

In 1976 the following truth set me free from 20 years' suicidal depression and severe anger (rage). Please study the scriptures references carefully; this is a "Bible course" reducing to a few pages what took me many years to learn.

How to Escape the Guilt Trap and Walk in the Spirit

(Scriptures from KJV and NKJB)

part one

What Faith Does That Law Can't

The Christian life is different from any other religion because God makes the most radical claim: "I will put My laws into their hearts, and in their minds I will write them" (Hebrews 10:16).

No other religion claims to make it so natural and easy to be holy and righteous, even to the point of laying down your life for your enemies. How does God do it, this "amazing grace"?

The roots produce the fruit.

He does it by dealing with our roots—our heart, where our spirit lives. The problem is that we attempt obedience by trying "of ourselves" (Jn. 15:5). Adam made this mistake. It's like attempting to change the fruit of a tree.

Fruit grows from its roots. Get rid of the fruit without dealing with the roots, and the fruit will grow back, because it's the nature of the tree. A dog barks because it's a dog. A sinner sins because he's a sinner. Believers are called saints (Eph. 1:1, etc), so it should be as natural for a believer to be saintly as it is for a sinner to sin.

Jesus said you can know a tree by its fruit. "A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit" (Matthew 7:18). If a believer acts unholy, bearing bad fruit, then something is wrong with his roots.

Faith, or belief, grows down in the roots, underground, unseen, in the depths of the heart, where our spirit is. Weak faith will produce poor fruit. It does no good to attempt to change the bad fruit without finding out why faith is not being produced in the heart.

Paul calls bad fruit "the works of the flesh." He lists them in Galatians 5:19-21—sins relating to lust (immorality, v.19), to pride (anger, jealousy, ambition, etc, v.20), and to selfish desire (murder, drunkenness, partying, etc, v.21).

Then he lists the "fruit of the Spirit," which is "love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance [self-control]" (v.22-23): one fruit with all these awesome flavors. It makes life as delicious as ice-cream, and, at times, as intoxicating as heavenly wine (Acts 2:13, Eph. 5:18).

So bad fruit is produced by the "flesh" and good fruit is produced by the Spirit. "These two forces within us are constantly fighting each other to win control over us, and our wishes are never free from their pressures" (v.17 Living Bible). Paul says the same thing with more detail in Romans 7:14-24. Then in Romans 8 he tells us all about living in the Spirit, being "spiritually minded" so we can "mortify [put to death] the deeds of the body."

It sounds easy and it is, with the understanding of the previous chapters (Rom. 3-7), the way a car engine depends on its support system—fuel, electrical, cooling, etc. Or the way a heart depends on the rest of the organs.

These chapters—all about faith or belief—get down to our roots. If our roots (hearts) are being filled with faith, the whole tree will eventually bear good fruit as naturally as oranges grow in the Florida sun.

This is what it means to have God's law written in our hearts and minds (Heb. 10:16) so that obedience comes naturally, as easy as sin used to be (Rom. 6:14f).

The N.T. makes the O.T. look easy.

Now let's look at these chapters and see how faith works and what's so difficult about it that everybody's not enjoying it. Romans 3-4 tells us God is not impressed with our works if they're not motivated by faith, from the heart. In Hebrews 6:1 they're called "dead works" to be repented of.

That's because outward action might actually be the opposite of how we feel inside. In the New Testament, Jesus upgraded the law, showing the full extent of what true heart-motivation should produce.

Take a look at His standard for the *New Testament* believer: He will forgive, love, pray for, and do good to his enemies—those who abuse, reject, hate, and persecute him (Mt. 5:44; 6:14). When they destroy his possessions or have him thrown in prison unjustly he will take it "joyfully" (Heb. 10:34, Acts 16:25, Rev. 2:10).

He will not fight back when struck, and will bless the one sinning him with more than he wants, returning good for evil (Mt. 5:39-42, Lu. 6:28, Rom. 12:20). He'll give freely to someone asking to borrow, and if he takes it away by force, he will not even ask for it back (Mt. 5:42, Lu. 6:30).

He knows his anger may deserve the penalty due a murderer, and that looking lustfully at another person is equal to sexual immorality, exposing himself to the possibility of eternity in Hell (Mt. 5:22, 28-30, Rev. 21:8).

