

Addictions Are Not Your Real Problem

part 3a

Finding Your Purpose: The Overcomers

For Judah prevailed above his brethren, and of him came the chief ruler; but the birthright was Joseph's. 1 Chr 5:2 KJV

The black hole

A friend recently released from prison called me over to his house to talk. During our conversation I asked him two questions that puzzle me. First, why is it that someone like him who knows the Bible so well (he learned a lot of it in prison) and is addiction-free in prison for years, why do they so easily go right back to their addiction instead of trusting the God they have learned to know(?) through His Word? He'd already gone back to chain smoking and struggled over temptation with drugs and alcohol.

He answered that drugs and alcohol are much more within reach than a God he can't see and takes too long to respond to his needs. (He obviously never got to *know* God.)

That set me up for my second question: How is it that these strong believers in jail who lead others in Bible studies and seem so mature spiritually, as soon as they get out of jail, are right back sleeping with a woman they're not married to, no matter how well they know the severity of God's judgment against sexual immorality? And that it's is the number one cause of crime because it breaks up the family, producing fatherless kids and unloved and insecure baby's mamas financed by the government and/or other babies' daddies who won't marry them either. (1 Cor 7:10-16; 10:12-14)

He said his deepest need is to feel someone needs and loves him. Since childhood he'd felt so much emotional pain, heartbreak, and rejection, he can't be happy or at peace without the comfort of a woman. And again, God is just too distant when it comes to this immediate need. (Mt 7:16-27)

Another friend I've known since he was a child grew up with so much rejection, he ended up taking nineteen different antidepressants over the years, and two different ones a day at the time he met the woman who gave him the unconditional love he'd longed for all his life. He called her his *happy pill* because she ended his need for antidepressants.

But it was too late. The pills, combined with a lifetime of alcohol and cigarettes, finally took his life. If only he'd found his "happy pill" in Jesus. Because living or sleeping with a girl you're not married to is only a temporary fix, a *substitute for God* and is why so many marriages fail. A marriage or live-in based on meeting each other's needs for love has a built-in potential for failure. For as soon as one party needs more love than the other can provide, the relationship may unravel or become dysfunctional.

For example, the two women who gave my first friend children only prolonged his pain, for he's long separated from the first and recently from the second, who's "false charge" landed him back in jail, not to mention the legal battle over their kids, which is still ahead. (Pr 5-7)

Many good programs attempt to deal with addictions, like the Twelve Step Program of AA and NA and various faith-based program. Hundreds of books have been written on the subject. But the best program in the world is useless without a strong faith-love connection to our Source—God. (Jn 1:1-5, 9,16-17; 3:19-20; 8:12; Eph 3:17; Heb 1:3; 1 Jn 5:11)

Jesus knew "that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going to God." Still He knew He could "do nothing of Himself, but

what He sees the Father do." He did what Adam failed to do—remain *perfectly dependent on the Father*. (Jn 13:3; 5:19; 15:1-5; Gen 3:1-6)

In this respect addicts and inmates are no different than spiritual leaders. For anything good we do *without Him* is in vain. (Mt 7:22-23; Jn 6:63; Rom 3-4; 1 Cor 13:3; Eph 2:8-10)

Hebrews eleven is known as "the hall of faith." It records many of the saints in the Old Testament who became victorious over temptation, affliction, and persecution through the power of God because they set their *hearts and minds* on Him. They got and stayed glued to their Source! They were *overcomers*.

Jacob, Abraham's grandson, had twelve sons. Two of them *overcame* in hopeless situations. I will tell their story through the warning of a king's mother because it has to do with our future as a kingdom of *royal priests*. (Ex 19:6; Ps 16:8-11; Eph 6:10-18; 1 Pet 2:9; Rev 1:6; 2:11; 5:10; 12:11; 20:6)

A Mother's warning, a ruler's wise judgment

Proverbs 31 is well-known as the chapter on the "virtuous wife." But nobody seems to pay attention to the first nine verses, a mother's warning to her royal son about two things that will destroy his ability to rule. I believe this king is the reason the virtuous wife has so much energy and wisdom. Because he fulfills *his* calling to "judge righteously," and "plead the cause of the poor and needy," she is free to fulfill hers, because *he has cleared out the demonic opposition in the spirit realm*. It's what Jesus did that cleared the spiritual atmosphere so the apostles could turn "the world upside down" (Acts 17:6; 2 Cor 10:3-6; Eph 2:13-18; Col 2:13-15).

