

Messages on Pentecost

Prof. Johan Malan

website: www.bibleguidance.co.za

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Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version, unless otherwise stated.

1. The Feast of Pentecost

The earliest origin of the feast of Pentecost, in a prophetic form, was when it was part of Israel's seven big feasts which were, according to Leviticus 23, celebrated in a fixed annual cycle. In the New Testament fulfilment of these feasts, we can follow the way of salvation which starts at the cross and the first cleansing of our sins, then proceeds to the resurrection life and the filling of the Holy Spirit, after which it leads to the long process of world evangelism until the end of the church dispensation. This period will be followed by the final gathering in of the harvest and the establishment of the Messiah's thousand year reign of peace on earth.

The first four feasts, from Passover to Pentecost, are closely associated with one another. With the dawning of the New Testament, they were all fulfilled in close succession during the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, as well as the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The last three feasts are jointly described as the harvest feast, and will be fulfilled at the second coming of Christ. A period of four months elapsed annually between these two groups of feasts, during which the harvest was gathered in Israel. Let us investigate the events leading up to the feast of Pentecost.

The Passover

The Passover is celebrated in the first month of Israel's religious calendar. That is in March or April on our calendar: "On the fourteenth day of the first month at twilight is the Lord's Passover" (Lev. 23:5). Israel's calendar is based upon lunar months which start with the new moon; consequently, it is full moon on the 14th day of the month.

Moses said to Israel: "Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male of the first year... Now you shall keep it until the fourteenth day of the same month. Then the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill it at twilight. And they shall take some of the blood and put it on the two door-posts and on the lintel of the houses where they eat it... For I will pass through the land of Egypt on that night, and will strike all the first-born in the land of Egypt... Now the blood shall be a sign for you... When I see the blood I will pass over you; and the plague shall not be on you to destroy you" (Ex. 12:5-7,12-13).

With the institution of the Passover, the first formal guidelines were established in terms of which God's plan of salvation for mankind was finally fulfilled 1500 years later during the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The fulfilment of the Passover was the crucifixion of the spotless Lamb of God, who became man in the fullness of time to lay down His life on our behalf. John the Baptist pointed at Him and said: "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). Peter also referred to the priceless sacrifice of the Lamb when he said: "...you were not redeemed with corruptible things, *like* silver or gold, from your aimless conduct *received* by tradition

from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot" (1 Pet. 1:18-19). Paul said, "In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace" (Eph. 1:7).

Because of the typological nature of the Passover, pointing to the future sacrifice of the Lamb of God, it was obvious that this feast was due to be fulfilled during one of its future celebrations. The Lord Jesus was indeed sacrificed on the day of the Passover. Have you accepted this big sacrifice in faith? "The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed... the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all" (Isa. 53:5-6). The question is whether your heart has been cleansed by the blood of the Lamb? If the atoning death of the Lamb has not been imputed to you, your heart and life have not been purified – then you will have to pay the penalty for your sins, which is death. The Lord says, "When I see the blood I will pass over you" (Ex. 12:13). He does *not* say, "If I see a good life, a certificate of baptism or confirmation, or a degree in theology, I will pass over you." Only the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses from all sin and unrighteousness (1 John 1:7). The condition for forgiveness is that all sin should be confessed and forsaken (1 John 1:8-9; Prov. 28:13). Do this, and you will have eternal life!

The feast of the unleavened bread

The feast of the Unleavened Bread commenced directly after Passover: "And on the fifteenth day of the same month *is* the Feast of Unleavened Bread to the LORD; seven days you must eat unleavened bread. On the first day you shall have a holy convocation; you shall do no customary work on it" (Lev. 23:6-7). To orthodox Jews this was a feast of soul-searching and cleansing. As yeast is a symbol of sin, eating unleavened bread would mean that the believer was honestly committed to live a holy life. Therefore, they had to remove all the yeast from their houses for the duration of the feast. This rule was to be applied so stringently that they even had to sweep out crumbs of leavened bread and burn it outside (Ex. 12:15). In the same way, the lives of people had to be cleansed by forsaking all known sins.

The unleavened bread was to be eaten with the meat of the sacrificial lamb and bitter herbs (Ex. 12:8). The people did not only obtain salvation through the blood of the lamb, but they also had to gain strength for the difficult journey that lay ahead by eating the lamb's meat. The bitter herbs allude to the suffering caused by sin, as well as the suffering that the lamb had to endure. The people of Israel had to take shelter under the blood of an innocent lamb that was sacrificed on their behalf, in order that their afflictions caused by their bondage to sin could be ended. The haste in which the meal was to be taken was part of the preparations for the journey of deliverance on which they had to embark towards a new life. They were sojourners and pilgrims on earth, on a journey to their eternal home.

This feast, which was part of the Passover celebrations, was fulfilled by

the death and burial of Christ. He was the seed that had fallen into the ground and died in order to grow and bear fruit (John 12:24). As the perfect and sinless Son of God, *He* was the unleavened bread of life through whom we could come to spiritual life. That was why Jesus said: "I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world" (John 6:51). He does not only deliver us from our bondage to sin but also enables us to walk the path of the redeemed and to fight the good fight of faith in an evil world.

It is expected of us to identify so closely with Christ as the unleavened bread of life that we will purge out all leaven of sin from our lives. Paul says, "Your glorying *is* not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover [Lamb] was sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened *bread* of sincerity and truth" (1 Cor. 5:6-8).

The Jews had to search their houses on their knees for traces of yeast. In the same way we have to search our lives in the light of God's Word and leave all traces of evil behind. Use the following Scriptures as guidelines for searching your life and committing yourself anew to the Lord:

- ✠ "Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my anxieties; and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Ps. 139:23-24).
- ✠ "Now you must also put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him" (Col. 3:8-10).
- ✠ "Therefore, laying aside all malice, all guile, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking, as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby" (1 Pet. 2:1-2).
- ✠ "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" 1 John 1:8-9).
- ✠ "Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2 Cor. 7:1).

We must confess all sins and make a clean break with our past life as it is impossible to follow the Lord with a heritage of unconfessed sins. These sins will cause us to stumble and fall down. If we thoroughly cleanse ourselves from these things we can trust the Lord for a new filling with the Holy Spirit. He *will* do it for us!

The feast of the First-fruits

This feast introduces Israel's annual harvest season. Right at its beginning, the entire harvest must be dedicated to the Lord by a special feast. Apart from this, the nation itself is to be made acceptable to the Lord through the waving of the sheaf of the first-fruits:

Tell the Israelites, When you have come into the land I give you and reap its harvest, you shall bring the sheaf of the first-fruits of your harvest to the priest; and he shall wave the sheaf before the Lord, that you may be accepted; on the next day after the Sabbath the priest shall wave it [before the Lord] (Lev. 23:10-11; *Amplified Bible- AB*).

Israel is a winter rainfall area, and the first sheaf of barley was given to the Lord as a sacrifice during springtime (wheat is not ready for harvesting till later). The feast of the First-fruits was usually celebrated close to the time of the Passover. The barley was nearly ready to be harvested when the Jews left Egypt (Ex. 9:31). This adds to the meaning of the spring month of Nissan as the beginning of a new life. Not only did Jesus rise from the grave in that month, but the Jews were also led out of Egypt in Nissan. The wave offering is scheduled for a Sunday (the day after the Sabbath). It was a very meaningful event, for this celebration was meant to make the people of Israel acceptable to the Lord.

In the year 32, the ceremony was conducted on Sunday morning – the day on which Jesus rose from the grave. It was the day after the Sabbath: “Now when *He* rose early on the first *day* of the week, He appeared first to Mary Magdalene” (Mark 16:9). The seed that had fallen in the ground (the death and burial of Jesus) gave its first fruit on that Sunday morning when Jesus rose from the grave. It also indicated the beginning of the harvest of souls, for the whole harvest that would be gathered after that would be acceptable to God through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Furthermore, it signalled the transition from the old covenant to the new. That is why it had to happen on a Sunday, the first day of the week and symbolically the beginning of a new dispensation. That is why the celebration of the special day of rest and dedication to the Lord was changed from the seventh to the first day of the week in the new dispensation of grace. Because of the finished work of the Messiah, we can celebrate resurrection day every Sunday. We have entered into the new covenant with God through Him, and are therefore active partakers in the resurrection life of Jesus our Lord:

And if Christ is not risen, your faith *is* futile; you are still in your sins!... But now Christ has risen from the dead, *and* has become the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep (1 Cor. 15:17,20).

After the resurrection of Christ, the disciples always assembled on Sundays (cf. Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:1-2). The outpouring of the Holy Spirit, when the disciples were endued with the power of the Holy Spirit to fulfil their commission of world evangelisation, also occurred on a Sunday. So, it was

not by chance that the early disciples started celebrating Sundays as the day of the Lord.

The feast of Pentecost

The feast of the wave-offering and the feast of Pentecost are jointly referred to as the feast of the first-fruits. They are also described as the feast of the weeks as they are celebrated seven weeks apart. According to Israel's system of inclusive reckoning, the seven weeks are expressed as 50 days, since both the first and the last Sundays are counted:

And you shall count for yourselves from the day after the Sabbath, from the day that you brought the sheaf of the wave offering: Seven Sabbaths shall be completed. Count fifty days to the day after the seventh Sabbath; then you shall offer a new grain offering to the LORD. You shall bring from your habitations two wave *loaves* of two-tenths of an *ephah*. They shall be of fine flour; they shall be baked with leaven. *They are* the first-fruits to the LORD (Lev. 23:15-17).

Only the first and the fiftieth days of the feast of the first-fruits were celebrated. On the fiftieth day, a Sunday, two leavened loaves had to be given to God as a wave offering. Remember that leaven is the symbol of sin, therefore these two loaves do not refer to the Messiah. They are to be seen as prophetic symbols of two groups of believers – in Israel and also in the Gentile world. The believers from Israel and the nations are despite their salvation not sinless and perfect, and should be consecrated to the Lord. That is the meaning of this ceremony. We need to humble ourselves before the Lord and purge out all leaven of sin from our lives. Since we are called to higher levels of sanctification we should live lives in which sin and fleshly desires are more and more put off as we more fully put on the Lord Jesus.

The Jews celebrate the onset of the dispensation of the law at *Pentecost* (derived from the Greek word *pentecoste*, meaning *fiftieth*). They believed that the people of Israel arrived at Sinai fifty days after their departure from Egypt. It was there that God gave Moses the law (Ex. 19:1-3). It was for the celebration of this feast that the Jews from all over the world gathered in Jerusalem on the day when the Holy Spirit descended (Acts 2). They did not realise that the Passover, the feast of the Unleavened Bread *and* the feast of the First-fruits had already been fulfilled through the atoning work and resurrection of Jesus. Therefore, they did not realise that the dispensation of the law had been consummated. The new dispensation of grace, ministered by the Holy Spirit, was to come in its place, “for the code of the law kills, but the Holy Spirit makes alive” (2 Cor. 3:6 *AB*. See also Heb. 8:7-13 and Jer. 31:31). 3 000 people died at Sinai because they were punished under the law for worshipping an idol (Ex. 32:28). On the day of Pentecost, of which we read in the New Testament, 3 000 people were saved when the new dispensation was introduced by the pouring out of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:41).

The beginning of the dispensation of the church at Pentecost, indicates that it replaces the dispensation of the law. It was another example of God's

perfect timing, since 40 days passed between the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, and another ten days while the disciples were praying and waiting for the Holy Spirit to be poured out. This total of 50 days is exactly the same as the time that expired between the two wave offerings of the feast of the First-fruits. We still recognise this chronology since we celebrate the resurrection day on the Sunday after Good Friday, the ascension 40 days later on a Thursday, and Pentecost ten days later, again on a Sunday.

It is also interesting that Pentecost is not celebrated in isolation. It forms part of a whole cycle of feasts and is intimately linked to the Passover festival 50 days earlier. For this reason, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit must always be seen in its close association with the whole series of events that include the death, resurrection and ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ. There are many people today who fail to observe the close relationship between these events. They place so much emphasis on the Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit that Jesus and His atoning death on the cross are virtually ignored.