He will fast and pray fervently and persistently without giving up, keeping his body under discipline. He will encourage the needy, widows, orphans, and prisoners, and give to others bountifully and cheerfully without having to be told, and do it all without even a hint of taking credit or wanting recognition (Mt. 6:1-6, 16-18; 25:31-46, Lu. 11:5-13; 18:1-8, 1 Cor. 9:27, 2 Cor. 9:5-7, Jas. 1:27).

And then he will give away anything he's attached to more than God, even if it means selling everything he owns, giving it to those who don't have or deserve anything. And as if that's not enough, he will take up his cross (hardship, yoke, or "thorn in the flesh") daily, just to make sure he doesn't put anything else, including his family, ahead of God or be lifted up with pride! (Mk. 10:21-31; 11:29, Lu. 9:23, 2 Cor. 12:7-10).

His motive will be so pure in all this that he won't dare judge those who don't do these things, knowing he's even worse without God's grace (Mt. 7:1-5). So to allow God to maintain in himself an attitude of esteeming others better than himself he will submit to a disciplining process whereby God reduces him down to a "bond-servant" (slave) with no reputation and willing to die for others in abject humility (Lu. 17:6-10, Jn. 15:13, Php. 2:5-8, Rom. 9:3).

If this kind of love seems beyond reach, consider a mother's love for her children: she will give her life for them, like a mother hen found burned to death, when out from under her charred body scamper her little chicks, alive and well.

Peter tells us to love one another like this, with "intense and unending love . . . for love covers a multitude of sins [forgives and disregards the offenses of others]" (1 Peter 4:8, Amplified Bible). Paul urges, "Be gentle and forbearing with one another and . . . enfold yourselves with the bond of perfectness [which binds everything together completely in ideal harmony] (Col. 3:13, Amp. Bib.)"

This is *New Testament* law, and it makes the Ten Commandments look almost fun. Yet God neither expects nor wants us to live up to this standard by our *own* ability, because it's like trying to get to the moon by jumping.

On the other hand He demands we walk in it, not legalistically—letter perfect—but in the wisdom, timing, and power (ability) of His Spirit (Rom. 8:1f-14, Gal. 5:16). But how?

God's MRI

To unbelievers the milder form of God's law (the 10 commandments) acts as a fence to keep them from harming themselves and others (1 Tim. 1:9). But to the believer, the higher New Testament standard of righteousness becomes both a diagnostic tool, like an MRI, as well as an instructor, pointing out the goal.

And that goal is not working hard to live up to these standards as rules or even principles, but the joy and peace of right relationship with God and people.

As a diagnostic tool, the law shows us our guilt, our rotten fruit, that there's something drastically wrong inside, a deadly disease of the spirit. "For by the law is the knowledge of sin" (Rom. 3:20).

If through "the fear of the Lord" (Pr. 9:10, Heb. 12:28-29) we take our horrible inability—our falling short of His glory (Rom. 3:23)—as seriously as we would cancer (Heb. 1:9), it will produce a kind of "death," a helplessness and loss of confidence in our selves (Php. 3:3, Rom. 7:7-24), enabling us to believe in and cling to Him who "gives life to the dead" (Rom. 4:17). This "death" by the law is covered thoroughly and powerfully in Romans 7, serving (with Romans 6) as a solid basis for Romans 8—life in the Spirit!

As an instructor or tutor (Gal. 3:24), the law points to right relationship, which is love. Genuine, self-less love, motivated by the Holy Spirit in us, will actually begin to operate in the direction of that long list of impossible demands Jesus and the apostles set for us (Mt. 22:37-40, Gal. 5:14, Jas. 2:8, 1 Jn. 3:23).

Rules do just the opposite, causing us to judge one another by external standards. Instead of building relationships, rules divide people. Paul calls it "the middle wall of partition" (Eph. 2:14) because it separates people who don't keep the rules (law) from those who *seem to*, when in fact nobody is able to keep the law perfectly enough to satisfy God. If we think we do we come under a curse for this self-deception (Gal. 3:10).

In His eyes we're all guilty. And if we take His law seriously enough to see our failure, our guilt (Rom. 3:19), we'll come to the only One who kept it—Christ—and not only kept it perfectly but absorbed the law's curse in our place (Gal. 3:13).

Relationship with Him through faith will allow His love to flow through us to others (Gal. 5:6). Abiding in God is abiding in love (1 Jn. 4). This is how the law, through His Spirit, gets into our hearts until we find ourselves *naturally* and *joyfully* beginning to serve others with self-denying love.