Genesis ends with two heroes: Joseph and Judah, who sold his young half-brother, Joseph, into slavery for twenty shekels of silver, like Judas, who sold Jesus for thirty. And Judas is NT Greek for Judah. Yet Judah ends up with a much higher calling than Joseph, and the word *Jew* comes from *Judah*, not Joseph. Judah's descendants became the royal kings, from David to Jesus, and Jesus returns as "the Lion of the tribe of Judah" (Gen 37:28; 49:8-12, 22-26; 1 Chr 5:1-2; Mt 26:15; Rev 5:5).

How could this be after what he and his jealous brothers put Joseph through—slavery, then prison for *obeying* God—refusing to have sex with his master's wife, who attempted to seduce him, then accused him of attempted rape? Furthermore, Judah is the only one of Jacob's twelve sons who broke the rule and married an ungodly Canaanite instead of someone inside the family tree. But worse, he almost burned his daughter-in-law to death when he found she was pregnant, until she proved he was the daddy. (Gen 37-39; 26:34-35; 28:1-2; Pr 5-7; 22:14)

This story is why jail is a gold mine: the worst criminals are no worse than Judah, yet Judah becomes exactly what God is looking for in Genesis. I want to show these crazy felons and detainees how to use their past stupidity to their greatest advantage, as Judah did. With *understanding*, they can use their failures as *leverage to know God* on a deeper level than the rest of us! (Ex 34:9; Ps 51; 131; Hos 4:6; 12:4; Rom 3-8; Eph 1-2)

So what did Judah do, and how does it connect with King Lemuel's mother's warning in Proverbs 31? First, here's what she warned her son: "Do not give your strength to women, nor your ways to that which destroys kings. It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine, nor for princes intoxicating drink; lest they drink and forget the law, and pervert the justice of all the afflicted" (31:3-5).

But what got Judah into trouble was a woman—his own daughter-in-law, Tamar. And while Joseph was resisting *daily* temptation, Judah had sex with Tamar because *he thought she was a prostitute!* When he found she was pregnant, he prepared to punish her by burning. John Gill (*Exposition of the Entire Bible*), comparing it with customs current at that time, says it's probable Judah meant to burn her alive. (Gill on Gen 38:24)

That's about as low-down as it gets! If God can forgive him, He can forgive anybody. However, many refuse to take serious responsibility for their sins (no fear of God), like Judah's three older brothers: Reuben had sex with one of his Dad's concubines (secondary "wife"), but made no attempt to humble himself, repent, and acknowledge his wrong. Simeon and Levi murdered a city of men through treachery, yet refused to take the blame when their dad, Jacob, tried to deal with them about it.

That's the prevailing attitude of many men and women behind the razor-wire fences and steel doors. It's called *denial* or *blame displacement*. (Gen 34; 35:22; 49:3-7; 1 Chr 5:1)

The point is, what you do wrong is one thing. But what you do *about it* is quite another. What Judah did was to get alone with God for a time of deep and profound *repentance*. He apparently came out of it totally transformed. We have three evidences of this in Genesis.

