

The
Two
Kingdoms

Understanding the Kingdom of God
and the Fallen World

Lim Kou

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Feedback and comments on this book are welcome and can be e-mailed to: feedback@godandtruth.com.

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Preface

In 2003, I published my first book, *Understanding Job*. It is a reflection on the meaning and purpose of Job's suffering. The book has been warmly received by believers in different parts of the world.

I am thankful for the Lord's provision and undertaking in many ways in relation to that book. I am also thankful for the brethren in different countries who helped in its printing and distribution. I see it as a meaningful expression of fellowship and oneness among God's people in the universal church.

This second book on the kingdom of God and the fallen world is based on eight consecutive messages preached in a local congregation in 1993-94.

Just as for the first book, this book is offered free to God's children. Both books are part of an ongoing project to provide wholesome materials to help Christians grow and serve the Lord according to His revelation in the Scriptures.

You may freely download from the website www.godandtruth.com, for personal use or for free distribution, these two books and other text and audio messages on major issues of the Christian faith.

In my preaching and writing, I have sought to approach the issues in such a way that the hearers and readers can satisfy for themselves that what is being presented is what the Scriptures teaches, rather than merely the assertions and opinions of man. Not only are scriptural references given and the texts referred to, care is also taken to show how the understanding of the issues is arrived at.

The fellowship, encouragement and support of the brethren in the congregation have contributed to my life and ministry over the years. Their involvement in this book is an example. As an expression of church life, many brethren participate in the transcription, editing, proofreading, publication and distribution process.

I would appreciate your prayers that the Lord will guide and undertake the whole project so that it may contribute to the advancement of His kingdom.

Lim Kou

Introduction

The Lord Jesus Christ

The Lord Jesus Christ is at the heart of the fulfilment of God's purposes and God's revelation to man. He is God's solution to the plight of man and His provision for their full salvation. He is the Saviour of mankind, the Word of God, the Light of the world, our perfect Teacher, the Way, the Truth and the Life. As Paul puts it so succinctly: Christ in you, the hope of glory.

As God's children, it is our desire to respond well to His call. We want to fulfil His will for our lives and participate fully in the fulfilment of His purposes. To do so, it is imperative for us to deepen in our personal knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ and identify with the primary concerns of His heart.

We must learn well from Him: His teaching, His perfect example, and the way He lived His life during His time on earth, which climaxed in His death on the cross.

This approach to life is well exemplified in the life of Paul and summed up in his testimony: For to me to live is Christ. I desire to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

It has been a burden of my heart to communicate this vast and important subject on the Lord Jesus Christ and the implications of the Cross, and for over a period of nine years, I preached a series of messages on it¹. The eight messages on which this book is based form a part of this series.

The Two Kingdoms

When we reflect on the earthly life of the Lord Jesus and ponder about our own earthly existence, we are confronted with some fundamental questions:

- If the Scriptures prophesied that the Lord Jesus would be a great king with everlasting dominion

and glory, why was He born into this world in a manger and of poor parents? Why did He wear no crown except a crown of thorns? Why was He mocked at, spat on, beaten, scourged and crucified like a criminal? If He is the King of kings, what kind of a king is He?

- What is the meaning and purpose of our time on earth? Since there is so much pain, toil, sorrow and temptations in this world, is it not better that we depart from this world and be with the Lord in heaven?
- How can we live well as citizens of heaven in a fallen world?
- How should we view material wealth, power and positions of status and authority in a world where people strive to be rich, powerful, successful and prosperous? What is true success and how can we live a successful life?

The messages in this book are an attempt to answer these questions and to consider the biblical teaching on fundamental issues relating to our time on earth.

To grasp the true meaning of our earthly existence, it is important that we understand the kingdom of God and the fallen world. The kingdom of God is a central theme in the Scriptures and in the teaching of the Lord Jesus. Understanding this subject can help us:

- appreciate the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus and identify with what is in God's heart
- recognise what our values, perspective and approach to life ought to be
- know how we can live well in this fallen world without succumbing to the pervasive negative influence of the spirit of the world

- reflect on issues of life and respond to them from a biblical perspective
- be effective ambassadors for Christ

To fully appreciate the issues considered in this book, it is needful that we read it prayerfully and take time to ponder over the content as we read. It is my prayer that this book will help us discover in a deeper measure the meaning and joy of living in and for the kingdom of God.

(Endnote)

¹ These messages on the Lord Jesus Christ are available on the website www.godandtruth.com under the headings *The Lord Jesus Christ* (AR118-172) and *Reflections on the Death of Christ* (AR173-274). *The Two Kingdoms* is based on eight of these messages (AR132-139).

Understanding the Kingdom of God and the Fallen World

Importance of understanding the kingdom of God and the fallen world

As disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ, we want to live well and effectively for Him. But how can we do so? Do we know how God wants us to live while we are on this earth? Do we know what perspective and values He wants us to have, and what approach in life He wants us to take? Do we know what is really important to Him?

As followers of Christ, we can gain insight into these issues by considering the life of the Lord Jesus, our perfect example.

However, when we look at the earthly life of the Lord Jesus Christ, we may be puzzled by His ways, which are often very different from what one would normally associate with greatness and effectiveness. Why did He conduct Himself the way He did? What was His approach in ministry?

To understand these issues, it is helpful for us to appreciate two major areas that God reveals to us in the Scriptures—the kingdom of God and the fallen world. If we understand these two areas and the issues involved, we will be able to better appreciate the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus, the kind of values we should have, the approach we should take in life, and what we should concentrate on.

In this message, we shall first consider what kind of a king the Lord Jesus is. We will then consider the major differences in emphasis between the world and the kingdom of God and their major contrasting characteristics.

The Lord Jesus Christ: What kind of a king is He?

It was prophesied in Daniel 7:13-14 and Isaiah 9:6-7 that the Lord Jesus would be a great king. He would be given everlasting

“dominion, glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations and men of every language might serve Him”, and there would be “no end to the increase of His government”. However, what is recorded in the Scriptures of His earthly life is a picture that seems totally at odds with these prophecies.

The Lord Jesus was born in a manger and of poor parents. While He was yet a child, King Herod wanted to kill Him, and His parents had to flee with Him to Egypt. During His earthly life, He experienced much suffering and pain, especially in the circumstances surrounding the Cross. On His cross were inscribed the words: “This is the King of the Jews” (Luke 23:38). But the only crown He wore on this earth was a crown of thorns. Instead of receiving worship and adoration, He was mocked at, spat on, beaten, scourged and finally crucified like a criminal. It was a very painful, agonising and humiliating way to die.

In Isaiah 53:2-3, 7, the coming Messiah is described as having “no stately form or majesty... despised and forsaken of men... He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth; like a lamb that is led to slaughter...”

As He hung on the cross, He appeared weak and helpless. He came into the world to be the Saviour of mankind, but He could not even save Himself. How could this be a picture of a great king, one with everlasting dominion and glory?

The Scriptures prophesied that the Lord Jesus would be a great king and indeed He is. In fact, He is the King of kings. But what kind of a king is He?

Evidently, the Lord Jesus is not a king in the worldly sense. When Pilate asked Him, “Are You the King of the Jews?”, His reply was: “My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm” (John 18:33-36). The Lord Jesus did not deny that He was a King. In fact, His reply was emphatic: “You say correctly that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth” (John 18:37). This shows that He was a King even at that point in time. But, as He

had said, His kingdom is not of this world¹.

It was prophesied in Isaiah 52:13 that “He will be high and lifted up and greatly exalted”. This verse can be appreciated not only from the angle of His future glory, but also of His glory during His ministry and time on earth. The apostle John tells us in John 1:14 that they “saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father”.

Although oppressed and afflicted, the Lord Jesus was, in reality, also being highly exalted. But the world was not able to appreciate this spiritual reality. Yes, the people of the world saw Him “lifted up” on the cross, but what they saw was a man who was helpless and forsaken, a lonely figure. However, that is not what “lifted up” means in Isaiah 52:13. In this verse, there is a connotation of glory and exaltation. And indeed, if we truly understand the meaning of what took place at the Cross, we will know that it was a manifestation of the Lord’s glory and greatness and an integral part of His exaltation.

John 13 records a remarkable incident of the Lord Jesus washing the feet of His disciples. We may read this with consternation and, like the apostle Peter, strongly protest. How could the King of kings, the Master and Lord of the Universe behave like a servant, washing the feet of His disciples?

There are various things pertaining to the life and conduct of the Lord Jesus recorded in the Scriptures that may seem rather puzzling. And indeed, it is difficult to comprehend them from a worldly perspective. How then can we reconcile the prophecies of His glory and the reality of His life on earth? How can we appreciate the different aspects of His life and their implications for our lives?

Understanding the differences in values, perspective, approach and characteristics of the world and the kingdom of God can help us unravel many of these puzzling events and help us appreciate the beauty, greatness and effectiveness of the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ. And as we grow in our appreciation of the Lord Jesus, we will be able to gain deeper insight into the meaning of our being in the kingdom of God.

The kingdom of God and the fallen world

A major area of truth revealed in the Scriptures is that we are living in a fallen world, which is under the influence and power of the evil one.

The Scriptures reveals that Satan rebelled against God (Ezek. 28:12-17; Isa. 14:12-15). Subsequently, in cunning and deceit, he tempted Eve (Gen. 3:1-5)². Adam and Eve yielded to Satan's temptation and sinned against God. As a result, they came under the judgement of God and the influence of the evil one.

The fall of Adam and Eve has far-reaching adverse consequences, not only for themselves, but also for the whole world. Since then, the fallen world has been under Satan's power. The apostle John categorically states this in 1 John 5:19: "The whole world lies in the power of the evil one". Man now has a tendency to live according to the course of this world, indulging in the desires of the flesh. This is a universal problem.

The apostle Paul describes the sobering reality of the lives of those outside the kingdom of God in this way:

Ephesians 2:1-3

1 And you were dead in your trespasses and sins,

2 in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience.

3 Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.

The "course of this world" in verse 2 refers to the trends, values, ways and perspective of the fallen world under the influence of the evil one, who is referred to as "the prince of the power of the air".

2 Peter 3:10 teaches that the heavens and the earth together with its works are destined for destruction.

2 Peter 3:10

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up.

1 John 2:15 and 17 caution us not to love the world nor the things in the world.

1 John 2:15, 17

15 Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.

17 The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever.

What is of the fallen world will not endure (v. 17); it will ultimately perish, and we must not be preoccupied with it.

What then will endure? The kingdom the Lord is building. He is not rebuilding or restoring the fallen world. He is building a different kingdom whose values and emphases are opposed to those of the fallen world. He is building an everlasting kingdom in which righteousness dwells. This is the kingdom of God.

Major differences in emphasis

Romans 14:17 describes the kingdom of God as one that is not primarily “eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit”. “Eating and drinking” represents the preoccupation of the fallen world with the visible, the carnal and the temporal. This reminds us of the warning of the Lord Jesus concerning His Coming again. The conditions then will be like those in the days of Noah and the days of Lot. People will be preoccupied with eating, drinking, buying, selling, planting and building (Luke 17:26-28).

The fallen world, under the influence of the evil one, is materialistic and seeks, as its primary goal, earthly riches, success, power, recognition, status and authority. The majority of people in this world channel much of their time and energy in a relentless pursuit of these things, some even risking their lives in doing so. But all these are merely outward achievements that have no eternal value in themselves and will pass away.

The kingdom of God, on the other hand, is “righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit”. It is, in essence, a moral and spiritual kingdom and its emphasis is on the spiritual realm

rather than on the material and visible realm. “Righteousness” speaks of positive moral values and qualities. True “peace and joy” is the result of the Holy Spirit working in our hearts when we have a healthy relationship with God and are walking in the truth. “In the Holy Spirit” communicates to us a very important aspect of the kingdom of God—the presence and ministry of the Holy Spirit.

The emphasis of the world is distinctly and vastly different from that of the kingdom of God. We can see this clearly in the light of what is revealed in the Scriptures and as we look at the world around us. We shall turn to a few passages in the Scriptures for the biblical position and perspective. Let me first summarise the differences in emphasis as follows:

The world

is preoccupied with

The visible

The carnal, materialistic

The temporal

Outward show and achievements

Earthly power, status and authority

The kingdom of God

concentrates on

The invisible

The spiritual

The eternal

Inner reality, what is of the heart, the development of the inner man

Spiritual power and authority

The kingdom of God concentrates on the eternal, spiritual, and invisible

The kingdom of God emphasises that which is invisible, spiritual and eternal, while the world is preoccupied with that which is visible, carnal and temporal.

The apostle Paul puts across clearly in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18 the correct perspective that believers in the kingdom of God should have.

2 Corinthians 4:16-18

16 Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day.

17 For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison,
18 while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

Paul said these words in the context of a faithful and fruitful ministry, one fraught with many dangers, trials and difficulties.

In verse 18, the apostle Paul says, “We look not at the things which are seen.” His emphasis and concentration is not on the visible, but on the invisible realm. He continues, “The things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.” This does not mean that everything that is unseen is positive and eternal, because the powers of darkness are also at work in the realm of the unseen. But it tells us the kingdom of God and what really matters are in the realm of the unseen—the invisible, spiritual and eternal.

And Paul could say, “We do not lose heart... our inner man is being renewed day by day” (v. 16), despite all the trials and afflictions that came upon him, because his concentration was on the invisible, spiritual and eternal realm. He was not disheartened because his focus was neither on the outward circumstances nor on what was happening to his physical body, but on the daily renewal of the inner man. He was more concerned with the positive inward transformation being brought about by these trials.

Paul regarded the severe afflictions that he and his co-workers had to endure as “momentary, light afflictions”. They were momentary and light when compared to the “eternal weight of glory” that these trials were producing. An important aspect of the eternal weight of glory is the renewal of the inner man Paul refers to in verse 16. The other important aspect, which helps us appreciate Paul’s perspective and posture, was his consciousness that these afflictions were taking place in the context of a fruitful ministry. The principle of death was at work in Paul and his co-workers, bringing about life in others. He mentions this in verses 11 and 12.

So we see in this passage that Paul is exhorting us to concentrate on the realities in the spiritual realm that are eternal and unseen, rather than on the things in the physical realm that are visible and temporal and will pass away. As we seek to serve God faithfully, let us not be discouraged by the trials and difficulties that may appear to be adverse from the temporal perspective. Instead, let us learn to view life from the eternal perspective of God's kingdom and rejoice in the development of our inner man and in the enduring fruit of a faithful ministry.

The kingdom of God concentrates on inner reality

The world is also preoccupied with outward show and achievements whereas the kingdom of God emphasises the inward reality. A key passage in 1 Samuel 16 highlights to us God's concern with the reality in the heart of man rather than the outward appearance. This is the approach that God wants us to adopt in life.

1 Samuel 16:6-7

6 When they entered, he looked at Eliab and thought, "Surely the Lord's anointed is before Him."

7 But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."

The Lord had given instructions to the prophet Samuel to anoint the one He had chosen to replace Saul as king of Israel. When Samuel looked at Eliab and saw that he appeared impressive, he thought that Eliab must surely be the Lord's chosen one.

Such is the tendency of man to be taken in by outward appearance. Even Samuel, a godly man, faltered in this area. The Lord corrected him, "Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him" (v. 7).

Why did God reject Eliab? He rejected Eliab because of the lack of quality in his heart. Samuel looked at the outward

appearance of Eliab, but God looked at his heart. It was on this basis that God chose David instead of Eliab or any of his other brothers. God chose David because he was a man after His own heart (1 Sam. 13:14; Acts 13:22).

The Lord is concerned about the reality and inward quality of the heart and not the outward appearance. We should, likewise, have the same concern.

The kingdom of God concentrates on spiritual power and authority

We can also see the contrast in emphasis in the area of power and authority. In the world, power and authority are built upon the worldly status and position that one has attained to and the wealth that one has acquired. In the kingdom of God, the emphasis is on spiritual power and authority that is God-given.

Consider Paul's life. God called him to be an apostle and equipped him with power and authority for spiritual service. His power and authority are therefore spiritual and divine; they are from God and not from man. Paul was very conscious of this and often highlighted it in the opening words of his epistles. For example, 1 Corinthians opens with: "Paul, called as an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God". In his second epistle to the Corinthians, he referred to the authority that the Lord gave him for building up believers (2 Cor. 13:10).

Contrasting characteristics

We can see striking contrasts in the characteristics of the kingdom of God and the world because of their differences in emphasis. The trends, values and ways of the world are diametrically opposed to those of the kingdom of God.

The apostle James teaches that "friendship with the world is hostility toward God" (James 4:4). Likewise, the apostle John warns us that if we love the world, the love of the Father is not in us, for "all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world" (1 John 2:15-17).

We can summarise the contrasting characteristics of the world and the kingdom of God as follows:

Characteristics of the world	Characteristics of the kingdom of God
Aggressive spirit	Meekness, gentleness
Selfishness, self-centredness, greed, covetousness	True love, generosity, concern for others, spirit of giving
Pride	Humility
Hypocrisy	Sincerity
Confidence in self, dependence on self, exaltation of self	Confidence in God, dependence on God, exaltation of God
Focus on appearance	Focus on reality
The flesh leading to death	The Spirit leading to life

Aggressive spirit versus meekness

In the fallen world, having an aggressive, self-assertive spirit is often regarded as a means to success and to attaining one's desires. However, in the kingdom of God, meekness and gentleness of spirit are extolled as virtues. They are manifestations of true strength of character within. The Lord Jesus says, "Blessed are the gentle" (Matt. 5:5). The margin of the NASB indicates that "gentle" can also be translated "humble, meek". The Lord Jesus Himself is gentle and humble in heart and He exhorts us to learn from Him and find rest for our souls (Matt. 11:29).

Self-centredness versus true love

The fallen world is driven by greed, covetousness and self-centredness. We often see worldly people grabbing things for themselves. Even when rendering help to others, they often expect something in return.

The kingdom of God, however, stresses true love, generosity, genuine concern for others and a spirit of self-giving. In Matthew 22:37-39, the Lord Jesus emphasises the supreme importance of loving God with all our hearts and loving our neighbours as

ourselves and in 1 Corinthians 13, Paul highlights and beautifully expresses what true love means. In Acts 20:35, Paul exhorts us to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, “It is more blessed to give than to receive”.

Pride versus humility

Pride is very prevalent in the fallen world and is a major hindrance to man’s relationship with God. It gives rise to all kinds of wrongdoing and failure. The Scriptures reveals that pride is a primary reason for the fall of Satan (Isa. 14:12-15, Ezek. 28:11-17). He tempted Eve in this area in the Garden of Eden and since then, he has been actively promoting pride in the hearts of men³.

In contrast, humility is a very precious quality in God’s kingdom. The absence or presence of humility, and the degree of its quality in us, have a significant bearing on the depth of our relationship with God. “God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (James 4:6). Therefore, if we desire to enter into deep fellowship with God and to enjoy His blessings, we need to nurture the spirit of humility in our lives.

Hypocrisy versus sincerity

Hypocrisy is related to pride. The Lord Jesus strongly condemned hypocrisy in the lives of the scribes and Pharisees. They did all their deeds to be noticed by men (Matt. 23:5). For appearance’s sake, they offered long prayers (Mark 12:40). Like whitewashed tombs, they appeared beautiful on the outside, but inside they were full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. Outwardly they appeared righteous to men, but inwardly they were full of hypocrisy and lawlessness (Matt. 23:27-28).

Hypocrisy was clearly manifested in the lives of the Pharisees, but it is also characteristic of the lives of many people in this fallen world. It exists even in believers, although it is often not obvious.

Hypocrisy should have no place in the lives of believers. Instead, there should be sincerity. In 1 Corinthians 5:8, Paul stresses the need for sincerity and truth when we partake of the Lord’s Supper. Sincerity and truth are qualities important to God, and

those who belong to His kingdom must possess them. Let us therefore come before the Lord with sincerity of heart and in a spirit of contriteness, mindful that we are frail human beings.

Self-confidence versus dependence on God

Also closely related to pride is the desire to exalt oneself and to project self-confidence. The world exalts self-confidence, which is closely linked to dependence on self. Both self-confidence and dependence on self are contrary to the spirit of God's kingdom.

The apostle Peter tells us in 1 Peter 4:10 that whatever gifts we have are from God and we are to employ them "in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God". In verse 11, he exhorts us to serve "by the strength which God supplies, so that in all things God may be glorified". Such an approach to life reflects the spirit of dependence on God and exaltation of God instead of the spirit of self-confidence and self-exaltation so common in this world and even in Christian service.

We need to constantly depend on God because we cannot live properly and meaningfully apart from Him. The Lord Jesus illustrates this truth in John 15 with the analogy of the vine and the branches. "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me" (v. 4). Just as the branch will wither if it is separated from the vine, we too will wither spiritually and morally unless we constantly abide in the Lord and depend on Him. This is how God has created us. He wants us to walk in fellowship with Him and in dependence on Him. As we do so, we can face the challenges and difficulties of life with confidence in the Lord. This is true confidence.

In Jeremiah 13, God drives home the need to depend on Him with the striking illustration of the linen waistband. The Lord instructed Jeremiah to get hold of a linen waistband and hide it in the crevice of a rock, and after many days, to take it from where he had hidden it. When Jeremiah did so, he saw that the waistband was ruined and totally worthless (vs. 4-7). In verse 11, we read:

Jeremiah 13:11

‘For as the waistband clings to the waist of a man, so I made the whole household of Israel and the whole household of Judah cling to Me,’ declares the Lord, ‘that they might be for Me a people, for renown, for praise, and for glory; but they did not listen’.

God intended Israel to cling to Him just as a waistband is meant to cling to the waist of a man. He desires the same of us. We have been created by God to “cling” to Him. If we depend on God and keep close to Him, we will grow towards full moral and spiritual stature in Him, and will enjoy a life of well-being and fruitfulness. If not, our lives will be ruined and totally worthless, just like the ruined linen waistband.

Appearance versus reality⁴

The world is characterised by preoccupation with the outward appearance of things, but the kingdom of God is characterised by ultimate reality. What counts in the kingdom of God is reality. The people of the world devote much time, effort and resources on their outward appearance in order to project a favourable impression. This has no ultimate value or meaning. Even Christians tend to be wrongly impressed by the outward appearance of things, whether it be in trying to understand a person and his conduct, in evaluating the effectiveness of service and contribution to God’s kingdom, or in perceiving and responding to situations.

It is vital that we learn to see beyond the outward appearance of things and discern reality as God sees it. This will enable us to respond to people and situations appropriately and effectively.

We also need to concentrate on the reality in our own lives. What is the meaning in our hearts? What is the quality of our relationship with God? What is the true value of our service and contribution to God’s kingdom?

The flesh versus the Spirit

The world is basically characterised by various negative traits of the flesh, leading to death, while the kingdom of God is characterised by the Spirit and what is positive, leading to life.

In 1 John 2:15, the apostle John warns us not to love the world nor the things in the world. He then goes on to explain in the next verse that this is because all that is in the world is characterised by “the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life”. On the other hand, the kingdom of God is “righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17).

In Romans 8 and in his epistle to the Galatians, Paul has much to say on this subject of the flesh and the Spirit. He dwells on the subject of walking according to the flesh versus walking according to the Spirit, sowing to the flesh and reaping death and sowing to the Spirit and reaping life.

It is important that we learn to deny the flesh and walk by the Spirit, so that the life of God may dwell in us richly.

God is working in this world and in the hearts of unbelievers

Some Christians may hold this notion: Non-believers, being outside the kingdom of God, do not experience God working in their lives. They are totally preoccupied with the things of the world, and their lives are fully characterised by the negative features of the world.

Such a notion is erroneous. The Scriptures clearly teaches that God is working in this fallen world, for He loves and cares for the people of this world. He lovingly provides for all, both believers and non-believers. The Lord Jesus teaches us in Matthew 5:45 that God causes “His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous”. The apostle Paul tells us in Acts 14:17 that God does not leave Himself without witness, in that He does good and gives rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying our hearts with food and gladness.

Besides providing for the people of the world, God is graciously and sovereignly working in the fallen world to restrain the full and free expression of evil and carnality. Although we witness

many acts of cruelty and terrible deeds of darkness in this world, the situation would have been far worse if God's restraining hand were withdrawn. Satan would then have full freedom to work in this fallen world and feed the flesh and exploit its weaknesses. Fallen men under his pervasive and overpowering influence would then express themselves in ways far more wicked and sinful than we could ever imagine.

Although the evil one is the "ruler of this world" and has great power, God is still the sovereign ruler of the universe. David declares, "The Lord has established His throne in the heavens, and His sovereignty rules over all" (Ps. 103:19). Satan cannot do whatever he likes. He can operate only within the boundaries determined by God. This reality is clearly revealed in the Book of Job (Job 1:12; 2:6).

More significantly, God seeks to work in the hearts of all men to draw them into the kingdom of God. John 3:16 tells us: "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life."

The "world" in John 3:16 refers to the people of the world whom God loves and does not have the same meaning as the "world" in James 4:4 and 1 John 2:15-17.

God clearly loves the people of the world and has demonstrated His great love by sending the Lord Jesus into this world to die for the sins of all mankind and opening the way of salvation for all who would repent and believe in the gospel.

God is actively seeking to promote positive values and to draw man to Himself and to the truth. The Lord Jesus declares that by His death on the Cross, He would draw all men to Himself.