A crucified life is a condition for being filled with the Holy Spirit (Luke 9:23). One should not only kneel before the cross to be cleansed from all your sins by the blood of the Lamb, but also to be crucified to the world and to sin. You should die to your old, sinful nature and be resurrected into a new life with Christ Jesus. We must put on the new man which was created according to God, in righteousness and true holiness. Only the Holy Spirit can endue us with the resurrection life of Jesus Christ. That is the blessing for which the disciples waited during the ten days between the ascension of Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

We should not expect signs and wonders, such as speaking in tongues, when we are filled with the Holy Spirit, as that was never promised to the disciples. That was only a transitional sign during those early years to publicly demonstrate that the gospel of Christ was meant for all peoples and tongues. The basic promise that was made to the disciples was the enduing with power from on high to enable them to be witnesses for Christ in a hostile world.

We should retain our confidence and zeal for the cause of the Lord, and for this we need new to be filled anew with the Holy Spirit. When the disciples experienced much criticism and threats, the Lord again filled them with His Holy Spirit to inwardly strengthen them. In Acts 2 the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit for the first time. In Acts 4 we read that the persecution against them was so intense that they prayed to God for grace to enable them to continue with their work: "Now, Lord, look on their threats, and grant to your servants that with all boldness they may speak your word" (Acts 4:29). The Lord answered this prayer by again filling them with His Holy Spirit: "...and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness... And with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And great grace was upon them

all” (Acts 4:31,33). In Acts 13:50-52 we read of another occasion where the Holy Spirit fills people under very demanding circumstances.

We can also trust the Lord with a new touch of power from on high. Are you caught up in a big crisis or conflict, or are you still controlled by the flesh or sin? Then humble yourself before the Lord, trust Him for complete deliverance and declare yourself willing to be emptied so that His Spirit can fill you. Let us wait on the Lord for a new anointing by His Spirit.

The reaping of the harvest

The feast of the first-fruits is followed by a period of four months, during which the harvest is reaped. That leads up to the last three feasts, which are jointly described as the harvest feast. Prophetically, the long period between the two groups of feasts alludes to the dispensation of the church, when the harvest for the kingdom of heaven is gathered on earth. This is a time of dedicated service to the Lord. Jesus urged His disciples to take action: “Do you not say, There are still four months, and then comes the harvest? Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest!” (John 4:35). On another occasion He said: “The harvest truly is great, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into His harvest” (Luke 10:2). In one of His parables he likens the whole world to a field and the final reaping of the harvest as the end of the age (Matt. 13:38-39).

We are still in the harvest season. Soon, the trumpet of the Lord will sound when the harvest of saved souls will be gathered in heaven. The message of Pentecost is of vital importance for the execution of the Great Commission, as no believer can gather the harvest of the Lord unless he or she has been empowered by the Holy Spirit. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit was the promise for which the early disciples had to tarry in Jerusalem. This power was not only promised to a selected group of disciples but to all of them. Not one of us can be an effective witness for Christ if this power is lacking in our lives. Without it we will not be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. We need the help of the Lord to be able to convincingly proclaim the gospel message because our preaching should not be persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power (1 Cor. 2:4). We need the enabling power of the Holy Spirit.

The disciples searched and humbled themselves while waiting on the promise of the Holy Spirit for ten days. To them all it was a second work of grace. They were already saved and experienced the peace of the forgiveness of their sins, which was given to them by the Spirit of God dwelling within them. On the day of the resurrection of Jesus they received the Great Commission to evangelise the world: “Then Jesus said to them again, Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you. And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, Receive the Holy Spirit” (John 20:21-22).

On the day of Pentecost they received the power to execute the Great Commission. All of us need the peace *and* power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We receive the peace of God when we are born again. This peace expels the dark feelings of guilt which were caused by our sins and lost state. After being reconciled to God we receive the joyful confirmation that we belong to Him and will one day go to heaven. The joy, peace and power of the Holy Spirit should be present throughout our lives as an indication that we are still walking with the Lord.

When the peace of the Lord no longer reigns in your heart, it is a sure indication that you are moving outside the will of God. Then, the Holy Spirit will not give you peace but instead convict you of your sin and carnal attitude. You should immediately correct the problem and restore your former relationship with the Lord. Do not take decisions on any matter before praying over it and experiencing the peace of the Lord in your heart to confirm that you are doing the right thing.

The power of the Holy Spirit will enable you to live victoriously, thereby averting a life of continued stumbling: "Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh" (Gal. 5:16). Wait on the Lord and trust Him for a new enduement with the power of the Holy Spirit. He will do it for you!

2. Power From on High

The Great Commission which the disciples received coincided with a promise that they would receive the power to do this very demanding work. Without the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit it would be completely impossible for them to successfully act as disciples of Christ in a hostile world. The Lord Jesus explicitly prohibited them from starting with evangelisation before they were endued with the power of the Holy Spirit. He said, "Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And you are witnesses of these things. Behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you: but tarry in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high" (Luke 24:46-49).

It is important to understand the promise of power from on high in its right context, i.e spiritual equipment to enable us to work for the Lord. This does not refer to salvation as the disciples were already regenerated by the Holy Spirit and had received the peace of the forgiveness of sins. On the day when Jesus rose from the dead He appeared in their midst and said: "Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you. And when He said this, He breathed on them and said to them, Receive the Holy Spirit" (John 20:21-22). They were saved before the day of Pentecost, and were also commissioned to evangelise the world, but had not yet received the second work of grace by being filled with the Holy Spirit.

Why did the disciples have to wait for ten days after the ascension of Christ before the Holy Spirit was poured out upon them? This was a much needed time of humbling themselves in preparation for the important blessing which the Lord had promised to them.

The ten days of waiting on the outpouring of the Holy Spirit was a time of soul-searching and spiritual cleansing. When the Holy Spirit searches the lives, thoughts and desires of believers in the light of God's Word, He often reveals to them many sins, impurities and materialism of which they should be cleansed. The Lord says that if we confess these sins He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). We should be clean channels through whom He can work.

This was also a time of denying and crucifying themselves (Luke 9:23). They had to realise that the flesh with its passions and desires must be crucified, and that they should be cleansed of all inclinations towards carnality and worldliness. Then only will the Holy Spirit take full control of their lives. What happens if the old nature (the flesh) of a believer is not crucified? "The flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish" (Gal. 5:17). Put off the old man and surrender him to be crucified;

then alone will you be able to walk in the Spirit and refrain from fulfilling the desires of the flesh (Gal. 5:16). We should first be emptied of ourselves before we can be filled with the Holy Spirit. The flesh strives after sin, self-honouring, pride, wealth and many other things of the world. The Spirit cannot inculcate and promote godly characteristics in us as long as we have an uncrucified flesh. The disciples surrendered themselves fully and waited upon the Lord to endue them with the new man which was created according to God, in righteousness and true holiness (Eph. 4:24).

During this time they denied themselves, emptied themselves and confessed that they could not do anything without the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. In their own power they would never be able to accomplish this big task. Before Pentecost the disciples naively thought they could remain true to the Lord Jesus on their own, but they seriously misjudged the situation. Peter was not even able to confess his faith in Jesus to a lowly servant girl, and denied the Lord three times in the same evening. But on the day of Pentecost he proclaimed the saving grace of the Lord Jesus with great boldness to thousands of people. What was responsible for the big change in his life? The power of the Holy Spirit.

Before Pentecost the disciples realised they would never be able to serve the Lord without a spiritual Guide and Teacher. For this reason the Holy Spirit has come, to guide them into all truth and declare to them the things which the Lord Jesus has spoken (John 16:13-14). The disciples did not only receive enlightened eyes of the mind to understand the Word of the Lord, but they also consciously experienced the presence of the Son and the Father in their hearts (John 14:23). The Holy Spirit thus comforted them and removed the sorrow which they experienced because of the physical absence of the Lord Jesus after His ascension.

The Holy Spirit also played a decisive role in giving the disciples victory over fear – fear of people and also fear for the attacks of Satan. The fear which they experienced during the events surrounding the persecuting and crucifixion of Christ had vanished and was replaced by great boldness. That enabled them to continue proclaiming Christ, even in the midst of severe threats, intimidation and persecution. This power also enabled them to prevail against the temptations and attacks of Satan. Paul referred to the power of the Holy Spirit when he said: “Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might. Put on the whole armour of God that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil” (Eph. 6:10-11). The enabling power of God’s Spirit is indispensable to every Christian.

A further very important difference which the filling of the Holy Spirit made in the lives of the disciples was to separate them from the world and worldly desires, and to instil a longing in their hearts to their home in heaven. An active expectation of Christ’s second coming was inherently part of their existence. The Holy Spirit did not only guide them into the truth of the gospel message but also taught them about the things to come (John 16:13). In His

last teaching to the disciples, the Lord Jesus said: "Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In my Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And 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" (John 14:1-3). This promise motivated them not to decline in the expectation of their eternal home in heaven, but to keep on proclaiming the message of God's kingdom. The Holy Spirit equips us for our work on earth and also prepares us to appear before the Lord Jesus holy and without blemish.

The promised enduement with power from on high transformed the faltering and fearful disciples into determined, committed and Spirit-filled Christians who proclaimed the gospel of the cross fearlessly, even in the midst of the greatest opposition. They realised it was in their interest that Jesus had ascended to heaven so that the promise of the fullness of the Spirit could be fulfilled to them. After this, Jesus could communicate with each of His disciples, wherever he or she was in the world. Jesus Christ was living in His disciples and He endued them with spiritual power to witness with authority of His saving grace. Christ multiplied Himself in this way to address the unsaved world in different places at the same time through His disciples. They represented Him.

Depending on each disciple's level of dedication, there was no limit to what the Lord could do through them. If they were clean vessels, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, they would achieve much in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus even said that they would do greater things as He did during His earthly ministry because He was going to His Father and would pour out the Holy Spirit upon them (John 14:12). That indeed happened, as 3000 people were saved on the day of Pentecost. Evangelisation of this extent never happened during the time of Jesus on earth. Why not? Jesus Christ had not yet paid the ransom for the sins of the world, the Holy Spirit was not yet poured out in His Pentecostal fullness, and knowledge of the doctrine of salvation was very limited before the crucifixion of Christ.

The gospel message first had to be intensively proclaimed by Spirit-filled disciples, also in the languages of the peoples to whom they preached. Initially, the Lord gave certain disciples the supernatural ability to preach the gospel in other tongues, thereby clearly demonstrating that the gospel was meant for all nations. After this initial stage, the gift of tongues ceased and Bibles had to be systematically translated by knowledgeable people. Evangelists also had to learn the languages of their target communities.

The same principle also applies to the signs and wonders performed by the early disciples as vindicating signs of the message that they proclaimed. An agnostic and hostile world was convinced by these visible manifestations that God was with the disciples. After this purpose was achieved and the Christian faith was established, signs and wonders markedly abated. Later generations had the Bible, as well as a multitude of Christian witnesses who

testified of its truth. They had to live by faith, without sensational signs and wonders. In any way, signs, wonders and speaking in tongues were not included in the promise of Pentecost, which clearly implies that no one can biblically expect these gifts. The Lord Jesus only said: "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me" (Acts 1:8).

From the history of the early Christian church it is evident that not all believers were filled with the Holy Spirit. They themselves were responsible for this lack of unction because they didn't humble themselves and take up the cross of self-denial. Such disciples were still dominated by the flesh and could therefore not be filled with and fully used by the Holy Spirit. Because of this serious deficiency in the lives of many disciples the instruction was given that only Spirit-filled elders and deacons were to be appointed in the early church: "Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business" (Acts 6:3).

This standard should still be applied today, but in most cases it is not done. The revivalist, Charles Finney, said in his book, *Power from on High*:

"We need the enduement of power from on high. Christ had previously informed the disciples that without Him they could do nothing. When He gave them the commission to convert the world, He added, 'But tarry ye in Jerusalem till ye be endued with power from on high. Ye shall be baptised with the Holy Ghost not many days hence. Behold, I send upon you the promise of My Father.' This enduement with power is an indispensable condition of performing the work which Christ has set before us.