The first is Genesis 42-44. By this time Joseph has risen from prison to become governor of Egypt, and after "seven years of plenty," God "called for a famine in the land." So Jacob sent ten of his sons to Egypt to buy grain. God had prepared Joseph through thirteen years of testing—slavery and prison, and now He will use him to deal with his ten renegade brothers. (Gen 39-41, Ps 105:16-22; Acts 7:9-15)

Joseph uses his position to strike fear into their hearts over what they'll do about their remaining half-brother, Benjamin, Joseph's full brother. He's the second son of Jacob's favorite wife, Rachel, who died giving birth to him, and those ten bad boys have good reason to feel toward him the way they felt toward Joseph. (Gen 30:22-24; 35:16-20)

In chapter 45, the governor (Joseph) calls the ten brothers back before they'd gotten too far with their newly purchased grain, accuses Benjamin of stealing his silver cup, then offers all ten men their freedom, except Benjamin; he will have to remain as a slave in Egypt. (Gen 44:1-17)

It's a set-up to see if the attitude of these brothers has changed since they'd betrayed Joseph twenty-two years earlier. They had Cain's attitude when God called him to account over the murder of his brother Abel: "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?" (Gen 4:1-13; 37:19-36)

This is *our* problem, and it's God's purpose to change our attitude toward our "little brother," which covers the whole range of our attitudes toward others regarding Jesus command to "love your neighbor as [though he were] yourself." And our "Benjamin" may be the one we're *least* likely to love. (Mt 5:43-48; Rom 12:20-21; 1 Cor 13:4-7)

The "first commandment" Jesus gave, to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, is not only about loving God, but basking in His incredible, unconditional love for us—*you!* For "we love Him because He first loved us," and we can love *others* only as we receive and enjoy *His* love! (Mt 12:30; Lu 10:27; Jn 13:34; 15:12; 1 Jn 4:19)

Without His love flowing through us, it is *impossible* to love others the way we should. And once we learn to "abide in [His] love," loving and serving others flows naturally and effortlessly, *depending on the depth of our relationship with Him*. (Jn 15; 1 Jn 2:9-11; 3:6-10; 4:7-11)

Judah's transformation

But back to Judah. We left him and his brothers before Joseph, pondering their freedom to leave, as long as they leave Benjamin behind. They are on the ground in front of him, having ripped their clothes in anguish over this horrible turn of events. Joseph had already put them through harsh testing the first time they came for grain. He listened for signs of repentance and breaking as he heard them speaking to one another in Hebrew. God was working in them through Joseph's wisdom. (Gen 42-43)

If God had not already worked in Joseph a forgiving heart through *his* trials, he never would have found that delicate balance of "speaking the truth in love," so essential in leadership and our future as *royal priests*. It confirms the importance of the Proverbs 31 mother's warning, lest we allow "a root of bitterness" to destroy us (Gen 50:15-21; Mk 11:25-26; Eph 4:15; Heb 12:11-17; 1 Pet 2:9)

But now they are speechless; their attitude has softened toward Benjamin, but Joseph looks for more. Suddenly Judah speaks. He'd left the family after selling Joseph, probably in bitterness over the whole family mess—especially his father's special love for Rachel and her two boys at the expense of his own mother, Leah and her six sons. Not to mention the four sons by his wives' maids—his concubines. All this produced

one of the most dysfunctional families in the Bible, next to David's. (Gen 29-30, 34; 2 Sam 13; 1 Ki 1)

Anyway, Judah suddenly begins to plead with the governor, *offering his life in place of Benjamin*—not over his love for Benjamin, but because he deeply feels *his father's love* for the lad. This is precisely what God and Joseph anticipated in all this testing. It's the expected outcome of one who spends enough time with the ultimate Lover—our Creator and God, who is Love! (1 Jn 4:7-8, 20-21)

At this, Joseph can hold his secret no longer. He sends the Egyptians out, and with loud weeping he embraces his long *lost* brothers and reveals his true identity. (Gen 37-45)

Since Joseph is one of most perfect *types* (pictures) of Christ in the Old Testament, this scene shows us that God *reveals* Himself to us, not only through our desperation and hunger, but through our obedience, that is, our response to His love, not just in words but in deed. This may include long periods of waiting while *love* works its way from head to heart to feet—love in *action*. (Gen 22; Is 30:18-19; 50:10-11; Lam 3:1-42; Hab 1:1-4; Jn 14:21-24; 15:12-14; 1 Jn 3:18)