There are many believers who've thrown out this high standard—God's law—for the sake of "grace" before it has had a chance to reveal our problem and "tutor" us in the right direction. This attitude produces carelessness and complacency, like the members of the church in Laodicea, whom God wanted to vomit out of His mouth, because they were in "need of nothing" (Rev. 3:16,17).

Still others (called legalists because they live by law or rules instead of relationship) measure themselves and others by these outward standards instead of allowing the law to reveal their own hearts and give them *understanding* and compassion for others.

Faith works best in our weakness

In Romans 3 Paul affirms that there is absolutely no difference between those who keep the law outwardly ("Jew") and those who don't. Paul needed to clarify this because the religious law-keepers so easily judged the law-breakers who'd been saved from sinful "street-life" and still looked pretty rough (Eph. 4:25-32).

How difficult it is for those raised in fine Christian homes to *understand* those believers on the other side of the religious tracks who look more like sinners than saints. So Paul warns us in this chapter that "there is none righteous, no not one," and that without God's grace we are full of "deceit," "cursing and bitterness," "destruction and misery," even to the point of shedding blood—murder (Rom. 3:11-18).

Anyone who thinks he keeps God's law and still judges these weak believers doesn't understand the full extent of the law, which is why Jesus fine-tuned it to the very motives and *secret intents of the heart* (Mt. 5-7, Heb. 4:12).

In Romans 4 and Galatians 3-4 Paul explains why faith works: It takes our focus off self and places it on God through His *promise* to put it in our hearts by the power of His Spirit (Gal. 3:2,5,14).

Keeping the law outwardly sets up indebtedness to God (Rom. 4:4), making Him our slave-master instead of our Daddy. But because *we* can never "earn" enough, we end up in bondage as slaves. And the endless struggle to *achieve* (stress) rather than *receive* (rest) produces pride and finally anger, if one tries hard enough, as I did (Rom. 4:15; Eph. 2:9, Pr. 13:10, Gal. 4:6-7).

Faith puts us in a receiving mode as sons who learn to love and give lavishly from the Father's *promised blessing* (Rom. 4:5-16, Gal. 3:26, Mt. 20:1-16, Lu. 15:31), producing the fruit of the Spirit—the *natural* desire to help others (Gal. 5:13-14, 22).

Romans 4 ends with Abraham getting stronger and stronger in faith through

keeping his focus on God's *promise*, refusing to cave in to doubt and unbelief when the situation looked more hopeless than ever.

In fact it was precisely this condition—"as good as dead"—that *released God's grace* to strengthen his "weak faith," because in *his hopeless condition* (as good as dead) he *refused to "waver at the promise of God"*! (Rom. 4:20)

God took his persistent and persevering *hope* in the face of the *impossible*, replaced it with *genuine faith*, and "gave life to his *mortal body through the Spirit*" (8:11 paraphrased).

Now *God* would get all the glory; there would be no room for boasting (3:27, also Heb. Mk. 11:23-27, Lu. 18:27, Jn. 12:24, Heb. 6:12,18).

This juncture is critical. *Most of us give up at the point of impossibility*, not realizing that it takes "death" for a resurrection. Hence the purpose of the law—"producing death in me by that which is good" (Rom. 7:13). When we are truly helpless in the flesh, then faith can be truly *faith*.

The conflict between faith and sight

We are dealing here with the development of *genuine* faith, that inner *knowing* that *stands* in the face of the lack of any evidence (Heb. 11:1) and finally produces concrete results—the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22), faith that *works* (Jas. 2:14-26).

It takes time and testing for faith to "know" the way a seed planted in "death" takes time to grow into a fruit-bearing tree (Gal. 4:1-2, Heb. 12:7-11). Thus faith develops as we "*glory* in tribulations" (Rom. 5:3), not grumble in them (Php. 2:14). It is this *God-focus under pressure* which produces "perseverance... character... hope," and finally *love* (Rom. 5:3-5).

Is it worth waiting for? Listen: "*Knowing* this, that our old man is crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin. For he that is dead is freed from sin." (Rom. 6:5-6).

Incredible! In other words, real *knowing* faith causes us to *act* from who we *are*—a "new man" (Eph. 4:24), a "new creature" in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17) instead of who we *were* in Adam, the "old man." The "new birth" is the birth of that new person in Christ, as well as the death of the old! "For by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous" (Rom. 5:19).