John 12:32-33

32 "And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself."

33 But He was saying this to indicate the kind of death by which He was to die.

This area of truth is illustrated by the life of Cornelius before his conversion (Acts 10). Non-believers who respond positively to the Lord's working in their hearts progress towards truth and draw nearer to God and His kingdom. They may manifest some degree of kindness and love in their lives.

Although the Holy Spirit is working in the hearts of non-Christians, they will not benefit if they do not respond positively. In Acts 7:51, Stephen said to the Jews, "You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did." This verse shows us that the Holy Spirit works in the hearts of men, and that man can resist the work of the Holy Spirit in his heart.

Hebrews 3:7-11 and 4:2 reinforce this point. The Israelites had the good news preached to them. However, those who hardened their hearts were not helped. They could not enter His rest because of their negative response.

Concluding remarks

Just as the lives of non-believers are not fully characterised by the negative features of the world, it is also true that the lives of believers are not fully characterised by the values of the kingdom of God. We can be easily drawn into the world and our lives are often tainted by the world system.

If we want to identify with the Lord and deepen in our relationship with Him, we must learn to focus on what He focuses on: the invisible, spiritual, eternal things of God's kingdom and the development of the inner man in true spiritual life and power.

We must not be preoccupied with what the world is preoccupied with: the things that are visible, temporal, carnal and materialistic, such as earthly riches, success, power, status, outward show and achievement.

We must rid our lives of negative traits characteristic of the world and seek to nurture and manifest moral and spiritual qualities characteristic of God's kingdom:

- meekness and gentleness, rather than an aggressive, self-assertive spirit
- love, generosity, a spirit of giving and genuine concern for others, rather than self-centredness, greed, covetousness and grabbing what we desire without consideration for others
- a spirit of humility and sincerity without any trace of pride or hypocrisy
- continual dependence on God, exaltation of God in all things and all situations without any sense of self-confidence or desire to exalt or project ourselves.

We need to respond more deeply to God so that we may experience more fully the meaning of being in His kingdom. Going beyond mental acknowledgement, we need to set our hearts decisively on the eternal kingdom of God. Let us be determined to develop that which is truly important so that, as Paul puts it, “whether by life or by death”, God may be exalted. Let us be preoccupied with God’s kingdom, with the things of the Spirit that lead to life.

(Endnotes)

¹ The Scriptures does indicate that the Lord Jesus Christ will return to this earth in glory and will reign on earth during the Millennium. This would constitute another dimension of the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies of the Messianic King.

² How Satan tempted Eve and the issues involved are covered in detail in messages 2TS01-15 posted on the website www.godandtruth.com.

³ The subject of pride is covered in two messages 2TS05-06 posted on the website.

⁴ The subject of appearance and reality has been covered in great detail over many messages in the series *Appearance and Reality* and can be found on the website.

The Kingdom of God— of Primary Importance to the Lord

The kingdom of God is very much in God's heart and is central to the fulfilment of His purposes. It is a major theme in the Scriptures and in the teachings of the Lord Jesus.

In this message, we will reflect on some teachings of the Lord Jesus concerning the kingdom of God to understand how important the kingdom is to the Lord and to appreciate some key issues pertaining to this kingdom.

The kingdom of God—a central theme in the teachings of Christ

In Luke 4:43, the Lord Jesus said: "I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also, for I was sent for this purpose." This statement reveals that preaching the kingdom of God was a primary burden of His heart and an important aspect of His mission on earth.

The Lord Jesus preached the kingdom of God right from the beginning of His ministry. And throughout His ministry, He constantly spoke about the kingdom of God: what it is like, how one can have a part in it, how it grows, and what values, perspective, attitudes and conduct should characterise those in the kingdom of God. He continued to do so even after His resurrection and before His ascension. During that period of forty days, He spoke to His disciples "the things concerning the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3).

Conditions for entering God's kingdom

The Lord Jesus began His ministry in Galilee after His baptism and the temptations in the wilderness. Mark 1:14-15 records that He preached the gospel and said, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom

of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.” He calls us to repent and believe in the gospel as these are the conditions for entering His kingdom.

The Lord Jesus also spoke of the conditions for entering God’s kingdom in a conversation He had with Nicodemus the Pharisee, as recorded in John 3.

John 3:3-7

3 Jesus answered and said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

4 Nicodemus said to Him, “How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born, can he?”

5 Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.

6 “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

7 “Do not be amazed that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’

In verses 3 and 5, the Lord Jesus made two important statements to Nicodemus: “Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” and “Unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God”. Although Nicodemus was not asking the Lord Jesus specifically about seeing or entering the kingdom of God, the Lord saw it necessary to address this critical issue. Indeed, it is *the* critical issue of life for all fallen men.

The Lord Jesus emphasised the need for us to be born again, to be born of the Spirit, because the kingdom of God is a spiritual kingdom and we have to be born of the Spirit to enter it.

To live a life of true meaning and purpose, we must first enter the kingdom of God. This is the beginning of a new life in Christ, a life of moral and spiritual transformation and growth.

The Sermon on the Mount

The discourse of the Lord Jesus in Matthew 5 to 7, commonly

known as the Sermon on the Mount, reveals how we can experience a life of true blessedness. It is an outstanding sermon that contrasts the emphasis of God's kingdom with that of the world. This sermon helps us appreciate the kind of values, attitude, approach and conduct that are important to the Lord.

We ought to carefully study the profound truths taught in this discourse and assimilate them into our lives. In this message, I will only make brief references to this discourse.

Important qualities of heart and spirit

The Lord Jesus addresses the Sermon on the Mount to His disciples (Matt. 5:1-2). He began by teaching His disciples the important qualities that God's children should have. He says:

Matthew 5:3-10

3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

4 "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

5 "Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth.

6 "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

7 "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

8 "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

9 "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

10 "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

The qualities described here—being poor in spirit, being gentle, being merciful, being pure in heart, having a hunger for righteousness—are moral issues of the heart.

The scribes and Pharisees paid much attention to religious practices and scrupulously observed them. They offered long prayers and gave tithes dutifully. They spent many hours studying the Mosaic Law and were eager to teach others. Yet the Lord Jesus denounced them because they did all their deeds to be noticed by men. While they appeared outwardly righteous, inwardly

they were full of hypocrisy and lawlessness (Matt. 23: 5, 28). Let us heed the words of the Lord Jesus in Matthew 5:20: “Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Our righteousness must go beyond outward appearance; it must consist of the qualities of the heart and spirit, like those the Lord spoke about in Matthew 5:3-10. It is only when we have these qualities that we can bear good fruit in our lives. Let us therefore diligently develop these inner moral qualities in cooperation with the Holy Spirit, who seeks to help us in this direction.

The path of true discipleship

A similar passage in Luke 6 shows us that these inward moral qualities are manifested and developed in the path of true discipleship.

Luke 6:20-26

20 And turning His gaze toward His disciples, He began to say, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

21 “Blessed are you who hunger now, for you shall be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh.

22 “Blessed are you when men hate you, and ostracize you, and insult you, and scorn your name as evil, for the sake of the Son of Man.

23 “Be glad in that day and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven. For in the same way their fathers used to treat the prophets.

24 “But woe to you who are rich, for you are receiving your comfort in full.

25 “Woe to you who are well-fed now, for you shall be hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep.

26 “Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for their fathers used to treat the false prophets in the same way.

People would generally regard laughing, being rich, well-fed and well-spoken of as very desirable. Indeed, many would eagerly

seek such things. They would try to avoid having to weep, being poor, going hungry, or being ostracised. It would be hard for them to see such conditions as blessed. The words of the Lord Jesus in Luke 6 may therefore seem puzzling.

Why is it a blessing to weep, to be poor, hungry, hated and ostracised? Why is it woe to laugh, to be rich, well-fed and well-spoken of? What is the meaning of the words of the Lord Jesus?

As in the Sermon on the Mount, these words of the Lord Jesus are addressed to His disciples (v. 20).

Verse 22 helps us see that the Lord was teaching His disciples *the path of true discipleship*. The disciples would be blessed if the trials and difficulties they had to go through were *for the sake of the Son of Man*. It is not hunger or weeping or being ostracised in themselves that is blessed, but suffering for the Lord's sake, in the path of true discipleship.

The path of true discipleship often involves suffering and unpleasant experiences. But the Lord exhorts us to "be glad... and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven" (v. 23). The Lord Jesus is in effect saying: Do not be troubled. You may be poor and hungry, you may weep, and people may hate you, but if all these take place because you are true to Me and because you seek after righteousness, you are blessed.

However, if we are concerned about having a pleasant life, becoming wealthy and receiving the praises of men, we may compromise our faith and deviate from the path of discipleship. This is a serious matter. The Lord Jesus pronounces "woe to you" (vs. 24-26) to those who choose this path in life.

Seek first God's kingdom and His righteousness

In Matthew 6:33, the Lord Jesus teaches His disciples how they should live their lives:

Matthew 6:33

"But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

The Lord Jesus exhorts us to seek first God's kingdom and His righteousness. Seeking God's kingdom and His righteousness are of supreme importance and they are inextricably linked. We cannot be seeking His kingdom without at the same time desiring a life of righteousness. As Paul puts it, "the kingdom of God is righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 14:17).

As we seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, we will be seeking God Himself and developing our relationship with Him and with those who are in His kingdom. Deepening our relationship with God is the way to true righteousness and the development of our moral character. And as we develop the quality of righteousness and our moral character, it will in turn nurture the quality of our relationship with God and with the brethren. We must pay careful attention to all these inter-related aspects, for they are the primary issues in God's kingdom.

In Matthew 6:33, the Lord Jesus also addresses those who may be anxious over their earthly needs. He assures them that if they seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, "all these things will be added to you". Our heavenly Father knows what we need and we can trust Him to provide for us. When we earnestly seek Him, we can experience true blessedness. However, such a sense of assurance of God's provision would not be valid if we fail to truly seek first His kingdom and His righteousness. It would be a false sense of assurance.

Submission to God and meaning of "kingdom of God"

In Matthew 7:21, the Lord Jesus warns, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven." We cannot enter God's kingdom by mere profession of our lips. True obedience is what the Lord is looking for. If we acknowledge Him as "Lord", we must seek to obey Him and be true to Him. This does not mean that we will not fail or falter, but it does mean that we sincerely want to honour Him and submit to Him, even if that would result in our becoming poor materially or being ostracised.

Submission to the will of God, whatever it involves, is a key feature of what it means to be in God's kingdom. This point helps us understand the meaning of the expression "the kingdom of God".

The kingdom of God is a moral and spiritual kingdom. In this kingdom, God reigns as King, and all who are in His kingdom must submit to His righteous kingship. Submission to God's kingship begins while we are on earth, for all true Christians are already in God's kingdom. This attitude and posture of submission to God is voluntary and is a requirement for our entering God's kingdom and having a part in it. We enter His kingdom through repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. This involves turning away from a self-directed, self-seeking life to one of submission to His lordship.

As we submit to the will of the perfect God, we will experience a life of spiritual abundance and fruitfulness. It is a truly satisfying life, one that is according to His kind intention, which He purposed in Christ (Eph. 1:9). We can say that the heart of what God seeks to teach us in the Scriptures pertains to His kingdom, how we can have a part in it and how we ought to work out our lives in it, in submission to His reign.

Teaching the kingdom of God through parables

The Lord Jesus constantly preached and taught about the kingdom of God in various ways. He wants to impress upon us its significance so that we will know how we should live in this fallen world.

For example, He told many parables to help us understand various things pertaining to the kingdom of God. I will refer to some of these parables and make brief comments on them.

Acceptance into God's kingdom

We have seen that entering the kingdom of God is critical, but the Lord tells us that not everyone will be able to enter it. Only those who are accepted by the Lord may enter. The Lord Jesus told a parable in Matthew 22:2-14 to illustrate this point.

In this parable, the kingdom of heaven is compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son and invited many to attend.

In verses 11-13, we are told that a man who attended the feast “was not dressed in wedding clothes”. The king ordered his servants to bind this person and cast him out into the outer darkness. The rejection of this man who had no proper clothes is a sober reminder that unless we are “clothed” with Christ (Gal. 3:27), we will not be accepted into His kingdom. Entry into God’s kingdom is *on God’s terms*, not ours. We need to repent so that we may be forgiven of our sins and washed by the blood of the Lamb. We are acceptable to God only in Christ, who bore the punishment due to us.

There are reasons why various ones may have no place in God’s kingdom. One of the reasons is addressed in another parable recorded in Luke 14:16-24.

Luke 14:16-24

16 But He said to him, “A man was giving a big dinner, and he invited many;

17 and at the dinner hour he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, ‘Come; for everything is ready now.’

18 “But they all alike began to make excuses. The first one said to him, ‘I have bought a piece of land and I need to go out and look at it; please consider me excused.’

19 “Another one said, ‘I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please consider me excused.’

20 “Another one said, ‘I have married a wife, and for that reason I cannot come.’

21 “And the slave came back and reported this to his master. Then the head of the household became angry and said to his slave, ‘Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the city and bring in here the poor and crippled and blind and lame.’

22 “And the slave said, ‘Master, what you commanded has been done, and still there is room.’

23 “And the master said to the slave, ‘Go out into the highways and along the hedges, and compel them to come in, so that my house may be filled.

24 ‘For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste of my dinner.’”

Those invited made excuses not to go to the dinner. They said that they had other matters to attend to. One said he needed to look at his newly purchased property; another wanted to try out his oxen; and yet another had married a wife. Well, none of those invited, declared the man, shall taste of his dinner (v. 24).

While such earthly matters as buying a piece of land, trying out the oxen and getting married may be legitimate, the Lord is warning us through this parable that we may have no place in God's kingdom if we are *preoccupied* with the affairs of this life and fail to heed God's call.

This reminds us of the Lord's warning of the conditions that will prevail at His Coming again. Like in the days of Noah, so it will be in the days of the Son of Man (Luke 17:26). This is also true today. Many are entangled in the affairs of the world—buying, selling, marrying, being given in marriage—and fail to respond positively to God's call to enter His kingdom.

Be ready for the Second Coming of Christ

The Lord Jesus also told parables concerning readiness for His Second Coming.

In our time on earth, the most important thing is to enter God's kingdom and, having entered it, to be ready for the Second Coming of Christ. How ready we are for His Second Coming depends on how we live our lives now, and that in turn will affect our status and life in God's eternal kingdom.

In the parable of the ten virgins in Matthew 25:1-13, the Lord Jesus warns us of the need to *be alert and ready* for His Coming again. He begins the parable with these words:

Matthew 25:1-4

1 “Then the kingdom of heaven will be comparable to ten virgins, who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom.

2 “Five of them were foolish, and five were prudent.

3 “For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them,

4 but the prudent took oil in flasks along with their lamps.

The five wise virgins prepared themselves for the bridegroom while the foolish ones did not and were not allowed in, thus missing the wedding feast. Concerning His Second Coming, the Lord says, “Be on the alert then, for you do not know the day nor the hour” (v. 13). Thus, we ought to be ready at all times for the Lord’s Second Coming, and not be foolish like the five virgins who were caught unprepared and missed the important event of the wedding feast.

How to be ready for the Second Coming

The parable of the ten virgins is immediately followed by the parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14-30.

This parable tells of a man who, about to go on a journey, entrusted his possessions to his slaves until his return. He entrusted five talents to one slave, two talents to another and one to the third slave, each according to his ability. When he returned, he asked them to give him an account of what they did with the money entrusted to them. The one who was entrusted with five talents gained five more talents and was commended, “Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master” (v. 21). The one who received two talents gained two more, and was commended in like manner.

But the one who was entrusted with one talent said to the master, “I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you scattered no seed. And I was afraid, and went away and hid your talent in the ground. See, you have what is yours” (vs. 24-25). This was the slave who was unfaithful and lazy, a “worthless slave”. He was reprimanded and rejected by his master while those who were faithful and diligent were given more (vs. 26-30).

This parable conveys to us not only the importance of being ready for the Second Coming of Christ but also *how to be ready*. We can be ready by being good stewards of what the Lord has entrusted to us. While awaiting His return, we must be diligent and faithful in fulfilling the responsibilities God has entrusted to us.

Several parables in Matthew 13 illustrate issues pertinent to the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven. We will consider some of them.

How do we respond to the word of the kingdom?

The Lord Jesus tells the parable of the sower in Matthew 13:3–8 and explains its meaning in Matthew 13:18–23. This parable is also recorded in Luke 8:5–8, 11–15.

This parable tells of a man who sowed seeds on four different kinds of soil, each kind of soil producing a different result. Some seeds fell beside the road, some upon rocky places, some among the thorns, and some on the good soil (vs. 3–8).

The Lord Jesus explains that the seed represents the “word of the kingdom” (v. 19), that is, truth concerning the kingdom of God. The soil on which the seed was sown is the man hearing the word.

The soil beside the road represents the hearer who does not understand the word of the kingdom, and whatever he has heard is snatched away by the evil one (v. 19). The rocky places represent the hearer who responds enthusiastically but superficially. Because of the lack of depth in his response to the word of the kingdom, he falls away from the faith when things get difficult (vs. 20–21). The thorny ground represents the hearer whose life proves unfruitful because he is overcome by the worry of the world and the deceitfulness of riches (v. 22). Finally, the good soil speaks of one who listens attentively to the word of the kingdom, understands it and responds to it wholeheartedly. In him, the word of the kingdom bears bountiful fruit (v. 23). Luke 8:15 tells us that these are the ones who have heard the word in an *honest* and *good* heart and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance.

Though it is known as the parable of the sower, this parable can also be appropriately referred to as the parable of the four soils or four grounds because its emphasis is on the four different kinds of ground on which the seed fell. The thrust of this parable is *how we should respond* to the word of the kingdom.

When the word of God is communicated to us, how do we respond? Do we seek to understand it and respond to it deeply, thus bearing fruit, or do we respond to it only superficially, thus bringing no fruit to maturity? How we respond to the word of the kingdom has implications of eternal significance.¹

There will be a day of reckoning and differentiation

The Lord Jesus tells the parable of the wheat and the tares in Matthew 13:24-30 and explains its meaning in Matthew 13:37-43.

In this parable, He compares the kingdom of heaven to a man who sowed good seed of wheat. But the enemy came along and sowed tares among the wheat (vs. 24-25). Both were allowed to grow until harvest time (v. 30).

The Lord Jesus explains that the one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man, and the field is the world. The good seed refers to the sons of the kingdom and the tares to the sons of the evil one. The one who sows the tares is the devil (vs. 37-39).

This parable helps us to understand that in the present age, there are both sons of the kingdom of God and sons of the evil one. For now, the Lord allows both to carry on. But in the future, there will be *a day of reckoning and differentiation*. At that time, the tares will be bound up and burnt, that is, the sons of the evil one, who are stumbling blocks and who commit lawlessness, will be thrown into the furnace of fire (vs. 40-42). However, the wheat will be gathered into the barn, that is, the sons of the kingdom, the righteous ones, will have a meaningful part in God's heavenly kingdom and will "shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father" (v. 43).

To emphasise the importance of this reality, the Lord Jesus tells another parable in Matthew 13:47-50.

In this parable, He compares the kingdom of God to a "dragnet cast into the sea and gathering fish of every kind" (v. 47). The good fish are gathered into containers while the bad ones are thrown away. So it will be at the end of the age when the angels shall come and remove the wicked from among the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire.

During this age both the children of God and those who are not live together on this earth. But a time will come when a distinction will be made between those who are acceptable to God and those who are not; a separation will also take place between them. Whether we respond positively or negatively to the gospel of the kingdom of God is critical and has eternal implications.

Growth in the kingdom of God

Growth in the kingdom of God is another important issue that the Lord Jesus taught by way of parables. In Matthew 13:31-32, the kingdom is compared to a mustard seed. And in Mark 4:26-29, the Lord Jesus compares the kingdom of God to a man who casts seed upon the soil, but does not know how the seed sprouts and grows.

Both of these parables speak of growth in the kingdom of God. In the first parable, the mustard seed, though smaller than all the seeds sown, grows and becomes larger than all the garden plants. In the same way, what is happening in the kingdom may at times appear to be insignificant, but it may have the potential to grow considerably.

In the second parable, the man does not know how the seed sprouts and grows and produces a crop. Similarly, we may not always understand fully what exactly is happening and how growth takes place in the kingdom of God. Yet there are spiritual principles involved. It has to do with God at work and an important aspect has to do with how much freedom He has to work in and through us so that growth can occur. This in turn depends on the longing, direction and attitude of our heart.

The preciousness and supreme importance of the kingdom of God

Two short parables in Matthew 13:44-46 show us the attitude we should have towards the kingdom of God.

Matthew 13:44-46

44 “The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid again; and from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

45 “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking fine pearls,
46 and upon finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

The kingdom is likened to a treasure, which a man found in a field and, with great joy over it, sells all that he has and buys that field. It is also likened to a merchant who, likewise, sells all that he has to buy the pearl of great value.

These two parables are meant to impress upon us that the kingdom of God and the things concerning His kingdom are of such incomparable value and significance that we should give our all for it.

Do we have such an attitude? Is the kingdom of God so precious and important to us that we will seek it with all our hearts? The degree to which such a spirit and longing is present in us is of utmost importance. It will have a direct bearing on the outcome of our lives. It will determine how well we will grow and how much we can contribute to the advancement of God’s kingdom.

Knowing the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven—our great privilege

Having heard the Lord speaking in parables, His disciples asked Him, “Why do You speak to them in parables?” The Lord replied, “To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted” (Matt. 13:11). The Lord Jesus highlights the great privilege His disciples had to gain insight into the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew 13:13, 16-17

13 “Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.

16 “But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear.

17 “For truly I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

The mysteries of the kingdom were revealed to His disciples then, and have been revealed to us today through the Scriptures. But although revealed, they are not always understood. Non-believers will not be able to truly appreciate the mysteries of God's kingdom. It does not mean, however, that believers will automatically have an insight into the mysteries of the kingdom of God. Our attitude will affect our insight into the truth. The more serious we are in seeking to understand the mysteries of the kingdom, the more insight into the truth we will gain. The more superficial our life is, the less insight into the truth we will receive.

In one sense, we are even more privileged than the disciples to whom the Lord Jesus addressed those words, for we now have the whole of the Scriptures. It is God's desire that we gain insight into these deep things of His kingdom, things which the prophets and righteous men longed to understand, but were not granted the privilege in their time.

But how do we respond to the opportunity and privilege given to us? Do we earnestly seek to understand God's revelation in the Scriptures? Sadly, even though God intends that we gain deep insight into the mysteries of His kingdom, and has made every provision for us to do so, many of God's children remain in relative ignorance.

Having a forgiving spirit

The Lord Jesus also told parables to emphasise the importance of those in God's kingdom showing *love and kindness* to others.

When Peter asked Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" His reply was, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven" (Matt. 18:21-22).

The Lord Jesus then used a parable to illustrate the importance of having a forgiving spirit. He compares the kingdom of heaven to a king who released one of his slaves from a very huge debt. However, this same slave had no compassion on his fellow slave who owed him a much smaller amount of money and

had him imprisoned because he was unable to repay the debt. The response of the king is recorded in verses 32-34:

Matthew 18:32-34

32 “Then summoning him, his lord said to him, ‘You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.

33 ‘Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?’

34 “And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him.

The Lord Jesus ended the parable with these words: “My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart” (v. 35).

God has forgiven us much. Do we also have a forgiving spirit towards others? The principle of forgiveness reflected in this parable can apply to other areas like patience, kindness and grace. In spite of our weaknesses, failures and slowness to learn, God has been very patient towards us. Are we patient towards others? We have tasted of God’s bountiful grace and unceasing love towards us. Are we gracious and loving towards others? God expects us to have, in humility and gratitude to Him, such an attitude towards others, including those who may have wronged or hurt us. Failure in these areas reflects our inward state and would have adverse effects on our own relationship with God.

Correct attitude and approach to service

In another parable, Matthew 20:1-16, the Lord Jesus illustrates the correct attitude and approach to service that those in His kingdom should have.

This parable likens the kingdom of heaven to a landowner who hired labourers at different times of the day for his vineyard. Early in the morning, he agreed with a group of labourers to pay them a denarius for the day’s work. He went out again at different times of the day and hired other groups of workers for his vineyard. At the end of the day, the landowner instructed his foreman to pay all the labourers, beginning with the last group (vs. 1-8).

Those who were hired much later in the day received a denarius each. When the turn came for those hired first to be paid, they thought that they would receive more; but they also received a denarius each. Unhappy, they grumbled at the landowner, saying, “These last men have only worked one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the scorching heat of the day.” But he reasoned with one of them, “Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go, but I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous?” (vs. 9-15).

This parable highlights to us the importance of our attitude and the way we approach service, our expectations and how we regard others. Note that those who were hired first were not happy and they grumbled because they expected to be rewarded more than those who were hired last.

What about us? What is our attitude when we serve God? Is our eye envious because the Lord is generous towards others? We should not begrudge the Lord’s generosity towards others, but learn to take our proper place in His kingdom. It is God’s prerogative to reward us and treat us as He sees fit, for it is lawful for Him to do what He wishes with what is His own (v. 15).

At the same time we know that God does not act arbitrarily. All His actions reflect His perfect character and attributes, including His perfect wisdom and love.