But how did Judah transform from this low-life man living after the flesh, whose sons were so wicked God had to take them out (which is why Tamar ended up twice widowed)? And now he's so broken and forgiving, he changes the course of history and his example paves the way for the Second Coming of Christ. (Gen 38:7-11; 1 Chr 5:2; Rev 5:5)

That leads to the other two evidences, which are little more than hints. The first hint is there in Genesis 38 where we find the *cause* of Judah's intense *hunger* for God. When Tamar sent the messenger (who'd come to take her to her fiery execution) back with the "collateral," Judah had left her when he couldn't pay this "prostitute," he took one look at it, his ring, cord, and staff, and *acknowledged* them, saying, "She has been more righteous than I, because I did not give her to Shelah my son," his youngest, to whom he had promised her. (Gen 38:24-26; Ps 84:2; Mt 5:6; Lu 1:53; Rom 3:19-20)

It doesn't sound that significant until you compare it with his three older brothers, who shrugged off their sin and responsibility. Then compare it with most of us men, who are quite creative when it comes to passing the buck or excusing ourselves, or *undervaluing* the importance of God's holy law, like, "Well, everybody's doing it," or "God forgives!"

I cringe when I hear that—taking the precious grace of God to *justify* sinful behavior. "Looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God," for it "teach[es] us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age" (Heb 12:15a; Tit 2:12; also Rom 6:1-2; Jude 1:4; Gal 5:13).

But Judah's acknowledgment of his sin was not enough. I meet lots of guys in jail who gladly admit their crimes and sins; it's one of the things that makes jail ministry so real. They not only admit their problems, but often through tears, plead for deliverance. But, like my two friends in the first part of this article, one thing is missing. And that explains Judah's incredible transformation from one of the worst sinners to a prototype of Jesus in His role as our Redeemer, our Judah, our High Priest and Intercessor. (Rom 8:34; Heb 7:24-25; Rev 5:5)

For Jacob, after disqualifying his first three sons for their failure to take responsibility for their disobedience, launches into his prophetic word for his fourth son: "Judah, your brothers will praise you. You will grasp your enemies by the neck. All your relatives will bow before you. Judah, my son, is a young lion that has finished eating its prey. Like a lion he crouches and lies down; like a lioness—who dares to rouse him? The [royal] scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from his descendants, until the coming of the One to whom it belongs, the One whom all nations will honor," Jesus, the Messiah. (Gen 49:3-10 NLT)

In other words, the heart of God's promise to Abraham that through his offspring all the nations of the earth would be blessed was given, not to Joseph, whose God-given

dreams indicated his rulership over the family. But to one who lived a life of *dis-grace* while Joseph walked in *grace* through the suffering his brothers plunged him into. (Gen 12:1-3)

Why God tries our hearts, allowing us to fail

So what's the third evidence, the secret of his astounding turn from gloom to glory, from no purpose to the ultimate purpose? You'll find it in two little verses at the end of Jacob's word to Judah: "Binding his donkey to the vine, and his donkey's colt to the choice vine, he washed his garments in wine, and his clothes in the blood of grapes. His eyes are darker than wine, and his teeth whiter than milk." (vv 11-12)

It's a metaphor describing an act similar to what Jacob had done when he wrestled with the Angel (God) and confessed his name—Jacob, meaning *heel-grabber*, from when he came out of his mother's womb, holding the heel of his brother Esau, and years later "grabbed" Esau's birthright and blessing. (Gen 25:22-34; 27:1f) (f= following verses)

When Jacob confessed his name, he in effect admitted his aggressive, heel-grabbing nature, and now realized it would not do, except to press through and "lay hold" of what He really needed—God! So God changed his name to *Israel*, meaning *prince*, from a Hebrew word, to *fight*. "For you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed." (Gen 32:28b; Hos 12:3-6; Mt 11:12; Lu 16:16; Heb 11:6).