"How shall we get it? Christ expressly promised it to the whole church, and to every individual whose duty it is to labour for the conversion of the world. He admonished the first disciples not to undertake the work until they had received this enduement of power from on high. Both the promise and the admonition apply equally to all Christians of every age and nation. No one has, at any time, any right to expect success without it.

"The example of the first disciples teaches us how to secure this enduement. They first *consecrated themselves* to this work, and continued in prayer and supplication until the Holy Ghost fell upon them. The text informs us that it is infinitely easy to obtain the Holy Spirit, or this enduement of power. The Father is more willing to give the Holy Spirit than we are to give good gifts to our children (Luke 11:13).

"There is a great difference between the *peace* and the *power* of the Holy Spirit in the soul. The disciples were *Christians* before the day of Pentecost, and, as such, they had a measure of the Holy Spirit. They must have had the peace of having sins forgiven, and of a justified state, but they had not the enduement of power necessary to the accomplishment of the work assigned to them. They had the *peace* which Christ had *given* them, but not the *power* which He had *promised*.

"This may be true of all Christians, and right here is, I think, the great mistake of the church, and of the ministry. They rest in conversion, and do not seek until they obtain this enduement of power from on high. Hence so many professors have no power with either God or man. They prevail with neither. They cling to a hope in Christ, and even enter the ministry, overlooking the admonition to wait until they are endued with the power of the Holy Spirit. Let anyone lay all upon the altar and prove God herewith, and he shall find that God will open the windows of heaven, and pour him out a blessing that there shall not be room enough to receive it.

"To the honour of God alone I will say a little of my own experience in this matter. I was powerfully converted on the morning of the 10th of October. In the evening of the same day, and on the morning of the following day, I received overwhelming baptisms of the Holy Ghost, that went through me, as it seemed to me, body and soul. I immediately found myself endued with such power from on high that a few words dropped here and there to individuals were the means of their immediate conversion. My words seemed to fasten like barbed arrows in the souls of men. They cut like a sword. They broke the heart like a hammer. Multitudes can attest to this. Oftentimes a word dropped, without my remembering it, would fasten conviction, and often result in almost immediate conversions.

"Sometimes I would find myself, in a great measure, empty of this power. I would go out and visit, and find that I made no saving impression. I would exhort and pray, with the same result. I would then set apart a day for private fasting and prayer, fearing that this power had departed from me, and would inquire anxiously after the reason of this apparent emptiness. After humbling myself, and crying out for help, the power would return to me with all its freshness. This has been the experience of my life.

"The want of an enduement of power from on high should be deemed a disqualification for a pastor, a deacon or elder, a Sunday school superintendent, a professor in a Christian college, and especially for a professor in a theological seminary. Is this statement too harsh? Suppose any of the apostles had failed, through apathy, selfishness, unbelief, indolence, or ignorance, to obtain this enduement of power, would that not have disqualified them to work for Christ?

"Shall the church of God be burdened with teachers and leaders who lack this fundamental qualification, when their failing to possess it must be their own fault? They are inexcusable. With such a command to convert the world ringing in our ears; with such an injunction to wait in constant, wrestling prayer till we receive the power; with such a promise made by such a Saviour of all the help we need from Christ Himself, what excuse can we offer for being powerless in this great work? What an awful responsibility rests upon the whole church, upon every Christian!

"There is a need of a great reformation in the church on this particular point. The churches should wake up to the facts in the case, and take a firm

stand in regard to the qualifications of ministers and church officers. They should refuse to ordain a pastor if they are not well satisfied with his qualifications for the office. Whatever else he may have to recommend him, if his record does not show that he has this endowment of power to win souls to Christ, they should deem him unqualified to serve as pastor.

“The churches should hold the theological seminaries to strict account in this matter; and until they do, I fear that the seminaries will never wake up to their responsibility. A seminary that aims mainly at the culture of the intellect, and sends out learned men who lack the endowment of power from on high, is a snare and a stumbling-block to the church of Christ. What really matters is the heart culture of theological candidates: What do they know of the power of Christ to save from sin, what do they know of the power of prayer, and to what extent are they endued with power from on high to win souls to Christ? Oh! that it were different and we were all agreed, now and forever, to hold fast to the promise of Christ, and never think ourselves or anybody else to be fit for the great work of the church till we have received the rich endowment of the power of God through His Holy Spirit.

“I beg the churches, I beg the seminaries, to receive a word of exhortation from an old man, who has had some experience in these things, and one whose heart mourns and is weighed down in view of the shortcomings of the church, the ministers, and the seminaries, on this subject. Brethren, I beseech you to more thoroughly consider this matter, to wake up and lay it to heart, and rest not till this subject of the endowment of power from on high is brought forward into its proper place, and takes that prominent and practical position in view of the whole church that Christ designed it should” (end of quotation from Finney’s book).

3. Filled with God's Love

The most important fruit of the Holy Spirit is love – love for God, love for the brethren and love for a perishing world. When we are filled with the Holy Spirit we are also filled with this *agape* love of God. Paul says, "...the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us" (Rom. 5:5). John says that the love of God must be perfected in us (1 John 2:5; 4:12).

When my elderly mother was in hospital she said to my two sisters: "We must have hearts full of the love of the Lord Jesus." She then asked them: "Do you have such hearts?" It is certainly not easy to give an honest answer to a straight question like this, as our hearts are often characterised by a combination of different thoughts and emotions. In many people's hearts there is conflict between the flesh and the Spirit (Gal. 5:17). The flesh is inclined towards self-love and the love of the world, while the Spirit leads us in the opposite direction to deny ourselves and the world and to love God.

We should be rooted and grounded in the love of God, always being cautious not to grow cold in our love due to worldliness. People who have grown cold in their love and abide in this condition, are in danger of losing their first love (Rev. 2:4). If that has happened we should urgently correct the problem by trusting the Lord to again fill our hearts with His love.

Since the love of God as a Christian principle of life is so vitally important, we should fully appreciate its salient characteristics.

1. It is an everlasting and unchangeable love

God's love exists from eternity to eternity. It is not temporary or transient. We are living in a sinful and depraved world in which everything perishes. Nothing has any value for eternity, so the present world cannot offer you any lasting happiness and fulfilment in life. Most people are inconsistent and unreliable because of their carnal and sinful nature. Kindness often changes into malice, acceptance into rejection, affection into aloofness, and love into lovelessness, contempt or even hatred. But God's love is eternal and unchangeable. It offers you something to live for, on which you can always trust, and which nobody can take away from you – not even death. Nothing can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:35-39). This reality makes life exceedingly worthwhile as it is a matter which unites you across the boundaries of time and space with the everlasting love of God Himself.

The most exalted and sensible thoughts which a person can imagine are on the love of God. A journalist once asked a professor in Literature what the most beautiful and meaningful words were that she ever read. Without hesitation this believing and well-read woman quoted the first few words from 1 Corinthians 13:8, "Love never fails." The *Amplified Bible* says, "Love

never fails – never fades out or becomes obsolete or comes to an end.” What a touching and profound thought – God’s love is imperishable! This is an inalienable gift. It offers you infinitely more than it asks of you. All that it asks of you is the willingness to be regenerated by this love. You must rise from your life of sin, short-sightedness and materialism, repent from your old life by faith in Christ, and lead a life in which you will love God through Jesus Christ, while always putting your hope and trust in Him alone.

2. It is a love which gives

God’s love has an outward inclination as it reaches out to a world in its need. That is why God could give the most precious of all gifts to the world, which is His only begotten Son who sacrificed Himself for our sins. “Greater love has no one than this, to lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). He is the Good Shepherd who gave His life for the sheep (John 10:11). All that is expected of us is to accept this gift by faith.

This characteristic of God’s love is the exact opposite of the love of sinful man whose mind has been blinded by Satan. Fallen man has a perverted, covetous and self-centred love. He is puffed up, full of himself and prefers to boast of his own achievements. He loves himself at the cost of others. He desires the things that he sees, and endeavours to get them. He is not inclined towards denying himself and giving himself for the needs of others because he has no real compassion with those who have the sorrows of life inflicted on them. He only loves those who can be exploited by him to advance his own interests. He is provoked when things do not go his way, and always seeks revenge against those who harm him.

How different is the pure, regenerating and unselfish love of God! It is so great and sincere that it includes all sinners. “God demonstrates His own love towards us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). In His condescending love He inclined to sinners and brought them out of a horrible pit. He takes the eternal interests of all people to heart, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:9).

3. It is a love which can forgive and forget

God’s love forgives unconditionally – so completely that He never again refers to forgiven sins. He casts our sins in the depth of the sea and no longer think about them (Micah 7:19). He does not blame believers for sins which have already been confessed and forsaken. Even if his children sin repeatedly and humble themselves again He shows no animosity and pardons abundantly (Isa. 55:7).

Backslidden people, like the prodigal son in the parable, should only be prepared to return to their Father and settle their case with Him. They will find in Him a compassionate and forgiving Father who will wholeheartedly welcome them back into His kingdom. To wayward Israel He said: “Return, backsliding Israel... and I will not cause my anger to fall on you; for I am

merciful, says the Lord... Only acknowledge your iniquity, that you have transgressed against the Lord your God" (Jer. 3:12-13).

How different do humans react, how impure is their love and how slow are they to forgive and forget. Solomon says, "He who covers a transgression seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates the best of friends" (Prov. 17:9).

Not only friends part ways because of uncharitable accusations, but also family members and marriage partners. People who are not filled with the love and forgiveness of God, easily become bitter and judgemental towards one another, revive old grievances and again start accusing one another. The mind of Christ is absent in our lives if we keep on quarrelling about things which have already been forgiven.

We have the following clear command on forgivingness: "...bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do. But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful" (Col. 3:13-15).

4. It is the law of the New Testament

The secret of a life of complete spiritual fulfilment is to be rooted and grounded in the love of God. That is why we only have one law in the New Testament and that is the law of love. If you love the Lord with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind you will remain true to Him and never bow the knee before idols.

If you love your neighbour as yourself, you fulfil all the laws which govern your relationship with other people: "Love does no harm to a neighbour; therefore love is the fulfilment of the law" (Rom. 13:10).

Divine love determines the nature and direction of our lives. For this reason we are not under the law and can freely give expression to the love of Christ. We are bound to the exalted principles of divine love and this should be the main characteristic of a Christian's life. In His high priestly prayer, Jesus said to the Father: "I have declared to them Your name, and will declare it, that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them" (John 17:26). Jesus said to the disciples: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John. 13:34-35).

5. It is boundless

We can impose no boundaries or limits on the love of Jesus Christ. It encompasses every aspect of our existence. Paul said in his prayer for the Ephesians: "For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ... that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may

dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height – to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph. 3:14-19).

Although we may comprehend the riches of God’s love that still does not mean that we can fully understand it. God’s love in Christ Jesus is fathomless and boundless. It is wider than the world, deeper than the deepest sea and higher than the highest heaven. We stand in amazement before the unsearchable love and saving grace of the Lord Jesus. In Him all treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden. His power and love know no bounds. He can supply every need to us according to the riches of His grace. Also when we need chastising He will not withhold it from us (Heb. 12:5-7).

This compassionate Saviour draws you and me to Him with chords of love. He does not only want to save us and give us eternal life but also wishes to establish our lives in perfect love. The Holy Spirit pours out His love in our hearts. He makes us shining lights in the midst of a dark and loveless world where we are called to be His witnesses.

Is your life completely under the control of the regenerating, unchangeable and eternal love of God? If so, you will have a burning desire to share it with other people. But your most intense desire and longing will be for the coming of the heavenly Bridegroom who will take His bride away to an ivory palace in heaven (Ps. 45:8-9).

The beauty of the bride

In the book The Song of Solomon, much is said on the beauty of the bride who is a type of the bride of Christ. From this description it is evident that we should always reflect the beauty and purity of Christ.

In Song of Solomon 1:8 the bridegroom says that his bride is the fairest among women. We should have a heavenly beauty which other women do not have. As the bride of Christ we are called to be perfect in holiness. The world should be able to see the love and beauty of the Bridegroom in us.