When we saints act unsaintly it's (hopefully) because we're still learning to believe and know who we are in Christ,

which involves the constant testing of our faith, our "knower" (Jas. 1:2-3).

The only thing wrong with these faith chapters so far (Rom. 3-6) is that it sounds too good to be true. It doesn't work in experience! And that's the reason for chapter 7, which tells about the terrible struggle that "wars" between flesh and spirit, between "the good that I would" and "the evil which I would not" (v.19). When all looks *hopeless* we cry with Paul, "O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from this body of *death*?" (v.24).

It may be a major crisis or a regular occurrence, but at the point of "death," when our heart truly *knows* we can do *nothing* without Him, God shows us an amazing way out: "I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin" (v.25).

When we *know* who we are in Christ, we naturally and effortlessly "serve the law of God," even though our flesh serves "the law of sin," because that's its nature. Our flesh has *fully revealed* itself as capable of nothing but *death*; and now we *see* by *revelation* that it's "no longer I who do it but sin that dwells in me" (Rom. 7:17).

Now everything hinges on what we're going to do with this verse. If we use it as an excuse to serve "with the flesh the law of sin," we'll twist this wonderful truth to our "own destruction," as Peter warns, concerning Paul's difficult writings (2 Pet. 3:16).

God does not give us an excuse to sin, but a way to "serve the law of God" *without the guilt* connected with the weakness of our flesh.

Our faith—our *knowing* who we are in Christ, will never get off the ground if we keep beating ourselves down by our own failure. Something has to break this vicious cycle, the "curse of the law" (Gal. 3:10) and release us to "give glory to God" as Abraham did in the face of his hopeless condition (see Eph. 2:1,5).

Stopping the vicious cycle.

The answer is chapter 8, in what it means to walk "after the Spirit" (v.1, 4). Walking after the spirit is not perfect holiness. The fruit of a tree with bad fruit that has suddenly gotten new roots does not bear good fruit all at once. It's not natural. It's going to take time. New branches and fruit will gradually come in as the old dead branches fall off with their bad fruit. If the roots are constantly being fed the poison of condemnation and guilt as the tree "worries" about the bad fruit still hanging on, it will despair and the new fruit will die before it ever gets started.

God has given us a way to be "spiritually minded" (v.6), to "serve the law of God" with our mind. Our *hearts* are "*transformed* by the renewing of [our] mind" (12:2), free of condemnation despite the weakness of the flesh—so real faith can grow strong. Only then is "grace" able to operate normally, pouring in its life-giving power to deliver us from the "dominion" of sin (6:14).

If, however, we either (1) refuse to take advantage of this privilege, "frustrating" the grace of God (Gal. 2:21) with self-condemnation and dead works; or (2) we use our "liberty for an occasion to the flesh," an excuse to sin (Gal. 5:13) and expose ourselves to sinful influences (1 Jn. 2:15-17, Ps. 26:4-5), we become "carnally minded," Adam-like instead of Christ-like.

Romans 8:6 says "to be carnally minded is death." It destroys faith, that glorious "knowing," the knowledge of who we are in Christ. "For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if *by the Spirit* you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live" (8:13).

If I "abide" in this awesome knowledge (Jn. 15:1f, 1 Jn. 3:6), if I'm "spiritually minded," all I have to do is "yield" (present, offer, give) myself "to righteousness unto holiness" the same way I offered myself to sinful acts (Rom. 6:19). I did sinful things because I knew I was a sinner. Now I'm free to do righteous things because I know (or getting to know as my faith develops) I'm in Christ!

This is the true meaning of grace—God's ability in us who believe. "For sin shall not have dominion over you, for ye are not under the law but under grace" (Rom. 6:14).

The hard part is not the doing, but the *believing*, the knowing, especially when you can't see any difference and change seems impossible. But that's why faith is so important—because our doing will spring naturally from our believing, our faith-relationship with God, the way fruit grows as it's fed by the roots.

Don't forget, faith is knowing something you can't yet see but is more real than what you can see (Heb. 11:1), because it's rooted in the promises of God. But they have to be "engrafted," planted, absorbed, fully received into the heart (Jas. 1:21, 1 Pet. 2:2; 2 Pet. 1:4).

Faith in God's Word and promises works according to the same invisible laws that produce a beautiful fruit tree from a tiny dead seed buried in decaying, wormy, bug-infested dirt—that "body of death" we long for deliverance from!

A tuned heart.