He returned to his family limping (God had put his hip out of joint in the encounter), but he'd seen Him "face to face," and was now ready to meet his vengeful brother Esau and his 400 men, having already won the battle alone with God. And Jacob with his new name Israel became our role model—we live with a "limping" Jacob-nature, but deep inside we have a Treasure, Christ, in whom we are "more than conquerors!" (Rom 7-8; 1 Cor: 4:8-13; 2 Cor 5,12; Col 1:21f)

So Jacob's prophetic words—donkey, vine, garments, wine, teeth, and milk—are symbolic of what happened to Judah, which I believe, must have occurred after Tamar exposed his hypocrisy. Instead of hiding behind some lie or excuse, I'm sure he realized, after losing two sons, and now the respect of his only daughter-in-law, it was time to drag his donkey nature to the Vine, the Source of life in God, soak his "garments," his identity, in the cleansing blood of His forgiveness. And gaze into His mercy until his vision is transformed, and his mind renewed as he meditates (teeth white with the milk of the Word) on the truths his father and grandfather, Isaac, had no doubt taught him many years earlier. (Rom 12:2; 1 Pet 2:2; Ps 51; Jn 15; 2 Cor 3:18)

I experienced this in 1975-6 when I too had all I could take. If I'd had "another woman" to run to for comfort and "love" (my wife didn't understand what I was going through), or could have deadened my pain with alcohol, or escaped through some chemical "high," I would have missed the greatest visitation from God in my life. (Pr 4:23; 23:26-35)

I stepped out on one "word" my dad used to drill into me during my "atheist" years—Jeremiah 29:12-14a, "Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart. I will be found by you," says the Lord, and I will bring you back from your captivity." He did!

My struggle was not with sex or crime, and my only addiction was reading. What did me in was the huge burden of trying to live on a spiritual level beyond my ability and maturity without understanding how to "abide in the Vine" as Judah learned. God finally taught me *how* to read—slowly, with meditation, to *absorb* and *live* the Scriptures as His Spirit led me. (Ps 1; 19; 131; Song 1:6; Jn 15; Rom 12:3)

But many inmates face rejection by family and friends, broken relationships complicated by babies' mamas with their stormy issues, some of whom are also in jail, a history of addictions and felonies, failed work history with little hope for a decent job or any job, and maybe a debt crisis over court costs, restitution, bondsmen, lawyers. . . . And, oh . . . more jail time ahead. Maybe years. (Dt 28:15f; Joel 1:4; 2:25-28; Ps 32; 38; 40; Job 3; Lam 3:1-42; Is 40)

I tell them God promises more grace where there's more sin, because they'll need it to climb out of their pit. I see them

as the Judahs of our time: they need a deeper grasp of the treasures in Christ than I do, and they'll get it when they do what Jacob and Judah did—simply seek Him until they find Him on the level that gives them victory. They'll *know it when they get it!* (Mt 13:44-46; Col 2:2-3; 3:1f; Job 28, 42)

Why was David, Judah's most famous descendant and linked with the first and second coming of Christ, a man after God's own heart? He made God number one—the first of the Ten Commandments and key to the rest. This is the meaning of "Do not give your strength to women, nor your ways to that which destroys kings." God is after our *heart*, but He allows someone or something else to steal it *if that's where our heart really is!* He tests and tries our heart, not to make us fall, but to help us see our weakness, that we might *run after Him!* (Job 23:10; Ps 11:5; 26:2; 66:10; Mal 3:2; 1Pe 1:7)

Samson lost his strength when, under Delilah's seductive coaxing, he "told her all his *heart*." Solomon lost his walk with God over women—a thousand of them! Ahab could have been a godly king, but he gave his heart to Jezebel, known only for her wickedness. And of Hezekiah, God said, "God withdrew from him, in order to test him, that He might know all that was in his heart" (Jud 16; 1 Ki 11; 21:25; Pr 5,7; 2 Chr 32:31)