“My spikenard sends forth its fragrance” (S. of S. 1:12). In ancient times, a costly perfumed ointment was made from this plant. The bride is surrounded by the lovely fragrance of this ointment. Likewise, we should spread the sweet-smelling aroma of Christ (Eph. 5:2), for we are to God the fragrance of Christ among all people – saved and unsaved (2 Cor. 2:15).

“My beloved is to me a cluster of henna blooms in the vineyards of En Gedi” (S. of S. 1:14). The henna shrub with its long clusters of white flowers is also known as the bride-flower. It spreads a lovely fragrance. Clusters of henna flowers were often worn by women around their necks. How fitting to liken the bride and her spotless white robe to henna blooms in the vineyards of En Gedi!

“Like a lily among the thorns, so is my love among the daughters” (S. of S. 2:2). The bride has a heavenly beauty and purity which the unsaved

people around her do not have. Her spiritual beauty and moral purity are in sharp contrast with the depraved characteristics of unsaved humanity who are dominated and tainted by sin.

“Awake, o north wind, and come, o south! Blow upon my garden that its spices may flow out. Let my beloved come to his garden and eat its pleasant fruits” (S. of S. 4:16). The life of the bride should resemble a garden with fragrant blossoms and delicious fruit. The Bridegroom wants to see and enjoy the fruit of His labour of love in her life.

“O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the secret places of the cliff, let me see your countenance, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and you countenance is lovely” (S. of S. 2:14). The bride is in a safe refuge high in the mountains, from where she must be seen and heard by the Bridegroom, but also by the world below. She should sing the praises of her Redeemer and appear before His throne, sanctified and washed in the blood of the Lamb. She must also proclaim His gospel of salvation among the lost, which was entrusted to her by the Bridegroom Himself.

“You are all fair, my love, and there is no spot in you” (S. of S. 4:7). Her fairness comes from the Bridegroom. She made a commitment to Him which resulted in the old things passing away and all things having become new in her life. Paul refers to the Bridegroom’s work of justification and sanctification of the bride: “Christ loved the church and gave Himself for it, that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that He might present it to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that it should be holy and without blemish” (Eph. 5:25-27). Have you completely been transformed by the renewing of your mind so that Christ in His excellence may be formed in you? This is our calling.

The love of God did not only lead to the atoning death of Christ to pay the penalty for our sins, but it was also abundantly poured out into our hearts to change our entire life. We are transformed to become conformed to the image of Christ. The question is whether we have surrendered ourselves to the transforming work of the Holy Spirit? Paul was anxious about the Galatians until Christ was moulded within them (Gal. 4:19). They were so slow to become conformed to Him and there was so little evidence of His love in their lives.

What is the position with you and me? Do we comprehend with all the saints what the width, length, depth and height of Christ’s love is, and do we daily walk in it? The Spirit of God has come to pour this love into your heart. Walk in such a way that others can see it in you.

4. Perseverance of the Saints

We are admonished to persevere on the way to holiness. Not all Christians do that and consequently limit their spiritual growth or even rescind it. The Lord Jesus said, “Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned” (John 15:4-6).

Our salvation is on the level of imputed righteousness. This is a gift that is received through faith and cannot be earned by works of any kind. Paul says, “By grace you have been saved through faith... not of works, lest anyone should boast” (Eph. 2:8-9). However, in the next verse works are commanded as an integral part of our lives after salvation: “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.” We must work for our sanctification as it is on the level of co-operative righteousness. As saved people we are God’s fellow-workers through Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 3:9). The Lord endues us through the Holy Spirit to live holy, but we should actively and resolutely walk in the Spirit and do works of dedication to bear fruits worthy of repentance (Matt. 3:8). What is asked of us to persevere in holiness?

Before I can persevere in holiness it must first be imparted to me. To be able to receive this blessing I have to repent of my old, sinful nature and surrender it to be crucified. I must trust the Lord to cleanse my heart and life with the blood of the Lamb and to fill me with His Holy Spirit. After this, I am engaged in a life-long process of growth in holiness in which I have to dedicate and commit myself to bear fruit for the kingdom of heaven. In the parable of the sower, the Lord Jesus says: “But the ones that fell on the good ground are those who, having heard the word with a noble and good heart, keep it and bear fruit with patience” (Luke 8:15).

After your heart has been cleansed and filled with the love of Christ by the Holy Spirit, you can actively start serving the Lord. But He warns you that it won’t be easy as you will have to serve Him under difficult and demanding circumstances. Much dedication and perseverance will be needed from you.

The Lord Jesus said, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me” (Luke 9:23). That is a daily process of dedication and rededication to the Lord. Why must the cross of self-denial continuously be taken up? The flesh should remain crucified, as he will ever be looking for the opportunity to get off the cross, be revived, and again take control of your life. If you offer him this opportunity he will resist the work of the Holy Spirit in your life and draw you back to the world. The Galatians were guilty of this. Paul said to them: “O foolish Galatians!

Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth? ... Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?" (Gal. 3:1-3). Disobedience to the Word of God has set in among them because they listened to false prophets who proclaimed lies.

Apart from people's own inclination towards disobedience there are also various external factors which influence you to deviate from the way of holiness and dedication to the Lord. Wrong friends without sound, biblical principles is one of the important reasons why certain Christians start doubting and losing direction. Peter says, "Beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked" (2 Pet. 3:17). The solution to this problem is to stand firm in the faith and to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 3:18).

Never allow bad friends or false teachers who are intent on spreading lies, to ruin your Christian witness. Paul said to the Colossians: "You [must] continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and not [be] moved away from the hope of the gospel" (Col. 1:23). Perseverance is needed on the way of the Lord. Paul said to the Hebrews: "We have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end" (Heb. 3:14; cf. 3:6). We should strongly commit ourselves to this principle.

Timothy is also exhorted to persevere. Paul says that he must have "faith and a good conscience, which some having rejected, concerning the faith have suffered shipwreck" (1 Tim. 1:19). Paul mentions the name of one of these spiritually shipwrecked persons, i.e. Hymenaeus, and says of such people: "Their message will spread like cancer... [they] have strayed concerning the truth, saying that the resurrection is already past; and they overthrow the faith of some" (2 Tim. 2:17-18). Today there are also many theologians who spread heretical teachings on the resurrection of Christ and the saints, thereby overthrowing the faith of many people. Not all Christians persevere on the right way to the end!

In Luke 15, the entire chapter is devoted to three parables – the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son – in which our responsibility towards backslidden believers is indicated. All three have to be found and restored to where they belong. The lost son yielded to the love of the world, as was also the case with Paul's friend, Demas (2 Tim. 4:10). The lost son turned his back upon his father and ended his relationship with him. However, during his wanderings he came to his senses when everything turned against him. When he arrived back home his elder brother was annoyed because the father had organised a joyful feast to welcome the younger brother. The father justified his action: "It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found" (Luke 15:32).

During his wandering the younger brother was dead in his sins and trespasses, but he became alive again as in the beginning before his serious backsliding. He became lost because of his own decisions and actions, but

was spiritually completely restored after he repented. According to Luke 15, we should reach out spiritually to backsliders. Do not abandon them and leave them to their own fate by writing them off. They are still important to the Lord and every effort must be taken to find the lost sheep and assist them to return to the flock.

What do you do with people who stumble spiritually? Do you accuse and reject them? Paul says, “Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a person in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted” (Gal. 6:1). “Let him who think he stands take heed lest he fall” (1 Cor. 10:12). Backsliders should be exhorted with love but also in a very definite and serious way. Sin has the ability to weaken a person’s faith. If this process is not resisted and countered a person even stands to lose his faith completely and become spiritually hardened.

A few years ago I was in Estonia where, among others, I preached in a small church in Rakvere in the north of the country. The pastor had two groups of members in his congregation, the one Estonian and the other Russian-speaking. On that morning there was also a visiting Swedish businessman in the church. After the morning service there was a meal for the congregation and he came and sat next to me. He could speak English very well and told me that he and his ex-wife lived in Canada for a long time. They were active members of a local evangelical church.

After a time his wife became involved with another man, they divorced and his wife left with her new friend. Because of this, they have both backslidden spiritually and complete lost contact with their church as well as the Christian community. They were disillusioned by the Christians who openly ignored them, and returned to the world and worldly friends. After a time he listened to a tape-recorded message on how the Lord can and indeed wants to restore backsliders. Like the lost son he returned to the Lord. He also sent the cassette to his former wife but she hardened herself against religion and refused to listen to it.

This man then told me how the Lord gave him a ministry among backsliders. He meets many such people on his business trips, and in most cases other believers do not take any notice of them and do not try to win them back. He said we should be aware that such people often experienced severe shocks, bitter disappointments and intense trauma, and that some of them even blame God for allowing these things to happen to them. Christians should gain their confidence and instil hope in them on spiritual restoration. The *Amplified Bible* says: “Exercise foresight and be on the watch to look [after one another], to see that no one falls back from and fails to secure God’s grace, in order that no root of resentment (bitterness or hatred) shoot forth and cause trouble and bitter torment, and by this many become contaminated and defiled by it” (Heb. 12:15).

The devil often attacks these backsliders by instilling the idea in their minds that they have committed unpardonable sins and that the Lord will not

forgive them and restore them to His favour. This is a lie, because the vast majority of backsliders have not blasphemed the Holy Spirit or trampled the Son of God underfoot by counting the blood by which they have been sanctified a common thing (cf. Heb. 6 and 10). Like the lost son, they were overcome by temptations and unbridled emotions, or they may have been brought down by major disappointments. We should take note, in an early stage, if a person starts backsliding and sinning again. Such people often join worldly parties where they use alcohol and conduct dishonourable conversations. They should be seriously admonished because a little leaven leavens the whole lump.

Paul warned the carnal Hebrew believers as follows: “Beware, brethren, lest there may be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily... lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end” (Heb. 3:12-14). We either make progress in our spiritual lives, or we stagnate and start backsliding. If we don’t experience spiritual growth towards maturity we may, after a time, even lose our assurance of faith and then need to repent and come to faith again. The Hebrew believers were in this situation:

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil. Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith towards God (Heb. 5:12–6:1).

We should make progress in our spiritual lives, while always persevering in holiness. Guard particularly against becoming uninvolved with the work of the Lord, as that is a sure way of growing cold in our love towards Him. We have all been commissioned to proclaim the gospel of Christ, and in one way or another we must all contribute to the execution of this major task. Every tree is known by its own fruit. If our lives do not yield any fruit for God’s kingdom we do not comply with our calling. Paul says: “I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified” (1 Cor. 9:27). The *Living Bible* strikingly paraphrases this verse as follows: “Like an athlete I punish my body, treating it roughly, training it to do what it should, not what it wants to. Otherwise I fear that after enlisting others for the race, I myself might be declared unfit and ordered to stand aside.” To Timothy he said that he must exercise himself in godliness (1 Tim. 4:7). To the Galatians he said: “Let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart” (Gal. 6:9). The devil induces people to abandon their work for the Lord.

The bearing of much fruit will only happen if we remain in Christ, are daily cleansed by Him and filled by His Holy Spirit. That is the abiding life. The branch that abides in Christ is pruned that it may bear more fruit. The branch which does not abide in Him becomes withered and is eventually cast out. It is destined for the fire. The apostle John often refers to the abiding life: "He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked" (1 John 2:6). If we abide in Him and observe His law of love we can confidently look forward to His second coming (1 John 2:28).

In Revelation, John refers to the Christians as overcomers if they persevere on the way to holiness. The Lord Jesus says the following about them:

- ✠ "He who overcomes, and keeps My works until the end, to him I will give power over the nations" (Rev. 2:26). The perseverance of the saints is needed to keep the works of the Lord to the end.
- ✠ "He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the book of life" (Rev. 3:5). There will unfortunately also be those who did not overcome but changed and distorted the Word of God to their own ruin. According to Rev. 22:18-19 they will not inherit God's kingdom if they do such things.
- ✠ "To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne" (Rev. 3:21). They will be co-rulers with Christ in His reign of peace.
- ✠ "He who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God and he shall be My son" (Rev. 21:7). It is important how we start the race, but just as important how we finish it.