It is important for us to grow and fare well in God’s kingdom. *We must not assume all is well with us just because we have been Christians for many years and have laboured long and done many things in the Lord’s vineyard.* God is deeply concerned about our character and the attitude with which we seek to serve Him. Let us therefore ensure that we are faring well and that He is pleased with us in these areas.

Identifying with the heart of the Lord

From the many scriptural passages referred to in this message, we can see that the teaching and ministry of the Lord Jesus centred

on the kingdom of God. That was His primary concern when He came to earth. His death on the cross, which was the climax of His life and ministry, is vitally related to this primary concern in His heart. So deep was His concern for the kingdom of God that even after His resurrection, He continued speaking to His disciples about it.

Acts 1:3

To these He also presented Himself alive after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God.

As the kingdom of God is of primary significance to the Lord, it should also be of similar significance to us. The kingdom of God must be as priceless and important to us as the pearl of great value was to the merchant such that we would devote our whole life to it and all that pertains to it. Is this true of your life?

Christ is King in the kingdom of God; He came into this world to testify to the truth. Those who are of the truth hear His voice (John 18:37). Let us be those who are of the truth. Let us hear the voice of the King and follow Him.

But how can we do so when we are living in a fallen world? In the next message, we shall look at how we should live our lives on earth as citizens of heaven, mindful of the fact that we are in the kingdom of God and in the fallen world at the same time.

(Endnote)

¹ The parable of the sower is considered in greater detail in the messages on *Good Hearers* (AR91-94), which can be found on the website www.godandtruth.com.

Being in the Kingdom of God and in the Fallen World

As children of God and disciples of Christ, it is important that we gain insight and develop deep convictions concerning the kingdom of God so that we can contribute wholesomely and effectively to the building of His kingdom.

In this message, we will continue with important aspects of the kingdom of God and appreciate how, as citizens of heaven, we can live our lives meaningfully in this fallen world.

We will see that the kingdom of God has a present and a future dimension and is vitally related to the Lord Jesus Christ and His church. We will reflect on the enduring significance of the kingdom of God and consider how we can fulfil our legitimate responsibilities on earth where the spirit of the world is pervasive.

The kingdom of God: Present or future?

There are differing views concerning whether the kingdom of God is of the future or of the present. We will not go into the details of the different views and the arguments put forward. Instead, we will concentrate on the biblical position.

A present reality

Some believers associate the kingdom of God with the future. However, the Scriptures teaches that the kingdom of God is not just of the future, but is a present reality.

In reply to the question of the Pharisees regarding when the kingdom of God was coming, the Lord Jesus declared, “For behold, the kingdom of God is in your midst” (Luke 17:20-21).

In Matthew 12:28, the Lord Jesus says: “But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.” During His ministry on earth, the Lord Jesus

did cast out demons by the Spirit of God. So the kingdom of God has “come upon” us. The coming of the kingdom of God is closely associated with the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus, which includes casting out demons and performing miracles. These testify to the realities of the kingdom of God.

Other passages also point to the kingdom of God being a present reality. In John 3:3-5, the Lord Jesus told Nicodemus that a person has to be “born again” or “born of the Spirit” to enter the kingdom of God. The words of the Lord Jesus indicate that the kingdom of God is a present reality, for we can be “born again” and enter the kingdom of God during our lifetime on earth. This takes place when we believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and receive Him into our hearts (John 1:12-13).

A future dimension

The Scriptures also teaches that there is a future dimension to the kingdom of God. This comes through clearly when we read Ephesians 5:5 together with 1 Peter 1:3-4. Ephesians 5:5 warns that no immoral or impure person “has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God” and 1 Peter 1:3-4 assures us that this inheritance “which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away” is “reserved in heaven” for those born again to the living hope.

1 Peter 1:3-4

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born
again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ
from the dead,

4 to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled
and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you,

All true believers, born again to this living hope, can look forward to the future, to eternity, where much more is in store for those who love God.

In John 14, the Lord Jesus told His disciples that He would be preparing a place in His Father’s house for them that they

may be with Him in eternity. He also told them that He would come again and receive them to Himself.

John 14:1-3

1 “Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me.

2 “In My Father’s house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you.

3 “If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also.

Thus, we see that there is both a present and a future dimension to the kingdom of God. While it is true that the kingdom of God is already here, the full and wondrous manifestation of the glory of Christ and His kingdom is yet to be.

Relationship between the kingdom of God, the person and work of the Lord Jesus, and the church

The kingdom of God, the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the church are key issues pertaining to the fulfilment of God’s purposes, and there is a close relationship between them. We will now consider this vital relationship.

By His death on the cross, the Lord Jesus bore our sins and the punishment due to us. Through repentance and faith in Him, our sins are forgiven and we are reconciled to God. We are born of the Spirit and we enter God’s kingdom. We become God’s children, spiritually joined to the risen Christ and baptised into the body of Christ, the church. And to the church Christ entrusts the responsibility of advancing God’s kingdom.

Paul teaches in Colossians 1:13 that all true believers have been rescued from the domain of darkness and transferred to the kingdom of His beloved Son. He also teaches us in 1 Corinthians 12:13 that “by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body”. In Ephesians 1:22-23, he tells us that “one body” is the body of Christ, the church, and that Christ is the Head of the church.

Ephesians 1:22-23

22 And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church,
23 which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

All true believers are part of the church. The church is not a building, but a spiritual body, the body of Christ. If we have indeed been born of the Spirit, we would have been baptised by the Spirit into the body of Christ, and we would have become a part of the church, of which Christ is the Head.

The Lord Jesus seeks to build His kingdom, and has entrusted to the church the immense privilege and responsibility of advancing His kingdom under His headship. Just as the Lord Jesus Himself preached the kingdom of God during His earthly ministry, He also gives instructions to His disciples to proclaim it.

The Lord Jesus teaches His disciples to pray to the Father: "Our Father who is in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:9,10). Teaching His disciples to pray in this manner reveals the deep concern in His heart for the advancement of God's kingdom and for God's name to be honoured and for His will to be done. He is seeking to transmit this primary concern in His heart to His disciples. A major aspect of this part of the pattern prayer is the growth of the church both in number and quality. This would mean more and more people entering God's kingdom, and those who are in His kingdom becoming increasingly submitted to Him. There will be an increasing manifestation of God's power and glory, and the retreat of the powers of darkness. This should be the earnest longing and prayer of God's people and what we should be committed to.

But how does the Lord want us to contribute to the advancement of His kingdom? What are the means by which He desires us to accomplish this objective? What are the spiritual principles that should guide us in our contribution?

Contributing to the advancement of God's kingdom

Let us look at some passages in the Scriptures to understand how

the Lord wants His disciples to advance His kingdom.

During His ministry on earth, the Lord Jesus sent out the twelve apostles with the instruction to “proclaim the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:2). Likewise, when He sent out the seventy, He instructed them to proclaim: “The kingdom of God has come near to you” (Luke 10:9).

In what is commonly known as “The Great Commission”, He instructed His disciples: “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you...” (Matt. 28:19-20).

Before His ascension, He told His disciples: “... you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

In obedience to the Lord’s instruction, the believers who “had been scattered went about preaching the word”. For example, Philip was in Samaria “proclaiming Christ” (Acts 8:4-5). He preached “the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ...” and those who believed were baptised (Acts 8:12).

“Preaching the word”, “proclaiming Christ” and preaching the “good news of the kingdom” refer to the same thing—preaching the good news of what God has done and provided for us in and through the Lord Jesus Christ. It involves helping non-believers enter the kingdom of God.

However, the Lord’s instruction to make disciples of all nations is not limited to helping non-believers enter the kingdom of God. It also includes teaching believers to observe all that He has commanded (Matt. 28:20). This point is crucial because believers can grow only if they know the Lord’s teachings and obey them.

The heart of the message to be proclaimed is the Lord Jesus—what He has done, how He bore our sins and how, through Him, we can enter God’s kingdom and grow spiritually. The Cross opens the way for all to have a meaningful part in God’s

kingdom. Not only can we have our sins forgiven, we can also have fullness of life in Christ. In Him, we have the potential to rise to the highest level of moral and spiritual development and stature, and we can enter into the deepest fellowship with God and with one another.

When the apostle Paul preached “Christ crucified” and wrote that he “determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified” (1 Cor. 1:23; 2:2), he was emphasising the centrality of Christ in God’s purposes. The risen Christ and what was accomplished at the Cross are crucial for our moral and spiritual development in His kingdom.

Importance of healthy church life

As Christ has entrusted the advancement of His kingdom to the church, it is imperative that the life of the church be healthy. The church must function effectively, be properly built up and submitted to the lordship of Christ.

In Ephesians 4:11-16, Paul tells us the importance of unity in the body of Christ and how the church can be meaningfully and effectively built up.

Ephesians 4:11-16

11 And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers,

12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ;

13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.

14 As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming;

15 but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ,

16 from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.

The building up of the body of Christ has two major aspects. One concerns the quality of the lives of believers; the other concerns the number of believers.

Too often, believers think of “The Great Commission” only in terms of evangelism, that is, adding numbers to the kingdom. While this is important, growing in quality and unto maturity is just as important, if not more so. Paul stresses this when he says in verse 13: “until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ”.

Believers need to grow to be a “mature man”. If we are unstable and our lives lack spiritual quality, we will not be in a position to properly serve the Lord. Instead, we will be easily “tossed here and there” like children (v. 14). When the lives of believers grow in quality, *that in itself* constitutes advancement of God’s kingdom. It is also the basis for the increase in numbers.

Verse 15 emphasises that we are to grow up in all aspects *into Him*. To develop wholesomely in every aspect, we need to know the Lord Jesus Christ intimately. We need to abide in Him and He in us.

Every member of the body of Christ is important to Him, and each member should be functioning properly. Paul elaborates on this truth in 1 Corinthians 12 to 14. It is this proper functioning of each individual part that “causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love” (Eph. 4:16). This growth encompasses both spiritual quality and increase in numbers.

Healthy church life can take place only when the church is submitted to the lordship of Christ, when it subjects itself to the authority of God and His revelation in the Scriptures, and when it is being empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Christ, the church and the fulfilment of God’s eternal purpose

Let us consider a passage in Ephesians that clearly shows the vital role of the church in the fulfilment of God’s eternal purpose.

Ephesians 3:8-11

8 To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ,
 9 and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things;
 10 so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places.
 11 This was in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord,

Verses 10 and 11 reveal that it is in accordance with God's eternal purpose for His manifold wisdom to be made known *through the church* to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places.

We can see from these verses that the church plays a major part in the fulfilment of God's eternal purpose. However, it is only when church life is worked out in the way the Lord desires that the wisdom of God in its many different facets will be manifested.

Furthermore, verse 11 reveals that God's eternal purpose is carried out *in the Lord Jesus*. It is carried out through His death, resurrection, ascension and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and worked out in the body of Christ under His lordship. Thus it is vital that church life be healthy.

"I will build My church"

The Lord Jesus says: "I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it" (Matt. 16:18). The Lord Jesus Himself will build His church, which is the spiritual body of believers with Christ as Head. He will do so through His people, and He will enable them. He will not leave them to struggle on their own. The church has a central role in the advancement of God's kingdom, and He will ensure that the church will never be destroyed.

As we seek to serve the Lord, *our ultimate goal must be the building of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ and the advancement*

of God's kingdom, not the advancement of a particular group or organisation. We should not harbour any personal ambition or seek to further our personal interests or that of anyone else, or do anything contrary to the ultimate goal.

The culmination

The Lord Jesus proclaimed and taught the kingdom of God when He was on earth and since then, He has been building it up. And the building of God's kingdom will culminate in the kingdom being handed over to God the Father. The apostle Paul reveals this in 1 Corinthians 15:24-28 where he speaks of the things that will happen after the Lord Jesus comes again:

1 Corinthians 15:24-28

24 then comes the end, when He hands over the kingdom to the God and Father, when He has abolished all rule and all authority and power.

25 For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet.

26 The last enemy that will be abolished is death.

27 For He has put all things in subjection under His feet. But when He says, "All things are put in subjection," it is evident that He is excepted who put all things in subjection to Him.

28 When all things are subjected to Him, then the Son Himself also will be subjected to the One who subjected all things to Him, so that God may be all in all.

Advancing the spiritual kingdom by spiritual means

It is crucial for us to recognise that God's kingdom is a *spiritual* kingdom. It is the kingdom *of God*. *It cannot, therefore, be served or advanced by worldly wisdom, fleshly energy or natural talents.*

The apostle Paul was a capable, learned and talented person, but he did not rely on his natural capabilities to advance God's kingdom. He testified to the church at Corinth that he did not use human wisdom or persuasiveness in his ministry. Instead, he served with the enabling of the Holy Spirit, and his ministry centred on the Lord Jesus Christ and what was accomplished at the Cross.

1 Corinthians 2:1-5

1 And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God.

2 For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.

3 I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling,

4 and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power,

5 so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.

We may be naturally very talented and capable. But these natural talents and capabilities in themselves cannot contribute to God's kingdom. There may be apparent results, but there will never be true spiritual advancement. Whatever is natural, of the flesh and of the world, cannot contribute to the spiritual kingdom of God. It will instead hinder its advancement and bring about all kinds of complications. *The spiritual kingdom of God can only be advanced by spiritual means, according to the guidance and ways of God and in the power of the Holy Spirit.* This is clear from the instruction of the Lord Jesus to His disciples to wait in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit came upon them (Luke 24:49). We must therefore be careful how we seek to serve God.

In Christian service, there is often a mixture: a certain degree of love for the Lord and dependence on Him and at the same time the presence of fleshly motivation like self-exaltation and pride, and the dependence on natural wisdom and the ways of the world. Let us, with the Lord's help, decisively put to death the ways of the flesh and learn more and more to *worship and serve God in all purity of heart and total dependence on Him.*

We shall now reflect on the enduring significance of the kingdom of God and its implications.

The kingdom of God: An enduring reality

The kingdom of God is incorporeal, not of the physical or material world, but of the spiritual realm. It is invisible; we cannot see it with our physical eyes. It is intangible; we cannot touch it.

As human beings, we tend to be more conscious of what we can see, touch, taste, hear or smell. We are easily affected by our physical senses and are often preoccupied with them. The kingdom of God, however, does not have such features that our five physical senses can detect. Yet it exists, and is an enduring reality.

It is like many important things in life that we cannot touch and see, but which are nevertheless very real, for example, love and quality of relationships. Character too is an extremely important aspect of life that we cannot touch or see at the physical level.

The kingdom of God is not only real, it will endure and is what really matters. In contrast, all that is of this fallen world and which is not of God will be destroyed. 2 Peter 3:10-13 declares that the earth and the works in it will be burned up.

This is a fundamental truth that we must constantly bear in mind: *Only what is of the kingdom of God will endure in the age to come and to eternity.*

As we live on earth, we must constantly reflect on the truths and implications of the passage in Hebrews 12:22-29.

Hebrews 12:22-29

22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels,
23 to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect,
24 and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel.
25 See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking. For if those did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape who turn away from Him who warns from heaven.

26 And His voice shook the earth then, but now He has promised, saying, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth, but also the heaven.”

27 This expression, “Yet once more,” denotes the removing of those things which can be shaken, as of created things, so that those things which cannot be shaken may remain.

28 Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to

God an acceptable service with reverence and awe;

29 for our God is a consuming fire.

The “Mount Zion” in verse 22 does not refer to the physical Mount Zion in Israel. The writer is referring to the spiritual kingdom of God. In verses 22 and 23, he says that believers have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the *living God*, the *heavenly Jerusalem*, and to myriads of *angels*, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in *heaven*, and to *God*. The writer is in effect saying, “You have come to the kingdom of God.”

“You have come” can be translated as “you have drawn near” or “you have arrived at”. Have we just drawn near to “Mount Zion” because it is still in the future or have we actually arrived at “Mount Zion”, a present reality? It seems meaningful to incorporate both aspects here, as both are relevant. We have seen earlier that the kingdom of God is a present reality; we have not only drawn near to it, but have arrived at or entered it. It also has a future dimension that we can look forward to.

Verses 26 and 27 are clear on this point that while all other created things will be shaken or will perish, what is of the kingdom of God will abide forever. Here, the writer to the Hebrews declares that the Lord will “shake not only the earth but also the heaven” (v. 26), and those things which can be shaken will be removed, while those things which cannot be shaken will remain (v. 27).

Verse 28 assures us that “we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken”. If we are born of the Spirit, we have a part in this unshakeable, eternal kingdom.

While encouraging us with this truth, the writer to the Hebrews also exhorts us to show gratitude and “offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire” (vs. 28-29).

Let us therefore serve in a manner acceptable to the holy God, truly contributing to the unshakeable, abiding kingdom of God. What is of the flesh will not abide, neither will it contribute to the eternal kingdom of God.

Concentrating on God’s kingdom and its advancement

As the kingdom of God is an enduring reality, God’s children must concentrate on His kingdom and the things of His kingdom rather than on the things of this world.

The spirit of “Your kingdom come” expressed in the pattern prayer the Lord Jesus teaches us must be the consuming passion of our hearts during our time on earth.

It is helpful for us to constantly check ourselves to see if our lives are consistent with this spirit. Because we are living in a fallen world, it is easy for us to deviate from such a posture and be absorbed in the visible and temporal things of the world and be entangled by them.

In 1 Corinthians 7, the apostle Paul expresses beautifully the spirit with which we should live our lives on earth. We will concentrate on verses 29-31.

1 Corinthians 7:29-31

29 But this I say, brethren, the time has been shortened, so that from now on those who have wives should be as though they had none;

30 and those who weep, as though they did not weep; and those who rejoice, as though they did not rejoice; and those who buy, as though they did not possess;

31 and those who use the world, as though they did not make full use of it; for the form of this world is passing away.

When the apostle Paul says: “those who have wives should be as though they had none” (v. 29), he is not encouraging us to

neglect our responsibilities in marriage or to ignore our spouses. Rather, he is addressing the importance of maintaining “undistracted devotion to the Lord” (v. 35). He refers to various areas that can become a distraction. An example is marriage, where the husband or wife may be preoccupied with trying to please his or her spouse.

Likewise, in referring to weeping, rejoicing, and buying, he is not saying that there is no place for such emotions and activities. He is stressing the importance of living by the spirit of “those who buy, as though they did not possess; and those who use the world, as though they did not make full use of it” (vs. 30-31).

As we live in this world, there are inevitably various things we have to be involved in. For instance, there is a proper place for buying things in this world and for using them. Yet, we should not be taken up with the issue of possessions. This is the meaning of Paul’s words, “those who buy, as though they did not possess” (v. 30).

Similarly, when Paul says: “use the world as though they did not make full use of it”, he does not mean that we do not make good use of the things we have. What he means is that we should not be preoccupied with the material things, our worldly possessions, and the visible and temporal realm, and as a result fail to maintain a healthy spirit of concentration on the kingdom of God.

All that we do in this world ought to be done from the perspective of God’s kingdom and its advancement. This includes our approach to life, our involvement in the affairs of this life, and our use of the things of this world.

Are we able to maintain the freedom in spirit to concentrate on our walk with God and be sensitive and submitted to what He requires of us, even while we are involved in various legitimate activities and responsibilities in this world?

In verse 35, Paul explains his intentions in giving the various exhortations. He writes, “This I say for your own benefit; not to put a restraint upon you, but to promote what is appropriate and to secure undistracted devotion to the Lord.”

His intention is not to deprive or restrain us. Rather, it is for our benefit—to promote what is seemly, good and appropriate, what is pleasing to the Lord. He wants to help us live without

distraction and be fully devoted to the Lord. He wants to help us ensure that we concentrate on God and His kingdom because God and His kingdom are what truly matter. If we understand this, we should appreciate that though the path of true discipleship may at times appear to be one of deprivation, in reality it is not. From the perspective of God's kingdom, from the eternal perspective, it is a life of true abundance, fruitfulness and fulfilment.

The apostle John directs us to the true perspective of life in 1 John 2:17: "The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever." He also warns us against loving the world (v. 15). In verse 16, he says: "For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world." This is what we must be wary of and keep away from. We must instead turn our attention to doing the will of God because those who do so will abide forever.

This principle of having a right perspective in life must pervade our being and dominate our thoughts so that we constantly live with the spirit of "Your kingdom come". We need to nurture this spirit to an ever-increasing depth of quality, purity, meaning and consistency. We may be gripped by this truth when we first hear it, but as we go on in life, we may lose sight of it. It is very easy, in the midst of everyday life, to fail to maintain this perspective and approach.

How much does God's kingdom mean to us? Is it as valuable to us as the pearl of great value is to the merchant, or the treasure in the field is to the finder, that he sold all he had in order to buy it (Matt. 13:44-46)? This is the kind of attitude the Lord wants us to have. It should be all that matters to us.

Legitimate responsibilities in this world

Although we must concentrate on God's kingdom and not be distracted by or be absorbed in the things of this world, we must also recognise that we are living in this world, in this present age. We are not living in heaven yet. Therefore, it is important for us to have a wholesome understanding of how we should live in the kingdom of God and in the fallen world at the same time.

When believers read Galatians 1:4, that the Lord Jesus “gave Himself for our sins so that He might rescue us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father”, some may wonder whether God desires us to leave this present world because the world is evil. This is not the teaching of the Scriptures and not what Paul is communicating here. Rather, Paul is teaching the truth that the death of the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross not only provides the way for our sins to be forgiven, but also delivers us and enables us to live a life of freedom from sin. Even though we were previously living in sin and under bondage to the evil one, we need not be gripped by sin or remain in bondage any longer.

Note that Paul says, “that He might rescue us”. This tells us that we are not automatically delivered because of Christ’s death. The path of freedom is offered, we *can* be delivered, but we need to cooperate with the Lord.

Sanctified in the truth

The Lord Jesus wants us to live well for Him in this present evil age. This is made clear to us in His prayer to God the Father recorded in John 17:

John 17:15-18

15 “I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one.

16 “They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.

17 “Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth.

18 “As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world.

We see that it is not the Lord’s intention that we be taken out of this world. He said pointedly that He has sent us into the world. We are to live in this world, but not in the same manner as the people of the world.

In verse 16, the Lord says: “They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.” Even though the Lord Jesus lived in this world, He was not of the world. Similarly, as God’s children, we are also not of this world. Therefore, we must not be identified with

the spirit and trend of the world.

But how can we be in this world and yet not live like the people of the world? The Lord Jesus provides the answer in verse 17. He asks God the Father to “sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth”. To be sanctified in the truth means knowing and walking in truth, according to God’s guidance and His revelation in the Scriptures. We need to be sanctified in the truth so that we can live an overcoming life. Although this is not easy, we have the assurance of God’s help. The Lord Jesus has asked the Father to keep us from the destructive influence of the evil one (v. 15).

Having entered the kingdom of God, we are citizens of heaven (Phil. 3:20). But we are still living on earth. We must be mindful of both of these aspects: we are citizens of heaven but we also live for a brief period of time on earth, with a purpose and a mission. We have a heavenly vision, a spiritual purpose and mission, but we also have legitimate earthly responsibilities to fulfil. And the way we live on earth and fulfil our earthly responsibilities must be based on the values, perspective, approach and priorities of God’s kingdom.

We are “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world”, the Lord Jesus tells us in Matthew 5:13-16. How can we be true to our calling? We can do so by conducting ourselves properly and responsibly in the home, in the workplace and society, and at the same time maintaining the values and perspective that befit those who belong to God’s kingdom. When we live in this way, we will be able to testify effectively, by our lives and our words, to the truth and to God’s kingdom.

We should not live like worldly people, as if all that matters is this world and the visible realm. As God’s children, we should live differently—with a heavenly vision. Such a life testifies to the people of the world that what they are so absorbed in are, in reality, unimportant, and can actually be harmful.

This is how the apostle Paul encourages us to live in Philippians 2:15—by proving ourselves to be “blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the

world". Although it is not easy, we should strive to live in this way, shining as lights in this dark and fallen world, testifying to the truth.

May not be easy to know what is legitimate and appropriate

It can be difficult to know where to draw the line between what is legitimate and appropriate, and what is undesirable. For example, in the work context, there is a proper place for upgrading our skills, improving our capabilities and increasing our performance efficiency. There is also a proper place for promotion and advancement in our careers. So when do these become worldly and out of place for the believer? How do we distinguish between fulfilling our responsibilities well and being worldly?

We are subjected to many worldly influences in our place of work and what is "worldly" can very easily creep into our lives and mould our attitudes and affect our motivation. It is easy to get caught up with the things of the world. In many instances, our initial aspirations to perform responsibly in our work and be a good testimony for the Lord gradually become contaminated with an unhealthy desire for worldly recognition, status and success. We may rationalise our being absorbed in our work and career as normal and the responsible thing to do, when in reality our motivation has become tainted by worldly ambitions and considerations.

The critical issue has to do with the realities within our hearts. Are our hearts and minds preoccupied with God and His kingdom, or have we become distracted? Are our hearts attracted by the things of the world? Are we being drawn into the world? It is not easy to maintain the correct posture of purity of heart while living on this earth. Hence, it is helpful for us to ponder how we can live in this fallen world and yet not be negatively influenced by the world.

Avoiding the extremes; keeping a healthy balance

As we seek to live as God's children on this earth, we have to avoid two extremes. One is the preoccupation with the affairs of this life;

the other is living as if we are only in the kingdom of God.