Abraham made the biggest mistake of his life when he listened to his wife instead of God, because he got impatient, waiting for Him. Notice in the Psalms how frequently the words "wait on" and "wait for" the Lord appear. It's the key to David's walk with God, for his hope was in *God alone*, even if it meant waiting "patiently" in a "horrible pit" until He came through. Well, once he failed to wait when he turned to a woman instead of God. It cost him dearly, driving him closer to God than ever. Like Judah. Like Jacob. Our sins will drive us closer to God, or further from Him. (Gen 16; Ps 40:1f; Pr 24:16; 2 Sam 11f)

But it's more than a woman. It's whatever steals our *heart* from its "first love"—God. It can be anything from friends to digital and social media—Facebook, I-phone, Internet, etc. Even *religion*. Jesus warned the church at Ephesus that He was about to remove His presence (lampstand) from them because they'd substituted religious activity for intimacy with God. (Rev 2:1-5)

Intoxication of the mind

However, we might have another problem: We may not feel our need for God because we're too distracted, too busy, too satisfied with earthly pursuits to *feel* our own emptiness, issues, and needs. *Or medicate them through alcohol, drugs, marijuana, or sex! We have spiritual diabetes—so addicted to the sweet things of life we don't feel pain.* (Pr 23:29-35)

A condition where a diabetic can't feel his feet and/or hands is called *diabetic peripheral neuropathy*. Pain is one of the body's most important protective devices, for it warns us of injury. Without feeling pain, we could lose a limb . . . or a life, a minor problem compared to losing our sensitivity to God and ending up in hell! (Ps 22, 32, 38, 88; Pr 8:34; 15:30; Heb 5:2f)

Furthermore, it *destroys our calling as priest-kings!* The other half of the royal mother's warning deals with intoxicating drink. This speaks of anything that "alters" our minds from focusing on or experiencing *reality*. Because knowing God is based on *transparency*—knowing *ourselves!* Knowing *about* God without knowing our own deceitful hearts makes us self-righteous toward others. (Jer 17:9; Mt 7:3-5; Rom 3:9-20)

Over the years I'm learning to deal with some favorite arguments about marijuana: "God created this as a seed-bearing plant." True, but the Amazon rain forest has so many deadly "seed-bearing plants" that a young woman lost in it who knew it well did not dare eat *any* plant she didn't recognize because she knew so many were poisonous and had no knife to get to the *heart* of palms. She would have starved to death, had she not found help in time. ("The Girl Who Fell From the Sky," *Reader's Digest*, July, 2013)

"The government is wrong; its studies are lopsided." But maybe God is using this plant to test their obedience as He used the tree of the knowledge to test Adam and Eve. Where it's illegal, they may go to jail, but worse, they set a bad example for a possible "doorway drug" to introduce others to a deadly lifestyle, even if it wouldn't affect *them* that way. Of course they would say it's *their* problem. As Cain said, "Am I my brother's

keeper?" So is *this* loving God with all you heart, soul, mind, and strength, and your neighbor as yourself? (Lk 10:27; 1 Cor 8:11-13; 10:23-24; 13:4-7; Rom 14:21)

Yet one argument almost stumped me: "Pot clears my mind and heightens my consciousness. I get better insight into the Bible through it." But stimulating the mind to understand the Bible better are based on a misconception of knowing God. First, we don't know Him through *human* wisdom, but through *revelation of the Holy Spirit*. Furthermore, not only do we not know Him through *information*, but through His answers to our *human and spiritual need*. (1 Cor 2:9-16; Dt 8:2-3; Ps 16)

I don't need to "prop up" my humanity by some artificial improvement, like using steroids for athletic competition. Quite the opposite: I need to "let go," be totally *real*, and then *listen* with my *spirit* for *His* solutions to my human problems. Because that's how I *identify* with and *understand* those I minister to. (Ez 3:15; Ps 40; 1 Cor 4:8-15; Heb 2:9-18; 5:2)

