank You that I am not like other men; extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess." *Luke 18:11,12*

WE WILL NOT SEEK GOD AS WE SHOULD IF WE ARE HINDERED BY SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS. If our focus is centered on the good deeds we've done and we forget how far short of perfection we still fall, we won't recognize how much we continue to need His mercy. There will be no real longing for grace or gratitude for forgiveness. This, of course, is the attitude illustrated by Jesus in His familiar parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, a story in which the Pharisee thanked God that he was not sinful like other people and, in effect, congratulated himself for being so careful in his observance of God's law. Luke prefaced this parable by saying that Jesus spoke it to some "who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others" (Luke 18:9). People do not seek God if their trust is in themselves. They may visit the self-help section in the bookstore, but they do not seek God.

Self-righteousness is such a devilish thing because it begins to afflict us at those times when we really are making some spiritual progress. Just when we begin to demonstrate some diligence in our spiritual lives and take some long-overdue steps in the direction of obedience, our enemy is often able to rob us of our progress by tempting us to become proud of our progress! The joy and wholesome confidence that come with doing what is right begin to slide off into the murky waters of self-satisfaction. Ever so secretly, we begin to entertain the thought that, yes, maybe we *are* a little more deserving of salvation than those who are less spiritual-minded. And although we've gone no more than a little distance in our journey toward God, we begin to be proud of ourselves for our patience with those who are somewhat less enlightened than we — and we can hardly understand why they aren't more eager to let us help them with their problems.

And so it can happen, if we're not on constant guard, that we end up with an attitude that is not very different from that of the Pharisees, who "trusted in themselves that they were righteous." And if what started out as spiritual progress ends up as spiritual pride, then our adversary will have held on to us after all.

Self-righteousness is the devil's masterpiece.

THOMAS ADAMS

November 12

DEEDS OF DENIAL

They profess to know God, but in works they deny Him, being abominable, disobedient, and disqualified for every good work. *Titus 1:16*

IF WE PROFESS WITH OUR WORDS THAT WE KNOW GOD, WE MUST ALSO CONFESS HIM WITH OUR WORKS. Paul wrote of individuals who claimed to know God but denied Him by their deeds. This is one of the most serious mistakes anyone can make. In a sense, it would be better to declare ourselves as opponents of God than to claim friendship and then betray Him by our way of life. As unfortunate as it would be to live in open defiance of God, at least there is some consistency in such a life. Speaking of certain Christians who were living licentiously, Peter wrote, "For if, after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the latter end is worse for them than the beginning. For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them" (2 Peter 2:20,21). There is no worse denial of Christ than denial by our *deeds*.

Of course, our adversary would like us not even to acknowledge the lordship of Christ verbally. From his perspective, there is always the danger that at some point we might start taking it seriously. But even though it's "dangerous," he knows that all is not lost if we profess Christ. He is willing for us to do that — as long as we don't practice our profession. But if we ever begin seeking God *diligently*, then it is much less likely that he will ever get us back. He certainly doesn't give up on us even then, but those Christians who confess with their lives what they profess with their lips are the toughest cases for him to crack.

It is not, however, just to worry our adversary that we ought to practice our principles. The more important reason is that this is how we glorify our Heavenly Father. Our neighbors have a right to look for evidence that "it is God who works in [us] both to will and to do for His good pleasure" (Philippians 2:12-15). Whatever we may *say*, it is our *deeds* that demonstrate that God really can redeem lost souls like our own and remake them in His image.

Beware of worshiping Jesus as the Son of God and professing your faith in him as the Savior of the world, while you blaspheme him by the complete evidence in your life that he is powerless to do anything in and through you.

November 13

HANDLE WITH CARE!

... as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures. *2 Peter 3:15,16*

IT IS POSSIBLE TO MISUSE THE SCRIPTURES IN SUCH A WAY AS TO HARM OURSELVES SERIOUSLY. We need to handle the Scriptures with care, especially when we're dealing with texts that are "hard to understand," as Peter described them, "which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction." If we're serious about seeking God as He truly is and not merely wanting to confirm our own opinions, we'll approach the Scriptures with reverence and patiently work our way toward greater understanding.

Most of us probably err by not making prayer a more important part of our study. But if the Scriptures are indeed what we believe them to be, then it would seem that prayer should be one of the main components in our study: before, after, and in between. For one thing, prayer puts us in a more respectful frame of mind and makes us more ready to listen to the things we need to hear. Prayer makes it more likely that we'll deal wisely with the Scriptures. But more important, prayer brings to our efforts the help we need from God, whose word we are studying.

One of the most marvelous things about God's word is the combination of its simplicity and its depth. Many of the things we read in the Scriptures are accessible even to children. (Indeed, our children sometimes understand what God has said better than we who have outgrown our childlike honesty.) But even the simple statements in the Scriptures contain enough depth to challenge us and reward a lifetime of reflection. There is much to learn on the surface of God's word, but the wonders that are below the surface are inexpressibly grand. What we find after many years of study is that the Scriptures are an inexhaustible source of enriching, ennobling truth. Even their harshest critics stand in awe of the impact these writings have had on the course of human civilization. Say what we will, these are no ordinary texts. They must be handled with caution and with care.

The Holy Bible is an abyss. It is impossible to explain how profound it is, impossible to explain how simple it is.

ERNEST HELLO

November 14

NO COMPROMISE

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world; the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life; is not of the Father but is of the world. *1 John 2:15,16*

A VERY BASIC DECISION HAS TO BE MADE: WILL WE LOVE THE WORLD OR WILL WE LOVE THE FATHER? "If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him," the apostle John wrote. The things in the world that tempt us are to be decisively rejected. And we must reject them not only because many of them are inherently wrong but also because they tend to dominate our hearts. The world is not content to share our affection with God; if given a chance it will displace God as our first love. "The whole effort — the object — of temptation is to induce us to substitute something else for God, to obscure God" (R. H. Stewart). Ultimately, we face a choice between worshiping the Creator or worshiping the things that have been created (Romans 1:25).

It has been said that our response to temptation is a barometer of our love for God, and there is an element of truth in this. The person who deeply loves God may certainly fall to temptation in an unguarded moment, but generally speaking, our love for God will move us to say an emphatic *no* to the enticements of sin. If we find ourselves unable to say *no*, it is probably because the *yes* that we ought to be saying to our Lord does not burn very brightly within us. Thus the best way to diminish the love of the world is not merely to strengthen our willpower but to do all those things we know will increase our love for God.

It is foolhardy, to say the least, to hold on to our love for the world while we try to love God. If we think that the "lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life" will not hinder our movement toward God, we are seriously underestimating the pull these things have on us. None of us is strong enough to serve two masters, and the person who tries to do so is writing a recipe for disaster. "But he who has taken his stand, who has drawn a boundary-line sharp and deep about his religious life, who has marked off all beyond as forever forbidden ground to him, finds the yoke easy and the burden light. For this forbidden environment comes to be as if it were not" (Henry Drummond).

Straw should make no pact with fire.

RUSSIAN PROVERB

November 15

VERITY

Test all things; hold fast what is good.

1 *Thessalonians* 5:21

PERSONAL GROWTH REQUIRES A CONSTANT REFINEMENT OF OUR UNDERSTANDING. As the days come and go, we have hundreds of opportunities to clarify our thinking. We are given many chances to learn new principles, clear up misunderstandings, and view reality from a higher vantage point. But such learning is not automatic. We must be open to having our perspective heightened, and we must be willing to do a certain amount of work. It takes diligence to broaden the boundaries of our knowledge and improve the accuracy of our thinking. At all costs, we must want to know what is real as opposed to what is illusory.

Much, if not most, of the information that is presented to our minds on any given day is false or incomplete. A serious commitment to God means that we must sift through the assortment of ideas that come to us and test these for truth and fairness. "Test all things," Paul wrote, and "hold fast what is good." We can ill afford to be casual in our acceptance of concepts and principles. Although it is sometimes difficult to do, a choice must be made to discard whatever fails the test of truth. Edward Young wrote of that "wisdom, awful wisdom! which inspects, discerns, compares, weighs, separates, infers, seizes the right, and holds it to the last." Quality lives are built on quality information, and growth toward God requires growth in our powers of judgment.

Ultimately, of course, "time will tell," as we say. Whatever is false and illusory will eventually be seen as such, and whatever is true will still be standing when everything else has vanished. In the meantime, we need to be making progress toward truth at every opportunity. As Georges Braque observed, "Truth exists; only falsehood has to be invented." What we want are lives of *discovery*: discovery of what is real, solid, and substantial.

Man with his burning soul
Has but an hour of breath
To build a ship of truth
In which his soul may sail
Sail on the sea of death
For death takes toll
Of beauty, courage, youth,
Of all but truth.

JOHN MASEFIELD

November 16

VALIDATION

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

1 Corinthians 10:12

IT IS WISE FROM TIME TO TIME TO CHECK OUR BEARINGS AND MAKE SURE WE'RE HEADED IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION. None of us has the perfect wisdom that would be necessary to live without "taking heed." We need to reconsider our convictions and validate our principles. Paul said, "Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves" (2 Corinthians 13:5).

One kind of pride is the pride of spiritual complacency, the contentment that sees no need to grow in our understanding or even check the accuracy of what we already know. It is easy to fall into this trap once we've traveled a little ways down the road of wisdom. When we look back and see what we've learned, it's easy to forget how far we have yet to go. We seem to reach a point at which we feel no great need to move ahead.

But humility, not to mention reverence, indicates that we ought to be careful. Rarely are we ever doing so well that we don't need to hear Paul's exhortation to the Corinthians: "Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall." And to the Ephesians he wrote, "See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil" (Ephesians 5:15,16). The more difficult our environment, the more important it is to be circumspect concerning our relationship with God.

Frequently validating our principles is not a sign of paranoia; it's a sign of prudence. Spiritual maturity knows the need for stability, but it also knows the need for caution. And if we're too proud to be cautious, then we're in a dangerous state. Paul wrote that "if anyone thinks that he knows anything, he knows nothing yet as he ought to know" (1 Corinthians 8:2). It is certainly not good to be driven here, there, and everywhere by the winds of popular dogma. But neither is it good to be so locked into our thinking that we can't reevaluate it. There is a delicate balance between confidence in what we know and respect for what we don't know. But if we intend ever to know more than we do right now, we'll have to humble ourselves. The greatest impediment to new knowledge is overconfidence concerning our present knowledge.

Caution is the eldest child of wisdom.

VICTOR HUGO

November 17

LIGHT AND LIBERATION

And you shall know the truth,
and the truth shall make you free. *John 8:32*

TRUTH IS OFTEN COMPARED TO LIGHT, AND JUST AS LIGHT FREES US TO DO MANY THINGS THAT ARE IMPOSSIBLE IN THE DARKNESS, TRUTH LIBERATES US FROM THE CONFINES OF UNTRUTH AND MAKES MANY GOOD THINGS POSSIBLE. It is a pity that we nowadays look upon truth with such skepticism. We may go so far as to doubt that there is any such thing as truth, but even when we acknowledge truth's existence, we often do so with reluctance. Truth seems to be the spinach on our plates that has to be eaten and not the cookies and cream that we would rather partake of. According to Jesus, however, truth is a positive force that will make us free.

However much truth might seem to limit our options, it would be in our long-term interests to concede this fact: *it is not truth but untruth that confines us in any kind of harmful way*. Indeed, falsehood is so confining that "enslavement" is not too strong a word to describe what it does to us. And this applies not only to our thinking but also to the outward actions that result from our thinking. One definition of "sin" might be that it consists of actions that are based on untruth. All such actions ultimately entrap us and enslave us to the lie they are based upon. So Jesus was not exaggerating when He said, "Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin" (John 8:34).