Therefore, since we also are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of God. For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls. You have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin (Heb. 12:1-4).

Brothers and sisters let us persevere on the way of the Lord and lay down the sin which so easily ensnares us, as well as others things that are weighing us down. The latter may not be sins but things that demand so much of our time, energy and money that they keep us away from serving the Lord. Do not be discouraged by opposition; in this dispensation we are following a Christ who is rejected by the world at large. But if we suffer with Him we will also be glorified with Him (Rom. 8:17). Paul says to Timothy: "If we endure, we shall also reign with Him. If we deny Him, He also will deny us" (2 Tim. 2:12). The Lord Jesus says that His sheep hear His voice and follow Him (John 10:27). They will never be ashamed because they remain on the right path – in sunshine and also in the shadows of affliction and persecution. Trust the Lord to deliver you from Satan.

5. Spiritual Warfare

When speaking about the power of the Holy Spirit we must be mindful of the fact that it has different applications in our daily lives. Firstly, it is spiritual endowment to enable us to be witnesses for Christ: “You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me” (Acts 1:8). Secondly, the Holy Spirit empowers us for the struggle against the enemy of souls, and to prevail. Paul says:

Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armour of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day (Eph. 6:10-13).

The biblical description of spiritual warfare has a personal application to individual believers. Every Christian must put on the armour of God to be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. It is important to keep this basic fact in mind as there are different unbiblical forms of so-called *strategic spiritual warfare* by which certain groups of believers try to pull down demonic strongholds over cities, and even countries, in order to transform them spiritually and set the scene for big revivals. However, the Bible says the devil will only lose his influence and power base in the world when Christ comes. Then, and then only, the Antichrist and the false prophet will be destroyed and Satan bound in a bottomless pit.

During the church dispensation we should, in fact, take notice of the presence and working of Satan and his demons and defend ourselves against them. It is for this purpose that spiritual weapons are offered to us. In this regard, there is also a warning to be heeded. There are people who are so preoccupied with the devil that every problem or sin experienced by a person is related to possession by a demon or evil spirit. They even claim that Christians can be demon-possessed! Deliverance ministries that deal with problems of this nature are proliferating in these times of increased deception. They offer the services of exorcists to solve people’s spiritual problems that allegedly arise from demon-possession. The methods often used by them are exorcising, inner healing, the binding of the devil, and the cancelling of blood guilt and generation curses inherited from our forefathers. They are deceived, because spiritual problems are not solved by exorcism but by confessing your sins and surrendering yourself to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

When Christians sin, it does not mean that the devil has directly intervened in their lives. He knows very well that temptations which arise from the world and the flesh are also causing Christians to sin. James says, “Each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and

enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin” (Jas. 1:14-15). Each person has infirmities which may lead to sinning. It may be the love of money, pride, a bad temper, emotional depression, corruption, laziness, or also an inclination towards lies and extra-marital relations. The devil may fan such desires but he doesn’t need to create them – they already exist. Resist every temptation to sin, wherever it comes from.

However, there are also specific occasions in every person’s life when Satan specifically targets him or her by his deception and destructive works. It is with a view to this possibility that Paul says, “Therefore take up the whole armour of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day” (Eph. 6:13). The evil day refers to the time when the devil makes a deliberate attack on your spirit, soul or body, or on your marriage, your work, your finances, or on one of your family members. Accidents, disasters, robbing and assaults do occur because we are living in an unsafe world which is under the sway of the Wicked One (1 John 5:19). We do not know when an evil day will dawn for us. For this reason, we should always stand strong spiritually – also when we experience peaceful times without any particular difficulties or attacks from evil sources. When a dark time or crisis suddenly comes upon us we will remain standing and handle the crisis by God’s grace without being spiritually defeated.

I do not wish to instil an excessive consciousness of the devil in you, which might lead you to looking for a devil behind every bush – neither do I intend causing fear or panic for possible disasters, dangers or accidents that may happen to you. I only want you to realise that we are living in a dark world in which Christians also have to contend with many possible dangers. There is definitely a battle to be fought, but also victory to be achieved. The devil has not yet been bound but walks around to do his destructive works. Make sure that you are not an easy target to him because of your spiritual slackness, impulsivity, ignorance of the Word, or because of your carnal lifestyle. We should not be knocked down or driven to despair or unbelief by sudden problems. We have to enter the kingdom of God through many tribulations; therefore, it is in our own interest to increase our crisis resistance and skills in spiritual warfare as soon as possible.

We need a thorough biblical knowledge on the nature of the church dispensation, as that will ensure that we do not underestimate the extent of the struggle in which we are engaged. According to 1 John 1:19, the world lies in the sway of the Wicked One. In John 14:30 the Lord Jesus refers to the devil as the ruler of this world. In 2 Corinthians 4:4 Paul says that he is the god of this age who blinds the minds of people. From these statements it is obvious that we are not now ruling as kings in Christ’s reign of peace, but we are soldiers for the cross who are engaged in a struggle against the enemy of God’s kingdom. The Lord wants us to use His spiritual armour so that He can “deliver us from this present evil age” (Gal. 1:4).

Every true Christian who has, by regeneration, been delivered from the

power of Satan is engaged in a spiritual battle against Satan and his accomplices. Not a single Christian can avoid this struggle. To be victorious, we should confidently offer resistance in the power and might of the Lord. Although this battle is waged in the spiritual sphere it is nevertheless a very real battle against a formidable force of demons under the leadership of Satan. A spiritual battle is waged from different fronts against believers. We will consider three of the fronts from which Satan and his co-workers attack Christians, and offer appropriate defence strategies.

1. Adversary

The devil is in a general sense described as the adversary of the Christian who seeks his downfall or tries to damage his interests in different ways: “Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith” (1 Pet. 5:8-9).

This position of confrontation is unavoidable as the devil is our adversary who will always oppose us and heap up stumbling-blocks in our way. Our command is to resist him, thereby becoming *his* adversaries. Never close your eyes to such attacks by trying to argue away the existence and actions of evil powers. Many people ascribe their problems to other factors and consequently fail to see the devil's share in causing them. Such people rarely seek spiritual solutions to their problems. They hope for the best, accept defeat in a fatalistic way and only rely on psychological counselling. They are losers in the spiritual battle.

The intensity of Satan's opposition to believers knows no bounds as he is a murderer from the beginning (John 8:44). Wars, disasters, accidents, incitement to suicide, and various other means are employed by him to give vent to his aggression and murderousness. He does not have unlimited powers over people, but as far as he is allowed to go he relentlessly pursues his evil objectives. Apart from sudden, violent attacks, he also uses slower methods to achieve his purpose. Many people's lives are ruined over a long period by being enslaved to liquor, tobacco, drugs, sexual perversions and various other addictions.

Resist the attacks of Satan in the name of the Lord. Follow the example of the Lord Jesus, by also opposing the powers of darkness that work through other people: “Consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls. You have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin” (Heb. 12:3-4).

2. Tempter

The devil tempts people to commit moral sins by enticing them through their unregenerate nature and fleshly lusts. By evil suggestions and the quickening of people's old, perverted nature they are tempted to sin. The solutions to sins arising from fleshly temptations are vigilance, self-control and prayer: “Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing,

but the flesh is weak” (Matt. 26:41). Do not become an easy victim by yielding to temptations without resisting them.

Approach the throne of grace in prayer with confidence. The Lord Jesus is the Conqueror who is ready to help us prevail in the struggle against temptations. He knows what temptations are, and by His power and authority they can be overcome: “For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted” (Heb. 2:18). “For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathise with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:15-16).

We are often admonished to deny ourselves and to crucify our old nature, lest we would be open targets for moral sins (Luke 9:23; Gal. 6:14). If we fail to put off the old nature and also to surrender it to be crucified, victory over temptations will elude us: “...that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in righteousness and true holiness” (Eph. 4:22-24).

3. Deceiver

A further capacity in which Satan fights against believers is that of deceiver. This mainly refers to religious deception. He exploits people’s ignorance and offers all sorts of religious lies to them to deceive them. A spiritual falling away is the inevitable consequence of this campaign: “Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons” (1 Tim. 4:1). In their ignorance the deceived people think that they are still on the right track.

Spiritual deception of this nature is the order of the day in most Christian churches (2 Tim. 4:1-4), while different kinds of satanic lies form the basis of all the non-Christian religions. In the end-time, the spirit of error will be very active to deceive people into accepting and worshiping the Antichrist and his false prophets. Jesus said, “Take heed that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and will deceive many” (Matt. 24:4).

Peter said: “There were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed” (2 Pet. 2:1-2).

Destructive heresies are introduced to the theological faculties of many of the leading universities, by which future pastors are completely deceived during their years of training. The virgin birth of Jesus, His deity, resurrection from the dead, the promise of His second coming, as well as the divine

inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible, are openly and blatantly denied by a large number of theologians at major universities. Another very common lie is that all religions worship the same God and consequently wait for the same world messiah. In this way the father of all lies prepares the way for the coming of the Antichrist as the universal messiah of all faiths. There is presently an active campaign to promote a universal messiah of all faiths. He has many titles – among others, the Christ, Buddha, the Imam Mahdi and Krishna. In this way, the true Jesus is denied.

A lack of biblical knowledge is the breeding-ground for religious deception. But it is not necessary to live in ignorance as the full truth about spiritual matters has been revealed to us in the Bible: “And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32). If we would only allow the Holy Spirit to guide us into all truth and also to inform us through the prophetic word on the things to come (John 16:13), we will have a clear frame of reference on spiritual matters.

Believers who are blinded by Satan and only have a form of godliness have, by their own doing, lost the battle against spiritual deceit and lies. They heaped up for themselves false teachers, rejected the truth and were turned aside to fables (2 Tim. 4:3-4). They do not wage a spiritual war against the spirit of error but have been successfully taken captive by it (1 John 4:1-6). They now oppose the truth!

Spiritual balance

When discussing spiritual warfare we must always remember that it is only one of two reasons why we need the enduement of the power of God’s Spirit. The first reason is to obtain power to be a witness for Christ, while the second reason is for empowerment to contend against sin, the world and evil powers. Balance must always be maintained between these two applications of the power of the Holy Spirit: the positive identification with Christ and His kingdom, and the negative resistance against Satan’s efforts to deceive and undermine us.

Some believers, to the detriment of themselves, fail to give these two matters the attention that they deserve. There are those who only want to occupy themselves with evangelistic work, but neglect the aspect of spiritual warfare against the enemy of our souls. That leads to dangerous ignorance on the strategies of Satan, and may cause the spiritual derailing and downfall of such an evangelist as he did not put on the full armour of God. There are also those pastors and Christian leaders who naively support the ecumenical movement, thereby assisting to construct the framework for the

Antichrist’s world church and interfaith alliance of religions.

On the other hand, there are those who are so occupied with fighting the devil, warning people against the Antichrist, false prophets and spiritual deception, that they are not involved with evangelisation. They are missing the basic purpose for which we are in the world. The light of the gospel must

be made to shine everywhere in this dark world to invite sinners to come to the Lord Jesus for salvation. At the same time we must always remember that, spiritually speaking, we are working in enemy territory and should therefore remain vigilant, informed on the methods used by the enemy and always ready to resist him. The Lord wants to make all of us more than conquerors. Trust Him for this.

6. Victory in the Battle

It is an undeniable fact that every Christian is involved with a spiritual battle – we all experience it. We need spiritual armour for this battle which the Lord alone can supply to us. Paul says: “Though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds...” (2 Cor. 10:3-4).

There is an arsenal of at least five of these weapons of light that are at our disposal for spiritual warfare. We should not only be cognisant of them but also skilled in using them. When discussing the armour it will immediately be evident that they are part of our normal spiritual attributes as Christians. They are vital in establishing and maintaining our relationship with the Lord but also relevant to our battle against temptations and evil powers. These weapons are the following:

1. Faith

Our faith in the Lord must be so strong and unshakeable that we will fully trust Him under all circumstances to make us more than conquerors in Christ. Know and believe that He who is in us is greater and stronger than he who is in the world (1 John 4:4). Without faith in the Conqueror we are defenceless in our struggle against sin and iniquity. The following Scriptures emphasise the fact that we are engaged in a spiritual battle in which our faith in the Lord is a strong weapon against the Evil One and all his devices:

- o “For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world – our faith. Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?” (1 John 5:4-5).
- o “...above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one” (Eph. 6:16).
- o “Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, to which you were also called and have confessed the good confession in the presence of many witnesses” (1 Tim. 6:12).
- o “Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith” (1 Pet. 5:8-9).