This is how Jesus "took the fall" as the offspring of Judah, giving up his divine privileges and identifying with our humanity. Even to the point of becoming *sin* for us on the cross, when the Son of *Man* held on to David's cry in his lowest pit, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" (Ps 22:1; Mt 27:46; 2 Cor 5:21; Lev 4, 16; Heb 10:1-17)

As I said, inmates sit on a gold mine—their own past failures and sins. But that's only if they cash them in for God's grace; they could be spiritual millionaires! Unless, that is, they "rise above" their *real* humanity into that haze-filled atmosphere of "super-minds," and escape the boredom and pain that drive the rest of us in weakness and hunger to God Himself. (Pr 23:29-35; 1 Cor 15:42-45; 2 Cor 12:9-10; 13:4)

The joy of fellowship with God

The hardest thing about "intimacy" with God is that He's invisible. Furthermore, He "hides Himself"! Can you believe it? The Bible is filled with warnings about seeking and knowing Him, and yet He *deliberately* makes Himself hard to find! It makes one feel *justified* for messing up: it's *God's fault!* (Job 3; 23; Ps 22; 88; Lam 3:1-21; Rom 11:33)

Actually, He hides Himself, not to make it *harder* to reach Him, but *easier*—because He's invisible! The danger is trying to reach him in the *sense* realm when He exists in the *spirit* realm, which is what the Fall is about: eating of the tree of knowledge cut us off from our spirit-connection to God. It's *our* problem, not God's! (Gen 3:4-7; Ps 44:24; Is 8:17; 45:15; 59:2; Lam 3:22-42; Rom 8:5-9; 1 Cor 2:9-16)

Seeking Him is like the inconvenience of getting fuel and a charged battery for your car compared to the problem of not being able to drive at all. It does take *diligent* seeking, but the reward is a Ferrari, spiritually, and the alternative is to be stuck in the Sahara without food, water, or a cell phone. (Hab 2:1; Zeph 2:3; Mt 11:12; Lu 16:16; Heb 11:6)

When God delivered Israel from Egyptian slavery, He brought them into a "great and terrible wilderness," the Sinai Desert not far from the Sahara. The trials there made them long to go back to Egypt, even if they had to kill Moses, and almost did. Yet God *deliberately* made it hard in the *physical* in order to push and pull them toward the *spiritual*. (Dt 8:2-3, 15; Num 14:1-9; 1 Pet 4:1-3; Heb 3-4; 12:1-29; Rev 3:19)

But the entire generation—those twenty and older, didn't get it and complained over the hardships God had given for their spiritual training. So instead of bringing them into their long-awaited "Promise Land," God kept them there—in the desert—forty years until they all died. What a price to pay for "ignorance gone to seed"! (Num 14:26-37; Hos 4:6)

Their children went in under Joshua and Caleb—the only two who learned that the hardships were designed to make them *hungry to know God personally through the revealed Word from His mouth*. That's the point of this mother's two warnings: whatever lures our *heart* and *mind* away from God destroys our potential to be what called us to be—a nation of royal priests—kings who rule with compassion and wisdom, not for control and power. (Lk 22:24-32; Heb 5:2; Rev 1:6)

One thing had baffled me: how is it that hundreds of martyrs throughout church history have been willing to suffer torture of every kind, and then gladly allow their bodies to be "burned at the stake"? While the flames slowly cook them, instead of agonizing in pain, they often raised burning hands in worship, encouraging their friends or preaching to their enemies. I wondered if I could do the same. (*Fox's Book of Martyrs* (a classic) and *Jesus Freaks*) (Heb 11:33-38)

Until I remembered Song of Solomon 8:6-7. "Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm. For love is as strong as death, its jealousy as enduring as the grave. Love flashes like fire, the brightest kind of flame. Many waters cannot quench love, nor can rivers drown it. If a man tried to buy love with all his wealth, his offer would be utterly scorned" (NLT). (Rom 8:35-39; 1 Cor 4:8-13; 2 Cor 6:4-10)