Some Christians are very taken up with the affairs of this life. They are preoccupied with succeeding in their careers, building a thriving business, providing material comfort for themselves and their family, and keeping up with their neighbours. In the pursuit of these things, they neglect their faith and the nurturing of their relationship with the Lord. They live as though life on earth is all that matters. Little attention is given to the issues of eternity.

In 2 Timothy 2:4, the apostle Paul states: “No soldier in active service entangles himself in the affairs of everyday life, so that he may please the one who enlisted him as a soldier.” Here, Paul warns us against being entangled, absorbed and preoccupied with the affairs of this life such that we are no longer living in a manner consistent with being citizens of heaven. Instead of pleasing the Lord who has called us into His kingdom, we develop, as the apostle James puts it, “friendship with the world” (James 4:4). Instead of being salt and light influencing the world with positive values, we are being influenced by the values and perspective of the world.

At the other end of the extreme, there are Christians who live as if they are only in the kingdom of God. They are careless about their earthly responsibilities. They are irresponsible, unmotivated and sloppy in the workplace. They neglect family relationships, their physical well-being as well as that of their loved ones. They devote all their time and energy on “Christian activities”, thinking that as citizens of heaven, this is how they will please God.

But we are not yet in heaven and we must not live as if we are. We are still living in this fallen world. We need to eat, sleep, take care of our health and also learn to understand and interact with people in various contexts. We must not neglect legitimate earthly responsibilities, including providing for the family and fulfilling our responsibilities in the workplace.

There are things we engage in while living in this world which are not necessary if we are already in heaven. For example, we need to have some awareness of what is happening in the world so that

we can be more effective in serving God and in fulfilling our responsibilities on earth. However, what knowledge we should acquire and how much of it will vary for different people. What is appropriate for one is not necessarily helpful for another. If we try to understand too many things or things not appropriate for us, we may not only be wasting our time, but we may become distracted and our faith adversely affected.

This can also apply to other aspects like acquiring skills and developing our capabilities and talents. What and how much is appropriate for us would depend on God's calling for our lives, our responsibilities in God's kingdom, our responsibilities in society, the nature of our work, what we can cope with, and what would be helpful. It would also depend on the stage of our development. In essence, we need to prayerfully consider what is God's will for us.

Therefore, though we are citizens of heaven, we still need to live responsibly in this world, exercising wise stewardship of the time, energy and resources the Lord has entrusted to us. And we need to do so with a deep consciousness of the spiritual and eternal dimensions, in accordance with biblical values and priorities. This heavenly vision must never dim. Otherwise our faith will slowly but surely be weakened, and we will begin to think and act more and more like the people of the world.

The life of Daniel is a good illustration of how one can keep a healthy balance between living responsibly in this world and living wholly for the Lord. In his youth, Daniel was brought into exile in Babylon, a pagan land. But he was determined to be faithful to the Lord and not to defile himself (Dan. 1:8). Although he entered the king's personal service, and subsequently held a high position, he did not allow the world's glory or the values of a pagan land to draw his heart away from God. His enemies could not find any ground to accuse him because he was "faithful, and no negligence or corruption was to be found in him" (Dan. 6:1-4). Despite the weight of the earthly responsibilities he had to fulfil, and the strong and pervasive worldly influences he was subjected to, Daniel maintained a faithful walk with God and kept his heart pure. God was with him and

highly esteemed him (Dan. 10:11, 19). His life of faithfulness to God was a powerful testimony in the pagan land.

The importance of being vigilant in the fallen world

With its many enticing temptations, the attractions of this fallen world can be very strong indeed. What is of the world can grip us to the point where we find them irresistible. Many who take to cigarettes, alcohol, drugs or gambling soon find themselves addicted. Even when they realise their damaging effects and want to abstain from them, they may feel powerless to do so. Likewise, we can become addicted to the pursuit of material wealth, recognition and approval from men, and various forms of worldly pleasures. Even watching television programmes and videos, and playing computer games and surfing the Internet, can become an addiction.

Let us look at some verses on this subject.

Titus 2:11-12

11 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men,

12 instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age,

Verse 12 warns us about ungodliness and worldly desires and contrasts them with living “sensibly, righteously and godly in this present age”. God has saved us, and He expects us to deny worldly desires and live righteously in this present evil age. This is an important implication of being saved.

The apostle James explains to us that helping those in distress is an example of the meaningful things God wants us to be involved in while on earth. However, in all that we are involved in, we must exercise care to keep ourselves unstained by the world.

James 1:27

Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

Keeping ourselves unstained by the world is a very important principle to live by because of the many temptations and pitfalls in this world. Behind all these is the evil one at work, seeking to lure us, tempt us and bring us into bondage.

As we have seen in 2 Timothy 2:4, Paul tells us that we are soldiers of the Lord, and He is the one who has enlisted us. So we must concentrate on being faithful and pleasing to Him. There is certainly a place for minding the affairs of everyday life; but as we do so, we must be careful not to become entangled in them. Let us keep our focus on God and His kingdom.

I wish now to highlight an important area of truth that we need to pay attention to while living in this fallen world—the presence of the spirit of the world and its adverse effects on us.

The spirit of the world and its negative influence¹

God has given us His Holy Spirit to guide, empower and help us in the things of God and to influence us in a positive direction. But there is the presence of a negative spiritual dimension in the fallen world that draws us in the opposite direction, contrary to the ways of God. I am using the expression “the spirit of the world” to refer to this negative spiritual presence. It is manifested in practically all areas of life and has a damaging influence on our spirit, dulling our spiritual appetite and distorting our values and perspective. Understanding its pervasive presence and powerful influence can help us to be more alert to it and to know how we can overcome its negative influence.

It can be present in the work environment, for example, in the spirit and attitude with which people work, in the way they pursue their ambitions and fight for promotion, the way they project themselves, and in “office politicking”. It is also present in the world of business, the world of politics, the world of art, literature, music, movies and fashion as well as in human relationships and even in sports and games!

However, not all that goes on in these areas are negative. Man is created in the image of God and, though fallen, still has the conscience within him. Besides, the Spirit of God seeks to encourage

man to do what is right and to refrain from evil, and man is still able, with God's help, to respond positively to Him.

How does this negative spiritual dimension come about?

This reality that I am trying to communicate is complex. It has developed over the ages and can be attributed to several factors:

- We are living in a fallen world. The context that we are now in is very different from that of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.
- The presence and working of the evil one and the evil spirits in this fallen world. They operate actively in various areas of life in this world to draw men away from God.
- The negative spirit of man as a consequence of wrongful desires in his heart and his succumbing to the influences of the evil spirits.

The presence of both the evil spirits at work and the negative spirit of man contribute to the negative spiritual dimension in the fallen world. This negative spiritual dimension projects a negative moral and spiritual influence and promotes the assimilation of values and perspective contrary to God's kingdom. It is a spirit diametrically opposed to the spirit of God's kingdom. We can term as "worldly" the direction of its influence and the values and perspective it promotes.

The apostle Paul tells us that when man walks according to the ways of the fallen world (the course of this world), he is in fact walking according to the will of the evil one (according to the prince of the power of the air). It is succumbing to the spirit at work in his heart. This results in sinful, fleshly living, contrary to the ways of God's kingdom and the will of God.

Ephesians 2:1-3

- 1 And you were dead in your trespasses and sins,
- 2 in which you formerly walked according to the course of

this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience.
 3 Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.

The spirit of the world is very pervasive. This is because “the whole world lies in the power of the evil one” (1 John 5:19). The spirit of the world may manifest itself in obvious and blatant forms: flagrant materialism, obsession with making money, unscrupulous dealings for selfish gains, corruption, sexual immorality, cruelty, arrogance and utter disregard for the welfare and feelings of others. It is also manifested in the worldly concepts of success, which have, as their main features, an intense preoccupation with wealth, possessions, worldly status and pleasures. We often see these negative features prominently reflected in the mass media and literature of all cultures and in the history of all civilisations. We read of conflicts, struggles, intrigues and unscrupulous behaviour because of greed and the pursuit of self-centred desires for material wealth, status, power and recognition. Often, worldly pleasure and sexual immorality feature in them as well.

The spirit of the world may also be manifested in less obvious or less obtrusive forms. We may then fail to see the dangers of our involvement in these things, thinking that they are normal and acceptable. We shall now consider briefly some of these areas.

Songs and music

Many Christians are not conscious that the spirit of the world can be manifested and communicated through songs and music and can affect our spirit negatively, at times severely. This may take place through the worldly spirit of the composer, the singer and the musician. The spirit of the world can influence the content and spirit of the song, the lyrics, the way the song is sung and how the music is played.

Some music, such as modern rock music, is raw and jarring and can have serious negative effects on us. But songs that appear innocuous or harmless can also affect us adversely if the spirit of the singer, or the way he sings it, is negative.

Apparel and fashion

The spirit of the world greatly influences apparel and fashion. Many clothe themselves extravagantly or indecently to “show off” or to attract attention.

There is a place for beauty, but we must beware of vanity and spending too much time, energy and money on these temporal things.

What we read and watch

Often, what appear in newspapers, books, magazines and movies, and on television programmes and Internet websites have contents that are negative or perverse. They can influence us, affect our spirit, and move us in the negative direction. Although some degree of awareness of what is happening in the world can be helpful, and some degree of exposure to the mass media and the reading of books are appropriate, we must prayerfully evaluate what is truly helpful and needful in our context.

Adverse effects of the spirit of the world

The effects of the spirit of the world on a person can be very obvious and almost immediate or they can be insidious and gradual. Sometimes the less obvious forms are even more dangerous. Its destructive influence can quietly grow and before we realise it, we have come so firmly under its grip that we find it difficult to extricate ourselves. Let us consider some negative effects that we may experience if we come under its influence.

1. Compromising our values and perspective in life

Under the influence of the spirit of the world, our values and perspective will become increasingly compromised. They will be less and less in line with those of God’s kingdom.

At one time, the kingdom of God and eternal issues may have been real and precious to us. Now, our convictions on these

areas dim, and these precious issues become blurred, distant and unreal. Increasingly, worldly values, perspective and ways begin to feature in our life. We begin to compromise on important areas that we once stood firm on.

While some Christians in such a situation may sense that something is amiss, others may not even know that they are deviating from the right path as their spirits are not as discerning as before, and they may regard the way they live as acceptable or progressing with the times. They are deceived and are in a precarious state.

2. Loss of our spiritual appetite, spiritual receptivity and perception of spiritual reality

This can take place in different areas of our lives. We increasingly lose our spiritual appetite and hunger for the things of God. The desire to read the Scriptures begins to wane. Even if we still read the Scriptures, we find it less refreshing, less enriching or even tasteless.

Our time of prayer will also be adversely affected. There is little desire to pray. Our personal worship of God loses its freshness and becomes perfunctory and we are less receptive to what God wants to say to us.

Our fellowship with God, instead of growing in quality, loses its vitality. We find it difficult to maintain a prayerful spirit and a consciousness of Him in our daily life. God and His ways begin to feature less and less in our consideration of things.

When we are growing well, we would have a sense of consciousness of God that is very much a part of us, like the act of breathing. But when the spirit of the world begins to affect us, this sense of consciousness of God can diminish substantially, and it would require great effort on our part to bring it back.

Our outworking in church life will likewise be adversely affected. Our receptivity, attitude and spiritual appetite during corporate worship, prayer meetings or fellowship with believers will no longer be the same. Having less desire to worship God and to have fellowship with Christians, we find ourselves withdrawing from the community of believers and the outworking of church life.

Our attitude towards our brethren would also change. While we may have appreciated their life and friendship in the past, we become critical of them now, finding fault with them and even branding them hypocrites.

3. Weakening of our spiritual strength, stability and ability to persevere

The spirit of the world can diminish our spiritual strength, affect our stability and weaken our resolve to persevere in the faith.

Even when we can recognise what is right, we are now unable to live by it where we once could. Like a leaking vessel, we find our spiritual strength seeping away. We are less able to fight the good fight of faith and live an overcoming life. Instead, we become more and more vulnerable to the wiles of the evil one.

For instance, we may find ourselves increasingly drawn to certain kinds of music or songs or to conversations that are not helpful. Office talk about fashion, worldly ambitions, material wealth and possessions, which at one time we were disinclined towards, now appeals to us, shaping our ambitions and attitude and perspective in life for the worse.

4. Increasing superficiality in our faith

When the spirit of the world affects us, we can become increasingly superficial in our faith and in our walk with God. Our faith tends to become a mere conformance to outward forms. We go through the motions at meetings and worship services. We may be at the worship service, but our hearts are far away. We are less attentive than we once were. This may also be the case when we spend time with the Lord in prayer or in the reading of the Scriptures. There is diminishing spiritual reality in our life and conduct.

5. Greater freedom for the evil one to work

When we allow ourselves to come under the influence of the spirit of the world, we are, in effect, giving in to the evil one who is at work in our lives. This opens the way for him to work in us with greater freedom. At the same time, this will make it more

difficult for the Lord to work in our lives because we are less receptive and responsive to Him.

The evil one will not merely have greater freedom in the areas we have allowed him to influence us. Since we are an organic being, if one aspect of our being is adversely affected in a significant way, other areas of our lives would become more vulnerable as well. The negative effects of the world will penetrate into more and more areas of our lives and the grip the evil one has on us will become tighter and tighter.

6. Operation of the principle of spiritual death

As Christians, we should grow in our experience of the life of God. But if we allow ourselves to come under the influence of the spirit of the world, instead of experiencing the life of God, we will experience spiritual death.

This death is a process; it is the gradual corruption and degeneration of our being. The more we have been under the world's negative influence, the more we are moving in the direction of death. Our spirit, mind and character become increasingly worldly. The apostle Paul teaches us this principle in Galatians 6:7-8:

Galatians 6:7-8

7 Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap.

8 For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.

The spirit of the world feeds the flesh. It promotes the desire to make money, gain status, and fulfil other worldly ambitions. It entices us to indulge in various forms of pleasures such as in worldly fashion, songs and music. If we sow to the flesh and allow these to grow in our lives, we will reap corruption and death. *Let us therefore sow to the Spirit, that we may reap eternal life.*

Concluding remarks

While we ought to fulfil our legitimate responsibilities as we live in this world, we must do so prayerfully, in fellowship with the Lord and always concentrating on the enduring kingdom of God. Only then can we fulfil His will for us to be His faithful witnesses on earth.

Let us not underestimate the negative influence the spirit of the world can have on us, and thus treat this matter lightly. The Scriptures warns us strongly of the effect the world can have on Christians. Let us take care that we may not be like the ones on whom seed was sown among the thorns, “who have heard the word, but the worries of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful” (Mark 4:18-19).

Demas was a co-worker of the apostle Paul for a period of time. But because of his love for the present world, he deserted Paul (2 Tim. 4:10). As children of God living in a fallen world, let us be watchful and vigilant. Let us be faithful ambassadors for Christ, influencing the world positively as salt of the earth and light of the world.

(Endnote)

¹ For a fuller consideration on the subject of “the spirit of the world”, please refer to AR219 posted on the website www.godandtruth.com.

Overcoming the Pervasive Negative Influence of the Spirit of the World

At the close of the previous message, we broadly considered the pervasive negative influence of the spirit of the world. In this message, we will look further into music and fashion, two areas in which the influence of the spirit of the world is very evident. We will also consider how we can overcome the world's negative influence while living in this fallen world.

Attractions of the world

Let us begin by observing from Matthew 4 how Satan sought to tempt the Lord Jesus with the attractions of the world and how the Lord Jesus overcame the temptations.

Matthew 4:8-10

8 Again, the devil took Him to a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory;

9 and he said to Him, "All these things I will give You, if You fall down and worship me."

10 Then Jesus said to him, "Go, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only.'"

The devil showed the Lord Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and their glory and said, "All these things I will give You, if You fall down and worship me."

The evil one used the things of the world to attract the Lord Jesus and lure the Lord to worship him. If the Lord had yielded to the temptation, He would in effect be worshipping the devil.

The evil one likewise seeks to tempt us and destroy us by using the world and the things of the world. We need to recognise

his strategy and reject both the tempting things of the world and the evil one at work through them. It is not just about the things of the world and us. It has to do with how the evil one uses these things to tempt us and bring us under his influence.

If we yield to the temptations of the evil one, we will come under his influence. Let us learn from the Lord Jesus in being very decisive and categorical in rejecting the evil one. This is how He replied the evil one: “Go, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God and serve Him only.’” If we want to worship God and serve Him only, we must, like the Lord Jesus, take a firm stand to reject the evil one and his working through the world to affect our lives. We must not allow ourselves to come under his influence in any way because the issues at stake are significant.

The Scriptures gives us clear injunctions on this subject. Paul emphasises the need for us to deny worldly desires (Titus 2:12). He also cautions us against being entangled in the affairs of everyday life (2 Tim. 2:4). In 1 Corinthians 2:12, he reminds us that we have received the Holy Spirit, and not the spirit of the world. James remarks that true religion is seen in God’s children keeping themselves unstained by the world (James 1:27).

Satan and the powers of darkness are working in and through the things, activities and people of the fallen world, influencing its trends and values. It is therefore not surprising that the presence and negative effect of the spirit of the world are very pervasive. However, it is not always easy to perceive the spirit of the world at work because it can work very subtly. Many Christians may not be conscious that the spirit of the world is actively working through songs, music, television shows, movies, literature, art, and the like.

I shall now elaborate on the two areas that affect many people in this world: (1) songs and music and (2) clothes and fashion. What I will be considering with you on these two areas is also intended to serve as illustrations of helpful aspects to bear in mind in our approach and response to other issues we

encounter in this fallen world. We must be vigilant and learn to recognise and effectively overcome the pervasive negative influence of the spirit of the world, so that we can be “in the world, yet not of the world”. At the same time, it is important to have a wholesome appreciation of the biblical perspective of the issues involved and the proper place some of these areas can have in our lives.

1. Songs and music

I will be considering this subject from the spiritual perspective and not from the technical angle.

Many are not conscious that the evil one is actively influencing peoples’ lives through songs and music. He often works subtly to influence our lives and values. Even Christians are vulnerable to the negative effects of songs and music.

Many contemporary pop songs are associated with fleshly lifestyles, a rebellious spirit, sensuality, emotionalism, promiscuity and the drug culture.

The spirit of the world can be expressed in various aspects of songs and music, for example:

- the lyrics
- the tune, tempo and rhythm of the music
- the way the song is sung
- the types of instruments used and how the music is played
- the arrangement of the music

Some may then ask: “Is there a place for songs and music in the life of a believer?” The answer is a clear “yes”. Songs and music have a wonderful place in God’s kingdom. We see this truth in the Scriptures and we can experience it in our own lives.

Let us take a look at how music featured in the life of David—a man after God’s own heart—before considering songs and music in the context of the Old and the New Testament.

David the “sweet psalmist of Israel”

David, anointed by the Lord and filled with the Spirit, was described as the “sweet psalmist of Israel” (2 Sam. 23:1).

David said, “The Spirit of the Lord spoke by me, and His word was on my tongue” (2 Sam. 23:2). The Spirit of the Lord inspired David to compose many psalms, and many of them are found in the Book of Psalms.

Written above the psalms are comments on the musical aspects. In Old Testament times, these psalms were sung. We do not know the accompanying music used then, but many have sought to set the words of the psalms to music.

The psalms are very instructive. They have, over the centuries, helped many in their worship of God.

The Scriptures describes David as a gifted and skilful musician. But he was not merely naturally gifted. The Spirit of God enabled him to play the harp skilfully and with positive spiritual impact. We catch a glimpse of this in 1 Samuel 16:13-23.

Whenever an evil spirit terrorised King Saul, David would play the harp. Saul would be spiritually refreshed, and the evil spirit would depart from him (v. 23). The kind of music David played and the way he played it had a positive spiritual impact on King Saul. Likewise, songs and music can have a positive spiritual impact on our lives.

Songs and music in the Old Testament

In Old Testament times, music and singing were an integral part of worship. Many passages in the first Book of Chronicles depict this aspect in the national life of Israel. Let us first look at 1 Chronicles 6.

1 Chronicles 6:31-33

31 Now these are those whom David appointed over the service of song in the house of the Lord, after the ark rested there.

32 They ministered with song before the tabernacle of the tent of meeting, until Solomon had built the house of the Lord in Jerusalem; and they served in their office according to their order.

33 These are those who served with their sons: From the sons of the Kohathites were Heman the singer, the son of Joel, the son of Samuel,

In verse 31, we see a category of service in the house of the Lord known as “service of song”. It had to do with the worship of God. It was not ordinary singing, but a ministry through songs as part of service to God (v. 32).

Verse 33 tells us that Heman was a singer. The context suggests that he was appointed a singer not just because he had a natural ability to sing, but also because he was spiritually gifted to minister through songs. Verses 31 to 33, together with the subsequent verses, tell us that others ministered together with Heman through singing. This shows that singing is recognised as a form of spiritual ministry.

We turn to 1 Chronicles 15:

1 Chronicles 15:16

Then David spoke to the chiefs of the Levites to appoint their relatives the singers, with instruments of music, harps, lyres, loud-sounding cymbals, to raise sounds of joy.

David deeply appreciated songs and music and played a major role in facilitating the ministry of songs and music as an integral part of corporate worship of God in Old Testament times. In this verse, David gave instructions for singers to play musical instruments and raise sounds of joy. Notice that different types of instruments were used: harps, lyres, and cymbals.

1 Chronicles 16:7-10

7 Then on that day David first assigned Asaph and his relatives to give thanks to the Lord.

8 Oh give thanks to the Lord, call upon His name; Make known His deeds among the peoples.

9 Sing to Him, sing praises to Him; Speak of all His wonders.

10 Glory in His holy name;

Let the heart of those who seek the Lord be glad.

David first assigned Asaph and his relatives to give thanks to the Lord and to make known His deeds among the peoples through singing. Singing praises to God, thanking Him and speaking of all His wonders are part of worship. Meaningful and appropriate lyrics that portray the greatness and goodness of God can help us express our worship of God.

In 1 Chronicles 25:1-7, we again see that some people were set apart to serve through music—“to prophesy with lyres, harps and cymbals” (v. 1). Among them were those “who prophesied in giving thanks and praising the Lord” (v. 3). God gave Heman, one of the leaders, many children and Heman directed them to serve in the house of God through singing and the playing of musical instruments (vs. 5-6). The total number of those skilfully trained in singing to the Lord was 288 (v. 7).

Thus, we see that songs and music were an integral part of corporate worship in Old Testament times, and were a part of service to God.

Songs and music in the New Testament

We shall now turn our attention to the New Testament.

The Lord Jesus singing with His disciples

The New Testament records the Lord Jesus singing with His disciples at the conclusion of the institution of the Lord’s Supper, just before He was arrested and subsequently crucified. Matthew 26:30 records that “after singing a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives”. This was a significant moment in the life of our Lord, and He found it appropriate to sing a hymn with His disciples before spending an evening agonising in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. This shows to us that the singing of hymns can have a meaningful place in our life.

Singing spiritual songs—part of a Spirit-filled life

Let us look at more verses in the New Testament regarding songs and music, beginning with Ephesians 5.

Ephesians 5:18-20

18 And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation,
but be filled with the Spirit,
19 speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual
songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the
Lord;
20 always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord
Jesus Christ to God, even the Father;

Here Paul exhorts us to be filled with the Spirit instead of being drunk with wine. When we are drunk, we may say and do things that are repulsive. In contrast, a Spirit-filled life would manifest itself in conduct that is edifying. Paul in this passage highlights songs and music as meaningful expressions of a Spirit-filled life. Our hearts breaking forth into songs and music is a spontaneous expression of appreciation of God and worship of Him.

In Colossians 3:16, Paul speaks on the same subject.

Colossians 3:16

Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

When we are filled with the richness of God's truths, we will find it hard to contain the joy within. Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs will flow from our grateful hearts. Indeed, this is an appropriate way to express how much we appreciate God and His truths. Songs not only help us express our worship of God, they also teach and admonish us. Often the hymns we sing warm our hearts with a word of encouragement or pierce our hearts with a word of admonishment.

Songs and music in church history

Whether at the congregational or personal level, the singing of hymns has been an integral part of true worship of God throughout church history and all over the world.

Good hymns, such as those composed by believers like Charles Wesley and Isaac Watts, have enriched the lives of Christians and their worship of God. We can say such composers have been raised up by the Lord and they are spiritually gifted in this area. Their hymns have stood the test of time.

Songs and music in eternity

Some may wonder what life will be like in heaven. What will we do there? Although we do not know many of the details, the Scriptures clearly reveals that there will be singing in heaven and in eternity.

Let us refer to three passages in the Book of Revelation on this subject, beginning with Revelation 5:8-9.

Revelation 5:8-9

8 When He had taken the book, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each one holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.

9 And they sang a new song, saying,

“Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.

In these verses, we see four living creatures and twenty-four elders, each with a harp, singing a new song in heaven. They were singing a song with spiritual content, a song in worship of the Lamb of God who was slain.

Revelation 14:1-4

1 Then I looked, and behold, the Lamb was standing on Mount Zion, and with Him one hundred and forty-four thousand, having His name and the name of His Father written on their foreheads.

2 And I heard a voice from heaven, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder, and the voice which I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps.