Proverbs 4:23 says “keep [guard] your heart with all diligence, for out of it [spring] the issues of life.” Living with your heart in tune with God, free of condemnation, humbly trusting Him, allows faith to tap into God’s ability. His commitment to develop the “fruit tree” (Christ) in you. With my faith in Him I find either grace to obey, or I find grace to keep walking in faith until He enables me to obey.

The only difference is time, and faith takes me out of time and into God’s eternity, where He credits me with righteousness through the obedience of Christ (Rom. 6:3,5,24, Heb. 10:10).

This time element is part of God’s wisdom, for we change in one area at a time, generally, though some, who’ve come to the complete end of themselves, change drastically in one glorious “resurrection.” Yet even these find many areas that still need changing. And while I’m changing in one area and my brother is changing in another, we have opportunity to exercise faith, patience, and mercy toward each other. (Col. 3:13).

Again, this is what the law and holiness are all about. “For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself” (Gal. 5:14). In fact the word holiness simply means “separated or dedicated” to God, and in Romans eight it means separated from the carnal mind and tuned in to the spiritual mind, the “mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 2:16).

No religion ever conceived of such wisdom, whereby God uses our weakness to make us righteous! No wonder the only people Jesus criticized were those who couldn’t see their faults.

But even better, through the Cross He absorbed all our sins and sin-nature, fulfilling every speck of the obedience He requires—in Himself. In other words, He is our obedience, through simple faith in Him (Rom. 3:21-22, Gal. 2:20, Eph. 2:1-10, Col. 1:21-29; 2:9-15, Heb. 10:5-10).

In part 2 we’ll take a more detailed look at how God cultivates our “tree” or “branches” to produce this delicious fruit (Jn. 15). For only those yielded to the faithful care of the “Vinedresser” will produce fruit.

Being “planted together in the likeness of His death” is to give Him freedom to prune and cultivate us in order to help us fully understand how “dead,” how dependent on His power, we are, even as Jesus completely depended on His Father (Jn. 5:19).

All the energy we put into trying of ourselves to change, God wants us to put that effort into simple trust as we “learn of Him” (Mt. 11:29-30) and learn to “rest” in His work, not ours (Heb. 4:1-11).

It sounds easy until the testing of our faith begins, so we can really know who we are in Christ. Then we realize trusting and believing against all odds can be much more difficult than keeping hard rules or throwing them out and calling it “grace.”

But for those who truly desire a better way—union with Jesus Christ, the reward is “out of this world,” like heaven on earth (Deut. 11:21).

part two

Three Huge Problems in this War

In part one we found that whatever we do springs naturally from our hearts. If we try to do better, but it’s not in our hearts, we end up failing sooner or later. This explains why we don’t change, no matter how hard we try.

The Twelve steps are really three.

Twelve Step programs (Alcoholics Anonymous, etc) meet three goals: First, the addict is honest enough to open his heart, humble himself, and receive correction (steps 1, 4-6, 10, 12); second, he is willing to surrender to his higher power, which, in the original AA teaching, was Jesus Christ (steps 2-3, 5-7, 11-12); and third, he becomes accountable to others, including those he has offended (steps 8-9).

In other words, from a biblical viewpoint, I, God, and others: I—humbling my heart, God—allowing Him to transform my heart through His Word, and others—forgiving them, seeking their forgiveness, receiving their correction, enjoying their fellowship, and receiving from and giving God’s Word to them. This is a Bible-based twelve step program in a nutshell.

Part one gave us the strategy, the battle plan, showing us how God changes us from inside out, through faith working by love. Now we’ll look at tactics, the assault against “the gates of hell” (Mt. 16:18) and what we run into in actual experience.

Problem one—hard hearts

First, our hearts. As we saw in part one, our hearts are the only part of us capable of converting God’s Word into godly activity (obedience). This is why the Bible calls obedience “the fruit of the Spirit” (Gal. 5:22). In a similar way, soil converts the planted seed into a fruit-bearing plant.

Our heart contains our spirit, and when God “plants” His Word in our hearts, the Holy Spirit united with our spirit, breathing

Life into that Word-seed and it begins to grow and eventually produces fruit.

Jesus talked about this in the parable of the sower (Mt. 13:18-22, Mk. 4:13-20, Lu. 8:11-18). The problem was not with the seed (the Word) but with the soil. The “wayside” soil was too hard, not allowing the seed to penetrate before the devil snatched it away. The “stony” soil didn’t hold enough moisture to water the plant.