Do you fight the good fight of faith? Do you quench the fiery darts of devil with the shield of your faith in Jesus Christ, or are you an easy target to all the confusing, deceptive and vile thoughts which the devil aims at you? Take refuge in Christ against all the attacks of the enemy: “The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe” (Prov. 18:10). Remember that you can only achieve the victory in Christ – never in your own strength. The power which He imparts to us through the Holy Spirit enables us to effectively resist the devil’s temptations.

2. The blood of the Lamb

It is important that our spiritual protection and victory should be based upon the shed blood of the Lamb! On the cross He has broken the power of sin to set us free: "In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace" (Eph. 1:7). He died on the cross, "that through death He might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil" (Heb. 2:14).

During the coming great tribulation when the devil will come down to earth with great wrath knowing that he has but a short time, there will still be only one effective weapon against him. Although many of the true believers of that time will die as martyrs (Rev. 6:9-11), they will prevail spiritually against the attacks of Satan through faith in the Lamb of God who was slain to redeem them from sin: "And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb" (Rev. 12:11).

The blood of Christ, which is the symbol of His atoning death, gives life (John 6:53-56), it cleanses us from all sin (1 John 1:7) and ensures victory in the battle against the devil and all his evil collaborators (Rev. 12:11). He will empower the Antichrist to do much evil on earth (Rev. 13:2).

3. Christian testimony

The Lord Jesus clearly commanded us to be His witnesses in a dark and evil world (John 20:21; Acts 1:8). Because of this, many great victories have been achieved for the cross while the kingdom of heaven was extended among diverse peoples in many parts of the world. Without Christian witnessing and preaching millions of people would still have lived in spiritual darkness, their minds blinded by the god of this world – the devil (2 Cor. 4:4). Pray for boldness to keep on witnessing of so great a salvation.

Identifying ourselves fully with the victory of Jesus on the cross and waiting on the Lord to fill us with His Holy Spirit, gives us confidence to witness to other people and to resist the devil. After his conversion, Paul was "filled with the Holy Spirit... Immediately he preached Christ... that He is the Son of God" (Acts 9:17,20). The bold and fearless testimony of a believer not only confirms his faith in the Lord Jesus, but also ensures the retreat of the enemy (Jas. 4:7).

People who do not confess their sins to God and give testimony to others about their faith in Christ cannot possibly be saved. "...if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes to righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made to salvation" (Rom. 10:9-10). Another form of confessing your faith with your mouth is by praising the Lord. To sing His praises and exalt His wonderful and victorious Name scares away the enemy and releases power within you, "for the joy of the LORD is your strength" (Neh. 8:10).

4. Prayer

A prayerless Christian is a powerless Christian. Intercession according to the will of God, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, can certainly change things. It moves the mighty arm of God and brings many blessings to people: "The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much" (Jas. 5:16). Prayer goes hand in hand with faith: "Let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways" (Jas. 1:6-8).

To pray prevailing prayers we should "draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience" (Heb. 10:22). We should live holy lives and pray in accordance with the will of God: "This is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us" (1 John 5:14). On that moment when we approach the throne of grace and submit ourselves to the authority of God, Satan will flee from us (Jas. 4:7).

Always guard against inactivity in your prayer life, as well as other areas of your service to the Lord. Idleness is the parent of vice, and the enemy will definitely exploit situations like this: "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labour is not in vain in the Lord" (1 Cor. 15:58). Single-minded devotion is needed in the service of the Lord.

If we ignore the attacks of the devil, shrug them off as an illusion, or try to ward them off by resorting to psychological or medical therapy, the problems will become more deeply entrenched, which will have serious consequences. If we take refuge in the Lord, lay down our burdens before Him in prayer, and also ask others to intercede for us, He will deliver us from evil: "...the Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of temptations" (2 Pet. 2:9). "Be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might" (Eph. 6:10). The victory belongs to Him who is mighty to save!

5. The Word

The Word of God is a mighty weapon in the battle against temptation, deception, unbelief, and other attacks that the enemy may launch against us. We must trust and know this weapon if we want to use it: "And take... the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Eph. 6:17).

The Word of God must govern your heart, renew your mind, and instill its divine nature and principles in your life. "Your word have I hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You" (Ps. 119:11). In the light of God's Word the true nature of your thoughts and intentions will be revealed: "For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart" (Heb. 4:12; cf. John 6:33; Jer. 23:29).

The Bible is the final measure for truth, and by its light I can judge all thoughts as good or bad. Since the Word is like a sharp sword that pierces into the depth of my soul it can fully reveal the nature of all my thoughts and motives. It works together with my conscience to show me what is right and wrong.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is a dynamic power to salvation for everyone who believes (Rom. 1:16; cf. James 1:21). It has the ability to deliver every unsaved sinner who believes in Christ from the power of Satan. The Word has an authority and power which is guaranteed by God Himself: "For all the promises of God in Him are Yes and in Him Amen (2 Cor. 1:20). Make sure that you experience the liberating power of the Word in your life every day, and keep walking in its light: "And you will know the truth and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32 AB). Never deviate from this proven guideline: "Direct my steps by Your Word, and let no iniquity have dominion over me" (Ps. 119:133).

Evil thoughts

The first line of defence in spiritual warfare is the countering of evil thoughts, as that is where all sins start. These thoughts need to be identified, resisted and removed before they become established and even justified in your mind, giving rise to strongholds of sin in your life. Paul says, "The weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor. 10:4-5). The victory must, therefore, be gained in the spiritual realm if we are not to be paralysed by the enemy and surrendered to the bondage of sin. This is essentially a battle for the spiritual control of the mind.

From this description of the spiritual war it is obvious that the enemy's strongholds in our lives result from vain reasoning and fleshly exaltation that arise from evil, misguided thoughts. If the strongholds of sin are to be pulled down and eliminated, every thought must be taken into captivity to the obedience of Christ. Should this not be done, the enemy of our souls will gain a large measure of control over us by establishing wicked and uncontrolled thoughts or desires in our hearts and minds. Due to our fallen human nature, our contact with the world and our inability to determine the origin of all ideas, there are various ways in which we can be tempted to sin:

- J Wrong ideas and evil intentions may emerge from your own fleshly nature and subconscious mind. "Each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death" (Jas. 1:14-15; see also Mark 7:21-23). Remember that the old man, your old, sinful nature, is completely corrupted by deceitful lusts (Eph. 4:22; Rom. 6:6). It cannot be reformed and must be crucified.

- J Many of the things that you see are pleasing to fleshly desires and also lead to sin: “For all that is in the world – the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life – is not of the Father, but is of the world” (1 John 2:16; see also Matt. 5:28).
- J Sinful thoughts are often stimulated by immoral TV shows, pornographic videos and magazines, or the conducting of immoral discussions. Do not expose yourself to these evils: “Do not be deceived: evil company corrupts good habits” (1 Cor. 15:33).
- J Doubts, evil thoughts and sinful desires are stimulated by spiritual agents from the kingdom of darkness. They have the ability to aim fiery darts at you (Eph. 6:16), thus defiling your mind. They can also cause your thoughts to wander and render them uncontrollable when you want to read God’s Word, pray or listen to a sermon.

Have you given the enemy the opportunity to make inroads into your mind and establish strongholds of sin in your life? Please recognise that these sins may have started with a single thought or evil suggestion that was not resisted or subjected to the authority of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. Once certain ideas are established in your mind, they often tend to dominate your thinking and actions.

From the roof of his palace King David saw a beautiful woman who was bathing, and coveted her. He devised an evil plan to get rid of her husband in order to take her as his wife. He acted on the spur of the moment and did not subject his desires and plans to the authority of the clear precepts in God’s Word (cf. Ex. 20:13-14,17 where adultery, murder and covetousness are explicitly prohibited). Instead of observing these statutes, David allowed fleshly rationalisation and evil schemes to gratify his lusts. In doing so, he opened his mind and heart to the enemy to erect a stronghold of murder and adultery in his life.

On realising his awful sin and defeat by Satan, David was a broken man under strong conviction of sin. He unconditionally put his trust in the Lord to forgive him his very serious sins and to restore him to a Spirit-filled life of dedication and obedience: “Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow... blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from Your presence, and do not take Your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation” (Ps. 51:7-12).

The strongholds of sin were immediately pulled down in his heart, and the fear of the Lord restored. Always reassert the authority of God over your mind and all the thoughts and desires of your heart. Test all your thoughts and ideas before accepting them. Reject them if they are not in full agreement with the Word of God: “Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Ps. 139:23-24 KJV).

Sinful thoughts must be dealt with immediately, and not given any chance to establish themselves in your heart or mind. The fiery darts of the enemy, as well as doubts and vain arguments that exalt themselves against the truth of the Word, can be quenched by the shield of your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (Eph. 6:16).

If you do not defend yourself against evil thoughts, they will take root in your mind and eventually get their way with you. They will actively resist and eventually subdue the good thoughts. In the process they will defile your mind and undermine your motivation to serve the Lord by inducing you to say and do wrong things. Are the thoughts of your heart under control and well pleasing to the Lord, or are you wilfully and foolishly accommodating evil thoughts?

7. The Correct Prophetic Perspective

Among the things which the Holy Spirit came to do for the entire church of Christ on the day of Pentecost was giving us the correct future expectation. The Lord Jesus said, "When He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth... and He will tell you things to come" (John 16:13). The Holy Spirit inspired all biblical prophecies and for this reason the Lord expects us to take notice of them and order our lives accordingly. Paul says, "Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies" (1 Thess. 5:19-20).

Peter says, "We also have the prophetic word made more sure, which you do well to heed as to a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet. 1:19-21).

Our spiritual lives are directly influenced by events which we expect to happen in the future since we want to be prepared for whatever will happen. Our reaction to the signs of the times determines our present assessment of world events and helps us to avoid false expectations for the immediate or distant future. The following matters are all relevant to our future expectation:

The restoration of Israel

One of the most important prophetic themes in the Bible is the end-time restoration of the people of Israel in the land which God had given them. He said to Israel, "I will gather you from the peoples, assemble you from the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel" (Ezek. 11:17). The Holy Spirit wants us to clearly understand this matter as it is one of the future things on which He teaches us.

We should never spiritualise prophecies on Israel with a view to applying them to the church. The promise of return to the land of Israel was only given to the Jews and cannot be transferred to the church. The Christian church is definitely not the spiritual Israel. The *spiritual Israel* or the *Israel of God* refers to saved Jews and distinguishes them from the others who are orthodox or secular. Only the saved ones who accepted Jesus as Messiah are the true *Israel* or true *Jews*. They are referred to as Messianic Jews. Paul says, "For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is that circumcision which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God" (Rom. 2:28-29).

Those who study biblical prophecies have a love for Israel, recognise their rights upon the land of Israel and the city of Jerusalem and also pray for

the nation's spiritual restoration. They understand the scenario which is busy unfolding in the Middle East and know that it will lead to the tribulation period of seven years during the rule of the Antichrist. They also know that according to John 5:43 those Jews who did not accept Jesus as Messiah will, to their own ruin, conclude a covenant with the Antichrist. The same principle also applies to all Gentiles – they are either followers of the true Christ or they are preparing the way for the coming Antichrist. Jews as well as Gentiles should be informed on this vital choice which they all have to make.

A very significant sign of the end-time is the restoration of Jerusalem. The Lord Jesus said, "Jerusalem will be trampled by Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled" (Luke 21:24). Jerusalem is in an advanced stage of restoration. The Lord Jesus promised that He would return to Jerusalem after the tribulation period, during a major siege of the city and its surrounding territories by enemy forces. He will set His feet on the Mount of Olives, destroy His enemies, save the remnant in Israel and make Jerusalem the capital of His reign of peace (Zech. 14:1-17; Acts 15:16-17; Rev. 19:19-21; Jer. 3:17; Isa. 2:2-4).