3 And they sang a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and the elders; and no one could learn the song except the one hundred and forty-four thousand who had been purchased from the earth.

4 These are the ones who have not been defiled with women, for they have kept themselves chaste. These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes. These have been purchased from among men as first fruits to God and to the Lamb.

In this second passage, we see one hundred and forty-four thousand singing a new song before the heavenly throne. It was a song that only they were privileged to sing, for they have been faithful followers of the Lamb, and have kept themselves undefiled.

Revelation 15:1-3

1 Then I saw another sign in heaven, great and marvelous, seven angels who had seven plagues, which are the last, because in them the wrath of God is finished.

2 And I saw something like a sea of glass mixed with fire, and those who had been victorious over the beast and his image and the number of his name, standing on the sea of glass, holding harps of God.

3 And they sang the song of Moses, the bond-servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying,

“Great and marvelous are Your works,

O Lord God, the Almighty;

Righteous and true are Your ways,

King of the nations!

In this third passage, the apostle John saw a sign in heaven. This sign gives us an insight into the kind of singing in eternity. Those who have overcome the enemies of God were seen holding harps and singing the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb, praising God, His works, and His ways.

From all the passages of Scriptures we have referred to, we can conclude that songs and music are an integral part of the worship of God in both the Old and the New Testament times

and in heaven and eternity as well. They tell us that the singing of hymns has meaning and significance in the spiritual realm.

Influence of songs and music

There is a spiritual dimension in songs and music that can be positive and edifying or negative and destructive. We can describe the direction of their influence and impact in the spiritual dimension as “the spirit of it”.

“Christian” songs can be negative, neutral or edifying

We can classify “Christian” songs into three broad categories: neutral, negative or edifying.

“Neutral” songs are songs that are neither edifying nor negative and jarring.

“Negative” songs are those that are negative and jarring to our spirit. The negative aspects can be manifested in different ways. For example, the lyrics can reflect wrong doctrines, wrong understanding of the Scriptures or wrong emphasis in doctrine and practice. As mentioned earlier, the spirit of the world may also be manifested in the tune, tempo, rhythm, the kind of instruments used and the way the music is played, and the music arrangement. It may also be reflected in the degree of loudness. Apart from the lyrics and music, the approach and spirit of the person singing or playing the instruments are the more significant factors.

To sing in a manner that edifies, the singer must concentrate on the worship of God. He should seek to convey the positive meaning of the song from his heart so as to promote worship.

A singer may have a good voice, and technically, a song may be well sung and the music well played, yet it may not promote the spirit of worship.

A good voice can even be a hindrance if the singer is too self-conscious. Instead of concentrating on worshipping the Lord and conveying the meaning of the song, the singer may be wondering how others will view his singing. He may also be paying too much attention to the technical aspects of his singing.

And if he sings to display his ability or if he has an arrogant spirit, the effects can be jarring and negative.

“Edifying” songs are those with meaningful lyrics and appropriate tunes. When they are sung prayerfully, they will be pleasant to the ears, and will draw our hearts towards God, promoting worship, faith, Christian values and sound convictions.

God gives spiritual gifts to some people to enable them to minister through hymns. Good hymns sung by the spiritually gifted can be very refreshing if they are sung prayerfully and with the right attitude. One who is gifted, though less mature spiritually, may be able to sing in a manner more edifying than another who is not gifted but more mature spiritually.

But it is also possible to be gifted in singing and yet sing in a way that is not helpful. A person’s attitude of heart and approach in singing can make a significant difference in the spiritual influence and impact. The gifted singer may, on one occasion, sing in a prayerful spirit that edifies others. Yet, on another occasion, he may sing in a self-confident manner, with a desire to impress others, thus projecting a negative spirit and would therefore not be edifying.

There can be a range within the three broad categories of songs. For example, in the category of songs that edify, some songs can be slightly edifying while some very edifying. There can also be a mixture in that a hymn can have positive aspects such as meaningful lyrics and appropriate tune, but the musical instruments used may be unsuitable, the way the music is played may be jarring, or the singer may be trying to display his voice and draw attention to himself.

The situation can be further complicated by another kind of mixture. This has to do with what is coming forth from the heart and spirit of the singer. He may be seeking to worship the Lord through his singing, but at the same time, there are negative elements in his spirit, for example, bitterness, anger, a covetous spirit or an unforgiving spirit. All these can be reflected in his singing.

“Non-Christian” songs

Many “non-Christian” songs are not worth listening to. Of greater concern is the negative effect they can have on us. This is often true

of pop, rock or heavy metal music, where “the spirit of it” is negative. Such music also tends to be very loud, as is evident in discos, teen parties and rock concerts and can damage our hearing. What is even more serious is that they can damage our spiritual health. Many of these songs promote or glorify worldly values. If we are constantly exposed to such songs, our values may become worldly and our spirit adversely affected.

Some “non-Christian” songs can be classified as “neutral”. For example, some folk songs and music can be relaxing to listen to. It is not wrong for us to appreciate them. God does give talents and skills to man, even to non-Christians, and it is not wrong for Christians to appreciate expressions of such talents in music and art. Just as we may appreciate beautiful pieces of art and paintings of God’s creation, we may likewise appreciate good music pieces. However, we need to be conscious of the influence of the spirit of the world in the arts, whether it be paintings, theatre, movies, songs and music, dance, literature, or fashion.

How can we overcome the influence of the spirit of the world in songs and music? As Christians, we should avoid songs and music that are associated with fleshly lifestyles and worldly values. More importantly, we should concentrate on what edifies our spirit and promotes worship of the true and living God. We can sing and reflect on songs that help us in this direction, making melody in our hearts to the Lord.

2. Clothes and fashion

I will now elaborate on the manifestation of the spirit of the world in clothes and fashion. We will consider the biblical perspective and seek a wholesome appreciation of this area.

The spirit of the world is clearly manifested in this area, especially in affluent countries. We can see much extravagance, showing off, attention-seeking, and indecency in what is called “fashion”. Some of these expressions can be rather outrageous; others are just silly.

Some people seek attention by being different from others. They want to project themselves as “non-conformists”. They may dye their hair blue, green, red or multicolour. They may also put on unusual hairstyles and keep changing them. Some will wear unusual clothes such as patched jeans or trousers bought in that condition, while others will put on clothes and accessories that they hope are of a style no one else has ever worn.

There are also those who want to keep up with the latest fashion. They will wear the same style of clothes or accessories others are wearing just because they are in fashion, without considering their suitability or propriety. They may also blindly copy the clothes or hairstyles of celebrities.

But fashion changes with the whims and fancies of the day. Tomorrow, there will be some other “latest fashion”, but they may be just as strange and vain.

Preoccupation with fashion is a waste of time and money. And such a preoccupation is not confined to women. Some men also spend extravagantly on such things. Even young people and students are spending large sums of money on clothes and fashion accessories.

However, while we exercise caution against worldly fashion, let us not swing to the other extreme and neglect our appearance. There is nothing commendable about ugliness or sloppiness in dressing. We must not take pride in or measure spirituality by how dull or drab our dressing is. We should not think that if we are committed Christians, we must dress in this way. There is a place for beauty. It is proper for us to pay some attention to the way we dress, and to dress in a manner pleasant to the eye.

Outward beauty in itself is not offensive to the Lord. God has created many things of great beauty, variety and colour. What is of concern is the wrong attitude in our approach to beauty.

It is all right to dress pleasantly, but we should not use this to rationalise indulgence in dressing. We should not seek attention by the way we dress or allow this area to be a distraction to ourselves or to others. Let us beware of vanity.

What counts is inner beauty

The world places emphasis on outward beauty, but outward beauty cannot make us better people. To God, it is inward beauty that counts. Let us look at 1 Peter 3:1-4.

1 Peter 3:1-4

- 1 In the same way, you wives, be submissive to your own husbands so that even if any of them are disobedient to the word, they may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives,
- 2 as they observe your chaste and respectful behavior.
- 3 Your adornment must not be merely external—braiding the hair, and wearing gold jewelry, or putting on dresses;
- 4 but let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God.

Although Peter is addressing women in this passage, the principle he is highlighting applies to men as well.

Women tend to be more preoccupied with this area of dressing. The wardrobes of many women are very costly. They spend much time, effort and money on make-up and various forms of beauty treatment in an attempt to improve their appearance.

Some women put on such heavy make-up that their natural beauty becomes obscured. Occasionally, we read reports of beauty treatments that have gone awfully wrong, and how the hapless customers have to undergo costly and painful remedial treatment.

In 1 Peter 3:1-4, the apostle Peter tells us not to concentrate on outward beauty, like braiding the hair, wearing gold jewellery and dressing. Instead, he urges us to develop inner beauty, the “hidden person of the heart”, the “imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit”. This is precious in the sight of God and has abiding, eternal significance. Such inner beauty will manifest itself in “chaste and respectful behavior”.

In 1 Timothy 2:9-10, Paul instructs women on the way they should adorn themselves.

1 Timothy 2:9-10

9 Likewise, I want women to adorn themselves with proper clothing, modestly and discreetly, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly garments,
 10 but rather by means of good works, as is proper for women making a claim to godliness.

In this passage, the apostle Paul instructs women to adorn themselves with modest and discreet clothing, and not ostentatiously. They should not adorn themselves with braided hair, gold or pearls or costly garments, “but rather by means of good works, as is proper for women making a claim to godliness” (v. 10).

We see then that the scriptural emphasis is on inward beauty, not outward beauty. This is true for both men and women. Inward beauty is what God is concerned about, and we should seek to develop this in our own lives and encourage others to do likewise.

The spirit of the world—areas of greater significance

In different areas of life, the spirit of the world influences us in different ways and to varying extents. It is more serious in some areas than in others.

From my observation, it is more significant and pervasive in areas involving values, attitudes, emotions, human nature and the moral and spiritual dimension, compared to areas of a more technical and mechanical nature. For example, it is more problematic in the arts than in mathematics and science.

The approach that people take in physical sciences like physics, chemistry, biology, or engineering, is basically the same. For example, when we do calculations, study the different muscles of the human body or the reaction between two chemicals, it is unlikely that the spirit of the world is involved in the results and findings. Whether Christians or non-Christians, we calculate in the same way and we get the same result. And a non-Christian engineer may be more capable in his field than a Christian engineer.

There can however be problems when scientists go beyond observing and recording their findings of the physical world and allow their personal world view, attitude, values and ambition to affect their studies and results. It is also problematic when they venture into the studying of supernatural occurrences from a “scientific” viewpoint. Such areas cannot be approached merely in a “scientific way”. The usual tools and approach to scientific studies are inadequate for the study and understanding of such occurrences. A person’s spiritual health and knowledge of the realities in the spiritual realm will have a direct bearing on his ability to understand and interpret such occurrences.

Areas of a technical and mechanical nature in themselves, like the making and repairing of household appliances, machinery and vehicles, pose less of a problem. However, when attitudes and values are involved, the spirit of the world becomes an issue. Take a manufacturer for example. He may compromise moral and ethical principles in his desire to maximise profits. This desire may influence how he does his business and the quality of his products.

Unlike areas of a technical and mechanical nature, psychology and philosophy have to do with expressions of human emotions and experiences, thoughts and ideas. In such areas, it is easier for the evil one to lead us astray in our contemplations and study, and the influence of the spirit of the world is therefore more significant. This is also true, as we have noted earlier, in areas such as music and the arts¹.

Whatever we are involved in while living in this world, it is important that we are not distracted by the things of the world, nor drawn into its values and ways.

Spirit of true discipleship

Having seen the negative influence the spirit of the world can have on us, how can we keep ourselves from being absorbed in the things and issues of this fallen world? How can we be free from the influence of worldly trends and values?

We can do so by living with a spirit of true discipleship, constantly maintaining the proper values and perspective of God’s

eternal kingdom. Our spirit need not be negatively affected while we live in this fallen world. All the water in the world cannot sink a ship unless it gets inside. Likewise, all the evil and sin in this world cannot affect us unless we allow them to penetrate our hearts and corrupt us.

It is helpful, from time to time, perhaps each night before we sleep, to examine before the Lord whether we are living with the spirit of true discipleship, or whether we have allowed the spirit of the world to seep into our lives. We need to nurture our relationship with the Lord and our spiritual life. To do that, our personal time with the Lord and our active participation in church life are very important.

Most of us are subject to many hours of worldly influences each day. We need therefore to jealously guard our time with the Lord, to draw near to Him, renew our minds, strengthen our spirits, and affirm afresh our convictions and our commitment to the Lord. And whatever context we may be in, we need to remain in close fellowship with the Lord, maintain the right perspective and be ever conscious of the fact that we are citizens of heaven living in a fallen world. This is necessary if we are to overcome the powerful negative influences the evil one seeks to bring into our lives.

A “friendly” and attractive world may be more dangerous and damaging to our faith than a persecuting world. In the face of persecution, we may be very conscious of the need to seek the Lord and draw near to Him. But in the midst of a “friendly” world, we can easily lose our guard and yield to negative influences. It is easy for us to increasingly receive into our lives what the world is subtly offering us. It is more comfortable and pleasurable to follow the trend of the world. But our love for God will grow cold as a result.

If we want to be worthy disciples of Christ, we cannot let the influence of the world corrupt us spiritually. Whatever our environment, we must remain prayerful and vigilant.

Let us live with the spirit of true discipleship, determined to overcome the pervasive negative influences of the evil one. As we do

so, we will be more able to grow and contribute to the advancement of God's kingdom. I will expand on this subject in the next message and consider with you how our time on earth can be meaningfully spent and how we can grow and contribute to the advancement of God's kingdom.

(Endnote)

¹ A more detailed consideration of these issues is covered in messages AR235-241, which can be found on the website *www.godandtruth.com*.

Meaning of Our Time on Earth: Growing and Contributing to the Advancement of God's Kingdom

The influence of the spirit of the world pervades all of mankind and every aspect of life in this fallen world. The pulls and attractions of this world are seductive and deadly. It is easy to be conformed to the world and be drawn away from the kingdom of God.

It is a serious matter for a believer to be entrapped by the attractions of this world. Yet, we should not look at life on earth as merely one in which we must constantly be on the lookout for such traps. Neither should we regard our time on earth as merely a context filled with negative influences, pain and suffering, temptations and evil.

Many may be so enamoured with the things of the world that they are reluctant to leave this earth. But there are also Christians who view this world as a terrible place and the sooner they leave it, the better. They may be suffering much in life and feel that it is better to depart from this earth and be in heaven.

In an attempt not to be corrupted by the world, some believers isolate themselves by becoming hermits, or withdraw into monasteries or Christian communities in some faraway place. But is this what the Lord wants His disciples to do?

While we should guard ourselves against the world's negative influences, we should not opt out of society. This is not the Lord's intention for us. The Lord Jesus wants His disciples to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matt. 5:13-14), to be witnesses for Him in this world, and we cannot do this if we isolate ourselves from society.

A wholesome, biblical approach to life must emphasise the significance of our time on earth and the positive dimension of fulfilling God's intentions for our lives.

Meaning of our time on earth

In His prayer to the Father for His disciples, the Lord Jesus said, "I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one" (John 17:15). The Lord does not want us to be taken out of this world. He has placed us in this world and wants us to remain here until it is time for us to depart.

In the same prayer, the Lord said, "As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world" (John 17:18). The Lord Jesus has sent us into the world, even as the Father has sent Him. Just as there was a purpose for the Lord coming into this world, there is meaning and purpose for us being in this world.

God has good reasons and important intentions for our time on earth. It is therefore important that we recognise what these reasons and intentions are and pay due attention to them.

In Ephesians 5:15-17, the apostle Paul instructs us in the way we ought to live our lives on earth:

Ephesians 5:15-17

15 Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise,

16 making the most of your time, because the days are evil.

17 So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

Paul urges us to be careful how we live our lives, "not as unwise men but as wise" (v. 15). This would mean "making the most of our time" on earth (v. 16) as it is a very important time and the negative influences of the world are very great. We should therefore make every effort to understand and do the will of God (v. 17).

From the Scriptures, we can see *two basic reasons* for God placing us in this world:

1. To be witnesses for God and to contribute to the advancement of His kingdom
2. To learn, grow and prepare ourselves for eternity

It is helpful to approach and evaluate the issues of life and the situations we go through with these two basic reasons in mind.

1. Witnessing for God and contributing to the advancement of His kingdom

Witnesses in this world

In Matthew 5:13-14, the Lord Jesus says, “You are the salt of the earth...” and “You are the light of the world”. In Acts 1:8, the Lord Jesus told His disciples, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses... to the remotest part of the earth.”

The Lord Jesus wants to empower us so that we can be faithful and effective witnesses to the truth, to God and to the great salvation He has provided for all mankind.

Ambassadors for Christ

Let us look at 2 Corinthians 5:18-20, where the apostle Paul dwells on the subject of man’s reconciliation with God.

2 Corinthians 5:18-20

18 Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation,

19 namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation.

20 Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

“The world” in verse 19 does not refer to the fallen world and its trends and values, unlike in 1 John 2:15-17. Here, “the

world” refers to the people of the world, as in John 3:16.

The Lord is not rebuilding or restoring the fallen world, which is destined for destruction. Instead, He is reconciling the people of the world to Himself, “not counting their trespasses against them” (v. 19). To this end, God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself. And to all of us who have been reconciled to God, He has entrusted the ministry of reconciliation. We are to be “ambassadors for Christ” (v. 20), reaching out to the world on His behalf.

Fulfilling the Great Commission

Let us now look at the passage in Matthew 28, often referred to as the Great Commission:

Matthew 28:18-20

18 And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.

19 “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,

20 teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

The fulfilment of what the Lord Jesus commands us in this passage does not merely involve our helping non-believers become Christians, but also our helping them grow unto maturity in Christ. The Lord Jesus instructs us to make disciples and to teach them to observe *all* that He has commanded us. It is important that the disciples are helped to understand and observe the fullness, comprehensiveness, and depth of all that the Lord intends us to know and attain to.

Helping believers grow unto maturity is actually a very major aspect of fulfilling the Great Commission and advancing God’s kingdom. It has to do with believers’ lives being transformed and they becoming more and more submitted to the lordship of Christ.

This is at the very heart of the meaning of the fulfilment of the Great Commission and the advancement of God’s kingdom—

the increase in the number of disciples and their growing in maturity, where the kingship of the Lord is being acknowledged, and He is reigning in the hearts and minds of His people.

Most Christians can recognise the importance of witnessing and contributing to the advancement of God's kingdom. But many understand this in the narrow sense of helping non-believers become Christians. They fail to appreciate the fuller meaning of witnessing, which includes witnessing by our lives all that we have been learning from the Lord; they also fail to see that helping Christians grow well is a major aspect of contribution to the fulfilment of the Great Commission and the advancement of God's kingdom.

The instructions of the Lord in Matthew 28:18-20 are intended to be worked out in the context of healthy church life and not just by individuals making disciples at a personal level. This was how the early church understood it and that was how they carried out what the Lord had committed to them, as seen in the Book of Acts and Paul's epistles.

This is our great privilege: Though we are weak and sinful, we can, by God's grace, contribute to His kingdom. We can make a positive difference to His eternal kingdom.

2. Learning, growing and preparing ourselves for eternity

The second basic reason for our time on earth is that we may learn, grow and prepare ourselves for eternity. Learning and growing in the Lord is extremely important for several reasons. It is in itself an important contribution to the advancement of God's kingdom. It is also the basis for the first basic reason. How can we be effective witnesses if we ourselves are not growing well? *There is an urgent need for greater emphasis on growth in moral and spiritual stature so that believers may be more impressed with its significance and be convicted about it.*

Growing unto maturity in Christ

God does not want us to remain as babes in Christ; He wants us to grow unto maturity in the Lord. Let us look at Ephesians 4:11-16:

Ephesians 4:11-16

11 And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, 12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ;

13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.

14 As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming;

15 but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ,

16 from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.

God wants each one of us to grow in “all aspects into Him” (v. 15). That is, we are to develop wholesomely in Christ. Verse 13 tells us that the goal is the “measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ”. We should therefore strive unceasingly to attain to an ever higher level of moral and spiritual stature.

But God does not want us to strive for spiritual maturity on our own or in a self-centred manner. He desires us to grow together in truth and love (v. 15), in the context of healthy church life. Each one of us is a member of the body of Christ, and each member ought to fulfil his part so that the whole body can grow and be built up in love and in the unity of the faith (vs. 13, 16).

Growing in the midst of trials

If we understand that learning, growing and preparing ourselves for eternity is a basic reason for our being on earth, it will help us understand why the apostle James exhorts us to consider it all joy when we encounter various trials (Jas. 1:2).

We may repeat this verse when we encounter painful situations, but do we truly identify with its meaning and spirit? Do we really

consider it all joy when we encounter all kinds of trials? For many of us, it would be a great achievement just to be able to go through intense difficulties without grumbling, or without being unduly disturbed or discouraged. To consider it all joy may seem beyond us, especially when the trials are severe.

But James tells us that it is feasible for us to have this attitude and spirit when we encounter all kinds of trials. He tells us the reason in the two verses that follow:

James 1:3-4

3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance.

4 And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

The trials and testing of our faith are intended to perfect us—that we may be *perfect and complete, lacking in nothing*.

Our time on earth is meant to help us learn and grow towards being perfect and complete, and the Lord allows us to go through various trials so that we may increasingly attain this goal. With this understanding, we can more readily identify with the meaning of what James is saying here. We can now ask God to help us learn to rejoice as we go through trials and difficulties. As long as the difficulties are part of a faithful walk with God and not because of our own foolishness, we can count it all joy.

It does not mean that when we are faithful to the Lord, our path will be smooth and pleasant. Remember what Paul and Barnabas said to the disciples in Acts 14:22, “Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God”, and what the Lord Jesus tells us in Luke 9:23, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me.”

The trials we encounter in life include having to deal with difficult people, going through trying circumstances, spiritual opposition and spiritual warfare. God intends to mould, transform and nurture our inner being through such trials so that we will be increasingly conformed to the image of His Son. In addition, we

will deepen in our knowledge of God and in our relationship with Him. The goal is our total development and eternal well-being.

Hence, we need not be perturbed, disheartened or devastated by the pain and difficulties. The evil one may seek to destroy us. Evil men may wish to harm us. But the Lord is sovereignly undertaking for us in the trials we encounter so that we can learn and grow as we go through them in fellowship with Him. This does not mean we passively accept what the evil one and evil men are seeking to do to us. Resisting the evil one and his intentions is an integral part of learning to fight the good fight of faith and helps us learn and grow in moral and spiritual stature.

We see then that God has placed us in this world, with all its temptations and trials, so that our development may be well-rounded. It is like being enrolled in a school that trains and develops our character. If we go through the trials well, together with the Lord, we will learn to be more humble, more patient, more considerate, more understanding, more persevering and stronger in the Lord. We will also learn to appreciate, in a deeper measure, God's grace, His sovereignty and His other attributes. We will become men and women of faith and conviction, reliable and trustworthy servants of the Lord.

Moral and spiritual development—an end in itself

This second basic reason for our time on earth is primary. It is crucial as an end in itself because it has to do with moral and spiritual development. *From an eternal perspective, developing moral and spiritual quality is of supreme importance.* It is at the heart of God's purpose in creating man, for it is the basis for man's personal well-being and a deep relationship with God and with one another. It is vital to the quality of our life both on earth and in eternity. Without it, we would not be able to properly fulfil the Great Commission, which is the other reason for our time on earth.

How the two basic reasons are related

The two basic reasons for our time on earth are closely related. If we are not learning and growing well, we will not be effective witnesses,

and we will not be able to contribute much to the advancement of God's kingdom, even if we appear to be doing so.

Where there is not that spiritual growth and reality within us, there cannot be the positive contribution coming forth. There can be the ministry of life and light from us only to the degree that there is life and light within us to flow forth. God can and does use people in spite of who they are. For example, God used Balaam (Num. 22-24) and the Chaldeans (Hab. 1:6-11) to fulfil His purposes. But that's not the way God desires us to serve Him. If our life is poor in quality, we will not be able to sustain a stable and consistent ministry of life and light. At best, our ministry will be sporadic.

On the other hand, if we are learning and growing well, our ability to contribute to God's kingdom will follow spontaneously. The spiritual principle in operation here can be illustrated by what the Lord Jesus says about He being the vine and we the branches:

John 15:5

"I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.

If we are abiding in Christ and He is abiding in us, we will derive life from Him and we will grow. And if we are growing in Him, we will bear fruit. This is the natural and spontaneous outcome. But if we are apart from Him, then we can do nothing that counts for eternity. There will be no true fruit, even though there may appear to be fruit.

The meaning and quality of our abiding in Christ and He in us can vary. This will be reflected in the quality of our lives and the quality of fruit-bearing. The poorer the quality of our life in the Lord, the poorer will be the quality of fruit-bearing; the richer the quality of our life in the Lord, the more abundant will be the fruit and the higher will be its quality. It is important that we pay much attention to nurturing the meaning and quality

of our abiding in Christ and He in us. How we can nurture this is elaborated in Message 8.

To appreciate further the relationship between the two reasons for our time on earth, let us turn to Colossians 1:9-11.