Truth has always been the primary "tool" God has used to accomplish His work in the world. This makes sense when we stop to remember that the problem God is working to correct — the problem of sin — is a problem that resulted from lies that were told to our ancestors (Genesis 3:1-24; 2 Corinthians 11:3). Our Adversary is described as "that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world" (Revelation 12:9). If untruth is the problem, then it should not surprise us that God works to undo the problem by restoring to us the truths we let get away from us in the first place. Deception concerning God is ultimately to blame for the break in our fellowship with Him. And if we are to seek reconciliation with Him, it is foolish to think we can do so by any other means than truth.

Man finds God through truth.

JEWISH PROVERB

November 18

TRUTH AND TRUST

Trust in the LORD with all your heart,
And lean not on your own understanding;
In all your ways acknowledge Him,
And He shall direct your paths. *Proverbs 3:5,6*

GOD'S PROMISE OF HELP IS GIVEN TO THOSE WHO ARE WILLING TO TRUST HIM. We all need God's guidance with equal urgency, but not all of us are willing to respect God's judgment. At those times when His instructions point to a different path than we would follow if we went by our own judgment, it is often hard to yield to Him. But those who seek God must make the choice to yield, and they do so in the confidence that God's wisdom will stand the test of time. It has never failed that test in the past.

If we've made any serious attempt to obey God, then we've surely discovered that His instructions can sometimes seem counterintuitive, at least from our earthbound viewpoint. What are we to do in such situations? The consistent answer of the Scriptures, of course, is that we must demonstrate faith. But faith is often misconceived. It is not a blind leap in the dark, and it does not require the setting aside of all reason. When we make the choice to trust that God knows what is best, we are putting our confidence in a God who has over and over again proven His trustworthiness. Our "leap" is anything but "blind," our eyes being wide open to what God has openly revealed of His character and His purpose. Nothing in the world would have seemed more counterintuitive than for the Son of God to be sent to the Cross (Matthew 16:21-23). But that sacrifice having been made and its surprising results now being obvious, there should never again be any doubt about either the wisdom or the benevolence of God's will.

When Solomon said, "Lean not on your own understanding," he did not mean we should deny our own reasoning powers or our ability to comprehend truth. It was God who gave us our rational minds, and He intends us to use them constructively in our relationship to Him. But compared to His knowledge, our information is lacking and our perspective is limited. For that reason, when there is a conflict between God's wisdom and our own (and therefore a clash between God's will and our own), we are wise to "acknowledge" Him in all our ways.

Any man who understands his own foolishness is already a little wise.

JEWISH PROVERB

November 19

OUR ENEMY IS NOT IMAGINARY

For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. *Ephesians 6:12*

WE NEED TO BE SOBERED BY THE REALITY OF THE EVIL POWERS THAT OPPOSE US. Evil is more than an abstract concept or an impersonal force. It is personified in a spiritual adversary who is the ultimate fulfillment of evil. Along with the spiritual beings who have allied themselves with him, this adversary is intent on our destruction. Satan, whose name means “Accuser” or “Slanderer,” is certainly not equal to God in his power, but he is nevertheless just as real. And his powers are not to be ignored. Those who seek to live in fellowship with God have to struggle against “the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.” Unfortunately, the path to God leads through enemy-occupied territory.

It bears repeating that the devil is not equal to God. Contrary to dualistic philosophies in which two equal and co-eternal powers vie against one another, the Scriptures affirm that the devil is one of God’s created beings, perhaps the highest, who at some point rebelled and has opposed God’s rule ever since (Jude 6; Revelation 12:9,10). Hell is portrayed as a place first of all “prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matthew 25:41). His doom is certain, but that does not mean the devil has ceased to destroy all that he can. John Milton, who of course had thought profoundly about these things, wrote that the devil is “the strongest and fiercest spirit that fought in heaven, now fiercer by despair.”

Satan, then, is primarily God’s adversary; we are caught up in the cosmic struggle, but only because we are associated with God. Satan seeks to overthrow every aspect of the Creator’s kingdom, and as beings whom God created to serve Him, we are among the targets of God’s enemy. To the extent that we take God’s side in the war, we will incur the wrath of Satan and his forces. The war is real, and our enemy is not imaginary. His destructive will, therefore, ought to be among the reasons why we seek God. “I sought only for the heart of God, therein to hide myself from the tempestuous storms of the devil” (Jakob Böhme).

The devil never sleeps, and your flesh is very much alive.
Prepare yourself for battle. Surrounding you are enemies that never rest.

THOMAS À KEMPIS

November 20

REAL EXALTATION

Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God,
that He may exalt you in due time. *1 Peter 5:6*

A PROPER RELATIONSHIP TO GOD REQUIRES HUMILITY: THE REVER-
ENT RECOGNITION THAT WE ARE SUBORDINATE TO HIS RULE. When we seek God, we must not barge into His throne room demanding to receive the recognition we think we're due. We must instead offer ourselves to Him humbly, willing and grateful to occupy whatever place He pleases to put us in. In the realm of spiritual things, it is our pride that has gotten us into trouble, and if our relationship to God is ever to be improved, the trait of humility is one we'll have to learn.

What is needed from us, however, is more than the pretense of humility. Our efforts to appear humble often backfire because they concentrate on the maintenance of a mere image. But without character, image is worthless, and humble words can never substitute for the real thing, which is humble *thinking*. True humility means we have an honest inward view of our own limitations, and this is different from the "modesty" of the person who sees himself as so great that he congratulates himself for remaining so humble. The truth is, very few of us have any reason to be anything other than humble! As Golda Meir once said to a certain individual whose mock humility came from an exaggerated view of his own talents, "Don't be so humble. You're not that great."

Perhaps we are tempted to pride because of our emptiness. Broken and degraded by sin, we would like to be much more than we are right now. In our frustration, we listen to voices that tell us to take control of our own destiny. But although we desperately need the joy that is nowadays called "self-fulfillment," the more we strive for it, the more it seems to elude us. In this regard, fulfillment is much like happiness, which is not attained by direct effort but rather comes as a by-product of focusing on other things. In a similar way, if we lift ourselves up in a conscious effort to feel significant, the long-term results are bound to be disappointing. But when we humble ourselves "under the mighty hand of God," then we find ourselves experiencing an exaltation that could not have been achieved by any amount of striving.

Pride is the cold mountain peak, sterile and bleak; humility is the quiet valley fertile and abounding in life, and peace lives there.

ANNE AUSTIN

November 21

SOMETHING ELSE THAT REQUIRES DILIGENCE

I [wisdom] love those who love me,
And those who seek me diligently will find me.
Proverbs 8:17

IF IT IS IMPORTANT TO SEEK GOD DILIGENTLY, AS WE HAVE ARGUED, IT IS ALSO IMPORTANT TO SEEK THE WISDOM THAT IS NECESSARY TO KNOW HIM. The path that leads to God is not found by the foolish, but rather by those who are willing to learn. God is a God of truth (Deuteronomy 32:4). He is “light and in Him is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). Thus our approach to God must be based on reality, soundness of judgment, and the absence of illusion.

But like the seeking of God Himself, the seeking of wisdom is a matter of choice and conscious activity. We don’t find ourselves growing wise simply by default. Most of life’s basic experiences come to all people, more or less equally. But not all become wise, and the reason is rather simple: it is by the *thoughtful interaction with our experiences* that we grow wise. Without a commitment to learn what we should, the experiences that could teach us wisdom simply wash over us with no lasting effect. “Though you grind a fool in a mortar with a pestle along with crushed grain, yet his foolishness will not depart from him” (Proverbs 27:22).

Determining to seek wisdom, of course, requires that we appreciate the *value* of what we seek. And while many people pay lip service to wisdom’s value, not many value it enough to go ahead and seek it diligently. We need to wrestle with our consciences and ask whether we actually believe what Solomon said about the worth of wisdom: “Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom. And in all your getting, get understanding” (Proverbs 4:7). “For wisdom is better than rubies, and all the things one may desire cannot be compared with her” (Proverbs 8:11).

But finally, it is important for us to recognize God as the ultimate source of wisdom. In a secular culture that extols the unaided efforts of our own understanding, it goes against the popular grain to defer to the wisdom of our Creator. But that is precisely what we must do if we are to grow wise in any lasting sense. Our lives must be based on something like Jude’s doxology: “To God our Savior, *who alone is wise*, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever. Amen” (Jude 25).

No man ever became wise by chance.

SENECA

November 22

HEARTS THAT ARE TRUE

But the ones that fell on the good ground are those who, having heard the word with a noble and good heart, keep it and bear fruit with patience. *Luke 8:15*

TO COMMIT OURSELVES TO GOD AND THEN REMAIN FAITHFUL TO HIM ALWAYS, THERE IS A CERTAIN KIND OF "HEART" WE MUST HAVE. This heart is one that is described in the NKJV rendering of Luke 8:15 as "noble and good." What kind of mind or character is indicated by these words?

The word "noble" in this text is a translation of one of the loveliest words in the Greek language, the adjective *kalos*. As one of the words used by the Greeks for "good," *kalos* meant good in the sense of fine or beautiful. As indicated by the traditional KJV translation "honest," *kalos* in Luke 8:15 refers to that which is morally honorable or praiseworthy. Paired with the adjective *agathos*, as it frequently was by secular Greek writers, *kalos* is used here to describe the heart that is sound and true. When Jesus said that the "good soil" in his parable represented those who have a "noble and good heart," the idea is that those whose spiritual lives come to fruition are those who have minds that are open to God's truth and dispositions that are eager to conform to His will. With regard to God, then, our motives must be completely pure. We must be moved by an honest, guileless intent to do whatever is right.

But why is this kind of heart so essential? There are a number of reasons, but one of the most important is that without hearts that are sincerely open to God, we won't be in a position even to *understand* His truth. The key to spiritual comprehension is not intelligence, but purity of heart. As William Barclay once commented: "People can become so dull and heavy and blunted in mind that when God's truth comes to them they cannot see it. It is not God's fault. They have become so mentally lazy, so blinded by prejudice, so unwilling to see anything they do not want to see, that they have become incapable of assimilating God's truth."

The possibility that we may not have the "heart" to understand what God wishes to say is a frightening prospect. But our hearts are not predetermined or ruined beyond repair. Any of us can decide to have a heart that is true, and making this choice is always the first step toward seeking God.

A guileless mind is a great treasure; it is worth any price.

A. W. TOZER

November 23

THE BOUNTIFUL HARVEST

But this I say: He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly,
and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. *2 Corinthians 9:6*

IF STINGINESS IS A PART OF OUR CHARACTER, WE WILL FIND THAT SEEKING GOD IS A QUITE DIFFICULT ENDEAVOR. On the other hand, if generosity is what motivates us, our experience is likely to be quite different: we will find the discovery of God to be considerably more pleasant. Indeed, whether we find God or not depends greatly on which of these directions our hearts are turned. If we are turned inward and our principal concern is to “get,” then we’ll probably report that the spiritual life is unrewarding. But if we are outwardly oriented and our desire is to “give” ourselves to God and to others, then we’ll have a different set of results.

When Paul wrote that “he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully,” he was addressing a specific area of obedience in the Christian life. But as he encouraged the Corinthian Christians to be generous in this particular matter, Paul pointed to a principle that is valid in almost every other area. This principle is a moral law that is as fixed as any physical law: *what we “reap” is in proportion to how bountifully we have “sown.”* Most of us would say that we’ve observed the validity of this principle in the secular affairs of daily living. We should not be surprised that the principle is also valid in the spiritual realm, a realm where the consequences happen to be much greater because they are eternal.

One of our most typical shortcomings is our tendency to be too conservative in our giving to God. Yet if seeking Him is as important as we believe it is, then surely this endeavor presents the ultimate opportunity for us to invest ourselves generously, giving full measure rather than holding back. And when we truly open our hearts to Him, we need not doubt what God’s response to us will be. It is not possible for us to exhaust the Lord’s bounty. “God is able,” Paul wrote, “to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work” (2 Corinthians 9:8).