It’s like those who believe at first, but pockets of hardness (stones) cause them to be offended and give up in the “heat” of trials and testing. It’s sad, because they first “receive the word with joy” (Lu. 8:13), but fail to maintain a humble, teachable attitude (brokenness).

Before a farmer plants his field, he first plows it up. When the “Kingdom of God” was “at hand,” both John the Baptist and Jesus preached, “Repent!” Hearts had to be broken and humbled before they would ever receive the Word of their Messiah, even though they had waited thousands of years for His appearance. Which explains why so few did receive Him. (Mt. 3:2)

Even the disciples had a heart-problem. Jesus blamed their lack of faith regarding the “loaves and fishes” and fear in their wind-driven boat on their “hardened” hearts (Mk. 6:52; 8:17). I find it amazing and amusing that Jesus expected so much out of them, and yet He blamed their lack of faith for such impossibilities not on their lack of “spirituality,” whatever that means, but on their hardness of heart!

Bible history is about breaking hearts.

When God brought Israel out of Egypt, He wanted to prepare them for their inheritance in the Promise Land (Canaan, the land God promised to Abraham). So He brought them into the Sinai Desert, a “great and terrible wilderness” (Dt. 1:19) to “humble” them so their hearts could open up to receive His Word (Dt. 8:2-3).

But they complained, grumbled, and rebelled so much that God refused to let them in (Ex. 32, Num. 11-14). He knew they would never have the faith it would take to “stand” against the physical and spiritual “giants” there. They refused the plowing of their soil, the conditioning of their hearts so they could “hear” the Word from God’s mouth (from His Spirit).

Before God used anyone to any great extent in the Bible, He took them through much trial and testing in order to prepare the soil of their hearts for the powerful Word that would make them so effective.

Abraham went through 25 years of testing before receiving the son God promised him; the stories of Jacob and Joseph are stories of much affliction and

tribulation, followed by amazing victories (Gen. 27-45). Moses went through 80 years of the most severe testing, and even then was denied entrance to the Land he had looked forward to for probably more than 100 years (Num. 20). But where do we see him next? On the “Mount of Transfiguration” in his “glorified” body with Jesus and Elijah, a preview of the resurrection to come (Mt. 17:3).

The trials and afflictions of David began soon after he slew Goliath, and never quit till the day he died (1 Sam. 17 to 2 Ki. 2). But the fruit that grew out of David’s heart was so wonderful that Jesus came as the “Son of David” and will return as the “Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the root of David” (Mk. 10:47, Rev. 5:5).

The well-known “faith chapter,” Hebrews 11, is the account of men whose hearts were “tried by fire,” as it were (1 Cor. 3:13). Some “were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. And others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings . . . of bonds and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword; they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented” (35-37).

The faith chapter is then followed by the “discipline chapter,” Hebrews 12. “If you endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons, for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not?” (v.7) But those trained by chastening experience “the peaceable fruit of righteousness” (v.11).

Paul told his new missions converts that “we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). He told the Roman believers that if “we suffer with Him,” we’ll also be “glorified together” (Rom. 8:17). He knew that to experience “the power of His resurrection” we must know Him in “the fellowship of His sufferings” (Php. 3:10).

Why such emphasis on suffering and affliction? Does God love to afflict us? No, quite the opposite; He wants to bless us! But He knows how hard our hearts are and what it takes to open them and keep them open in order for the Word to take root and grow.

As we found in part one, to be complacent, “in need of nothing,” is bad enough to cause Jesus to “vomit” us out of His mouth (Rev. 3:16 NKJV). Like the hard or stony soil, unbroken hearts are incapable of producing any spiritual fruit and thus enjoy His blessings (Eph. 1:3).

Problem two—lack of focus

The third type of soil is apparently good soil, but it’s got too many other seeds growing in it—thorns and weeds. The “Word-plant”

grows and may even produce fruit, but the fruit doesn't mature. Why? Jesus said the "cares, riches, and pleasures of this life" "choked" the Word (Lu. 8:14).

Because of my depression I spent years searching psychology, philosophy, eastern religion, theology, great spiritual books, and even the Bible. Then I got so desperate I began to seek God with all my heart (Jer. 29:13). After six months of extreme praying, fasting, and waiting in agony, God finally put his finger on my life-long problem—distractions!