A deceived and morally depraved world

It is particularly important to also have perspective on spiritual matters. The Holy Spirit warns us through the prophetic word that the world will become very wicked and depraved in the end-time. The most important reason for this will be a spiritual falling away of vast proportions – to the extent that Satanic teachings will be accepted by many Christian churches: "Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron" (1 Tim. 4:1-2). The *Living Bible* paraphrases these verses as follows: "The Holy Spirit clearly tells us that in the last times some in the church will turn away from Christ and become eager followers of teachers with devil-inspired ideas. These teachers will tell lies with straight faces and do it so often that their consciences won't even bother them."

False doctrines will be proclaimed, accompanied by sensational signs and wonders, which will be very popular among the deceived masses. The false prophets will be highly regarded, they will openly and shamelessly ask for money and become very rich. Paul says the following on the deluded churches of the end-time: "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables" (2 Tim. 4:3-4). The Lord Jesus Himself had warned against false prophets who will deceive large audiences by signs and wonders (Matt. 24:11,24).

Peter said that the false teachers of the end-time will not hesitate at all to

deny Jesus (2 Pet. 2:1-2). They do that by denying His virgin birth, His deity as well as His bodily resurrection, thus rendering Him an ordinary man. In this way they change Him into another Jesus (2 Cor. 11:3-4), which will result in the Antichrist being accepted in His place as *the Christ* of all faiths (cf. John 5:43). We have been warned against deception of this nature and must ensure that we completely reject it.

Extensive moral decline is also characteristic of the end-time. Paul says, "But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For people will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors... having a form of godliness but denying its power" (2 Tim. 3:1-5). These morally depraved people of the end-time nevertheless have a form of godliness, which means that they are unsaved church people. They have denied the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit as they only pay lip-service to Christianity.

The situation is far worse among heathen people outside the church. The Lord Jesus said that in the end-time it will be like the days of Noah and Lot (Luke 17:26-30). Noah's time was characterised by a culture of violence which prevailed in all the wicked societies (Gen. 6:5,13). In Lot's time big cities were dominated by aggressive gay societies. We experience a repetition of these times today.

If one takes notice of these prophecies on the end-time you can more effectively resist the prevailing wickedness and ensure that you are not carried away by the rising tide of moral permissiveness and apostasy. Christians who do not stand firm will backslide. Christ said, "Because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold" (Matt. 24:12).

Study biblical prophecies and realise that strong perseverance is needed to remain standing in the end-time: "He who is righteous, let him be righteous still; and he who is holy, let him be holy still" (Rev. 22:11). We are living in a time of a great falling away, and unwavering dedication is needed from us to shine like lights in the midst of a perverse generation.

Dispensational distinction

The Holy Spirit gives us enlightened eyes of the mind to correctly understand the mysteries of God's counsel for man. It is of the utmost importance that we are able to clearly distinguish between the dispensation of the law (Israel in the Old Testament), the New Testament dispensation of the church, the future dispensation of the Antichrist's seven-year reign, and the dispensation of Christ's thousand-year reign of peace after His second coming. Each of these dispensations has their distinguishing features and should in no way be confused with one another.

The purity of the New Testament dispensation of grace, as well as our prophetic expectation of what will happen in the future after the Lord has taken away His bridal congregation, demands an approach in which we

refrain from mixing the characteristics of the church dispensation with that of any dispensation before or after it. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit we must rightly divide the word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15), which means that that all biblical statements should be understood and applied in their correct dispensational context. Great confusion results when this is not done.

It must be clearly understood that the Old Testament dispensation of the law has passed away and that in the New Testament we are not under law but under grace (Rom. 6:14). "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (Rom. 10:4). No efforts whatsoever should be taken to subject believers in any way to the law – e.g. to observe the Sabbath on Saturdays – as that would diminish or even nullify Christ's work of grace on the cross. The Galatians tried to mix the law and grace, but Paul said to them: "You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace" (Gal. 5:4).

The New Testament time is also referred to as the dispensation of the Holy Spirit as He convicts us of sin, regenerates us, fills us and pours out the love of God into our hearts. A person who truly loves God and his neighbour has fulfilled the principles of the law and lives spiritually on a higher level than believers of the Old Testament. They only had the letter of the law and not the Holy Spirit to guide them into all truth.

We should be equally cautious not to confuse the church dispensation with any of the future dispensations. The Antichrist and his wicked rule of seven years which will commence after the rapture should in no way be regarded as part of the church dispensation. There are many people who nevertheless do this by advancing a historical interpretation of prophecies on the Antichrist. They allege that the church dispensation coincides with the dispensation of the Antichrist since, according to them, prophecies on the Antichrist and the tribulation period were fulfilled during the lifetime of various dictators, e.g. Nero, some of the popes, Stalin, Hitler, etc.

However, the Bible is very clear on the fact that the Antichrist will only be revealed after the one who restrains him – the true church of Christ indwelt by the Holy Spirit – has been removed from this wicked world. Then, the Antichrist as a false world messiah and world leader will be revealed for the start of his relatively short rule of seven years. At the end of his reign of terror, at the second coming of Christ, he will be destroyed. It is an undeniable fact that he will be an end-time ruler. Paul says:

And now you know what is restraining, that he may be revealed in his own time. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord will consume with the breath of his mouth and destroy with the brightness of His coming. The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this reason God will

send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness (2 Thess. 2:6-12).

In Revelation 19:19-20 it is also confirmed that the Antichrist will be a living ruler on earth at the time of the second coming of Christ. The Lord Jesus also refers to this terrible time in His Olivet Discourse: "Then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be... Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory" (Matt. 24:21,29-30).

We have a promise to escape the judgements of the Antichrist's reign of terror by way of the rapture, just as sure as Noah and Lot also escaped the divine judgements of their time: "Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man" (Luke 21:36; cf. 1 Thess. 4:16-17). What a motivation for holiness and a clean, fruitful life to have the sure expectation that we will soon appear before the heavenly Bridegroom!

In the last instance, the church dispensation should also not be equated with the future kingdom dispensation of Christ's reign of peace after His second coming. This is commonly done nowadays and gives rise to the serious deception of kingdom theology (dominionism). These people do not believe that we are sojourners and pilgrims in a world that lies in the sway of the Wicked One (1 Pet. 2:11; 1 John 5:19), and that we have to engage in spiritual warfare to remain standing against the wiles of the devil. They see themselves as called upon to reveal the kingdom of God on earth now, before the second coming of Christ. This approach gives rise to a theology of signs and wonders by self-proclaimed prophets and apostles who view themselves as small gods. They promote ecumenical unity among all churches, and ultimately among all faiths, as well as transformation rallies, to introduce the kingdom with all its prosperity, peace and unity.

We have not been called to such ideas and actions during this dispensation. We are living in a sinful and agnostic world which is heading for the judgements of God and the revelation of the Antichrist. Evangelical Christians have a hard time because they refuse any compromise with the ecumenical movement. Unsaved people should be plucked like brands from the fire, and realise that they should escape the depravity of the world and the deception of a false faith. We have to suffer with Christ now, and also be prepared to be rejected with Him, if we wish to rule in His future kingdom dispensation with Him (John 15:18-20; Phil. 1:28-29; 2 Tim. 2:12).

People who proclaim kingdom reforms now, and fail to warn people against the coming wrath of God, are not guided by the Holy Spirit but by

deceiving spirits that promote a human agenda which is in conflict with God's counsel (2 Cor. 11:4; 1 Tim. 4:1). Trust the Holy Spirit to reveal the future things to you in the Bible and to give you enlightened eyes of the mind.

8. Appearing Before the Judgement Seat

The Holy Spirit was poured out on the day of Pentecost to empower the Church of Christ to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ all over the world so that people can be saved. This work is firstly done to offer lost sinners the opportunity to be reconciled with God by coming over out of the darkness of sin into His marvellous light, thus escaping the judgement of hell. This is why Christ has sent us out into the world. Secondly, we do it with a view to the future revelation of the kingdom of Christ. We exert ourselves so that as many people as possible will share in this wonderful kingdom because that will bring glory to the name of the Lord. Thirdly, we do it because we don't want to be bad and unproductive servants who will appear empty-handed before the judgement seat of Christ. To the honour of His name we want to receive crowns that can be laid down at His feet in gratitude for and in recognition of what He has done for us.

It is not easy to be witnesses for Christ in a wicked, unbelieving and hostile world. There is a price to be paid for this ministry, as we must be prepared to become soldiers for the cross who will often be rejected by people because Jesus Christ is also rejected by the majority of them. We are not kings who are ruling in His kingdom with Him now. We should be motivated by the promise of rewards in His future kingdom to continue working and expressing ourselves against sin and apostasy. That will definitely not make us popular! Moses chose "rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward" (Heb. 11:25-26).

Prepare to appear before the judgement seat of Christ. Peter says the time has come for judgement to begin at the house of God (1 Pet. 4:17). That refers to the judgement of the works of believers. The Lord Jesus said, "Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to his work" (Rev. 22:12). When the Lord comes, He will reward His servants and judge the wicked: "Your wrath has come, and the time of the dead that they should be judged, and that You should reward Your servants the prophets and the saints, and those who fear your name, small and great, and should destroy those who destroy the earth" (Rev. 11:18). The Lord will reward His servants for their labour and will then judge the wicked people during the tribulation period.

All Christians have an appointment before the judgement seat of Christ, whether they were good servants or not. Some will receive rewards while others will stand there with empty hands. The fact is that they will all have to give account of themselves. Paul said to the church in Corinth: "We must all

appear before the judgement seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad” (2 Cor. 5:10). The word “bad” can also be translated as “worthless.” On that day the works of many people will prove to be worthless as they have no value for eternity. The Lord Jesus says to every church: “I know your works” (cf. Rev. 2:2). He will judge them according to their works, depending if they are good or worthless. Paul directs the same message at the church in Rome: “We shall all stand before the judgement seat of Christ... So each of us shall give account of himself to God” (Rom. 14:10,12).

Paul explains to the Corinthians in much more detail how the works of believers will be subjected to God’s test of fire. The works referred to here are those that were done after repentance because they have been built upon the Rock, Jesus Christ. The works of some Christians will be rejected and consumed by the fire because they were works of the flesh. This passage clearly indicates that we have definite duties as co-workers of God in His kingdom. But we must take care how we discharge our duties – not in the strength of the flesh but in the power of the Holy Spirit:

...each one will receive his own reward according to his own labour. For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, you are God’s building. According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it. For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one’s work will become manifest; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one’s work, of what sort it is. If anyone’s work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone’s work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire. Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? (1 Cor. 3:8-16).

A few matters are very evident from this section:

- o The foundation of repentance, which is the beginning of a new life in Christ, must first be laid before we can start working for the Lord.
- o After repentance we are commanded to work for the Lord by being witnesses for Him and letting our light shine in a dark world. We are called to be fellow-workers of God in the extension of His kingdom on earth.
- o It cannot be taken for granted that we will only do acceptable works under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, since Christians can also do worthless things in the flesh (1 Cor. 3:1-3). These works are the wood, hay and straw that have no value for eternity, and are consequently rejected by God. No reward will be received for them.
- o To those who do unacceptable works in the flesh the question is asked: “Don’t you know that the Spirit of God dwells in you?” They should have

given their lives over to be controlled by the Holy Spirit to be able to serve and worship the Lord in spirit and truth. That is the biblical standard for all Christians.

In Luke 19:11-27 the Lord Jesus also referred to the day when His servants will have to give account of their lives to Him. He says in the parable that He gave each of them money, which symbolises the enabling power of the Holy Spirit, i.e. a divine ability to work in His kingdom. They will have no excuse for sitting back and doing nothing.

When He returns as King He will firstly call His servants to reward them according to the work they have done. To the one who has made tenfold profit He will say: "Well done, good servant; because you were faithful in a very little, have authority over ten cities" (Luke 19:17). Another one gets authority over five cities, but the one who kept the money and returned it unused, will be strongly reprimanded. He hasn't done anything and won't get any reward, despite the fact that he was one of his Master's servants.