The tissue of the Life to be
We weave with colors all our own,
And in the field of Destiny
We reap as we have sown.

JOHN GREENLEAF WHITTIER

November 24

ULTIMATE EXPERIENCE

Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good;
Blessed is the man who trusts in Him! *Psalms 34:8*

THAT GOD IS “GOOD” IS ONE OF THE MOST VALUABLE TRUTHS EVER ENTRUSTED TO THE HUMAN RACE. How could we survive if we did not know that He is perfectly wise and just — and that He is benevolently inclined toward us? Like the other aspects of His nature, God’s goodness far surpasses our ability to comprehend it. His benevolence is an ocean deeper than we can fathom. But the Scriptures hold up this truth for us to contemplate and to be comforted by. And the wonder of it all is that our Creator’s goodness is consummated in this great desire: He desires to give Himself to us. “God is so good that he only awaits our desire to overwhelm us with the gift of himself” (François Fénelon).

David invites us to experience God’s goodness firsthand. “Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good.” We can debate the theoretical pros and cons of divine goodness for months and not learn as much about it as there is to be learned in one day of actual walking with God. Ultimately, “the proof is in the pudding,” as the old cooks used to say. And as John Keats observed, “Nothing ever becomes real until it is experienced — even a proverb is no proverb to you till your life has illustrated it.” If we wish to make great spiritual strides, one of the most valuable things we can do is to “taste” that which up to now we’ve only thought about.

There is, of course, a degree of risk involved in the “tasting” approach, and that may be why we limit ourselves to theoretical discussions of God’s goodness. It is safer, in a sense, simply to talk about the question than to put ourselves at risk and find out for sure. So David’s statement, “Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good,” is followed immediately by the benediction, “Blessed is the man who trusts in Him!” Trust is truly what it takes to find out whether God’s goodness can be counted on. If we hide behind our suspicions and keep God at a “safe” distance, then we can’t expect to know for ourselves what it is like to walk with Him. God’s goodness is best tested by being tasted.

Acquaint thyself with God,
If thou wouldst taste His works.
Admitted once to His embrace,
Thou shalt perceive that thou wast blind before.

WILLIAM COWPER

November 25

CHOOSING OUR FOCUS

Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy — meditate on these things. *Philippians 4:8*

WE ARE COMMANDED TO CENTER OUR THOUGHTS ON THINGS THAT ARE VIRTUOUS AND PRAISEWORTHY. Living as we do in environments where there is much that lacks virtue, it is not easy to keep our thoughts filled with the kinds of things suggested by Paul. But if we are willing to pay the price required by self-discipline, there are immensely valuable benefits that come from making these things our meditation. Those who are careful about their thinking are much more pleased with the quality of their lives.

It is true that passing thoughts that are less than pure will present themselves to us on a fairly regular basis. As long as we live in the present world, there is no avoiding the temptation to think evil thoughts. But while we can't keep these thoughts from presenting themselves to us, we can and must refuse to let them lodge in our meditations. Passing thoughts will come and go, but we are in control of the habitual patterns of our thinking, and it is these deliberate thoughts that Paul has reference to when he says, "Meditate on these things." That which we hold in our hearts and continue to reflect on is a matter of choice, and if we're serious about seeking God that choice must be made carefully.

The fact is, there are still many good things in the world that we can focus our thoughts on if we're willing to make the choice. The enemy has not so marred the world of God's creation that there are not many fine treasures left: wonderful things that are true, noble, just, pure, lovely, and of good report. These we must seek out and learn to enjoy reflecting on. It's undeniable that our minds grow by what they feed on, and what we feed on right now will determine the characters that will carry us into eternity, for better or worse. "Good thoughts bear good fruit, bad thoughts bear bad fruit — and man is his own gardener" (James Allen). Much in life depends on the simple matter of "focus," and learning to focus wisely the minds that God has given us is one of the greater challenges of the spiritual life.

As nothing is more easy than to think,
so nothing is more difficult than to think well.

THOMAS TRAHERNE

November 26

ETERNAL GLORY

For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory. *2 Corinthians 4:17*

IF THERE IS ANY HARDSHIP TO BE ENDURED AS WE SEEK GOD, THAT HARDSHIP IS NOTHING COMPARED TO THE GLORY THAT WAITS FOR US WHEN THE HARDSHIP IS OVER. It would be dishonest to suggest that the Christian does not have to deal with the “problem of pain,” for that is certainly not the truth. But the other side of that truth should not be forgotten. Speaking of His own crucifixion, Jesus said, “Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?” (Luke 24:26). Just as His glory was on the other side of His suffering, so it is with us who intend to follow Him. Our prayer is not to be delivered from difficulty but to keep our minds fixed on the radiant joy that the difficulty is accomplishing. Peter wrote, “But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you” (1 Peter 5:10).

Paul speaks of a “weight of glory” that is out of all proportion to the “light affliction” we may suffer during our earthly lifetime. Our suffering may be so painful right now it is hard for us to see how this can be so, but we will have only just begun to enjoy that glory when we realize how insignificant the suffering was. The point is not that our sufferings are insignificant in themselves, for the horrors some have suffered in this world are truly profound. But compared to the glory, our sufferings are small. And not only that, but compared to the “eternal” nature of the glory, our sufferings are only “for a moment.”

In their practical impact on our thinking, these truths can be nothing short of revolutionary. They can make a monumental difference in our ability to persevere. “We do not lose heart,” Paul writes. “Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day” (2 Corinthians 4:16). Our adversary would like to bog us down so deeply in our troubles that we lose all perspective, but we simply must not allow that to happen. Our vision must be kept clear, and we must make the consistent choice to look not “at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen” (2 Corinthians 4:18).

Glory is perfected grace.

MEISTER ECKHART

November 27

THE OPEN WAY

Jesus said to him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." *John 14:6*

JESUS CHRIST CLAIMED TO BE THE "WAY" THROUGH WHICH WE CAN COME TO GOD. As beings who are alienated from God by our own rebellion, the "here" of our present condition is separated by a great distance from the "there" of fellowship with God. But a "way" is a path or an opening that allows passage, and it is the astounding claim of Jesus Christ to be the opening that allows the passage of sinful human beings to God. Without Him, no such passage would be possible. We would be those "having no hope and without God in the world" (Ephesians 2:12).

There is no dodging the fact that the claim of Jesus is a radical claim. It is radical in several ways. First, it is exclusive. "I am the way, the truth, and the life," is what Jesus said. "No one comes to the Father except through Me." Either this claim is true or it is not. If it is not, then Jesus is forever disqualified from being a "great moral teacher." If His central claim is false, then we should simply disregard Him as a liar and have no more to do with Him.

Second, Jesus' claim is radical in that it confronts us with the fact that we are not already "with" the Father. This is strong medicine. We are cut off from God despite the very best of our own systems of philosophy and moral endeavor. In Jesus' teaching, there is no sugarcoating of the truth about either the human condition or the impossibility of fixing that condition ourselves.

But third, Jesus claimed that He Himself was the way to God. This is far more than the "instruction" of a religious teacher. Jesus did not simply say that He *taught* the way to God — He claimed to *be* the way. The nature of our problem was such that it could not be rectified by another, more advanced set of religious teachings. Instead, it took the vicarious death of a perfect Personal Being to bridge the gap between our sinfulness and God's justice. Having offered Himself as that sacrifice, Jesus Christ has become the way to God. "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, *that He might bring us to God*, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit" (1 Peter 3:18).

Jesus Christ set a window in the tiny dark dungeon of the ego in which we all languish, letting in a light, providing a vista, and offering a way of release from the servitude of the flesh and the fury of the will.

November 28

HEREIN IS OUR GLORY

Thus says the LORD: "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, nor let the rich man glory in his riches; but let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD, exercising lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth. For in these I delight," says the LORD. *Jeremiah 9:23,24*

MOST OF US FEEL A NEED TO HAVE SOMETHING ABOUT OURSELVES THAT WE FIND DEEPLY SATISFYING. There needs to be something that we can take "pride" in, something about us that is honorable and praiseworthy, at least by our own standards. Those who don't have any such source of satisfaction are said to have a low sense of "self-worth" or an unhealthy "self-image." Whatever words are used to describe this human need (and the terminology varies greatly from culture to culture), almost every person in the world knows what it is to strive for this fulfillment. We need to have something significant that we can "glory" in.

The problem is that we were created by a God who fashioned us in His own image and made us such that our greatest need is for Him personally. When we ignore the truth that this is our greatest need and try to find our significance and satisfaction in other things, we engage in a pursuit that is dangerous and destructive. Surrounded by so many things that seem to be likely sources of fulfillment, we are constantly tempted to "achieve" in these areas and then use our achievement as the foundation for our self-esteem. We look long and hard for something that we can be good at, and when we have found it, we make that our "glory."

But the God who gave each of us our gifts has said, "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, nor let the rich man glory in his riches; but let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD." Whatever our achievements and our accolades may be, these are never the most important things about us. What matters is whether we know God. And if we do not know Him, then there is much about the subject of "glory" that yet awaits our discovery. When we make it, this discovery will perhaps amaze us: that all is well when we simply let ourselves be whatever we are — *in God*.

Our great honor lies in being just what Jesus was and is.
To be accepted by those who accept him, rejected by all who reject him,
loved by those who love him and hated by everyone who hates him.
What greater glory could come to any man?

A. W. TOZER

November 29

WHERE FRUSTRATION COMES FROM

Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war . . . *James 4:1,2*

THE MORE SELF-CENTERED OUR DESIRES ARE, THE MORE FRUSTRATED OUR RESPONSE WILL BE WHEN THOSE DESIRES ARE BLOCKED OR DENIED. James pinpoints this problem when he says that even among fellow Christians “wars and fights” result from the inability of people to get what they lust for. When what we want is the mere fulfillment of selfish demands and those demands are not met, we often react with a range of soul-shriveling emotions, including anger and anxiety.

First of all, consider anger. If our focus is purely on the accomplishment of God’s purposes, there will be little anger in our response to obstacles and delays, simply because we know that nothing can ultimately block God’s purposes from being achieved. If, however, what we really want is the satisfaction of our own selfish will, our reaction will be very different when someone stands between us and what we want. The response that has aptly been called “demandingness” is a sure symptom that our desires are centered on something other than God.

But think also of fear and anxiety from this perspective. Is it not a fact that our tendency to worry stems from uncertainty that we’re going to get what we want or that our goals are going to be reached? And if our goals are self-centered to start with, isn’t the likelihood of anxiety much higher than if our goals were God-centered and depended on His power for their accomplishment?

These are important considerations for every person whose purpose is to seek God. If we find ourselves frequently experiencing either anger or anxiety, it is probably time to ask ourselves whether it is really our Father whom we are seeking. We must have the honesty to admit how often emotions like these are the result of frustrated self-seeking. And we must replace our demandingness with a sincere delight in the certainty of His will.

When my sense of self depends on what others say of me, anger is a quite natural reaction to a critical world. And when my sense of self depends on what I can acquire, greed flares up when my desires are frustrated.

Thus greed and anger are the brother and sister of a false self, fabricated by the social compulsions of an unredeemed world.

HENRI J. M. NOUWEN

November 30

THE COST OF THINGS WORTH HAVING

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

LIKE THE GRAIN OF WHEAT THAT CANNOT BE PRODUCTIVE UNLESS IT "FALLS INTO THE GROUND AND DIES," SO WE MUST BE WILLING TO GIVE UP CERTAIN LESSER THINGS IN ORDER TO HAVE THOSE THAT ARE GREATER. There is, as the saying goes, no free lunch. Whatever is worth having is worth paying for. And we are not wise to waste time looking for a way to beat the system and "get rich quick." The riches of the spiritual life are for those who are willing to make real investments of themselves. And the investments that are required will separate us from some things we're reluctant to let go of. An actual *cost* will have to be paid. There is no way to have it both ways. Either we make the investment or we do not. And whichever choice we make, we should not expect still to have all we would have if we had made the other choice!