Colossians 1:9-11

9 For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,

10 so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God;

11 strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience;

Paul prayed for the Colossian believers that they might be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding (v. 9). Paul was addressing the believers' spiritual growth and maturity. When we are growing spiritually and progressing towards maturity, we will be able to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, pleasing Him in all respects, and bearing fruit in every good work (v. 10).

And as we walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, pleasing Him in all respects and bearing fruit in every good work, we will also be "increasing in the knowledge of God" (v. 10) and will continue to grow in our knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding. Thus we see a cycle of growth resulting in a faithful walk with God and in fruit-bearing, giving rise to further growth and greater fruit-bearing. And throughout this process, God will be strengthening us with His power, enabling us to become more and more steadfast and stable (v. 11).

Spontaneous ministry of life and light and biblical emphasis on learning and growing

The apostle John, writing about the Lord Jesus, tells us that "in Him was life, and the life was the Light of men" (John 1:4).

When the Lord Jesus lived His life on earth, He was the true Light (John 1:9). He did not have to make a special effort to shine; the light shines forth because there was life and light within Him. It was spontaneous.

Likewise, as we abide in Christ and He in us, we will grow well and the light and life within us will shine and flow forth spontaneously, ministering to others. It is only on this basis that we can meaningfully contribute to the fulfilment of God's purposes. There must be the spiritual life and reality to enable and sustain our service and contribution. *When we concentrate on learning and growing well, and are truly available to the Lord to guide and use us as He sees fit, we will contribute effectively to the advancement of God's kingdom.*

Although the Scriptures teaches that we should help non-believers turn to the Lord and enter His kingdom, its emphasis, particularly in the New Testament, is on teaching and helping believers to grow to maturity.

When believers grow well in the framework of healthy church life, they will be properly equipped to help others, not only to enter the kingdom of God, but also to grow unto maturity and in turn contribute in service. This is an important area of truth and is the thrust of Ephesians 4:11-16 which we referred to earlier.

Where there is strong emphasis on reaching out to non-believers and contributing to God's kingdom without sufficient emphasis on learning and growing, believers are likely to experience spiritual overstrain, unhealthy stress and inability to cope with the wiles and attacks of the evil one and overwhelming spiritual pressures. Various undesirable complexities may easily come about resulting in damaging consequences not only in our own lives, but also in the lives of those we are trying to help. Such a scenario is not uncommon.

Effective contribution flows forth from the quality of our heart

If we are growing well, we will be contributing to God's kingdom. Such contribution will be meaningful and effective even if it is

not obvious to us or to others. An example can be seen in the life of the poor widow who contributed two small copper coins (Mark 12:41-44).¹

The Lord Jesus made the remarkable statement that “this poor widow put in more than all the contributors to the treasury” (v. 43). From the world’s perspective, what she had contributed was but a meagre sum. But from the perspective of God’s kingdom, the true value of her contribution was indeed very great. Why is this so? It was because of the meaning and realities within her heart.

The moral and spiritual meaning and the realities within our hearts are of utmost importance and have a direct bearing on the meaning and impact of our contribution to God’s work, whether the contribution is obvious to others or not.

If we pay attention to our spiritual growth and development, if we have the correct attitude of heart, if we trust in God and are faithful to Him, there will be the corresponding and spontaneous contribution to the kingdom of God.

Continuing consciousness of the two basic reasons

It is important for us to have at the forefront of our consciousness the two basic reasons for our time on earth and their relationship to each other. Being deeply conscious of these two reasons will help us to:

- have the right perspective, values and priorities
- learn how to use our time and resources well
- know how to evaluate our lives and understand the meaning of what we go through

We will, essentially, be helped to know how we can live well on earth, including how we can go through difficult circumstances.

Helps us go through difficult situations well

All of us do encounter difficulties. If we are always conscious of the two basic reasons for our time on earth, we would and should ask ourselves: Can and do these difficult circumstances contribute to our growth? Will they help us to be effective witnesses? Can they help us contribute to the advancement of God's kingdom?

If we can answer "yes" to these questions, we know we can rejoice, and can concentrate on learning and responding well in the midst of the difficulties. We would not have to flee from the difficulties or compromise our faith in order to avoid them.

As we adopt such an attitude and posture, we will find that every circumstance we go through in life has meaning and provides an opportunity for us to learn and grow. We will then become more effective ambassadors for Christ.

It is necessary, however, for us to first ensure that we are not in those difficulties through our wrongdoing, neglect or foolishness, and that it is God's desire for us to be in such contexts and to go through such situations. Having done that, we can rightly trust in God's sovereignty and undertaking, and exercise faith in Him in line with Paul's declaration in Romans 8:28.

Romans 8:28

And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.

Many believers claim this assurance, but often wrongly, when they do not have the proper basis to do so. What is the proper basis for having such confidence in God's undertaking? It is only when we love God and are seeking to work out His purposes that we can be properly assured that He will cause all things, including difficult circumstances, to work together for our good.

In the next verse, Paul goes on to talk about our being *conformed to the image of His Son*. One major aspect of God causing all things to work together for good is our being conformed to the image of His Son. If we love God and walk faithfully with Him,

He will help us to be increasingly conformed to the image of His Son whatever our context. Our character will be developed and we will grow unto maturity in the Lord.

Concluding remarks

If we understand the two basic reasons for our time on earth, our primary concern would not be whether our circumstances are pleasant or unpleasant, but whether what we go through helps us to grow and contribute to God's kingdom. Our growth and contribution to God's kingdom would be our constant and consuming concern.

Does it mean then that our concentration on growth and contribution comes before our love for God and commitment to Him? No, God must always come first. Our worship of God, our fellowship with Him, and our obedience to Him, are of primary importance. Our concentration on growth and contribution is our response to His call, and the outworking of His intentions for our time on earth.

We can grow and contribute well only as we grow in our knowledge of God, love for Him, and commitment to God and truth. It cannot take place outside of this framework. We must therefore set our heart, soul, mind and strength on this. It is the basis for growth and contribution to the advancement of God's kingdom.

Living with a sense of purpose and mission

So then, we should not live like those without hope. We are already in God's kingdom and we are here on earth with a purpose and a mission.

Our time on earth is not meant for us to indulge in the things of this world or be immersed in the affairs of this life. Nor should we be merely trying to keep ourselves unstained by the world, important though it may be. Our lives should also not be seen as just undergoing pain and suffering in trials and testing without definite meaning and purpose.

Our lives should have a positive thrust and direction—to learn, grow and contribute effectively to God's kingdom. In the

process of growing and contributing, we learn to appreciate more and more the unfathomable richness of fellowship with God and with those who love God.

The two basic reasons viewed as advancement of God's kingdom

The two basic reasons for our time on earth can also be viewed together as one, that is, both personal growth and contribution can be viewed as advancement of God's kingdom. Personal growth, besides being the basis, is also itself an integral part of the advancement of God's kingdom.

So we see that advancing God's kingdom should be our primary concern during our time on earth. This is at the very heart of the pattern prayer that the Lord Jesus teaches His disciples.

Matthew 6:9-10

9 "Pray, then, in this way:

'Our Father who is in heaven,
Hallowed be Your name.

10 'Your kingdom come.
Your will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.

The prayer is directed to God the Father, and a major thrust of this prayer is the advancement of God's kingdom. As God's kingdom advances, God's name will be increasingly hallowed and exalted, and His will progressively fulfilled.

This prayer helps us to recognise that the advancement of God's kingdom and His will being done ought to be the deepest longing of our hearts and the consuming passion of our lives.

When the will of God is done, when men are increasingly submitted to the reign of God in their hearts, then "Your kingdom come" becomes a reality. God's kingdom is advanced when His name is honoured and glorified in our lives, in the lives of others, in all things and in all situations. This is what we should concentrate on and be committed to.

Paying attention to personal growth not selfish or self-centred

Some may feel uneasy or apologetic about concentrating on their own spiritual growth. They may wonder whether it is being selfish or self-centred. But we do not have to feel this way. Paying attention to personal learning and growing well does not imply that we are being selfish or self-centred. It is the Lord's will that we grow well. And when we grow well, we honour and glorify the Lord. It leads to increasing submission to Him and that is the basis for effective contribution to the lives of others. We will be more able to humbly contribute in whatever forms the Lord leads us, be it prayer support or showing care and concern for others, or in any specific ministry the Lord desires us to be involved in.

Wholesome learning and growing and service take place when we have a healthy relationship with the Lord and when we take our proper place in the outworking of body life as explained by the apostle Paul in Ephesians 4:11-16.

Paying attention to personal growth is consistent with the spirit and meaning of the pattern prayer the Lord Jesus teaches His disciples. Such a spirit will mean that we are supportive of all who are contributing to God's kingdom. We will seek to contribute in whatever way appropriate for us, and will rejoice whenever we see the kingdom of God advancing. We can wholeheartedly concentrate on our personal growth together with the brethren, giving it due priority. And we will do it in a spirit of worship and of love for God and man.

(Endnote)

¹ Message AR69, posted on the website www.godandtruth.com, gives a fuller consideration of the poor widow who contributed the two copper coins.

*Success, Ambition and
Accomplishment
—the Biblical Perspective*

The serious Christian living in this fallen world will find himself constantly challenged by the world's values and ways. Many issues of life will confront him. To walk faithfully before God, he has to learn to respond to the various issues of life from the perspective of God's eternal kingdom. This is especially important because of the pervasive negative influence of the spirit of the world, which has seriously distorted God's values.

In the last three messages of this book, we will reflect on one major issue that confronts all of us—the issue of success, ambition and accomplishment. We will consider this issue from the biblical perspective. As we do so, let us learn how we can likewise ponder over other issues in life, and how we can respond to them in a wholesome manner¹.

The world associates a successful life with material wealth, status, recognition, fame and power. All over the world, people are intent on achieving success in life. They invest much time and energy pursuing worldly success, ambition and accomplishment. For many, seeking worldly success is what life is all about. But how does the Lord look at such issues?

Should a Christian aim for a successful and prosperous life?

This may seem a strange question to ask. Some Christians may recoil at its mere mention because they tend to associate terms like “ambition”, “prosperous” and “successful” with worldliness.

Indeed, Christians should beware of the teaching that if you are doing well as a Christian, you will have earthly wealth and

prosperity. Sadly, this unwholesome teaching has made inroads into many Christian circles and we do well to avoid being enticed by it. Yet, we should not then think that the area of success, ambition and accomplishment has no place in the life of a true disciple of the Lord.

Properly understood, this area has a very important place in the lives of believers and ought to be encouraged and emphasised. What is needful is to distinguish between true success and worldly success and to examine the motivation behind the pursuit of success. Is it for personal gain and glory or is it for the glory of God and the advancement of His kingdom? The critical issue is: Are we seeking worldly success and prosperity or success and prosperity in God's kingdom?

Our Goal—success and accomplishment in the kingdom of God

We should seek true success because it glorifies God. Indeed, attaining true success and accomplishment is at the heart of biblical revelation and exhortations, both in the Old and the New Testaments, and should be the goal of every Christian.

The success and accomplishment that the people of the world seek are temporal and have no eternal value. But true success and accomplishment have eternal worth. Why then do Christians not pursue true success and accomplishment with the same zeal and passion as non-Christians pursuing their earthly goals? Indeed, believers ought to be even more highly motivated to succeed and prosper in God's kingdom. Instead, many are lukewarm and complacent in this area.

The lives of God's faithful servants such as Moses, Daniel and Paul exemplify this motivation to succeed in God's kingdom. And the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus exemplify it perfectly.

The Lord Jesus: A perfectly successful life

The Lord Jesus lived a perfect life—one of success and accomplishment every step of the way. When He uttered on the cross, "It is finished", He declared that He had accomplished all that God the Father wanted Him to. Although not everyone responded positively to Him and

to His ministry, He was successful in that He did His part perfectly. He lived out the perfect will of the Father.

It is not obvious that the Lord Jesus lived a successful life on earth. He was born of poor parents. He did not amass earthly possessions and had neither earthly power nor status. He had to endure humiliating treatment by sinful men and was put to death in a most excruciating manner—death on a cross. Hanging there on the cross, apparently lonely, helpless and without obvious accomplishments, His life must have appeared to be a total failure in the eyes of the onlookers. But in reality, throughout His life and ministry on earth, climaxing in His death on the cross, He was laying the groundwork and foundation for the kingdom of God.

Even while He was being afflicted and crucified, the Lord Jesus was prospering. In Isaiah 52:13, it was prophesied of the Lord: “Behold, My servant will prosper, He will be high and lifted up and greatly exalted.”

Even as He was lifted up physically on the cross, He was also being “lifted up” in the spiritual sense. The lonely, agonising death on the cross was in reality a demonstration and an accomplishment of supreme power, glory and triumph in the spiritual realm (Col. 2:15).

Indeed, His death on the cross made it possible for mankind to attain full salvation. His death opens the way for us to be forgiven of our sins and to be reconciled to God, be born of the Spirit and enter God’s kingdom, and experience a life of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. We no longer have to be in bondage to sin and to the powers of darkness. We can live a life of triumph and victory if we exercise true faith on the basis of the Cross.

The Cross is the ultimate expression of love. It is the supreme example of faithfulness and obedience to the will of God the Father. These are crucial issues in the establishment and advancement of God’s kingdom.

The Lord Jesus lived out God’s will perfectly. God is likewise concerned with whether we seek to live out His perfect will for our lives. This is what we must concentrate upon: How He assesses us

during our earthly journey, and how He is going to assess us when we face Him in eternity. Have we accomplished what He desires of us, or have we been complacent and indifferent about it?

The kind of accomplishment that glorifies God

What kind of accomplishment glorifies God the Father? Certainly, it is not the fleshly achievements that the people of the world and many Christians glory in. The accomplishment that glorifies God is best seen in the life of the Lord Jesus. He fulfilled the perfect will of the Father when He walked on this earth. In His prayer to the Father, the Lord Jesus said:

John 17:4

“I glorified You on the earth, having accomplished the work which You have given Me to do.

Fulfilling the Father’s will was of utmost importance to the Lord Jesus. Fulfilling the Father’s will is true accomplishment. It glorifies God.

Likewise, we should wholeheartedly and earnestly work towards accomplishing what God desires of our lives. We can never pursue this too earnestly. Our failure has been a lack of zeal, earnestness and perseverance in this direction. To the degree we have done His will, to that degree we glorify God and succeed in life.

Scriptural encouragement to live a successful life

Both the Old Testament and the New Testament encourage us to live a successful life and show us the way to attain it. Joshua 1:1-9 highlights this and also shows us the conditions for success.

Joshua 1:1-5

1 Now it came about after the death of Moses the servant of the Lord, that the Lord spoke to Joshua the son of Nun, Moses’ servant, saying,

2 “Moses My servant is dead; now therefore arise, cross this Jordan, you and all this people, to the land which I am giving to them, to the sons of Israel.

3 “Every place on which the sole of your foot treads, I have given it to you, just as I spoke to Moses.

4 “From the wilderness and this Lebanon, even as far as the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, and as far as the Great Sea toward the setting of the sun will be your territory.

5 “No man will be able to stand before you all the days of your life. Just as I have been with Moses, I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you.

It was a momentous occasion. Moses was dead and the Lord was speaking to Joshua whom He had earlier commissioned and appointed leader over Israel (Deut. 31:23; Num. 27:15-23). Joshua’s role and responsibilities were significant. They involved the exercise of authority and leadership responsibility pertaining to God’s work and the fulfilment of God’s purposes.

The Lord assured Joshua that He would be with him to help him (v. 5). He further encouraged Joshua:

Joshua 1:6-7

6 “Be strong and courageous, for you shall give this people possession of the land which I swore to their fathers to give them.

7 “Only be strong and very courageous; be careful to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, so that you may have success wherever you go.

The Lord wanted Joshua to be consistently successful and He explained to Joshua the way to true success. “Do not turn from it to the right or to the left”, the Lord said to him in verse 7. Joshua was not to deviate from the path of obedience. He was not to act according to his own ways or desires, but “according to all the law”, that is, God’s revelations, teachings and instructions.

Joshua 1:8

“This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may

be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success.

God wanted Joshua to be “prosperous” and to have “success”. He told Joshua how this could come about. The book of the law was not to depart from his mouth. He was to meditate on it “day and night” so that he would “be careful to do according to all that is written in it”.

Joshua was to meditate on the whole of God’s revelation, not just selected portions here and there. He was to assimilate the truth into his life such that his whole life would manifest the true intent of God’s instructions. This would help him draw near to God and deepen in his knowledge of God and fellowship with Him. His character, perspective and way of life were to be moulded by the instructions and ways of the Lord.

Likewise, God wants us to be obedient to Him and to His instructions in the Scriptures. He wants us to study, understand and absorb into our lives all that He has revealed to us. If we are faithful in following the true meaning and spirit of His teachings and instructions, He will also make our way prosperous, and we will have success.

Joshua 1:9

“Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous! Do not tremble or be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.”

The principles reflected in these words to Joshua are applicable to us. God wants us to be strong and courageous. We need not be fearful or be dismayed when we encounter trials, sufferings, temptations and pressures. *If* our hearts are set to do God’s will, He *will* be with us wherever we are.

The whole of the Scriptures is intended to help us attain to spiritual maturity, contribute to the advancement of God’s kingdom and succeed in life.

In the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord Jesus highlights the moral and spiritual qualities that are necessary for a life of blessedness. When we have such qualities in our lives and the right attitude and spirit, the Lord will be with us in a favourable sense. We will then be assured of success. When we are poor in spirit and learn to mourn, when we hunger and thirst after righteousness, when our hearts are pure, we will be able to grow well and contribute to God's kingdom.

We should seek, personally and together as God's people, to achieve as much as we can according to God's guidance and enabling and the principles He has revealed.

In this way, God will be truly pleased with our lives and we will attain a life of true blessedness. This is the biblical meaning of a prosperous and successful life, and it ought to be the goal and earnest desire of all true disciples of the Lord.

A truly successful life is not always obvious

However, a truly successful life may not always be obvious or easily recognised by others, especially by non-Christians. Christians, and even the person himself who has attained to such a life, may also not appreciate what is taking place. You may wonder how this can be so. Let us consider the example of Joseph.

Joseph

Genesis 37 and 39 record a period in Joseph's life when he suffered terrible ordeals. Out of jealousy, his brothers sold him to Midianite traders, who in turn brought him to Egypt and sold him to Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's bodyguard. As a slave in Potiphar's household, Joseph was put in charge of everything his master owned. One day, his master's wife tried to seduce him. She persisted over a period of time, but Joseph steadfastly rejected her advances. Being rebuffed, Potiphar's wife falsely accused Joseph of sexual assault. On hearing his wife's account, Potiphar became very angry and had Joseph imprisoned.

From the world's viewpoint, Joseph did not appear successful during this period of his life. His own brothers sold him and he served as a slave in a foreign land. Not only that, he was falsely

accused and unjustly imprisoned. How could he possibly be considered successful? Even Christians would have difficulty recognising a person going through such times as successful or prospering. And it would not be surprising if Joseph did not see himself as successful and prospering during this period of his life.

Yet Genesis 39:2-3, 23 pronounce Joseph successful and prosperous.

Genesis 39:2-3

2 The Lord was with Joseph, so he became a successful man.

And he was in the house of his master, the Egyptian.

3 Now his master saw that the Lord was with him and how the Lord caused all that he did to prosper in his hand.

Genesis 39:23

The chief jailer did not supervise anything under Joseph's charge because the Lord was with him; and whatever he did, the Lord made to prosper.

It is remarkable that this pronouncement on Joseph being successful and prosperous refers to the period when Joseph was a slave in a foreign land, and when he was subsequently falsely accused and unjustly imprisoned (the margin of the NASB indicates "successful" in verse 2 can also be translated "prosperous").

Verses 2-3 and verse 23 tell us that Joseph was successful because God was with him and caused all that he did to prosper. This is the key factor. God was pleased with Joseph, and He therefore enabled and undertook for Joseph in what he was going through.

So long as Joseph was faithful to God, his life would not be lived in vain, even if it appeared to others a pitiable life. There would be spiritual health, positive growth and development. His life would be a positive testimony for God in the spiritual realm, and there would be contribution to God's kingdom. This remained true regardless of the outward circumstances.

To those seeking to be faithful to God, the story of Joseph offers strong encouragement. It can help us to view life and go through our own trials and difficulties with the right perspective: *Whatever the circumstances, whatever the opposition from the powers of darkness or from man, the Lord can and will make us prosper if we are faithful to Him. We will fare well from the perspective of God's kingdom.*

The apostle Paul

The apostle Paul is an outstanding example of one who lived a successful life and he accomplished much for God. But the descriptions of his life in various passages of the Scriptures are not what would generally be associated with a life of success.

In 2 Corinthians 6:3-10, Paul testified about the difficulties he went through in the course of serving the Lord.

2 Corinthians 6:3-5

3 giving no cause for offense in anything, so that the ministry will not be discredited,
4 but in everything commending ourselves as servants of God, in much endurance, in afflictions, in hardships, in distresses,
5 in beatings, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in hunger,

In this passage, Paul reveals much about his attitude, perspective and approach in life. It is intended to instruct us on how we too ought to live our lives. He explained how he sought to live a blameless life as God's servant in the midst of various trials and difficulties.

Paul had to endure afflictions, hardships, distresses, beatings, imprisonments, tumults, labours, sleeplessness and hunger (vs. 4-5) in the context of a faithful and effective ministry. It was a life God approved of. He was indeed prospering, but not in a way the world could recognise.

While many Christians would find it difficult to associate such experiences with a prosperous and successful life, Paul's testimony illustrates the reality that going through difficulties and hardships is an integral part of the life of a successful servant of God.

Verses 6 and 7 reveal the critical aspect of the moral and spiritual dimension in a life of true success and prosperity.

2 Corinthians 6:6-7

6 in purity, in knowledge, in patience, in kindness, in the Holy Spirit, in genuine love,
7 in the word of truth, in the power of God; by the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and the left,

The expression “in the Holy Spirit” in verse 6 tells us that Paul lived according to the guidance and enabling of the Holy Spirit. In the original Greek text, there is no distinction between what is in upper-case letters and what is in lower-case letters. It is therefore possible to also translate “in the Holy Spirit” as “in the holy spirit”. It would then mean “in the spirit of holiness”. So “in the Holy Spirit” could mean “according to the guidance and teaching of the Holy Spirit” or “in the spirit of holiness”. Both meanings are possible. The second rendering is also consistent with the context. Paul is here referring to moral qualities like purity, patience, kindness and love. These have to do with what is in the heart and spirit of the person—in this case, Paul himself.

Such moral qualities are indispensable in a life of true success and prosperity. It is also important to have the right approach—“in the word of truth, in the power of God”—and to be properly equipped with “the weapons of righteousness”. The effective soldier of God’s kingdom wields weapons of righteousness like love, patience, kindness and truth, unlike the weapons used by the world, which are the fleshly and aggressive kind.

In verses 8 to 10, Paul describes the varied and contrasting facets of the successful and effective Christian life.

2 Corinthians 6:8-10

8 by glory and dishonor, by evil report and good report; regarded as deceivers and yet true;
9 as unknown yet well-known, as dying yet behold, we live; as punished yet not put to death,

10 as sorrowful yet always rejoicing, as poor yet making many rich, as having nothing yet possessing all things.

Here he draws a contrast between how he and his co-workers would appear before the world and how they are in reality and in the eyes of God. He emphasises what true spiritual riches are in contrast to worldly riches.

“by glory and dishonor”

In his service, Paul was sometimes treated with honour and sometimes with dishonour. How he was treated was not critical to Paul; his primary concern was to be faithful to the Lord.

“by evil report and good report”

Sometimes he received a good report, and sometimes a bad report. But it did not matter to Paul; his concentration was on how the Lord viewed his life and service, and he knew the Lord was pleased with him.

“regarded as deceivers and yet true”

Though he was regarded as a deceiver by some, he was in reality true to God and lived a life of truth.

“as unknown yet well-known”

He was regarded as unknown, yet he was well-known. In this world, he might be regarded as an unknown, but in God's kingdom, he had stature and distinction.

“as dying yet behold, we live”

His outer man went through much bodily afflictions and he would be seen as dying, but in reality he was living the true spiritual life, a life of fullness and abundance.

“as sorrowful yet always rejoicing”

He might have appeared sorrowful to other people, but he always had the joy of the Lord.

“as poor yet making many rich”

He had little material possessions, yet he could make many rich from the perspective of God’s kingdom.

“as having nothing yet possessing all things”

He appeared deprived in the eyes of the world, yet he was spiritually rich and had an abundance of true and lasting possessions. Though “having nothing”, he was in reality “possessing all things”. “Possessing all things” can also be viewed from the angle that we can have access to all things, as if we possess all things. Nothing can prevent us from having what the Lord wants us to have, and from using them as He desires us to.

God has revealed to us the way to true success and accomplishment in His kingdom. When we abide by His instructions, when we walk in truth, we will attain to it. This is true however man may regard us and even when the outward appearance suggests otherwise.

The way to true success and accomplishment

As disciples of the Lord, we must be deeply motivated to strive for true success and accomplishment. But how should we go about it?

The way of the world is the way of the flesh; it is characterised by a life of self-seeking, personal ambitions and desire for worldly success and achievements. The way of the kingdom of God is the opposite. To truly succeed in God’s kingdom, we have to give up *all* fleshly ambitions and desire for worldly success and accomplishment. To the degree we fail to give them up, to that degree we will fail to achieve true success.