My distractions were good ones—all related to my pastoral ministry. It's just that I was too busy to "be still and know" the voice of God (Ps. 45:10)! I'd never learned how to slow down, "tune in," and listen to God for the *Word from His mouth!* (Dt. 8:3) My over-active mind controlled my lifestyle, too busy to humbly take directions from the Spirit as a true *son of God*, "led [carried, empowered] by the Spirit" (Rom. 8:14).

The corn garden

As God began dealing with me about this, my neighbor asked if I'd like to share some of his land for a garden. Delighted, I had my wife's father come over and use his expertise. I watched as both he and the neighbor planted. I noticed "Papa" planted three kernels of corn 18 inches apart, while the neighbor sprinkled his corn in a solid line. I felt sorry for Papa, thinking maybe he was getting old.

The neighbor's corn came up in a solid line with no spaces between. Papa's corn had one or two or no sprouts a foot and a half apart. Then he went along and pulled one out where there were two and planted the extra ones in the empty spaces. His garden looked so pitiful compared to the neighbor's, I was embarrassed; what a waste of valuable soil!

But after a few weeks the neighbor's corn stopped at about three feet high, and never lost its dingy, yellow color. Pop's corn kept growing until it was about eight feet tall, so thick you could hardly walk through it, and a dark, luscious green, with the most delicious corn tucked inside.

When later I came to the end of myself, utterly desperate, and finally "heard" God's simple word about my "corn garden," my over-stuffed mind filled with religious activity and too much reading to digest and absorb any of it, I began to spend much more time "waiting on him" (Is. 40:31) with the Word in front of me.

And then the Holy Spirit began to "guide me" into His truth (Jn 16:13), teaching me scriptures I had memorized and taught but had never received enough Spirit and heart nourishment, enough "listening

space," to take root and grow. After 20 years of getting nowhere, the Word from God's heart to mine set me free in one year (1976).

Brokenness and focus work together!

All around me I see these two types: those with powerful, alert, concentrated, brilliant minds, perhaps highly skilled in their field, but whose hearts are not broken enough to "hear" the voice of God.

Jesus said that unless we "receive the kingdom of God as a little child," we'll not enter it. He told the religious leaders this because of "the hardness of [their] heart" (Mk. 10:5,15). No wonder God chooses "the foolish," the "weak," the "despised," and the nobodies to bring to nothing the "mighty" and the somebodies! (1 Cor. 1:27-28)

But equally sad are the many poor and afflicted, whose hearts are fertile, broken by circumstances, failure, and sin, but who don't grasp the importance of focus, of meditating in the Word until it becomes *God's word to them personally*, transforming and renewing their minds from the inside (heart) out (Rom. 12:2).

Most of us are in between, average saints with a little hunger and a little focus, but not enough of each. We complain in trials instead of seeing each trial as an opening in our hearts where the Word can drop down and take root. We spend some time with the Lord and His Word, but not quite enough to really "hear," to really get satisfied and saturated with His Presence.

And so we watch those who do, the men and women whose connection with God is strong enough to conquer giants and show us the way . . . if we'll only follow.

Problem three—our response to others

The third category in this three-step summary is "others." It is the natural outcome of intimacy with Him. If you noticed, this is the essence of what I call New Testament law; it is the goal toward which real faith moves (Gal. 5:6). *There's no point in overcoming anything if we don't become accountable and responsive to others.*

One reason is that God uses others both to break us and teach us. To receive the Kingdom as a child is to be both broken in spirit (Is. 57:15; 66:2, Mt. 5:3), and teachable. Brokenness and focus—broken hearts and focused minds, like seeds planted in plowed soil without weeds and thorns.

God can use our *enemies* to break us, but it doesn't work unless we forgive, love, pray for, and bless them (Mt. 5:44). Otherwise we'll become *hardened by the very thing God could use to mellow us.*

This is a hard pill to swallow, especially for those who've been abused and deeply wounded. But it's one of the secrets to the success of counseling programs with those who persevere until the bitterness and resentment are completely broken.

It's one of the reasons faith is a "fight" (1 Tim 6:12, 2 Tim 4:7) and "warfare" (1 Tim. 1:18, Eph. 6:12). *Some counselors boil down one's entire success to the problem of overcoming resentment.* Others predict that most of the "insane" could be released from mental institutions if they'd only *forgive!* The same has been said of many hospital patients too weakened by resentment to regain their health (1 Cor. 11:28-33).