The discipline of prayer furnishes a simple illustration. It is a considerable understatement to say that there are benefits to having a rich prayer life. We often look with admiration upon those who have such a life and wish we could enjoy what they enjoy. But prayer takes time, and those who have spent a great deal of time praying have had to make some sacrifices. Whatever it is that we've been doing while they were praying, they've had to do without those things. And if we suppose that some way can be found for us to have all the benefits they enjoy and still do all the things we presently do, then we're only being silly. What we have is what we've been willing to pay for, and in all too many cases, that is not much.

In a way, it is only an insult that we offer to God when we try to give Him things that don't involve any cost (1 Chronicles 21:24; Malachi 1:8). If the investments we make in our spiritual lives don't require us to give up anything of real value to us, then they aren't really investments, and the results won't be worth very much. In the end, God's value to us will be indicated by what we've *exchanged* for Him. "He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life."

It is necessary that he who looks for gain, should incur expense.

PLAUTUS

December 1

WHAT SHOULD WE DEMAND OF GOD?

Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said:
"Who is this who darkens counsel by words without knowledge?" *Job 38:1,2*

THROUGHOUT HIS AFFLICTIONS, JOB MAINTAINED HIS FAITH, BUT BEFORE THE ORDEAL WAS OVER HE DEVELOPED A DEMANDING SPIRIT THAT WAS NOT PLEASING TO GOD. As most of us do when the long haul has become so long that we're nearly exhausted, Job began to be more and more insistent that God explain the reason for his suffering. He didn't go so far as to question God's righteousness, but he did start to sound as if he was irritated at God.

When our hardships are not alleviated in what we think is a reasonable time, and especially when we don't understand why we should be suffering in the first place, almost all of us begin to grow impatient. In our impatience we become demanding, and in our demanding frame of mind we often begin to say things that go beyond our understanding. We speculate about matters known only to God, and we come close to putting Him on notice that He'd better remove our pain or tell us why not. When Job made his arguments and laid down his demands, he spoke of things he had very little understanding of. And when he finally realized how presumptuously he had spoken about God, he was humiliated: ". . . I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know" (Job 42:3).

God is indeed the Giver of gifts and the Answerer of questions. For those with Job's faith, there can be no doubt about this fact. But God's wisdom far exceeds our own, and so His gifts and His answers are not always supplied according to our timetable. When we're faced with either God's "inaction" or His "silence," we need to hold our tongue and also watch our attitude. After all, it is not the gifts or the answers of God that we seek; it is God Himself. We know that He has our greatest good at heart and can be counted on to act in infinite, powerful love. (At least we know these things if we've considered what happened at the Cross.) We know also that whether God deems it wise to share with us the answer to every question, He knows the answer. Not only does He know the answer, but He *is* the answer! The fact that He will give Himself to us is far, far more than enough.

Lust means "I must have it at once." Spiritual lust causes me to demand an answer from God, instead of seeking God Himself who gives the answer.

December 2

CREATIVE TENSION VS. EMOTIONAL TENSION

... till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. *Ephesians 4:13*

IN REGARD TO OUR SPIRITUAL GROWTH, THERE IS A GAP BETWEEN WHERE WE ARE AND WHERE WE WANT TO BE. As we reach for the “stature of the fullness of Christ,” we’re conscious that there is a discrepancy between our present condition and the goal we seek. Yet how we choose to think about this discrepancy is one of the main factors that determine our spiritual lives. Depending on whether we think of the difference as a problem to be worried about or an opportunity to be embraced, there will be a corresponding impact on our spiritual growth.

Peter Senge, in his book *The Fifth Discipline*, makes the important distinction between “creative tension” and “emotional tension.” When we have an idea in our minds about what we would like our reality to be but we recognize that our current reality is far below this ideal, the result is “tension.” But tension is not always bad. The anxiety-filled “emotional tension” that we often feel is not the only response a human being can make when he or she realizes there is work to be done. We can respond instead with decisiveness, energy, and enthusiasm. This kind of tension is a positive stimulus that urges us in the direction of good work, and this is what Senge calls “creative tension.”

When it comes to spiritual growth, we tend to swing between the extremes of worry and complacency. Either we obsess about our shortcomings in an unhealthy, self-pitying manner or we just forget about the whole thing and accept ourselves as we are. It seems as if we’re determined to be either neurotic or lethargic. But there is a third way, and that is the way of growth, the way of improvement. Yes, we need to feel our hurts deeply. “In this [body] we groan” (2 Corinthians 5:2). But no, we should not worry about our imperfections in a destructive way. Making progress toward perfection is what the spiritual life is about. If we’re growing, we’re reaching forward and narrowing the gap.

[T]he gap between vision and current reality is also a source of energy. If there was no gap, there would be no need for any action to move toward the vision. Indeed, the gap is *the* source of creative energy.

We call this gap *creative tension*.

PETER M. SENGE

December 3

CAREFUL LEARNING

For all the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing. *Acts 17:21*

AS PLEASURABLE AS OUR INTELLECTUAL PURSUITS MAY BE, WE MUST BE CAREFUL TO KEEP THESE IN PERSPECTIVE. Like the Athenians, we may be thrilled “to tell or to hear some new thing.” But it is to be hoped that we have our sights set on something more than the mere exchange of intellectual information. Seeking God requires the use of our intellects, and there is an intense joy in the right use of the minds we’ve been given. Yet seeking God is not just an intellectual pursuit. We must work at achieving balance between this priority and others that are no less important.

One of the dangers we face, of course, is pride. Paul contrasted the benevolent benefits of love with the lofty attitude that often goes with learning when he said, “Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies” (1 Corinthians 8:1). It is a rare individual who can make more intellectual progress than his peers and not begin to feel at least a little proud of that fact. So in seeking the knowledge of God, we must keep pride in check by every possible means.

But the word “love” suggests another danger: we may become so consumed with intellectual activity that we disconnect ourselves from the people around us and from the active responsibilities of daily living. Spiritually speaking, we can’t afford the luxury of living in an ivory tower. Having wrestled, perhaps by the burning of midnight oil, with the ideas that are involved in seeking God, we must come out into the sunshine of real human relationships and put to work the truths we have learned. We must not engage in “pointless lucubrations,” as I once heard a friend refer to purely abstract inquiries.

There is a great accountability that goes with knowledge. On the one hand, a little knowledge is a dangerous thing, and on the other, much will be expected of those to whom much has been given. Whether we’ve learned little or much, whatever we’ve learned involves a stewardship. There are serious responsibilities that go with knowledge, and especially with the knowledge of God. To know even a little of Him is a privilege we should respond to with reverence, caution, and respect.

Don’t let your intellectual pleasure exceed your fear of misusing it.

December 4

PITFALLS

O Timothy! Guard what was committed to your trust, avoiding the profane and idle babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge; by professing it some have strayed concerning the faith.

Grace be with you. Amen. *1 Timothy 6:20,21*

PAUL WARNED HIS FRIEND TIMOTHY AGAINST THE “CONTRADICTIONS OF WHAT IS FALSELY CALLED KNOWLEDGE,” AND WE WOULD DO WELL TO HEED A SIMILAR WARNING. Paul probably had in mind something like the esoteric knowledge of the Gnostics of his day, and so his warning may seem to have little direct application to us. Nevertheless, his caution contains an interesting point that we would do well to consider in a general sort of way. There is a principle here that is pertinent to anyone who seeks knowledge, but especially to those of us who seek the knowledge of God: *not everything is knowledge that wears the name*. Similar appearances notwithstanding, there is a huge difference between reality and illusion, and whatever it is we seek, we need to be sure we find the real thing and not some substitute.

Along the path that leads to God there are numerous pitfalls. Having committed ourselves to learning all we can of Him, we discover what is perhaps a new and exciting delight in the life of the mind. New understandings and insights seem to open up to us daily. It is all quite exhilarating. But the very pleasure of our pursuit should make us all the more careful not to misplace our affection. To repeat: *not everything is knowledge that wears the name*. In the marketplace of ideas, counterfeits abound, many of which look and feel very much like the real thing. And for every step of progress we make toward something valuable, there will always be an easier step we could take toward something less valuable. In the spiritual life, we have a very practical need for *constant vigilance*. Our focus needs to be rechecked frequently. In effect, God is saying to us, “It is I whom you seek. Accept no substitutes!”

We pray, O Lord, for deliverance from all that weakens faith in you:

from pompous solemnity;

from mistaking earnestness for trust in you;

from seeking easy answers to large questions;

from being overawed by the self-confident;

from dependence upon mood and feelings;

from despondency and the loss of self-respect;

from timidity and hesitation in making decisions.

In Christ, we pray. Amen.

WILLARD SPERRY

December 5

DISCIPLESHIP AND SELF-DENIAL

Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me." *Matthew 16:24*

SELF-DENIAL IS A DIFFICULT DISCIPLINE, TO BE SURE, BUT IT IS ONE OF LIFE'S MOST IMPORTANT VIRTUES. If we wish to become disciples in any serious sense, we must learn to deny ourselves, take up our crosses, and follow Christ.

One reason we find self-denial so difficult is that it goes against the grain of our culture. The social environment in which we live is increasingly dominated by self-affirmation rather than self-denial. This ethic comes through loud and clear in the lyrics of our popular music. For example, a hit by one of the most powerful pop stars of the past decade tells us, "You've got to do what you've got to do." Another song, this one even by an artist known for his spirituality, says, "You've got to do it in your own way."

What is wrong with this philosophy? It is certainly true that when tough personal decisions have to be made, we must summon the courage to act on our own convictions. When we've analyzed a decision from every angle and considered the advice of others, the time comes when we have to make up our own minds. Integrity requires that we do what we believe is right, even if this conflicts with the collective judgment of everybody we know.

But the philosophy of self-affirmation advocates far more than the simple following of conscience. Instead, when we're told that "you've got to do what you've got to do," it's understood that what we've "got to do" is whatever we *want* to do. One of the scariest statements I have ever heard illustrates this ethic. The remark came from a very up-to-date friend who said with evident satisfaction, "It feels so good at this point in my life finally to have the courage to do what I *want* to do and not what anybody else says I *ought* to do." In our culture, "want" defeats "ought" every time.

As "self-actualized" people, then, it is hard for us to learn self-denial. We do not find it easy to yield to God when what we want is on a collision course with His standards of what is right. Yet self-denial is what we must learn. Somehow we must recover the old-fashioned virtue of *sacrifice* — the willingness to let go of everything except that which most greatly glorifies God.

We tend to be devoted, not to Jesus Christ, but to the things which allow us more spiritual freedom than total surrender to Him would allow.

December 6

ACCEPTING OUR ASSIGNMENTS

If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I am not of the body," is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I am not of the body," is it therefore not of the body? *1 Corinthians 12:15,16*

DESPITE OUR TENDENCY TO WANT SOMEONE ELSE'S ROLE, WE EACH NEED TO ACCEPT THE ASSIGNMENTS IN LIFE THAT WE OURSELVES HAVE BEEN GIVEN. We can't excuse ourselves from our obligations simply because we lack someone else's abilities. This is especially important to remember if we're members of the body of Christ. If we're a "foot," for example, we must not say, "Because I am not a hand, I am not of the body." In Christ, it is God who has apportioned the various abilities: "God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased" (1 Corinthians 12:18). It is not good to question God's organization of the body.