The way to true success and accomplishment is perfectly exemplified in the life of the Lord Jesus Christ. It involves living according to the principle of “the grain of wheat must die”, which the Lord Jesus Himself taught in John 12:24.

John 12:24

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

By prefacing His statement with the words, “Truly, truly, I say to you”, the Lord Jesus emphasised the significance of what He was about to communicate. The context was His impending death on the cross, which He referred to in verse 23: “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.”

Bearing much fruit in verse 24—true fruit in the kingdom of God—refers to a life of success and accomplishment. How does it come about? Verse 25 (read with verse 24) provides the answer.

John 12:25

“He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it to life eternal.

If the grain of wheat refuses to die, it will not bear fruit. Likewise, if we cling to our lives and refuse to follow the principle of death, we will not be able to succeed.

We have to say “no” to all our selfish, personal and worldly desires. We have to concentrate on living only for God and what is pleasing to Him. That was the principle that the Lord Jesus lived by throughout His life (John 8:29), and this manner of living climaxed at the Cross.

Having only one ambition—to be pleasing to Him

We should have only one basic ambition—to be pleasing to the Lord. That was the secret of Paul’s success. In this respect, he was following the example of the Lord Jesus—to be pleasing to God *whatever it may involve*.

2 Corinthians 5:9

Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him.

Whether he dies and is with the Lord, or he lives on in this world, Paul seeks always, then and through eternity, to be pleasing to the Lord.

Philippians 1:20-21

20 ... with all boldness, Christ will even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.

21 For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

Paul's goal in life was to exalt the Lord at all times, whether by life or by death. The Cross and its implications for mankind were upon his heart. He wanted to do what the Lord had entrusted to him, to follow all His instructions and to do so in the power of God.

Is it really your ambition to be pleasing to God? Affirming it is easy, but do we understand its meaning and implications? Are we ready for the cost of discipleship, whatever it may involve, whatever the pain, whatever the cost? We must seek to accurately and wholesomely understand His will, His instructions and revelations, and seek to live by them. There must be a serious commitment to be pleasing to Him.

Concluding remarks

The people of the world are gripped by the desire for worldly success and prosperity. As Christians, we should be wary of this and not be enticed by this desire.

Yet the Scriptures does speak of success and prosperity for God's people. There is a legitimate place for success, ambition and accomplishment in the life of true believers. It should, however, be achieved in God's way, according to His desire, and by His guidance. A primary goal of the instructions and exhortations in the Scriptures is for us to succeed in our lives. We must not neglect this area of doing well in God's kingdom. Instead, we should encourage and emphasise success and faring well from the biblical perspective.

The Lord Jesus is the perfect example of a life of success and accomplishment. He glorified God the Father while He was on earth by accomplishing the work God gave Him to do. Likewise, we must also strive to succeed in life and glorify the Lord by being faithful to Him and accomplishing all that He requires of us. It is imperative that we have the moral and spiritual qualities of heart and spirit to be able to walk the path of faithfulness and experience the life of blessedness and fruitfulness.

(Endnote)

¹ Messages AR140-165 on the website www.godandtruth.com address other issues of life and explain in greater detail the meaning of being truly strong and truly rich, the meaning of true greatness and true dignity, and how we should understand the subject of sorrow and pain, peace and joy.

True Success—the Way to Attain it and its Different Manifestations

In the previous message, we considered an area that preoccupies the hearts and minds of the people of the world—the issue of success, ambition and accomplishment. This area is very important and has a proper place in the lives of believers. For the people of the world, this is often associated with wealth, status and recognition in society. However, as believers, we must understand and approach this area from the perspective, values and principles of God’s kingdom.

In this message, we will continue to reflect on this subject, particularly from the angle of attaining true success and the different manifestations of true success.

Worldly approaches to success

Believers are constantly confronted with worldly ideas and concepts. There is a very strong influence and, often, subtle pressure in the direction of worldly success.

Many books have been written, and many courses conducted, to help people succeed in life, but they are mostly from the worldly perspective. They provide instructions, suggesting ways and means on how to be successful in career and in business, how to be wealthy, and how to make a mark in this world.

Some of the ways in which the world pursues success and prosperity are obviously wrong. For example, dishonest or unscrupulous means of achieving personal goals, or the pursuit of personal gain in utter disregard for the interests and welfare of others. Christians can easily recognise these to be clearly wrong. Some of us may think that as long as we do not use such methods,

our pursuit of success and prosperity would be acceptable. However, this should not be the way we judge whether the approach is acceptable. *We have to see beyond the obviously wrong and the obviously unethical* and learn to perceive the underlying issues in these approaches.

Even though some of the world's methods of achieving success may not be obviously wrong or unethical, they are basically of the flesh. *The motivation, goal, meaning, approach and the spirit behind these methods* often stem from self-interest and a desire for self-glory. The spirit of the world permeates them.

God's way to true success

If worldly success is wrong, and there is a place for true success, what then does it mean to truly succeed and prosper?

We can view God's way to true success from three angles.

1. Fulfilling God's purpose for us on earth

To understand what a truly successful life is, we have to view it from the perspective of God's kingdom. Such a life is vitally linked to God's purpose for us on earth.

We have seen in Message 5 that there are two basic reasons for our time on earth. One reason is to learn and grow well and prepare for eternity and the other, which flows forth from the earlier reason, is to effectively contribute to the advancement of God's kingdom. *To the degree we grow well and contribute to the advancement of God's kingdom, to that degree our lives will be successful.*

2. Doing God's perfect will

We can also understand the truly successful life as one in which God's perfect will for our lives is being lived out.

God has a perfect will for our lives. His will is that which is most meaningful and it will lead us towards the fullest life we can live. The Lord Jesus tells us He has come so that we may have life, and have it abundantly (John 10:10).

The Lord Jesus also teaches us to pray: "Your will be done". This would include God's perfect will being accomplished in

our lives. We should live in line with the thrust of this prayer; it must be our constant longing and prayer. *To the degree God's perfect will has been fulfilled in our lives, to that degree we would have lived a successful life, one of spiritual abundance and true accomplishment.*

3. *Living the victorious Christian life*

The truly successful life may also be viewed from yet another angle, which is that of the victorious Christian life, the overcoming life, the life of spiritual fruitfulness. It is a life that is true to God, one in which we enjoy God's blessings, His guidance, enabling and undertaking.

How to attain true success

The question that we would have to ask then is this: How can such a life of success be attained? In a nutshell, we can say that the attainment of true success involves two fundamental spiritual principles—that of “dying to self” and “walking according to the Spirit”.

- *Dying to self.* If we die to self-life, we will be able to experience “the power of His resurrection” (Phil. 3:10) and being “filled with the Spirit” (Eph. 5:18). To the degree we attain to the reality of the principle of death¹, to that degree God will have the freedom to work in and through our lives, and to the same degree we will live a successful life, one of spiritual abundance.
- *Walking according to the Spirit.* If we are walking according to the Spirit, we will be walking in the truth, in fellowship with God and in dependence on Him. We will be fulfilling the will of the Lord by His empowering. This is what it means to live a Spirit-filled life. This is a life of true success.

The meaning and reality of such a life is covered in greater detail in the next message when we look at the life of the apostle Paul.

True success manifested in different forms

Every child of God should earnestly seek to live out the successful Christian life. It is therefore important to understand what true success is, and that such a life can be manifested in different forms. Some forms are obvious, while others hardly appear successful at all. What is important is not how it is manifested, but that we concentrate on doing the will of God regardless of the outward manifestations. If we are doing God's will, we will be living a truly successful life, even if it does not appear to be so to others or even to ourselves.

Unless we are clear about this point, we may become unduly perturbed or distressed, especially when we see others living what seems a very successful life, thinking that we are ineffective in our own life and in our service to God. We may then try to achieve success that is of a more obvious form. When we do that, we would be misdirecting our energy and efforts, striving to achieve that which is not the Lord's will for our lives.

Obvious manifestations

When we read the Scriptures, we are invariably impressed by the lives of people like Moses and the apostle Paul. We can see clearly that they were very effective in service and contributed much to God's kingdom.

God performed many great miracles through Moses. Moses confronted Pharaoh, overcame his many obstructions, and led the people of Israel out of Egypt.

The apostle Paul, by his faithful ministry, helped many to turn to the Lord. He founded local churches and, through his preaching, teaching and epistles, helped believers to grow.

Christians can readily recognise the achievements of people like Moses and Paul and the fact that they lived successful lives.

There are, however, many successful lives whose meaningful

and effective contributions to God's kingdom are not immediately obvious. The supreme example is the life of the Lord Jesus Christ and what took place at the Cross². What the onlookers saw was a dismal picture of the lonely Lord Jesus dying a very cruel and painful death on the cross. The whole situation appeared an utter failure—there was nothing obvious to suggest otherwise. Yet, it is the greatest triumph and the most significant contribution to mankind and to the fulfilment of God's eternal purpose. The very foundation for the building of God's kingdom was laid at the Cross.³

We will look at four other examples from the Scriptures of successful lives whose contributions to God's kingdom are not immediately apparent.

Less obvious manifestations

Daniel

God deeply appreciated Daniel, but it is not obvious from scriptural records how much Daniel has contributed to the kingdom of God. He lived in exile in an idolatrous land and served in the court of the tyrannical King Nebuchadnezzar, together with sorcerers, conjurers, diviners, and astrologers whom the king turned to for advice. These were men steeped in idolatrous worship and superstition. He later served under another arrogant king, Belshazzar, and, subsequently, the Persians.

Although not obvious, Daniel's contribution to God's kingdom was, in reality, very significant.⁴ His high standard of moral qualities and character, together with his careful and faithful discharge of responsibilities in high office, would have been a powerful testimony in the spiritual realm. And it would have significant positive impact on all those he came in contact with and beyond. So too would his unwavering and uncompromising faith in God and calmness even in the face of imminent death. His effective prayer life would also have contributed to the fulfilment of God's purposes. Likewise, the remarkable, significant and deep insights and revelations of the future and the unfolding of God's plans and advancement of His kingdom, which the Lord

was pleased to reveal to and through Daniel, would also have contributed significantly to the fulfilment of God's purposes⁵.

Simeon and Anna

It would be even more difficult to see how effectively Simeon and Anna have contributed to the kingdom of God, but the Scriptures highlights their lives favourably. Simeon and Anna were not noted for being very “active” or for doing what many would regard as “mighty works” for God. Nor were they among the religious leaders of the day. Yet, they were specifically singled out as two people in the whole nation of Israel who were ready for the First Coming of Christ.

Luke 2:25-35

25 And there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; and this man was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel; and the Holy Spirit was upon him.

26 And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ.

27 And he came in the Spirit into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to carry out for Him the custom of the Law,

28 then he took Him into his arms, and blessed God, and said,

29 “Now Lord, You are releasing Your bond-servant to depart in peace,

According to Your word;

30 For my eyes have seen Your salvation,

31 Which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples,

32 A Light of revelation to the Gentiles,

And the glory of Your people Israel.”

33 And His father and mother were amazed at the things which were being said about Him.

34 And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary His mother, “Behold, this Child is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and for a sign to be opposed—

35 and a sword will pierce even your own soul—to the end that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.”

Without any fanfare, the Scriptures introduced Simeon simply as “a man in Jerusalem”. He apparently led a quiet life and would probably have been unnoticed by many had it not been for this inspired account in the Scriptures.

God, through the Scriptures, highlighted the moral and spiritual qualities of this man and the longings of his heart. He was described as devout and righteous and one who was looking forward to the coming of the Messiah, the consolation of Israel. The Holy Spirit was upon him and as he was sensitive to the Holy Spirit, God had the freedom to speak to him and to indicate to him that he would see the Messiah. When the Lord Jesus was brought into the temple as a child, God guided Simeon to testify that this Child was the Messiah. Evidently, within the heart of Simeon, there was a meaningful identification with the heart of the Lord and a desire for the fulfilment of God’s purposes.

Not many people would be conscious of the effectiveness of a life such as Simeon’s because there was hardly any obvious outward manifestation. Yet, this scriptural record highlights to us that what may not appear to be a successful life can indeed be so. This is because positive impact on the spiritual realm and effectiveness of contribution to God’s kingdom basically arise from what is within a person’s heart.

The Scriptures paints a similar picture of the life of Anna the prophetess.

Luke 2:36-38

36 And there was a prophetess, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years and had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage,
 37 and then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple, serving night and day with fastings and prayers.
 38 At that very moment she came up and began giving thanks to God, and continued to speak of Him to all those who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

This passage describes Anna in very favourable terms. For many years of her life, Anna served God day and night with fastings

and prayers. God approved of her life and used her to testify of the Lord Jesus Christ. From the scriptural presentation, we can say that Anna lived a successful life and that she would have contributed significantly to God's kingdom. But such a life is not easily recognised as a life of great achievement, not even by Christians.

May we learn well from the lives of Simeon and Anna so that we will be among those who are ready for the Second Coming of Christ.

The poor widow

The effectiveness and significance of the life and contribution of the poor widow who offered two small copper coins are even less obvious than those of Simeon and Anna. The story of the poor widow is recorded in Mark 12:41-44.

Mark 12:41-44

41 And He sat down opposite the treasury, and began observing how the people were putting money into the treasury; and many rich people were putting in large sums.

42 A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which amount to a cent.

43 Calling His disciples to Him, He said to them, "Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the contributors to the treasury;

44 for they all put in out of their surplus, but she, out of her poverty, put in all she owned, all she had to live on."

What the poor widow had contributed may seem an insignificant amount, but the Lord Jesus made the remarkable statement that she gave more than all the other contributors, which included many rich people who put in large sums of money. How could this be possible? The significance of her contribution was not because of anything special about her two copper coins. It was because of the meaning in her heart. That made the act meaningful and her contribution significant in the eyes of the Lord.

If the Lord Jesus had not highlighted it, it could well be that no one else would have realised the significance of her contribution or even noticed it. Even the poor widow herself, when she put in the two small copper coins, might not be conscious that she was contributing anything significant.

There are important lessons for us to learn from the remark of the Lord Jesus concerning service and significance of contribution to His kingdom.

If a person's heart is right, and he is living a faithful life, then God will appreciate all that he does in fellowship with Him and in obedience to Him. His contributions would be significant in God's eyes, even though they may appear unimportant.

Like the poor widow, such a person could very well be living a life that hardly anyone would notice or would regard as significant.

Likewise, there are believers all over the world who live faithfully and effectively for the Lord, in simplicity and quietness, with hardly any outward sign to attest to the value of their contribution to the kingdom of God. We therefore need not be unduly concerned about the relative absence of contribution in obvious forms.

What motivates us to serve God?

So then, let us ask ourselves: *Is it our longing and prayer that God's perfect will be fulfilled in our lives, whatever form it may take and whatever it may involve?* Are we prepared to fulfil His will without any desire for personal recognition or appreciation by others? Would we be fully contented with such a life, even if it means hardly anyone notices us or recognises us as being effective? Are we able to continue living according to God's perfect will in such a context, without flagging in our zeal and fervour? *Or do we need visible, obvious accomplishments and men's recognition in order to persevere in our walk with God and service for Him?* If we seek accomplishments so that we may be noticed and praised, it is an indication that within us there is a wrong spirit, fleshly desires, pride, and a tendency to make unhealthy comparisons.

We have to resolve this area of our lives decisively. Failure in this area has resulted in various complications and negative consequences in many lives and in the outworking of church life and the Lord's work generally.

A healthy spirit and attitude is very important for true spirituality. We must progress in the direction where our basic desire is for the Lord's will to be fulfilled, and we live lives of truth and faithfulness. These realities in the heart must form the basic motivating force in our lives. This is the way to attain true spirituality and godliness, and the way for the Lord to have much freedom to work deeply and effectively in and through our lives.

Failure to adopt this kind of posture will hinder God's working in our lives and will keep us from experiencing His blessings. We will then fail to attain to a life of spiritual abundance.

Desire for spiritual success

Many Christians would like to emulate Moses and Paul. They want to accomplish great things for God. Such sentiments may appear very positive and spiritual and may be regarded by believers as commendable. But such aspirations can easily be mixed up with an undesirable and unwholesome spirit and attitude of fleshly desire for a sense of accomplishment, recognition by others, status, power and authority.

This kind of spirit is similar to the desire for worldly accomplishments and recognition. It is the spirit of the world being transferred to the Christian context—a desire for spiritual success motivated by fleshly desires.

This is a serious danger to our development and service, and it opens the way for the evil one to work in us, to deceive us and to make use of us for his evil ends. We must deal decisively with any trace of its presence in our lives and prayerfully guard against its emergence and growth. This kind of spirit is not what we find in Moses and Paul. *If we want to be like these two giants of the Christian faith, we need to learn to be truly like them in motivation, spirit and attitude.*

We will reflect further on this issue of right motivation in service in the next and final message, where we will continue to consider the examples of Moses and Paul in their service to God.

Concluding remarks

We must be wary of the subtle influence and pressure towards worldly success. The spirit of the world can easily influence our thinking and approach. We may be seeking to attain worldly success and prosperity and still think that it is all right. Or we may be seeking to attain spiritual success but with an unwholesome spirit.

On the other hand, we should not neglect to fulfil our responsibilities in this world or be deterred from seeking to do well in our career or studies or in spiritual service. The critical issue is: What is it that motivates us, what is the reality in our hearts, what are our true goals and values? Are we honestly and sincerely longing, praying and seeking that God's perfect will be fulfilled in our lives, whatever form it may take?

A life of success cannot be divorced from the fundamental issues of the Christian faith. A life of spiritual abundance, of God's presence and blessings, entails walking in the Spirit and death to the self-life.

The successful life can be manifested in many different forms, some easily recognisable, whereas others may be inconspicuous. Whatever form it may take, it does not matter. The deep longing of our hearts must constantly be to remain faithful to the Lord and to fulfil His perfect will for our lives.

So what does it mean to truly succeed and prosper during our time on earth? It means growing well and contributing effectively to the advancement of His kingdom according to His guidance and enabling. To the degree God's perfect will has been fulfilled in our lives, to that degree we have truly succeeded and prospered.

And as we have seen in the examples of Daniel, Simeon, Anna and the poor widow, positive impact on the spiritual realm and contribution to God's kingdom cannot be measured by outward manifestations. It arises from the quality within one's heart. It is

therefore vital that we pay much attention to nurturing the quality of our heart.

(Endnotes)

¹ The meaning and outworking of the principle of death is considered in detail in two messages on “Identification with the Lord Jesus Christ in His death and resurrection” (AR120-121) posted on the website *www.godandtruth.com*.

² The perfectly successful life of the Lord Jesus is described in Message 6.

³ Appearance and reality pertaining to the death of Christ are covered in detail in messages AR173-274 in the series on *Appearance and Reality* under the section: *Reflections on the Death of the Lord Jesus Christ*.

⁴ The meaning and significance of Daniel’s life and his contributions are considered in detail in messages AR31-44.

⁵ For a fuller appreciation of Daniel’s contribution through God’s revelations to him, please refer to AR40.

True Success and Accomplishment— Right Motivation and Faithfulness

Many of us may wish we could be like Moses and Paul and accomplish great things for God. But what were their motivation, spirit and attitude as they sought to serve the Lord? In this final message, we will consider the importance of right motivation and faithfulness in service to the Lord. We will examine the examples of Moses and Paul.

Moses—his motivation, spirit and attitude

Moses was described in the Scriptures as “very humble, more than any man who was on the face of the earth” (Num. 12:3). He was not one who sought to project himself or one who liked to be seen as doing great things.

Moses' hesitation in assuming leadership

Moses fled Egypt after he killed an Egyptian in a moment of rashness. Forty years later, the Lord called him to lead the people of Israel out of their oppression in Egypt. It was a great task, one associated with status, power and authority. If he succeeded, it would be regarded as a great achievement in the fulfilment of God's purposes. Many would think that such a call by God should be something to lay hold of eagerly, an opportunity not to be missed.

But Moses was reluctant, even unwilling, to shoulder the task. He did not harbour any fleshly desire to accomplish great things in order to attain recognition or status. He had learned humility and had matured during the forty years in the wilderness.

Let us look at Exodus chapters 3 and 4.

Exodus 3 relates how the Lord appeared to Moses in the midst of a burning bush. God told him, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (v. 6). God had given heed to the cry of the Israelites and intended to deliver them from Egypt, and to bring them to a land flowing with milk and honey.

God wanted to entrust this task of leading the Israelites out of Egypt to Moses. But Moses’ reply was, “Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?” (v. 11).

God then gave many assurances to convince Moses that He was in control. He said, “I know the king of Egypt will not permit you to go, except under compulsion. So I will stretch out My hand and strike Egypt with all My miracles which I shall do in the midst of it; and after that he will let you go” (vs. 19-20). The Lord assured Moses that He would manifest His power, and Pharaoh would let the Israelites go.

But still, Moses did not feel assured; he was very hesitant to shoulder such a heavy responsibility, and he asked, “What if they will not believe me or listen to what I say?” (4:1).

The Lord then demonstrated how He would undertake and manifest His power through Moses with miraculous signs. Moses did not seize the opportunity for greatness, but replied, “Please, Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither recently nor in time past, nor since You have spoken to Your servant; for I am slow of speech and slow of tongue” (4:10).

The Lord assured him, “Who has made man’s mouth? Or who makes him mute or deaf, or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now then go, and I, even I, will be with your mouth, and teach you what you are to say” (4:11-12). Yet Moses replied, “Please, Lord, now send the message by whomever You will” (4:13).

Some may wonder whether Moses responded the way he did because he was inadequate for the task and was not ready to shoulder this awesome responsibility. But that was not the case.

It is true that Moses’ response at this point in time was

not totally wholesome, and the Lord was angry with him for failing to obey His call in spite of many assurances (4:14). It could well be that his failure forty years earlier, when he acted rashly and had to flee Egypt, had a bearing on his present inappropriate response and hesitation in shouldering the task. However, his basic attitude was positive.

Moses had by now matured and had attained a high degree of spiritual stature. This was seen when he finally responded to God's call. With God's empowering, he confronted Pharaoh and led the people of Israel out of Egypt, and then led them for forty years in the wilderness. It was a very heavy and difficult responsibility but Moses fulfilled it very well.

The Lord knew that Moses was ready. That was why He called him at that point in time and entrusted him with this great task. It was a very crucial point in time in the history of Israel and in the fulfilment of God's purposes.

The Lord used Moses in a mighty way, and with good basis. It is clear that there were significant positive qualities in Moses. Otherwise the Lord would not have entrusted this important and enormous task to him. He was a very humble man who harboured no fleshly desire for status, power and accomplishment.

No desire for self-glory

Some may initially manifest humility when God calls them to spiritual service. However, with passing time, especially in contexts where there are obvious indications of God working mightily through their ministry, pride and a sense of accomplishment and self-importance can creep in. This did not happen to Moses.

Let us examine another context that showed there was no trace of self-centredness or desire for self-glory in the heart of Moses. This incident took place after Moses had experienced a series of spectacular manifestations of God's power through his ministry, while leading the Israelites out of Egypt.

Exodus 32 records the context where the people, together with Aaron, made and worshipped a molten calf (vs. 1-4). Although

the Lord had wonderfully provided and undertaken for them, they had quickly corrupted themselves and were unfaithful to God.

The Lord was angry with them and said to Moses, “They have quickly turned aside from the way which I commanded them. They have made for themselves a molten calf, and have worshiped it and have sacrificed to it and said, ‘This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt!’ ” (v. 8).

And in verse 10, the Lord told Moses, “Now then let Me alone, that My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them; and I will make of you a great nation.”

Note how Moses pleaded with God not to do so:

Exodus 32:11-14

11 Then Moses entreated the Lord his God, and said, “O Lord, why does Your anger burn against Your people whom You have brought out from the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand?

12 “Why should the Egyptians speak, saying, ‘With evil intent He brought them out to kill them in the mountains and to destroy them from the face of the earth?’ Turn from Your burning anger and change Your mind about doing harm to Your people.

13 “Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants to whom You swore by Yourself, and said to them, ‘I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heavens, and all this land of which I have spoken I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.’ ”

14 So the Lord changed His mind about the harm which He said He would do to His people.

When God indicated to Moses that He wanted to destroy Israel and make of him a great nation, Moses did not rejoice. He did not seize the opportunity and privilege offered him, which would involve great honour, recognition and status from a spiritual perspective. Instead he entreated the Lord not to destroy Israel, although he himself also suffered as a result of the grumbling and unfaithfulness of the people.

The primary concern in Moses' heart was the Lord's name and glory. He had no desire to make a name for himself, to project himself, or to consider his own advantage. He asked the Lord, "O Lord, why does Your anger burn against Your people?" and, "Why should the Egyptians speak, saying, 'With evil intent He brought them out to kill them in the mountains?'" And he reminded the Lord of His promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob: "Remember Abraham, Isaac and Israel, Your servants to whom You swore."

Moses was concerned for the Lord's name, His glory, His purposes and intentions, and His promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God had promised the patriarchs that He would multiply their descendants as the stars of heaven.

Moses was indeed a faithful servant of God. And God answered his prayer. This demonstrates that there is power in the prayer of one who has the right kind of spirit and motivation.