God also uses those *who love us* to teach, correct, and "break" us. But we resist them as well, like Israel did Moses and the Jews did Jesus. According to Ephesians 4:11-16 we mature through spiritual fellowship with other believers who can nourish us with the Word God has given them (Eph. 4:11-16).

Yet our hard hearts "stumble" over every little offense (Mt. 11:6) and *excuse to "forsake the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some"* (Heb. 10:25), and like those who "receive the word with joy," but "in time of temptation [testing] fall away" (Lu. 8:13).

True, it is hard to receive from others no more mature than we are, with hang-ups worse than ours, but "to the hungry soul, every bitter thing is sweet" (Pr. 27:7). Again, it is why the Kingdom is received by those with childlike humility (Mt. 18:4).

No wonder Jesus said to "strive to enter in at the narrow gate, for many . . . will seek to enter and will not be able" (Lu. 13:24 NKJV). No wonder He said the kingdom of heaven takes "violent assault, and violent men seize it by force" (Mt. 11:12, Amplified Bible).

No wonder God tells us that when we get desperate enough to seek Him with all our heart (Jer. 29:13), when we "keep asking . . . keep seeking . . . and keep knocking" we'll get the answer (Lu. 11:9-10, literal meaning).

Furthermore, God not only uses "others" to break us and teach us, but He wants us to help others in various ways. This is how we grow, how we test what we've learned, and how it's reinforced through experience. (Lu. 12:35-48, Rom. 12, 1 Cor. 12, Heb. 13)

Through reaching out to others we allow God to test us because of their reactions and problems. And it's how we become skillful in the Word (Heb. 5:12-14) as we share it with others and disciple them in Christ.

Faith grows best in abject humility!

But again, it's a difficult and "narrow" path. When the disciples asked Jesus to increase their faith, He gave them a parable about a servant [slave] who comes in from working in the field, no doubt hungry and exhausted. But before the slave is allowed to eat he must first prepare supper for his master (whether or not his master is fat, lazy, and arrogant). Then he must not expect thanks, for he's only done his duty. (Lu. 17:5-10)

Can you believe Jesus gave this hard, cruel illustration to show what develops faith?! I call this a lesson in "abject humility." Abject means contemptible, miserable, vile, despised, disgraced (please read Lam. 3:22-32).

It's the kind of humility those listed in Hebrews 11 went through, the men and women in the "hall of faith." It is the "culture medium" in which faith grows, the way in seventh grade science class we grew bacteria placed in a warm, moist culture medium.

It is faith developing in its *natural* environment, for faith grows best when the Word is "incubated" in hearts kept humble and warm by the "testing" of patient, enduring, unselfish service to others, "forbearing and forgiving one another . . . even as Christ forgave" us (Col. 3:13).

Like good soil without stones and weeds, faith grows best in hearts watered by the Spirit, *patiently enduring even under cruel, humiliating circumstances* (Lu. 8:15). If you'll read Hebrews 11, you'll see exactly this pattern of what it took to produce the giants of biblical faith.

It's hard, but look what we'd go through if we had cancer—all the misery of surgery, radiation, chemotherapy, and anything else the doctor and his drugs put us through.

Maybe the reason we're not willing to endure much is that we don't realize we have a spiritual cancer more deadly than any physical disease known to man. *We've never taken God's holy demands seriously enough to grasp the horror of our problem with self.*

This is why it often takes coming to the complete end of our *selves* through some terrible problem, addiction, or prison sentence, when *God's law could have shown us the same thing with much less trouble.*

But how can I talk? I knew God's righteous law of self-sacrifice, but it took 20 years for it to finally "break" me and drive me to faith in Christ (Gal. 3:23-25). Maybe it took that long for me to be willing to submit to *His* program and discipline, to *humble myself* before His people, His church, to give up my great ideas and become a little, helpless child again, totally dependent on Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit.

I know the difference between my own self-discipline—trying to achieve something always out of reach—and God’s loving discipline. When I came to *the end of my rope* He showed me a better way: submit to His simple three-step plan. Break me, fill me, use me!

Like a butterfly emerging from its cocoon of death, our “change” will take place little by little (Ex. 23:30, Is. 28:10), “grace for grace” (Jn. 1:16), “from faith to faith” (Rom. 1:17), “strength to strength” (Ps. 84:7), and “from glory to glory, even as *by the Spirit of the Lord*” (2 Cor. 3:18).

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