The "body" is an apt metaphor for Christ's followers because a human body is an organism where each member is *needed*. Some parts of the body seem to get more publicity, but no part is without an important use. And it is when all the parts work together healthily that the body functions as it was intended to function. Christ, of course, is the head, "from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love" (Ephesians 4:16).

Humility means we try to see ourselves as God sees us. When we do this, we will not think too highly of ourselves (Romans 12:3), but neither will we think too lowly of ourselves. It is just as wrong to deny our abilities and dodge our duties as it is to be poisoned with pride. God is not pleased when we complain about the assignments He has given us. And it is not humility but false humility that causes us to deprecate ourselves and the tools that are in our toolbox. In truth, God has given to each of us the abilities that He has because those are the resources we need to do the work that belongs to us — *right where we are*. It's tempting to think we could do a better job if we occupied someone else's place, but that is probably not true. If we won't serve Christ where we are, then we wouldn't serve Him anywhere else.

True humility consists in being satisfied with what we are asked to do.
Do your assigned task with good cheer.

TERESA OF AVILA

December 7

LEARNING WHAT WE LONG TO KNOW

Now therefore, I pray, if I have found grace in Your sight, show me now
Your way, that I may know You and that I may find grace in Your sight.

Exodus 33:13

OUT OF ALL THE THINGS WE LONG TO KNOW, IT IS THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD THAT WE LONG FOR THE MOST. The need to know God is embedded deep within our created nature, and while we may not always recognize this need, it is still a part of us. At some level, all of us can identify with Moses' request of God: "Show me now Your way, that I may know You and that I may find grace in Your sight." What we do about this desire is the single greatest determinant of the quality of our lives. In the end, it will be seen that all of our outward actions were the result of our knowledge of God — or the lack of that knowledge. This knowledge is the soil out of which our lives grow, and if the soil is barren, our harvest will not be bountiful.

There are certain things about God that we can learn from the creation (Romans 1:20), but it was in His Son that God fully revealed Himself (John 1:18). And, of course, since we did not live when Jesus lived, it is only through the medium of the Scriptures that we can know what He revealed of God. But if these are the documents through which we can come to know God, it is extremely important that we *study* them. And coming to know God should be the primary *reason* for our study. We are not looking for mere curiosities but for information about God! Even at the end of a long lifetime of study, we should still be looking for truth to help us refine and purify our concepts of God Himself.

Having been created in God's image, we have no higher hope than this ultimate, all-encompassing desire: *one day to see God's face*. It is no coincidence that the last book in the New Testament canon closes with this very prospect. John wrote, "And there shall be no more curse, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His servants shall serve Him. They shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads" (Revelation 22:3,4). This hope should not only fire our imaginations; it should move our wills. The promise of knowing God fully so that we can worship Him perfectly — this must be the mainspring of every godly action.

The child, the philosopher, and the religionist
have all one question: "What is God like?"

A. W. TOZER

December 8

WHAT DOES GOD WANT US TO LEARN?

Do you not yet understand, or remember the five loaves of the five thousand and how many baskets you took up? Nor the seven loaves of the four thousand and how many large baskets you took up? *Matthew 16:9,10*

IT IS VERY IMPORTANT THAT WE DRAW THE RIGHT CONCLUSION FROM THE MIGHTY SIGNS AND WONDERS THAT ARE RECORDED IN THE SCRIPTURES. But like the disciples of Jesus during His ministry, we often fail to get the point. We may be impressed with what the miracles say about God's existence, and we may even understand that they are evidence of His power and authority. To our loss, however, we don't always see what these signs say about God's nature, His purposes, and His intentions toward us.

What, for example, should the disciples have learned from Jesus' feeding of the five thousand (Matthew 14:13-21)? If they saw this amazing feat as a demonstration of Jesus' supernatural power, that was a first step. And if they understood this demonstration of power to support His claim to be the Messiah, the Son of God, that was another step. Yet Jesus' feeding of the multitude should have convinced the disciples of more than His godhood. It should have prompted them to place more of their trust in His goodness as God. Later, in another situation where they showed a lack of trust (Matthew 16:5-12), it was evident that they had not gotten the point of the earlier miracle. "Do you not yet understand, or remember?" Jesus asked them. The real lesson of the miracle had been lost on them. "So little had they learned it yet, that they remembered the loaves but forgot the Father — as men in their theology forget the very Logos" (George MacDonald).

To every *What?* in life there is a corresponding *So what?* And if each word or deed of God recorded in the Scriptures is a *What?*, then it is our business to answer correctly the question *So what?* Sometimes we don't do any better than the Lord's first disciples, but it will help us greatly to learn from their experience. God desires to show us His nature. *He wants us to learn not only His power but also that He can be trusted to use that power for our good!*

The lesson He would have had them learn from the miracle, the natural lesson, the only lesson worthy of the miracle, was, that God cared for His children, and could, did, and would provide for their necessities. This lesson they had not learned. No doubt the power of the miracle was some proof of His mission, but the love of it proved better, for it made it worth proving: it was a throb of the Father's heart.

GEORGE MACDONALD

December 9

A DRY AND THIRSTY LAND

O God, You are my God; early will I seek You;
My soul thirsts for You; my flesh longs for You
In a dry and thirsty land where there is no water. *Psalm 63:1*

ALTHOUGH OUR NEED FOR GOD IS VERY REAL, WE DON'T ALWAYS RECOGNIZE THAT NEED. And if we spend our lives pursuing other things, we may explain that by saying we don't need God as much as others do, but that explanation doesn't do justice to the truth. It would be more accurate to say that we don't *recognize* our need. The objective existence of our need and our subjective feeling of it are two very different things. And the great challenge we face is to bring these two into harmony. Having a need for God, as every human being does, we need to *feel* that need. As the years go by, we should more truthfully *understand*, lovingly *feel*, and honestly *acknowledge* that we need our God.

David spoke of his "thirst" for God: "My flesh longs for You in a dry and thirsty land." What does it mean to thirst for God? Does it not mean we recognize our inadequacy without Him? Yes, it means this and more. It means we confess Him to be our Creator (Romans 1:21) and admit the impossibility of our existence without His sustaining grace (Colossians 1:17). It means we reverently and gratefully turn our hearts toward Him and come to the point where we love the thought of Him. It means we long for fellowship with Him and, above all, we recognize that without redemption from the sins we have committed against Him, we are hopelessly lost and undone (Acts 16:30).

In regard to our physical bodies, we objectively need such things as vitamin D and exposure to sunlight. If we don't get these two things, we develop rickets. A person with rickets may or may not understand what it is that he is lacking; yet the deficiency and its consequences are very real. And so it is with the needs of our spirits. "The soul is a never ending sigh after God" (Theodore Christlieb). If we don't recognize our need for what it is and attend to its truthful satisfaction, in time the dry and thirsty land in which we live will take its toll.

Our nature hungers for God even when it broke with him long ago, perhaps the more intensely the longer ago it was. It experiences a sort of famine. But the devil rides it and spurs it on, to distract it from its own need. He changes its hunger into haste. That is why people today are in such a hurry. Their speed is to distract their hunger.

LOUIS EVELY

December 10

WHEN WE DO WITHOUT GOD

O LORD, I know the way of man is not in himself;
It is not in man who walks to direct his own steps. *Jeremiah 10:23*

THERE IS AN IMPORTANT PRINCIPLE IN THE STATEMENT THAT "IT IS NOT IN MAN WHO WALKS TO DIRECT HIS OWN STEPS." As created beings, we are not autonomous. We are not a law unto ourselves, and we are not wise enough or strong enough to do without God. Even if it were objectively true that there is no God, honesty would still suggest that our difficulties are greater than our wisdom and strength. A century ago, many people had an unbounded faith that it would only be a matter of time until "progress" found a way to make everyone in the world safe and happy. Yet progress has not delivered on its promise, and despite some improvements, our worst problems are only getting worse.

When we try to "go it alone," the result is bound to be either *discouragement* on the one hand or *pride* on the other. If we fail to be comforted by the availability of God's grace, we bog down in despair. But if we fail to be humbled by the necessity of God's guidance and help, we bog down in something even worse: the illusion that we're doing better than we really are.

So without God, the best we can do is to get by for a few years living "on the surface," avoiding the harsh realities of life. Since the greatest problems in life are insoluble without God, if we exclude Him from our thinking, then we have no choice but to exclude also the problems that only He can solve. Without God, we only have two choices: (1) not dealing with the ugly realities of human life, or (2) dealing with them in the pride of human self-sufficiency, presuming to be able to accomplish what we know deep down is impossible for us. Either way, life ends up being much less than it could be. Jeremiah was right: our way is not in ourselves. It is not in us who walk to direct our own steps. And the recognition of this truth is not weakness but strength.

O God of earth and altar
Bow down and hear our cry,
Our earthly rulers falter,
Our people drift and die;
The walls of gold entomb us,
The swords of scorn divide:
Take not thy thunder from us,
But take away our pride.

G. K. CHESTERTON

December 11

MUCH MORE THAN WHITEWASH

. . . these people draw near with their mouths and honor Me with their lips,
but have removed their hearts far from Me, and their fear toward Me
is taught by the commandment of men. *Isaiah 29:13*

WORDS ARE POWERFUL THINGS, BUT THEY SHOULD NEVER BE USED TO COVER UP THE CHANGES WE NEED TO MAKE. When what is going on is not good, the temptation is for us to cover up our wounds with the bandages of fine-sounding words. We may “draw near” to God with our mouths and “honor” Him with our lips, but if our hearts are far removed from God, then our words will not be accepted by Him as a substitute for real worship. We may mislead other people who can’t see the true condition of our hearts, but God will not be misled. He is not looking for verbiage but for hearts willing to be transformed. And if our hearts are not willing to be turned toward Him, then no amount of “image management” will get us where we want to go.

It may be that we underestimate the amount of transformation that is actually possible. Discouraged by our past efforts to become what we want to be, we give up and lower our expectations. Not convinced that God can make any real difference in our dysfunctional behavior, we content ourselves with talking *as if* He had made a difference. Doctrinally, we may go so far as to believe that the Christian doesn’t even *have* to live a life qualitatively different than the non-Christian. Since salvation is by grace and not by works, the Christian is different only in being forgiven.

But while it is indeed true that salvation is by grace and the perfection of our holiness must await the resurrection, it is also true that our transformation begins in this life. Writing to the Christians in Rome, Paul said, “Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4). And in the same letter, he said, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2). God’s purpose for us goes far beyond words and images and outward reputations. He intends nothing less than to actually turn us around!

Faith means being grasped by a power that is greater than we are, a power that shakes us and turns us, and transforms and heals us. Surrender to this power is faith.

PAUL TILLICH

December 12

BECOMING REAL

I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear,
but now my eye sees You. *Job 42:5*

WE ARE FAR AWAY FROM GOD, AND THE JOURNEY BACK TO HIM TAKES MORE THAN A DAY. We begin by hearing distant reports of Him, perhaps listening to them skeptically because they don't fit with what we think we know of reality. Eventually, however, we begin to see some truth in what we've heard. At some point, we may commit ourselves to seeking Him and living according to His principles, although some of these principles still don't make complete sense to us. But over time, we discover that we've passed into a completely different land than we used to live in. What once was theory now seems solid and very practical. We find that the knowledge of God is no longer something to speculate about but rather something to experience. Like Job, who said, "I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you," we find that however serious we were about God before, He has now become *real* to us. And in the process of His becoming real to us, we ourselves have become real also.

It needs to be said, of course, that the passage from knowing God in theory to knowing Him in real life involves a good deal of discomfort. Just as it is through suffering that our knowledge becomes wisdom, so it is through suffering that our wisdom becomes reality. Only as we work our way through hardships do we learn that the truth really is true after all. The safe nursery of our thinking is not where we find out what works and what doesn't; it's out in the street where mistakes about what is real are costly. That is why God invites us to take some risks and put Him to the test: "Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good" (Psalm 34:8).