If we have the same kind of character and spirit as Moses, we too can rest assured that our prayers will not be powerless. It does not matter whether or not we are able to pray eloquently, for effectiveness in prayer basically springs forth from the meaning in our hearts and the quality of our lives.

The apostle Paul—a truly successful servant of God

Paul is one of the greatest and most successful servants of the Lord. His teaching and preaching ministry resulted in many turning to the Lord. Many were built up in their faith, and God was pleased to establish many local churches through him. He is indeed a man of great spiritual stature and deep spiritual insight. His epistles and his exemplary life have left an indelible mark on church history.

Paul's basic motivation, approach and attitude

What were Paul's basic motivation, approach and attitude in life? He learnt to humbly submit himself to do the perfect will of God, whatever it might be, whatever it might involve. He gladly chose, as he described himself in his epistles, to be a bond-servant of

the Lord (Rom. 1:1). We can see this attitude from the moment of his conversion, when the Lord Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus.

Acts 22:10

“And I said, ‘What shall I do, Lord?’ And the Lord said to me, ‘Get up and go on into Damascus, and there you will be told of all that has been appointed for you to do.’”

When he recognised that it was the Lord Jesus who appeared to him, he responded, “What shall I do, Lord?” This question revealed an attitude of humble submission to the Lord. And that was Paul’s basic posture and attitude from then on.

The Lord told Paul to go to Damascus where he would be told all that he had been appointed to do. Since then, the Lord continued to guide him and help him recognise what was required of him. And throughout his life, Paul was obedient to the Lord’s will.

We have seen that true success is directly related to the Lord’s will being fulfilled in our lives. Using this as a measure then, Paul can be described as having succeeded to a very high degree, for the Lord’s will for his life was fulfilled. This comes through in his testimony to Timothy near the end of his life on earth:

2 Timothy 4:6-8

6 For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come.

7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith;

8 in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing.

The deep longing of his heart

After Paul's conversion, worldly fame and glory, and man's recognition for his accomplishments no longer mattered to him (Phil. 3:3-8). His consuming desire was "that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death" (Phil 3:10).

"That I may know Him"

These words show that Paul's primary longing in life was to know the Lord deeply. It is not a longing for more head knowledge, but for more personal knowledge of the Lord and a deeper relationship with Him.

"And the power of His resurrection"

There is a proper place to long for power in our lives—the power of the Lord—if our attitudes are correct. We must recognise that we need God's enabling and empowering to fulfil His will. We cannot fulfil His will in our own fleshly strength.

In Ephesians 5:18, Paul exhorts believers to be filled with the Spirit. It is imperative that we know the ministry and power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. However, we must be motivated by a desire to be faithful to God, and not a desire for a sense of power.

"And the fellowship of His sufferings"

When Paul speaks of seeking "the power of His resurrection", he is not referring to seeking the enjoyment of this power, for he goes on to add, "and the fellowship of His sufferings".

Paul did not run away from difficulties and suffering; but he did not rush headlong into them either. He was prepared to endure whatever pain and hardship the Lord saw fit for him to go through. He longed more and more to enter into the fellowship of Christ's sufferings because this is a very meaningful dimension of healthy Christian living. Just as the Lord Jesus suffered for our sakes as He fulfilled the will of God the Father, Paul knew that faithful service to the Lord and obedience to His will would involve

suffering and pain. The faithful disciple of the Lord must deny himself, take up his cross, and daily follow the Lord.

We must be prepared to suffer in the path of obedience to the Lord and in faithful service to Him. A deeper experience of the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives will help us develop a deeper knowledge of God and to be ready for greater depth of the fellowship of Christ's sufferings. Indeed, it is a great privilege and an enriching experience to be able to enter into the fellowship of Christ's sufferings. It draws us into a richer experience of fellowship with the Lord and knowledge of Him, and of what is truly meaningful and beautiful in the spiritual dimension—a deeper identification with what the Lord Jesus went through at the Cross on our behalf. This ongoing process of ever deepening knowledge of God, the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives and the fellowship of Christ's sufferings will, in turn, help us in our service to the Lord and contribution to the advancement of His kingdom.

Pleasing the Lord and exalting Him

We have seen that Paul's one ambition in life was to be pleasing to the Lord. This is his testimony in 2 Corinthians 5:9: "Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him". The Lord Jesus always does what is pleasing to the Father (John 8:29). Paul, following the perfect example of the Lord Jesus, humbly submitted himself to do the perfect will of God. Is this also our ambition?

In Philippians 1:20-21, Paul testifies that his basic approach and motivation in life was to always exalt the Lord with all boldness "by life or by death". He did not exalt himself.

Philippians 1:20-21

20 according to my earnest expectation and hope, that I will not be put to shame in anything, but that with all boldness, Christ will even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.

21 For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

Paul's obedience and faithful service

Paul testified in Acts 20:24:

Act 20:24

“But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God.

This verse reveals Paul's attitude in the midst of all kinds of difficulties and trials, including contexts in which his life was threatened. He was prepared to go through whatever was needful, even to give up his very life, in order that he might finish his course, a course not of his own choosing, but one bound up with the ministry entrusted to him by God.

After many years of faithful service, Paul was able to testify to King Agrippa that he was not disobedient to the heavenly vision (Acts 26:19). He was basically obedient in whatever God desired of him.

Generally, Paul maintained this attitude consistently. This does not mean that there were no failures or lapses in his life. But he was prepared to go through anything, however difficult, unattractive, or humiliating from a human or worldly perspective.

This kind of spirit and attitude is clearly the opposite of having personal desires for recognition and status.

Therefore, when we say we want to be like Paul, let us bear in mind what he had to go through and the attitude with which he went through them. Let us not suppose that Paul's life was a glamorous one. It is the opposite. This comes through as we read his testimony in 1 Corinthians 4:9-13.

1 Corinthians 4:9-13

9 For, I think, God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as men condemned to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men.

10 We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are prudent in Christ; we are weak, but you are strong; you are

distinguished, but we are without honor.

11 To this present hour we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless;

12 and we toil, working with our own hands; when we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure;

13 when we are slandered, we try to conciliate; we have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things, even until now.

In verse 13, we see that Paul was prepared not only to be slandered, but also to become as “the scum of the world”. The word translated “scum” has the meaning of refuse, what is discarded as rubbish, dirt, filth. It is also used to describe condemned criminals of the lowest class. In a similar vein, Paul was also prepared to be treated as “the dregs of all things”. The word translated “dregs” also has the meaning of dirt. When you scrape a dirty vessel, the scrapings are also known as dregs. Paul too was prepared to be a “spectacle to the world” (v. 9)—to be exposed to public ridicule—and to be a fool for Christ’s sake (v. 10).

Verses 10 to 13 also reveal other experiences of Paul. He toiled without honour; he was hungry, thirsty, roughly treated, reviled, slandered and persecuted. While these things were taking place, he was not downcast and did not complain but continued to rejoice in the Lord. He counted it a privilege to be able to be identified with the Lord in this way. This spirit and attitude come through when we read this passage together with 2 Corinthians 4:7-12; 6:4-10 and 11:23-27.

In these three passages in 2 Corinthians, Paul testifies how he was afflicted in every way, beaten, stoned, shipwrecked, imprisoned, exposed to all kinds of dangers and was regarded from the world’s perspective as unknown and as having nothing. He was “always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus” (4:10), yet he was able to minister life to others. In fact, it was because the principle of death was at work in his life that he was able to minister life to others (4:10-12). In the midst of all these difficulties, he was always rejoicing and making many rich spiritually (6:10).

The principle of “the dying of Jesus” refers to our identifying with the meaning and purpose of the death of the Lord Jesus. It is the principle of death to self-life and to personal desires that are contrary to the will of God, including desires for recognition and commendation by others. It is very important that this principle of death operates in our life so that we may experience life for ourselves as well as minister life to others.

Faithful men of God like Paul are examples to us. Their attitude and motivation in life are very different from those of the people of the world. There is the conspicuous absence of any desire for worldly success, recognition and status, which, sadly, many Christians do harbour in their hearts. “Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ”, Paul exhorts Christians in 1 Corinthians 11:1. If we want to move in the same direction, we must deal with our fleshly desires thoroughly.

Assurance of success... abiding in Christ and He in us

If we adopt a spirit and direction similar to that which we see in Moses and Paul, we will live successful lives, and will contribute to the advancement of God’s kingdom. It is not just a “maybe”; we *will* live successful lives and *will* contribute to the advancement of God’s kingdom, because God will have the freedom to be with us and to work in and through us. This is the critical issue.

We see this principle worked out in Joseph’s life. “The Lord was with Joseph, so he became a successful man” (Gen. 39:2). If we live like Joseph, we will likewise be successful and will prosper, whatever the circumstances we need to go through, whatever may take place in our lives, because the Lord will be with us. Our confidence is in God. As we learn to submit to Him, to cooperate with Him, to give up the self-life and all that is of the flesh, He will bring about a life of true success and true accomplishment.

We should learn deeply what the Lord Jesus wants to teach us in the analogy of the vine and the branches in John 15. It is very rich and deep in meaning, and can be appreciated at different depths. One precious truth this passage teaches us is the assurance of a fruitful life.

Let us concentrate on verse 5, where the Lord Jesus says:

John 15:5

“I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.

Just as the branch must abide in the vine to draw nourishment from it and bear fruit, we must abide in Christ if we desire a fruitful life. If the branch is separated from the vine, it withers. Likewise, if we are separated from the Lord, our life will lose its meaning and vitality.

But what does it mean to “abide in Him”? Abiding in Christ refers to believers having a meaningful fellowship with the Lord. It has to do with the condition of our heart—our motivation, our direction in life, our willingness to submit to Him, to obey Him and to be conformed to the character of Christ. When these positive qualities and attitudes are present in our lives, we will have meaningful fellowship with the Lord. To the degree they are present, to that degree will be the depth of our abiding in Him and He in us.

Some may wonder: Isn't the Lord Jesus already dwelling in us from the point of our conversion, when we received Him into our lives? Why then does He talk about Him abiding in us?

It is true that the Lord Jesus is already in us if we are God's children, but in this verse, He is referring to the freedom with which He can manifest Himself in our lives and work through us. In verse 4, He exhorts us, “Abide in Me, and I in you.” It is when we learn to properly submit to the Lord that He has the freedom to work in this manner. The outcome is that we *will* bear much fruit.

A life in which we abide in Him and He in us can never be dull because God is at work in and through us, and He sovereignly undertakes what we go through. There will definitely be much meaning and richness in such a life, regardless of our circumstances and whether we go through difficult times or seemingly uneventful days. We should not be troubled even if our lives do not seem to be

fruitful. We should concentrate on the inward reality, not the outward manifestations.

God's training

God will bring us through His training process to mould our lives and characters so that our abiding in Him will be increasingly deeper and richer. We must therefore cooperate with God in His training programme for us and be willing to go through it well, whatever it takes. This is the way to attain spiritual health and stature, one that is grounded in true knowledge and God's way. The Lord Jesus alludes to God's dealings in our lives when He speaks of the pruning of the branches in John 15:2: "Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit."

God wants to train all who seek to be truly successful. The direction, the process of training, and the inward requirements are essentially the same for all, though the outward manifestations and the way things work out may differ.

Similar goals; differing manifestations

Basically, God requires us to have a healthy spirit with the right motivation, attitude, character and goal. And He is seeking to bring about this inward reality in us.

It does not matter what the outward manifestations may be; the inward realities are what really count. And if we have the inward reality of a healthy spirit with right motivation, attitude, character and goal, we will move towards a life of true success and fruitfulness.

As we seek to work on the positive, we must also give up our wrongful desires and deal with all negative elements in our spirit.

If we go through the various situations of life prayerfully, the Lord will reveal to us our deficiencies. And as we deal with these deficiencies, we can come closer and closer to the posture of wholehearted commitment to Him. The posture of wholehearted commitment to the Lord is the hallmark of a successful life and we

must seek earnestly to make good progress towards increasing depth of quality of such a posture.

How should Christians view doing well in career, achieving status and recognition in society and having material wealth?

The people of the world regard these things as very important. They are gripped by them and equate them with success. It is clear that this ought not be our perspective and approach to life. However, we need not, and should not, totally reject these things. We should not regard them as worldly, evil, or intrinsically harmful, because these things are not wrong or evil in themselves. A faithful walk with God can go together with doing well in career or studies, or having recognition and position in society, or being entrusted with wealth by the Lord. However, we must ensure they are indeed the Lord's will for us.

I shall briefly refer to four biblical examples of men to whom God entrusted wealth and status.

Job

Job was well respected in society; he had status and was a wealthy man. God appreciated him greatly because he was a blameless and upright man. Job lived a life of faithfulness to God. Although he was severely afflicted and lost his children, wealth, and possessions during the trials, God blessed him again with wealth and status after that period of testing. This shows that possessions, wealth and status were part of the Lord's will for him.

Joseph

Joseph was exalted to become the ruler of Egypt, second only to Pharaoh. But it was not a position that he coveted. It was clearly the Lord's will for him to be in that position of power and wealth.

David

When David was on the throne, he had recognition, authority and wealth and it was the will of God for him to be the king of Israel (1 Sam. 16:1, 11-13). It can, at times, be God's will for some of His children to be in such positions.

Daniel

Daniel was regarded as a man of high esteem, for God deeply appreciated him. He was faithful in all his ways and lived an exemplary life. With God's help and enabling and the wisdom that God gave him, Daniel attained a high position in society and was a good testimony for the Lord. It was the Lord's will for him to be in such a high earthly office.

What makes it wrong is the pursuit of these things

What then is the issue? What is it that makes these things the world equates with success unhealthy and negative? It has to do with our hearts' longing and approach. Do our hearts long for these things and reach out for them? Do we pursue these things as our goals and view them as marks of success and accomplishment in life? Do we seek fleshly indulgence and the fleshly enjoyment of material things? It is the erroneous perception and improper longing to lay hold of these things that make such pursuits wrong and unhealthy. For example, there is nothing wrong with having money; the problem is the love for it.

As Christians, we should consecrate our lives to the Lord, to be true and faithful to Him. We should set our hearts on the things above, and the prayer and longing of our hearts ought to be, "Your kingdom come, Your will be done". Should the Lord see it fit for us to attain status and material wealth as part of a faithful walk with Him, we need not feel uneasy about it. We must, however, take note of three points:

First, these things are neither the basis nor the measurement of true success.

Second, these things must be held with open hands and with a true willingness to give them all up at anytime. We must not be gripped by them.

Daniel, in his faithful walk with the Lord, could be in a very high earthly position or in the lions' den. Regardless, he was prepared, not only to give up all his wealth and status, but also to face death for his faith.

What counts is being faithful to God. The correct posture of concentrating on being faithful to God will ensure that our life will be a truly meaningful life of success and accomplishment in the spiritual realm, whatever the context we may be in. Regardless of how things may appear, something positive will be taking place in the kingdom of God.

It would be incorrect to say that nothing positive was happening during the period when Joseph was a slave or a prisoner, or when Daniel was in the lions' den. In fact, those periods of time could very well be among the most positive and fruitful periods of their lives. How Joseph and Daniel went through those times glorified God and are powerful testimonies in the spiritual realm. There is much that we can learn from their lives and from their preparedness to be faithful to God whatever the cost. And the way God undertook for them is a great encouragement to all who desire to be faithful to God. However, trusting God's undertaking does not mean believing that He will always deliver those who trust Him from physical pain, suffering or even death (Heb. 11:36-38). This was the attitude Daniel's three friends demonstrated when they faced the prospect of being thrown into the furnace of fire (Dan. 3:18).

Third, we must have a genuine willingness never to have any of these things the world equates with success and be equally contented with or without them. Is this true of our lives? This was the attitude of the apostle Paul, which he reveals in Philippians 4:

Philippians 4:11-13

11 Not that I speak from want, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am.

12 I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need.

13 I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.

The apostle Paul "learned to be content in whatever circumstances" he was in (v. 11). Whatever the Lord saw fit for him,

he was fully satisfied. His heart was at rest. He did not reach out for any other thing, so long as he could walk faithfully with the Lord. He could get on well, be it “humble means” or “prosperity” (v. 12).

Paul revealed that “in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry” (v. 12). If he was filled, that was fine with him; if he had to go hungry, he would also continue to rejoice. Whether it was “having abundance” or “suffering need”, he was contented. His heart was not centred on these things. His basic concentration was on the Lord—“for to me, to live is Christ” (Phil. 1:21). What mattered to him was whether he was exalting the Lord (Phil. 1:20) and whether he was walking faithfully with Him. *His joy and meaning in life was in the Lord. He found his satisfaction in God, in His fellowship, and in being faithful to Him.*

Paul also testified that “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me” (v. 13). The text here has the meaning that Paul had the strength, not only to do all things, but also to go through all kinds of situations. It is not that Paul was able to do so by himself, but it was through or in the Lord. The Lord Jesus Christ was empowering him and strengthening him. That was the secret of his life. He was abiding in Christ and Christ was abiding in him. Is this also true of our lives?

These things can easily become a snare

At this point, I want to sound a note of caution. Although God may see it fit for us to experience some of these things, like doing well in career, having status in society and having material wealth, let us realise that these things can easily become a snare and a distraction. They can dilute our faith and commitment to God. We must be vigilant. Not many are able to fare well spiritually when they have an abundance of material wealth or when they attain secular status and authority.

Remember King Saul—he started with much promise, but note how his life degenerated after he was appointed king. He was unable to cope spiritually with being in that position. One factor that contributed to his degeneration was his clinging on to the kingship against the will of God¹.

King Uzziah is another example. The Scriptures records in 2 Chronicles 26 that he fared well initially and, with the Lord's help, grew in stature and power as a king. He had a powerful army. But he was not able to cope in that position. He became proud and sinned against God. It led to God's judgement, and he ended up being a leper till the end of his life.

The evil one tempted the Lord Jesus in the wilderness with "all the kingdoms of the world and their glory" (Matt. 4:8). Likewise, he seeks to tempt us by offering us these things in order to destroy us. Let us not be ignorant of his wiles.

It is very easy to be deluded into thinking that we have already resolved these areas in our lives. We may also rationalise wrongful desires within us by saying that it is not wrong for Christians to have such things, as long as our attitudes are right. We must exercise care not to justify ourselves in this way when there are such wrongful desires within us.

We may be sincerely seeking to grow, to serve God and to honour Him, and yet at the same time, we can be harbouring such wrongful desires. Having such mixed motives is often more prevalent and subtler than we may realise. We may refuse to acknowledge its presence in our hearts or fail to deal with them decisively. We may rationalise, for example, by saying that when we do well in career, or are well recognised in our professions, we will be good witnesses for Christ. But in reality, there could be personal ambition in our hearts to achieve these things and the spirit of the world is already at work in us. If this is the case, the work of the Holy Spirit will be hindered in our lives. This is a major stumbling block to true spiritual growth and success.

Some Christians may not seek these things initially. They may start off with good attitudes. But when they attain these things, they begin to cling to them. This will immediately have a negative effect on their spiritual life and their spiritual health and vitality.

Learning to be contented

Let us examine 1 Timothy 6:7-12, a passage that teaches us to be content and explains why.

1 Timothy 6:7-12

7 For we have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it either.

8 If we have food and covering, with these we shall be content.

9 But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction.

10 For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

11 But flee from these things, you man of God, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness.

12 Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called, and you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

In verse 7, the apostle Paul tells us that “we cannot take anything out” of the world, emphasising the transitory nature of the things of this world. They are perishable and have no eternal value. Isn’t it foolish then for us to be preoccupied with amassing earthly wealth? Instead, we should learn to be content even if we have only the basic necessities of life, with “food and covering” as Paul puts it in verse 8.

In verse 9, Paul tells us “those who want to get rich fall into temptation”, and in verse 10 he tells us “the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil”. There is nothing essentially evil or wrong with riches or money. The real issue is that of having wrong desires—the desire to be rich and the love of money. If we harbour such “foolish and harmful” desires, we will be exposing ourselves to temptations and will easily be ensnared. But in spite of clear biblical teachings and warnings, many believers are still ensnared, leading to their “ruin and destruction” (v. 9).

In verse 11, Paul exhorts us to turn away from pursuing the things of the world and instead to pursue “righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness”. This is part of fighting “the good fight of faith” (v. 12). Some believers may think that fighting the good fight of faith is a reference to spiritual warfare in

the spiritual dimension and fail to realise that many “battles” that we need to fight and win also involve the visible, material, worldly attractions of this life. Fighting the good fight of faith involves fleeing from wrongful desires, and pursuing that which really counts. Our chief concern should therefore be with the things of enduring meaning and value in God’s eternal kingdom.

Concluding remarks

What is crucial to true success and accomplishment is having the right motivation and being faithful to God. This will result in God’s approval of our lives, in His blessings and undertaking, and in spiritual growth and fruitfulness. Then, whatever we do or go through in life, whether in prison or in an exalted earthly position like Joseph, whether as a fleeing fugitive or as king like David, and whether in the lions’ den or in a high position in society like Daniel, there will be meaning and quality in our lives, whether or not it is obvious to others or to ourselves.

It is helpful always to remember the poor widow who contributed the two small copper coins. She might not even be conscious of the meaningfulness and significance of her contribution. Yet her contribution was very significant because her heart was right.

The Lord looks at the heart, and the true meaning that flows forth from there. The quality and the reality within is the critical issue. This is the way and perspective of God’s kingdom.

Are we committed to this way and perspective? Are we concentrating on the inward qualities of our heart or are we indulging in our fleshly desires? *What we are committed to and what we concentrate on in life will determine whether we will be truly successful!*

(Endnote)

¹ The life of Saul and his degeneration are considered in detail in two messages G10 and G11, both available on the website www.godandtruth.com.

Closing Thoughts

We have seen that the kingdom of God is very much in the heart of our Lord Jesus. God the Father sent Him into the world to proclaim His kingdom and to draw all men into it. He came into the world and, by His teaching, life, death and resurrection, laid the foundation for the kingdom and the basis for its advancement.

The Lord Jesus sets the perfect example for us. By His life and teaching, He shows us what the kingdom is like and how we are to live in this world for His kingdom. And He has entrusted to us the solemn responsibility of continuing to build His kingdom.

To fare well, we must abide in Christ and He in us. We will then be able to learn and grow well, and be increasingly conformed to the image of Christ. As we learn to take our proper place and fulfil our individual part as members of Christ's body, in fellowship with the brethren, the ministry of light and life will flow forth from us. Our lives will manifest the true meaning of the advancement of God's kingdom, which is primarily in the hearts of men. God's kingdom advances when more and more people affirm loyalty to Him and submit to Him, and when there is a deepening quality and meaning of God's reign, power and glory in and through the lives of His children. This must be the primary concern and burden of our hearts.

We will encounter adverse circumstances and suffer various afflictions, and our lives may appear a failure in the eyes of the world. But we must persevere in this path, learning to see beyond the outward manifestations to the ultimate meaning and reality of all things from the perspective of God's kingdom. Just as the Lord Jesus despised the shame and endured the Cross, we too must deny ourselves, take up our cross daily and follow Him. This is the path of true discipleship and fruitfulness.

For personal reflection

Do you have a longing to know the Lord Jesus more deeply, abide by His teaching, follow His example and walk in His steps?

It is helpful to take time to reflect on what the truths in these eight messages mean to you. How deeply have you identified with what is upon the Lord's heart? Is advancing God's kingdom your all-consuming passion? Have you been seeking to advance God's kingdom according to your own way and strength instead of His? Are you concentrating on nurturing moral and spiritual qualities in your heart, that Christ may be formed in you, or are you enticed by earthly riches, worldly success, power, status and recognition? Are you the salt of the earth and the light of the world, a positive influence in this fallen world, or are you being influenced by its trends and values? Can you, like Paul, affirm from the depth of your heart: "For to me, to live is Christ"?

Let us be mindful that we are ambassadors for Christ, living in a fallen world with its many temptations and pitfalls, and relentlessly opposed by a formidable and crafty enemy. Let us always be prayerful and alert. Let all we are and do commend us as trustworthy servants of the Lord. Let us encourage one another in this path. As we persevere in doing our part to fulfil God's eternal purpose, we can rejoice that we are truly living the successful life.

Beyond *The Two Kingdoms*

As the Lord Jesus is at the heart of the fulfilment of God's purposes, it is my prayer that the Spirit of God will kindle within our hearts a deep longing for a fuller and more wholesome understanding and appreciation of:

- the Lord Jesus Christ, His life, teaching and ministry
- how we can identify more deeply with what is in His heart
- what Christ has accomplished at the Cross and what this means to us

- the unfathomable riches of Christ and what God intends for us in Christ and through Christ
- how we can perceive and respond to people and situations in fellowship with the Lord, reflecting His character, values and concerns.

May God always lead us in His triumph in Christ and manifest through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place.

A personal word

My heart's burden has been to help believers gain insight into what God intends for His children and to enable them to enter into a rich experience of that reality. This has undergirded my preaching and counselling ministry. It was with this in view that I preached the series of messages on *The Lord Jesus Christ* and *Reflections on the Death of Christ*. Fresh angles of appreciating these issues are being considered in another series of messages on *The Fulfilment of God's Purposes*¹.

(Endnote)

¹ The messages on *The Lord Jesus Christ* (AR118-172), *Reflections on the Death of Christ* (AR173-274) and *The Fulfilment of God's Purposes* are available on the website www.godandtruth.com.