This beautiful love-song is a metaphor, a picture of our fellowship with Christ as His bride. It's the perfect *cure* for the fall of man and every human problem because it satisfies us on the deepest level of our God-created need for relationship: affirmation, acceptance, significance, etc., all included under *love*. Yet, it's not the love and acceptance I need for *myself*. Rather, it's the glory I see in *Him* that meets this need. (Php 3:10; 1 Jn 4:7-8)

Because love tends to reciprocate, that is, it loves back. I feel as though Solomon wrote this book after his own "fall from grace" through giving his heart to women instead of God. In Ecclesiastes he wrote of the lessons he learned through the emptiness he experienced after having everything. And his love Song may well be his revelation of God's unconditional, forgiving love that brought him back. (1 Ki 11; Ecc.2:1-11)

"For God has imprisoned everyone in disobedience so He could have mercy on everyone." In the parable of the prodigal son, the boy who blew his inheritance on "harlots," ends up enjoying a much deeper level of fellowship with his father than his jealous older brother who didn't understand mercy because he'd never messed up enough to need it. (Rom 11:32 NLT; Lu 15:11-32; see Lu 7:37-50)

Solomon's Song begins with an invitation to the king's banquet. Jesus compared the Kingdom of God to a banquet. But the invited guests had too many excuses, based on their lack of need—families, material things, etc. (idolatry, spiritual adultery). So the poor and needy and outcasts ended up enjoying the feast. (Lu. 14:15-24; 1 Cor 1:26-31)

The maiden in this Song longed for this relationship because of her emptiness. It didn't come through sin, but through emotional and spiritual "burnout," trying to help everybody else, not realizing her own "vineyard" had been neglected, like the church at Ephesus in Revelation 2. Her works without *heart* became a *veil*, hiding her from the *intimacy* she craved but didn't realize was her problem (1:6).

The rest of this lovesong is the progression of the maiden from the beginning of her love relationship to the completed fulfillment, where she comes "up from the "wilderness [*place of breaking and humbling-like jail!*] leaning on her beloved" and "set as a seal upon [his] arm." Her love now is "as strong as death" and nothing can separate her from him.

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?" This follows Romans seven, where Paul experienced the exhaustion of trying to keep the law in his own strength and ended up aware he's *limping*, trapped inside a "body of death." (Rom. 8:35; 7:24; Song 1:6; Php 3:10)

Her progress involved both *heart* (offenses) and *mind* (distractions). And strangely, some of the offense comes from the very leaders who should have guided her. First they are *angry* with her, and later they *beat* her, though it's a picture of misunderstanding and emotional abuse. (1:6; 5:7; Ps 141:5)

Most people simply *leave* the church (or mate) that appears to reject them and find another where they feel loved and accepted. Or else, just leave, giving up on "relationship."

Yet the “watchmen” who “struck” and “wounded” her did the very thing God was after: they removed her *veil*. (5:7)

Now “with unveiled face,” she beholds her lover in a much fuller revelation of his glory than she had yet seen. She now saw him for who he was *himself*, not just for what he meant in reference to *her* or to his might, as her previous descriptions indicate. *Her maturing insight into his glory rises to the level of his insight into her beauty!* This is intimacy! (Sg 1:16-17; 2:3-6, 8-9, 16-17; 3:6-11; 5:6-16, 2 Cor. 3:18)

It’s our purpose, found in relationship with Jesus, and then His people. Out of this everything else proceeds, like the “virtuous wife” of Proverbs 31, full of life and energy to do what needs to be done. In fact the blessings that follow are often so abundant (the gold mine!), we fall into a new trap—we slip back through carelessness. (Dt 8; 2 Chr 18:1; Heb 2:1f)

That’s why we need one another’s support, both for encouragement and for correction. And it’s why we need Him. For without Him we can do nothing, but through Him we can do anything He asks—even unto death. (Jn 15:5; Php 4:13)

“To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne” (Rev 3:21).

Scriptures from the New King James Bible

unless otherwise noted.

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