Becoming real is a gradual process. It takes place so slowly that sometimes we wonder if we're making any progress at all. But if we're patient — and if we're willing to accept a certain amount of pain as we learn — then the time will come when the best of the good ideas we've had will come true. We'll find ourselves not merely thinking about God but knowing Him. And in God, what we've always wanted to be is what we actually will be!

"Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse.
"It's a thing that happens to you . . . It doesn't happen
all at once. It takes a long time."

MARGERY WILLIAMS

December 13

ASK, SEEK, KNOCK

Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. *Matthew 7:7,8*

WE HAVE GOD'S ASSURANCE THAT THOSE WHO TRULY DESIRE HIM WILL HAVE THEIR DESIRE FULFILLED. If we ask, it will be given to us. If we seek, we will find. And if we knock, the door will be opened to us. Yet these are not casual activities that we can take care of in our spare time. They are based on something more than a mere whim concerning God's importance, and they require more than a passing interest in things of a spiritual nature.

Asking, seeking, and knocking are the outgrowths of *loving* God. Only strong, steadfast love has the persistence necessary to push through the obstacles that confront us. "It is love that asks, that seeks, that knocks, that finds, and that is faithful to what it finds" (Augustine of Hippo). It is not enough to ask once or twice, to seek now and then, and to knock a time or two. Jesus' statement instructs us to keep on asking, keep on seeking, and keep on knocking. It is only love that will keep us doing these things.

But not only do these things require love; they also require *humility*. The older we grow, the less willing we are to ask for what we need. Perhaps men have a harder time asking for help than women do, but certainly adults find it harder than children do. It is the most natural thing in the world for a child to *ask*, and that is one way in which we must become "as little children" (Matthew 18:3) if we are to enter the kingdom of heaven. If it is pride that keeps us from asking because asking gives the appearance of weakness or need, that is a pride that we must repent of.

The fact is, we *are* weak and we *are* needy; there is no use trying to cover up this truth. We are created beings who are dependent on our Creator, and there is no significant greatness we can achieve without His help. "Therefore," Jesus said, "whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:4). To be sure, our needs are already known to our Heavenly Father before we ask Him. But He wants us to have the humility to recognize those needs ourselves and ask for His help. The deeper our gratitude for His grace, the more faithfully we will ask and seek and knock.

Whether we like it or not, asking is the rule of the kingdom.

CHARLES HADDON SPURGEON

December 14

MORE THAN ANY CONCERN FOR OURSELVES

... that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. *Philippians 3:10,11*

KNOWING GOD IS WORTH WHATEVER IT COSTS, EVEN IF IT MEANS THE SACRIFICE OF EVERY CONCERN FOR OURSELVES. For most of us, however, it takes constant vigilance to make sure our hearts are truly turned in God's direction and we are seeking Him for His own sake. We must be careful not to "use" God. He does not exist to furnish us a means — not even the highest of means — by which we can come to think of ourselves more positively. God is not a *means* to anything, least of all the mere boosting of our self-image.

What, then, is "godliness" about? It may come as a surprise to some, but godliness is about more than the acquiring of godly character. We can't glorify God as we should without living godly lives, it is true, but the reasons for which we seek to become godly have more to do with Him than with us. We do not show reverence and gratitude to Him simply because it benefits us, but because those are the proper responses of a creature to its Creator.

Our self-centered approach to godliness is one reason why our religion does not show up any more often in service to those around us. Oswald Chambers made this point in his usual terse way: "Christian workers fail because they place their desire for their own holiness above their desire to know God. 'Don't ask me to be confronted with the strong reality of redemption on behalf of the filth of human life surrounding me today; what I want is anything God can do for me to make me more desirable in my own eyes.'" Living in a culture that so openly worships self-esteem, can we fail to be made uncomfortable by words like these?

At all costs, we must move away from self-centeredness, even when it appears in the guise of a desire for holiness. This does not mean that holiness should not be a priority, for it certainly should be. But holiness, like happiness, comes as a by-product of seeking something more important than any concern for ourselves, namely the glory of God. Our principal focus must be kept on Him and on serving others in His name. The "bottom line" is not how this or that action affects the way we look at ourselves but whether those deeds magnify His eternal honor.

God cannot deliver me while my interest is merely in my own character.

OSWALD CHAMBERS

December 15

GRACE TEACHES US TO SAY NO

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age. *Titus 2:11,12*

GOD'S GRACE MEANS WE HAVE BEEN LIBERATED FROM THE GUILT OF OUR PAST SINS AND MADE FREE TO DO WHAT IS RIGHT IN THE PRESENT. It does not mean we are free to do anything we please. To those who might see grace in this kind of permissive way, Paul asked, "What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?" (Romans 6:1,2). Grace means we have "died to sin," and if we are sincere in seeking God, this is a truth we must take very seriously.

There is a difference between "freedom" and "licentiousness." Our English word "licentiousness," like its cousin "license," comes from the Latin *licentia*, which meant freedom. But licentiousness is not true freedom; it is nothing more than the lack of restraint. It is the stolen freedom of the person who disregards the rules of reality and throws discipline to the wind. But because licentious conduct respects no standards except those of its own pleasure, its effect is not to liberate but to enslave. Speaking of those who taught that God's grace confers the freedom to engage in immoral conduct, Peter wrote, "While they promise them liberty, they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by whom a person is overcome, by him also he is brought into bondage" (2 Peter 2:19).

There is simply no way around the fact that there are some "thou shalt nots" in the Scriptures. Grace does not mean we never have to say no — it means we say no to the things we should say no to. Teaching us to "deny ungodliness," grace says "we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age." And in this sense grace is the most powerfully motivating force in the world. Forgiven of our past acts of rebellion against God's love, we respond *gratefully*. We never lose our healthy respect for God's justice, but we learn to keep God's law primarily out of love and appreciation for Him. This is "renunciation" in the very highest and noblest sense, and it is by no means an infringement on our freedom. It is simply the kind of commitment that is willing to make sacrifices for the sake of love.

Renounce everything that does not lead to God.

BROTHER LAWRENCE

December 16

WHAT DOES THE LORD REQUIRE?

He has shown you, O man, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you but to do justly,
to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God? *Micah 6:8*

IT OFTEN HELPS TO SIMPLIFY THINGS. Especially when the subject is God, it is good from time to time to step back and ask what it is all about. There are a handful of texts in the Scriptures that help us do this. One such text is Micah 6:8, which asks what it is that God requires of us and then answers that question in a very basic way: *we are required to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God.* Here, then, are some things of fundamental importance. Leaving aside for the moment the question of details and particulars, godliness comes down to just a few issues like these.

When we look thoughtfully at what this text says, we are struck by the fact that God's basic requirements have to do with the heart, or inner character, rather than the superficial things of outward activity. It is not that our outward actions are unimportant, but rather that God begins His work on the inside. The fruit borne by the tree will be good if the tree itself is good (Matthew 7:17,18), and whether the tree can be good depends on how healthy the tap root is. Micah 6:8 deals with some of the more important "tap root" issues; it is one of the most basic "character" texts in all of God's word. And when we take seriously what it says about justice, mercy, and walking humbly with God, we will find that we have much less trouble with the details of daily living. When our *character* is conformed to the principles of God, our *conduct* will be very naturally what it ought to be.

But are we really committed to the virtues recommended by such texts? It is not difficult to pay lip service to things like justice, but are we truly willing to build our character on these principles? Too often we define ourselves in terms of what we are against and see our righteousness as little more than the disapproval of certain sins that other people commit. But texts like Micah 6:8 call us back to the center of what really matters most. It is good, and even necessary, to be *against what is wrong* in the world. But God is looking for people who will be *for what is right* — and justice, mercy, and humility are the right things to be for.

Loving what is right is different from hating
what is wrong and feeling right about it.

ROY MASTERS

December 17

SEEKING GOD DELIBERATELY

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. *Matthew 13:44*

WHETHER WE SEEK GOD OR NOT IS A MATTER OF CHOICE. As creatures made in the image of our Creator, we have a natural desire for God. But we may fail to acknowledge our need for Him, and even if we acknowledge our need, we may fail to do anything about it. Seeking God is not an automatic process; it requires both *deliberation* and *decisiveness* on our part.

First, think about the concept of *deliberation*. The verb “deliberate” means to consider a matter carefully or to take thought by weighing the alternatives. If we do a thing deliberately that means we do it purposefully, having made the choice to take that path rather than others that might have been taken. Only rational creatures, of course, can act deliberately, and that is why we are responsible for our actions. To be “responsible” means that we are “able” to choose our “response.” Having been endowed with free will, we can consider the possibilities and then make a choice.

Sometimes it is true, however, that even after we’ve considered what we should do, we don’t always choose to do it. For that reason, our deliberation must be followed by *decisiveness*. In our spiritual lives, few things are of more practical value than the simple ability to make decisions and make them stick. Starting with little decisions and working our way up to the big ones, we must gradually build the strength of our decision-making muscles.

But what is sufficient to motivate us in these matters? Paul recommended that we keep in mind “the goodness and severity of God” (Romans 11:22), and we must not forget either of these. Yet of these two motivators, the Scriptures place the greater emphasis on the goodness of God (1 John 4:17-19). What would make a person want to give up everything else in the world in order to know Him? Without any doubt, it is the surpassing goodness of God Himself. And so Jesus said the kingdom is “like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.” In the end, those who seek God are those who choose to do so. It is for nothing less than “joy” that they decide to seek the “treasure” that is God.

God is never found accidentally.

A. W. TOZER

December 18

ONE PEARL OF GREAT PRICE

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it. *Matthew 13:45,46*

IF WE HAVE ANY UNDERSTANDING OF GOD'S GOODNESS, WE WILL BE GLAD TO SEEK HIM DILIGENTLY. The passion with which we seek God comes from our appreciation of His worthiness. And so Jesus said the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant who found "one pearl of great price" and was willing to sell everything he had in order to buy that pearl. With respect to God, we will do what this merchant did if we appreciate the value of the "pearl."

Since so much depends on our recognizing the value of what can be found in God, it is important that we grow in our appraisal skills. If our ability to evaluate things is limited to the physical things of this world, we probably won't see what spiritual things are worth even when their value is obvious. We need better "eyes" with which to see the worth of treasures like the forgiveness of sins and the hope of eternal life. Thus Paul said that he prayed for the Ephesians that "the eyes of [their] understanding" might be enlightened. They needed better vision so they could see more of "the hope of His calling" and "the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints" (Ephesians 1:18).

The truth of the matter is that the least of the treasures we seek in God are of much more value than the greatest of the trinkets that occupy our attention in the here and now. And this happens to be true even of the knowledge of God. When we seek to know Him, we are seeking something that is better to know than every other kind of knowledge combined. Paul was correct in his evaluation when he said that "the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord" was so great that he had been willing to "count all things loss" for it (Philippians 3:8). Before our lives are done, we will have had the opportunity to "buy" many things, some of great value and some of much less. But there has always been "one pearl of great price," a treasure of such magnitude that it defies comparison. If we have the eyes to see even a little of its worth, we'll not complain about the diligence required to seek it. Simply said, nothing else matters more than knowing God.

A scrap of knowledge about sublime things is worth more than any amount about trivialities.

THOMAS AQUINAS

December 19

SEEKING GOD IN HIS WORD

As newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word,
that you may grow thereby. *1 Peter 2:2*

WE NEED TO GET A CLEAR UNDERSTANDING IN OUR MINDS OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GOD AND HIS WORD. Though this is not always an easy thing to do, we must work at it. God is a personal Being. He is not His word. But His word is indispensable in obtaining and maintaining fellowship with Him. We can't properly appreciate God if we don't properly respect the Scriptures, and yet there is more to loving God than loving Bible study. Perhaps these concepts are hard to keep in balance, but the closer we come to appreciating the role of God's word in His work of redemption, the better the quality of our spiritual lives will be.

Peter wrote that we ought to "desire the pure milk of the word." Just as a hungry baby longs for milk, we should desire the nourishment of God's word. And our exposure to the inspired writings should be more than casual and occasional. A familiar text in Acts indicates that the citizens of Berea "were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so" (Acts 17:11). *They searched the Scriptures daily.* If the Scriptures are what they purport to be, then the word "search" is an appropriate word to describe how we ought to read them. Our approach to God's word must not be any less diligent than our seeking of God Himself (Hebrews 11:6).

Although we've thought about it many times and the idea may have become familiar to us, it is still an astonishing thing that God has communicated to us as He has. Our Creator has not merely given us our lives, but He has given us the gift of language and then spoken to us! We don't have to have a technical understanding of biblical inspiration in order to be awed by the concept of having such documents in our possession. These texts contain truths that came from the very mind of God, and they are given to aid us in seeking a right relationship with Him. This is a fact of no slight importance. It is also a fact that calls for a reverent, diligent response from us. If we profess to be seekers of God, then we must prepare to be searchers of the Scriptures.

Be astounded that God should have written to us.

ANTHONY OF EGYPT

December 20

WILLING TO BE STIRRED UP

For this reason I will not be negligent to remind you always of these things, though you know and are established in the present truth. Yes, I think it is right, as long as I am in this tent, to stir you up by reminding you. *2 Peter 1:12,13*

A GOOD PART OF WHAT WE NEED IN ORDER TO GROW SPIRITUALLY IS SIMPLY TO BE REMINDED OF WHAT WE KNOW. There is much to be said for learning new facts and principles, of course. But most of us already know most of what is needed for a rich relationship with God. The problem is that we don't keep in mind what we know, and we don't always do what we should about it.

Teachers have always known the necessity and the importance of review. It is almost as if our knowledge is worn away by the erosion of daily living and has to be refreshed. But whatever the reason for the loss of what we've been taught, learners are always having to relearn, and teachers who wish to make a lasting mark on the minds of their pupils will pay frequent attention to the renewal and reinforcement of what has been taught. "For this reason," Peter wrote to his fellow Christians, "I will not be negligent to remind you always of these things . . . I think it is right, as long as I am in this tent, to stir you up by reminding you."

The notion of being "stirred up" is also important. Just as we need to be reminded, we also need to be nudged out of our comfort zone. The word "provoke" is not always a bad word. In fact, it's a word that describes one of our primary needs. In the New Testament, the need to be stirred up is one of the reasons for the Christian assembly: "And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some" (Hebrews 10:24,25).

But even with respect to God, we aren't always *willing* to be reminded and stirred up, even by our friends. It is more comfortable to be left alone. Yet if we're unwilling to be warned when we need to be warned, we risk losing the very things that could contribute to *true* peace and comfort. There is a sense, then, in which the willingness to be "disturbed" is the main difference between those who make progress spiritually and those who do not.

From the cowardice that dares not face new truth,
From the laziness that is contented with half truth,
From the arrogance that thinks it knows all truth,
Good Lord, deliver me.

A PRAYER FROM KENYA

December 21

EARS THAT DO NOT HEAR

But they refused to heed, shrugged their shoulders, and stopped their ears so that they could not hear. Yes, they made their hearts like flint, refusing to hear the law and the words which the LORD of hosts had sent by His Spirit through the former prophets. *Zechariah 7:11,12*

HOW DO WE ACCOUNT FOR THE FACT THAT MANY DO NOT “HEAR” THE MESSAGE OF GOD? Out of all the thousands who personally heard Jesus speak, for example, relatively few believed Him to be speaking the truth, and out of those few even fewer actually did anything about what they said they believed. All heard the same words, but not all responded the same way. Was the message not clear enough? Was it not sufficiently convincing? Are some individuals by nature simply incapable of understanding?

These are ancient questions that go far back in the history of our world, and they have to do with the freedom of our will. The long and short of the matter is simply that we sometimes abuse our freedom in such a way that our “hearing” ceases to function. We *refuse* to hear God because His word is not agreeable to us.

To one of His less-than-receptive audiences Jesus said, “You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life . . . I know you, that you do not have the love of God in you” (John 5:39,40,42). Some of these individuals were lifelong experts in the contents of the Scriptures, yet for all their detailed searching of the Scriptures they had not found the correct answers to their questions. They had not really “heard” what they had studied so scrupulously, and Jesus did not mince words as to the reason why: their intent was not honest.

But before we criticize people who fit this description, we need to ask whether our own hearing is as honest as it should be. If we fail to keep ourselves open to God’s message and to listen with a real intent to obey, then we will lose the ability to recognize the truth even when it is clearly and convincingly presented to us. “Therefore,” said Jesus, “take heed how you hear” (Luke 8:18).

O my God, how does it happen in this poor world that you are so great and yet nobody finds you, that you call so loudly and yet nobody hears you, that you are so near and yet nobody feels you, that you give yourself to everybody and yet nobody knows your name? Men flee from you and say they cannot find you; they turn their backs and say they cannot see you; they stop their ears and say they cannot hear you.

HANS DENCK

December 22

CAN WE BE CONFIDENT?

And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart. *Jeremiah 29:13*

WE HAVE GOD'S ASSURANCE THAT WE WILL FIND HIM, BUT ONLY IF WE SEEK HIM WITH ALL OUR HEARTS. There is no guarantee that the indifferent or the double-minded will find Him. We must do more than dabble in religion, and God must be more than simply one of the "interesting" things on our agenda. We must pursue Him with a purity of heart and a passion that will not be denied. What He seeks is to be the Lord over all our thoughts, and if we seek anything less than that, then it is not God whom we seek. But even so, we need to be strengthened by the confidence that when we seek Him truly, we will in fact find Him.

There is a text in Isaiah where God says that He desires to be found by those who seek Him: "For thus says the LORD, who created the heavens, who is God, who formed the earth and made it, who has established it, who did not create it in vain, who formed it to be inhabited: 'I am the LORD, and there is no other. I have not spoken in secret, in a dark place of the earth; I did not say to the seed of Jacob, "Seek Me in vain"; I, the LORD, speak righteousness, I declare things that are right'" (Isaiah 45:18,19). Just as God did not create the earth and then leave it uninhabited, He did not command His people to seek Him and then hide Himself from them.

When Paul was given an opportunity to speak in Athens, he said that God designed the world so that people would be moved to seek Him: "in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us" (Acts 17:27). We may "grope" for God, as it were, but in truth "He is not far from each one of us." Our seeking for God need not be unsuccessful.

The lackadaisical may complain that they sought God but never found Him. Yet no one has ever been disappointed who sought Him *wholeheartedly* and with an honest desire to *obey* Him once He was found. "You will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart," God said through Jeremiah. This means it is a matter of choice on our part whether we find God or not. And the choice we must make is to seek Him diligently. If we're diligent, we can also be confident.

They never sought in vain that sought the Lord aright.

ROBERT BURNS

December 23

RESERVED FOR GOD ALONE

Therefore know this day, and consider it in your heart,
that the LORD Himself is God in heaven above and on the earth
beneath; there is no other. *Deuteronomy 4:39*

GOD'S UNIQUENESS IS ABSOLUTE. He alone is God — self-existent, eternal, and uncreated. And because of His uniqueness, we are to deal with Him in a way that is unlike our manner of dealing with anything else: God alone is to be *worshipped*. The very first of the Ten Commandments was, "You shall have no other gods before Me" (Exodus 20:3). It has always been wrong to give God's preeminence to anything other than God Himself.

There is an obvious tendency, however, for us to do this. Perhaps because God is unseen by our physical eyes, He does not seem as real to us, and it is hard to keep the things we can see from creeping higher up on our scale of priorities than they should be. If we're not vigilant, one or another of these tangible things can climb so high in our hearts that it displaces God as our ultimate concern. Long after this has happened, we may still be saying God is the only object of our worship, but the degree of time and enthusiasm we devote to our "idol" is indisputable evidence that God is no longer the most important thing in our lives.

It will help us to make some *conscious decisions* about the priority of God. Whatever things are to be given to God, we must *reserve* those things for Him. We should, in the words of the hymn by E. R. Latta, "render not to any other, what alone the Lord's should be." Decisions about such priorities are best made ahead of time rather than "on the fly." If we wait until the moment of temptation to decide whether we will honor God, then our temptations may prove to be our undoing. When Jesus was tempted to worship the devil, His response was swift: "Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve'" (Matthew 4:10). It seems obvious that Jesus had not waited until this moment to decide whom He would worship. Like Him, we need to chisel this conviction in stone: "the LORD Himself is God . . . there is no other."

God is truly worshiped when someone actually gives full attention to God with feelings of awe, love, devotion, respect, and wonder.

Such a moment is genuine worship. It is idolatrous to think and feel this way about anything other than God.

December 24

BELOVED

But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. *Ephesians 2:4-6*

GOD IS “RICH IN MERCY,” AS PAUL WROTE. To Christians in and around Ephesus, he spoke of the “great love” with which God had loved those who were “dead in trespasses” but now had been made “alive together with Christ.” And to the Romans he wrote: “To all who are in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 1:7). In a very special sense, then, we may say that to be in Christ is to be among the “beloved” of God.

Two of the most basic challenges of the Christian life are to hear — really *hear* — the message of God’s love and then to *act* consistently with that great truth. To know ourselves as God’s “beloved” and to act like the people we are: these are the keys to consistency in our spiritual lives. If we verbalize the fact of God’s love but don’t really believe it, or if we fail to follow through and respond as we should to God’s love, then our devotion to God will falter. The only thing that can keep us going is *gratitude for grace*.

It should be the most obvious thing in the world that God is to be thanked for the gifts His love has made possible. As James wrote, “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning” (James 1:17). But we should constantly guard against the temptation to seek God simply for His gifts and blessings. No gift God could give us is any greater than His love, and it should be His love that is our primary interest. Indeed, all our Father’s other gifts would mean little if His love were not in them. And the same thing is true in regard to our love for Him. If we love God, there will be things we are required to do in order to worship Him and serve Him. Obedience to God’s will is not optional. But even more than the deeds that He requires, God is interested in the love that motivates those deeds (1 Corinthians 13:1-3). What He desires is for us to be His beloved — and to love Him for His love’s sake.

A wise lover values not so much the gift
of the lover as the love of the giver.

THOMAS À KEMPIS

December 25

TO THE KING BE HONOR

Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, to God who alone is wise, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. *1 Timothy 1:17*

EVERY PROPER RESPONSE TO GOD IS A RESPONSE TO HIS GREATNESS. Every right relationship to Him is based on respect for His majesty. So if we seek God, what we are really seeking is to know enough of His greatness to respond to it with honor. By our sin, we have dishonored God terribly. What we should be seeking now is to regain the ability to honor Him properly.

God is the source of all *light*. Our response to Him should be to open our minds to His truth. It was falsehood and delusion that moved us to break our relationship with God, and if our problem is to be solved, we must have the courage to return to reality. We honor God when we make an honest commitment to truth and when, based on that commitment, we seek to know Him truly.

But God is also the source of all *life*. Paul spoke of God as the God who “gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did” (Romans 4:17). The resurrection of His Son serves to “release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage” (Hebrews 2:15). We honor God when we love Him for the life that He has made possible.

And finally, God is the source of all *strength*. He enables us to do His will and restores to us the privilege of participating in His work. As Paul wrote to the church in Philippi, “It is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure” (Philippians 2:13). In the very highest sense, our labor can be a “labor of love” (1 Thessalonians 1:3). And we honor God when we serve Him faithfully in the strength that He provides.

A simple way to sum up our proper response to God is to say that we must adopt both reverence and gratitude. If we fail to fear God or to show our thanks, we dishonor Him. God’s greatness as our King calls for us, as His subjects, to find our gladness in His glory. “Lift up your heads, O you gates! And be lifted up, you everlasting doors! And the King of glory shall come in” (Psalm 24:7).

O Thou, who are the Light of the minds that know Thee, and the Life of the souls that love Thee, and the Strength of the thoughts that seek Thee; help us so to know Thee that we may truly love Thee; so to love Thee that we may truly serve Thee, whose service is perfect freedom; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

December 26

KNOWING GOD

And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent. *John 17:3*

IT WOULD BE DIFFICULT TO COUNT THE NUMBER OF THINGS THAT HAVE BEEN SAID ABOUT "ETERNAL LIFE" AND THE NUMBER OF WAYS THAT PEOPLE HAVE DEFINED THAT CONCEPT. Yet as He prayed on the night of His betrayal, Jesus penetrated to the very heart of the matter when He said, "And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent." When we have discovered what it means to "know" God, we will have learned what eternal life is.

Knowing God surely means more than acquiring information about Him. Granted, there is no knowing God without the cognitive information He has revealed about Himself in the Scriptures, but to know Him means more than the memorization of these facts. God is a personal being, and to know Him is to have a relationship with Him that is personal as well as rational. To enjoy eternal life means we have accepted the terms of God's forgiveness and come into a relationship with Him that is described in the Scriptures as "fellowship" (1 John 1:1-4). Within that relationship, we learn more about God's nature, His purposes, and His will. We begin to take great delight in thinking of Him, pleasing Him, and serving Him. We come, in short, to *love* Him.

It should go without saying that knowing God needs to be more of a priority with us. We need to see knowing God as the reason for such things as prayer and the study of the Scriptures. Even the outward deeds by which we render service to God and to our fellow human beings should be seen as bodily activities through which we come to know God more deeply.

We cannot, of course, know God as fully in this life as will be possible later on, but we can enter into a relationship with Him that is a rich down payment on what is coming (Matthew 5:8; Ephesians 1:13,14; 1 John 3:1-3). It has been quite a long time since God said to the people of Judah, "Let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD" (Jeremiah 9:24). But although our own lives are more complicated, it is still the knowledge of God that turns mere living into real life.

Nothing matters more than knowing God.

LARRY CRABB

December 27

BROKEN CISTERNS

For My people have committed two evils:
They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters,
And hewn themselves cisterns; broken cisterns
that can hold no water. *Jeremiah 2:13*

EVERYTHING WE WERE EVER CREATED TO NEED CAN BE FOUND IN THE GOD WHO MADE US. But we don't always allow Him to satisfy us. Even though the fulfillment that is available in God is perfect in every way, we still make the mistake from time to time of looking for our satisfaction in other places. And when we do so, we do the same thing the people of Judah did in Jeremiah's day: we forsake "the fountain of living waters" and drink from "broken cisterns that can hold no water." When we could be slaking our thirst with the fresh waters of a sparkling spring, we content ourselves with the stagnant contents of a holding tank. This does not make good sense. Why would we do such a foolish thing?

Generally, we do foolish things when we have been deceived as to the facts of our situation. And when it comes to the created needs that are deep within us, we have a spiritual adversary who is a master at making his cheap counterfeits look better than the fulfillments that God offers. The devil's deceptions are not clever enough to withstand very close scrutiny and it's only a matter of time until we discover the truth — but in the short term, he can make black look white and white, black. He can actually lead us to believe that a broken cistern is better than the fountain of living water. And unfortunately, he has had a certain amount of success in getting us to live on the basis of that lie.

Life is full of discoveries, however, and many of them are sad ones. "A thousand voices clamor for our attention, and a thousand causes vie for our support. But until we have learned to be satisfied with fellowship with God, until he is our rock and our fortress, we will be restless with our place in the world" (Erwin W. Lutzer). In the long run, if not in the short, we find that nothing we've ever substituted for God has quenched our thirst. Eternity is in our hearts, and nothing but God can satisfy our souls.

Father I know now, if I never knew it before, that only in Thee can my restless human heart find any peace. For I began life without knowledge, but full of needs. And the turmoil of my mind, the dissatisfaction of my life all stem from trying to meet those needs with the wrong things and in the wrong places.

PETER MARSHALL

December 28

TODAY

Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called "Today," lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. *Hebrews 3:12,13*

AS LONG AS LIFE LASTS, IT IS NEVER TOO LATE TO START LOVING GOD. Nevertheless, it is of the utmost importance that we start loving Him as soon as possible. We must not wait any longer than *today* to begin doing this thing we were created to do. When we finally realize what it is like to love God — and more important, to be loved by Him — we will wish we'd learned this enjoyment earlier. We will begrudge the time we lost in other pursuits. However early in life we embark on our journey toward God, we will wish we had begun this adventure much sooner.

And what will it be that we regret? It will not only be that we've lost some of the joy that could have been ours in this life. More than that, it will be that the days that are now lost forever could have been given to God. It will seem to us that what is left of our lives is too little a gift for Him. We will regret that what we have to give is not more complete, more perfect.

The truth is, every day we live in this world is a difficult day. We are surrounded by influences that push us into selfishness and pull us away from God. In its present condition, our world is enemy-occupied territory. It is so much under the dominion of the evil one that he is described by Jesus Himself as "the ruler of this world" (John 12:31). So we live on somewhat of a battlefield, and since we do, it is all the more necessary for us to be careful. The temptations are great, and the opportunities for devotion to God are not unlimited. The apostle Paul wrote, "See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil" (Ephesians 5:15,16). Like a commodity in short supply, our days need to be "redeemed." Without wasting any more time than we already have, we need to "buy up" every day that is left on the shelf. The entire length of a long human lifetime is too little to give to One who has loved us as our God has. But if the days left are all we have to give, it is another token of His grace that He will accept this as our all.

Too late I loved thee, O thou Beauty of ancient days,
yet ever new! Too late I loved thee!

AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

December 29

PERSISTENT LOVE

The LORD has appeared of old to me, saying: "Yes, I have loved you
with an everlasting love; therefore with lovingkindness
I have drawn you." *Jeremiah 31:3*

BECAUSE HE LOVES US WITH A PERSISTENT LOVE, GOD WILL NOT GIVE UP ON US WITHOUT HAVING PURSUED US TO THE VERY END. If we think He invites us to accept His rule but is indifferent as to whether we do that or not, we have read little of what the Scriptures say of His love. We never refuse our God without breaking His heart, and in the end, that is what sin always comes down to: a refusal to accept God's love. When we say no to Him, we are stubbornly saying no to the better things His love is longing to give us. We are running away from our greatest good!

Mark it well, however: although it is a long time, it is not forever that God will pursue us with His love. The patience of God is greater than any mortal patience, but eventually it will come to an end. Having been given the freedom of our will, we may continue to refuse Him for a while. Yet if we do so long enough, the time will come when the pursuit is over and the only thing left is awesome judgment. Weeping over Jerusalem, Jesus said, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! See! Your house is left to you desolate; for I say to you, you shall see Me no more till you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!'" (Matthew 23:37-39).

If we still live, however, then God still pursues us because we mean so much to Him. The "Hound of Heaven" will not easily be thrown off our trail. And those who have finally relented and let themselves be overtaken by His love find that their joy is tinged by only one real regret: that they did not let themselves be loved sooner. Francis Thompson, in his remarkable poem, has well guessed what our Lord will say at last to those who have found Him: "Ah, fondest, blindest, weakest, / I am He whom thou seekest! / Thou dravest love from thee, who dravest me."

I fled Him, down the night and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.

FRANCIS THOMPSON

December 30

WORTHY ART THOU

You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power;
for You created all things, and by Your will they exist
and were created. *Revelation 4:11*

OUR GREAT GOD IS WORTHY TO RECEIVE GLORY AND HONOR AND POWER. It is inherent in the nature of the creature-Creator relationship that the Creator is to be worshiped. But it so happens that the God who created us and whom we have the privilege of worshiping is *worthy* of our reverence. And not only our reverence, He is worthy of our *love*. When all has been said and done, God's worthiness must be our ultimate reason for relating to Him properly. Apart from any consideration of personal gain or loss, God is worthy to be worshiped and loved just because of the love He has had for us as our God. We must aspire to love Him as He has loved us, whatever that may require.

Is it not time for us to rise above the relatively small concerns we usually attach to our worship of God? Vast realms of awe and adoration await us in God if we will but seek Him for His own sake. Each of us is important because each of us has been created by God. But each of us is also a part of the much larger web of reality that God has brought into being. We will reach the pinnacle of our own glory as creatures when we shed our self-importance and independence and begin humbly relating ourselves to the Creator and to His creation which surrounds us.

What life is about is not getting God and His world to do what we want and to give us what we wish. It is about properly giving ourselves to God and His world so that our relationship to Him and to it is based on truth, whether we are remunerated for that giving or not. If we count on God to do what is right whether or not it pays Him to do so, then He must be able to count on us to have a similar regard for what is right. Now is the time for us to erase the fine print from our contract with God and enter into a loving relationship that is hale and hearty. It is not His gifts that we seek. It is simply to give ourselves back to the Giver.

My God, I love you; not because I hope for heaven thereby,
Nor yet because who love you not are lost eternally.
Not with the hope of gaining anything, nor seeking a reward;
But as you have loved me, O ever-loving Lord!
Even so I love you, and will love, and in your praise will sing,
Solely because you are my God, and my eternal King.

ANONYMOUS 17TH CENTURY PRAYER

December 31

THIS WE SEEK: TO BE MADE PLEASING TO GOD

The poor shall eat and be satisfied;
Those who seek Him will praise the LORD.
Let your heart live forever!
Psalm 22:26

IT IS POSSIBLE FOR OUR HUNGRY SOULS TO BE SATISFIED BY GOD. When we seek Him and find Him, a profound satisfaction is available to us, but it is not what many people expect whose first thought is for what they themselves wish to receive. It is a satisfaction that comes from what David called “praise.” Our hearts were made to enjoy God by giving joy to Him, and this we do by expressing our adoration for what He has done — and can do.

We are to seek God diligently, and having sought and found Him we are to serve Him obediently and faithfully. But the emphasis must be kept on God. Even those scriptural exhortations that urge us to be careful about our obedience do so within the context of God’s work rather than our own: “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure” (Philippians 2:12,13).

Ultimately, we seek God because we long to be persons who please Him. Having been made by Him in His image, we find that this longing has been planted deep within us. But we are creatures broken by our own sin; we cannot make ourselves into what we long to be. So the thing we desire is to be *remade* — by God Himself — into persons who please Him. We understand that the highest holiness to which we may aspire is the yielding of ourselves to Him so that He can do His good pleasure through us. Only we can make this choice (and our actions will be a fair indication of whether we have done so), but our focal point, first and last, must be simply God Himself. The Hebrew writer prayed for his Christian readers: “Now may the God of peace . . . make you complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen” (Hebrews 13:20,21). For personal beings, the highest and sweetest joy of all is to give joy to the Person from whom our lives have come. This is what we seek.

Sweet are the waters of thy shoreless sea,
Make sweet our waters that make haste to thee;
Pour in thy sweetness, that ourselves may be
Sweetness to thee.

CHRISTINA GEORGINA ROSSETTI

A PRAYER FOR DAILY MEDITATION

Grant, O heavenly Father, that the spiritual refreshment I have this day enjoyed may not be left behind and forgotten as tomorrow I return to the cycle of common tasks.

Here is a fountain of inward strength.

Here is a purifying wind that must blow through all my business and all my pleasures.

Here is light to enlighten all my road.

Therefore, O God, do Thou enable me so to discipline my will that in hours of stress I may honestly seek after those things for which I have prayed in hours of peace.

— *John Baillie*

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