The following five crowns are promised to overcomers:

1. The imperishable crown for a holy and fruitful life

There are definite rules which we must obey in the race if we want to be overcomers who have achieved substantial results for the kingdom of God. Paul said the following in connection with the dedication of athletes: "Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown" (1 Cor. 9:24-25).

The athletes see to it that they remain healthy; they do not smoke or drink and eat good food. In the race of life we also have to refrain from harmful (sinful) habits that can retard our progress: "...let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus" (Heb. 12:1-2).

Dedication of this nature goes hand in hand with the cleansing of our hearts and the filling of the Holy Spirit: "Therefore having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2 Cor. 7:1). That demands self-discipline as well as exercise in godliness (1 Tim. 4:7). In this way we are striving to receive an imperishable crown – not, like the athletes, only a perishable laurel-wreath and a short moment of glory.

2. The crown of rejoicing for soul-winners

World evangelisation is the most important task the Lord Jesus committed to His disciples: "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15). This commission applies to all Christians of all ages. Paul said to believers in Thessalonica: "What is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Is it not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming?" (1 Thess. 2:19).

To everyone who leads lost souls to Jesus, the crown of rejoicing will be given at the judgement seat of Christ. This is a highly esteemed calling in the kingdom of heaven, which is why soul-winners are compared to shining stars – they have brought the light of the world, Jesus Christ, the Sun of Righteousness, to a lost, dark world, so that others can find their way to Calvary and to a new life in Him: “Those who are wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament, and those who turn many to righteousness like the stars for ever and ever” (Dan. 12:3).

3. The crown of glory for faithful shepherds

The spiritual nurture and edification of the flock is a very important aspect of Christian service which was ordained by Christ Himself and will eventually be rewarded by Him: “Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by constraint but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away” (1 Pet. 5:2-4).

Pastors will be kept responsible for their flocks. James says, “My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgement” (Jas. 3:1). It is expected of pastors to declare the whole counsel of God, including the doctrines of justification, sanctification and the second coming of Christ. If they do that, they will be rewarded – if they don’t, they will be held responsible for the lost people who were entrusted to their care. Pastors of New Testament churches have the same responsibilities as that of Israel’s spiritual leaders. God said to them:

When I say to the wicked, You shall surely die, and you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way, to save his life, that same wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood I will require at your hand... Again, when a righteous man turns from his righteousness and commits iniquity, and I lay a stumbling-block before him, he shall die; because you did not give him warning, he shall die in his sin, and his righteousness which he has done shall not be remembered; but his blood I shall require at your hand (Ezek. 3:18-20).

4. The crown of life for Christian martyrs

The crown of life is reserved as a reward for those who have laid down their lives for their faith. This reward also applies to all who were severely persecuted and who bore the reproach of Christ through suffering, beatings and ridicule. According to 1 Peter 4:12-16,19 the martyrs are seen as partakers in the sufferings and afflictions of Christ because they are in the heat of the battle against the forces of Satan. This kind of sacrifice is precious to God and the oppressed are encouraged to accept their suffering joyfully: “Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer... Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life” (Rev. 2:10).

The gospel of Christ did not reach us by easy means or without cost. It

was confirmed by the testimonies of millions of martyrs who laid down their lives for it. They sealed it with their blood and in this way made a major contribution to its survival. Through their heroic actions they confirmed the validity and truth of our faith beyond any doubt. In critical situations they were willing to pay the highest price to defend the Christian faith against the vicious, satanically inspired attacks which are aimed at its total destruction.

It is clear that costly sacrifices for the sake of the gospel are required even in countries where no religious persecution occurs. Furthermore, the Lord often allows afflictions in the lives of His followers to test their faith, mostly in the form of sickness, bereavement, financial setbacks or other disappointments. Through these experiences they realise their need to depend upon Him fully. It also gives them the opportunity to encourage others who suffer and to taking a clear Christian stand in life (2 Cor. 1:3-10). Those who do not become bitter or despondent as a result of their trials and afflictions, but allow themselves to be purified and edified by these experiences, will receive a crown from the Lord on that day: "Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been proved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him" (Jas. 1:12).

5. The crown of righteousness for those who love His appearing

"Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved His appearing" (2 Tim. 4:8). It might appear strange that the Lord should reserve a distinctive crown as reward for a good work that seems no more than an attitude of mind and heart. Closer scrutiny, however, reveals that not only does the Lord deeply value our love for Him, but especially the fact that we are eagerly looking out for His second coming! It is this which gives a special quality to all our work and witness for Him.

The eye should be kept steadfastly on Jesus who has promised to return soon and to reveal His heavenly kingdom in glory. Christians should be keenly aware of this fact to the extent that it continuously gives purpose and direction to their daily life and work. The concept of the second coming contains a special motivation to serve the Lord. It adds a dimension of urgency to evangelical and pastoral service. It is also a strong incentive towards sanctification because every Christian who has the hope of Christ's appearing "purifies himself, just as He is pure" (1 John 3:2-3).

Only when the faith of believers is focused far above the horizon of worldly interests on the coming of Christ, when we understand our purpose to work for a kingdom which is yet to be revealed when the King comes, and are willing to be used in this regard, does the conviction exist that all our labour is not in vain, and are we safeguarded against a secularised life.

We are very close to the time when judgement will begin at the house of God. Are you ready to appear before the judgement seat of Christ and give

account of your life? He has eyes like a flame of fire and nothing is hidden from Him. He even understands all your thoughts afar off. If you have not been washed from your sins in His blood you will not even appear before the judgement seat with the other believers. This is not the place where one is cleansed from your sins – sanctification must occur here on earth before the coming of Christ. Then alone will you have confidence to appear before Him and to be rewarded as a good servant.

9. Salvation on the Cross

The gospel of the cross was the great message which the Holy Spirit impressed upon the hearts of the disciples. He makes the crucified Christ a reality in our lives as He is the Rock upon which our lives are built. Identification with Jesus Christ is also foundational to sanctification as a second work or grace. If we die with Him we will also live with Him. Paul said he preaches Christ crucified (1 Cor. 1:23). A person can only be saved after proclaiming to him or her the message that Jesus shed His blood for the atoning of sins on the cross. We are “justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth to be a propitiation by His blood through faith” (Rom. 3:24-25).

During the six hours when Jesus laid down His life on the cross (that was from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. – in Israel it is between the 3rd and 9th hours of the day) He talked very little. The seven pronouncements which He did make jointly took less than a minute to utter. Nevertheless, they were the most meaningful words of forgiveness, saving grace, comfort and victory over the powers of Satan which Jesus had spoken in the midst of intense agony of death. These words were the following:

1. “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they do” (Luke 23:34). Jesus demonstrated His boundless love and grace when He prayed for His trespassers during His condemnation and execution. Before His crucifixion He already prayed for the spiritually blind residents of Jerusalem. They faced great anxiety and international dispersion because they did not know the time when God visited them through His Son. The prayer which Jesus offered on the cross for the pardon of His trespassers was heard during the subsequent centuries when thousands of Jews accepted Jesus as their Messiah. In the end-time there will also be a large group of Jews who will look on Him whom they have pierced, and grieve for Him (Zech. 12:10).

2. “When Jesus therefore saw His mother and the disciple whom He loved standing by, He said to His mother, **Woman, behold your son! Then He said to the disciple, **Behold your mother!** And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home”** (John 19:26-27).

With this arrangement Jesus had far more in mind than caring for His mother Mary. He also committed His mother (Israel) to the care of His disciples (the church). In the Bible Israel is often likened to a married woman of whom the Messiah would be born. In Isaiah 54:5 Israel is depicted as a married woman, and in Revelation 12:4-6 as a woman with her male Child, Jesus, who will rule all nations with a rod of iron.

The church certainly has an obligation to comfort and encourage Israel. We are called upon to provoke them to jealousy by the way in which we

serve the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob through this woman's Son, Jesus (Rom. 11:11-12).

3. “Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). Initially, the thieves who were crucified with Jesus both reviled and insulted Him (Matt. 27:44). Later, the one thief was strongly convicted of his own wickedness and of the innocence and righteousness of Jesus. He then begged for mercy (Luke 23:39-42). The Lord Jesus immediately reacted to this change of heart, and gave the repentant sinner the assurance of eternal life. In this way He honoured a promise which is still valid today: “The one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out” (John 6:37).

From the wonderful repentance of a stubborn sinner on the cross we know that Jesus is the great Physician who came to save spiritually dying people. He did not come for those who justify themselves and think they do not need His saving grace. We also know that there is no sin which is so big that it cannot immediately and completely be forgiven. Furthermore, we know there is grace for everyone who has entered the valley of the shadow of death, as long as he or she stretches out the hand of faith to the Lord Jesus.

4. “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” (Matt. 27:46). Between 12 noon and 3 p.m. when Jesus died on the cross there was darkness upon the whole land (Mark 15:33). That was an overt indication that, spiritually speaking, the dark clouds of humanity's sin had descended upon Jesus and separated the Son from His heavenly Father. As an innocent Person, Jesus willingly took the place of convicted sinners so that the sin of lost humanity could be laid upon Him to pay the just penalty for all sinners. “He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities. The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed” (Isa. 53:5).

The Father has laid on Jesus the iniquity of us all (Isa. 53:6), thereby making Him the object of His divine wrath. “For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:21). At that critical moment when the Son was covered by lost humanity's burden of sin the Father looked away. Jesus was dying and during those agonising moments of laying down His life on the cross He cried out in His human nature: “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” He took the place of all lost sinners who were forsaken by God, and was surrounded by the darkness of divine wrath and judgement.

5. “I thirst!” (John 19:28). People who were crucified experienced an intense thirst when they were nearing death, and yearned for water. In a Messianic Psalm which prophetically refers to the death of Jesus, David said: “My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue clings to my jaws; You have brought Me to the dust of death” (Ps. 22:15).

The death of Christ was much more severe than ordinary people's death. He was confronted by fallen humanity's total burden of sin and had to lay

down His life under the extreme wrath and judgement of God: “My heart is like wax. It has melted within Me” (Ps. 22:14). He was indeed forsaken by God in a place where perpetual thirst prevails. The lost rich man was vividly conscious of his thirst when he opened his eye in Hades (Luke 16:24). Jesus served the full penalty for our sins.

It was shortly before His death when Jesus was forsaken by God and experienced immense thirst. The events of these critical moments emphasise the clear contradistinctions of His crucifixion:

- ✠ The big antithesis from which all the others arise is that Jesus died so that we can live (John 3:16).
- ✠ Jesus was forsaken by God so we will never be forsaken by God once we are reconciled with Him through Christ (Heb. 13:5).
- ✠ Because Jesus experienced the thirst of death He can quench our spiritual thirst so we will never again be thirsty (John 4:14; 6:35).
- ✠ He hanged naked on the cross so we can be clothed with the garments of salvation (John 19:23; Rom. 13:14; Rev. 3:18).
- ✠ He became poor so that we, through His poverty, might become rich in God’s grace (2 Cor. 8:9).

6. “Father, into Your hands I commend My spirit” (Luke 23:46). Jesus laid down His life and commended His spirit into the hands of His Father. He did it willingly and consciously (John 10:17-18). Directly afterwards, with His last breath, He cried out:

7. “It is finished” (John 19:30). The Greek version of the dying word of Jesus is *tetelestai*. To fully comprehend the significance of the word *tetelestai* that was uttered by Jesus at the moment of His death, we should briefly investigate its applications during the first century. This word was more meaningful to those people than to us today, and we will do well to retrieve its original meaning.

Fully paid. In the first instance, according to the *Vocabulary of the Greek Testament*, the word *tetelestai* was used as the first word on a receipt. It therefore conveys the meaning of *fully paid*. Have you ever considered the fact that Jesus actually bought you when He shed His blood and gave His life for you? Paul reminds us of this truth: “For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s” (1 Cor. 6:20). Peter said: “...you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct... but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot” (1 Pet. 1:18-19). The testimony of the elders in heaven confirms their full realisation that they have been bought with the blood of the Lamb, when they sang: “You were slain (sacrificed) and with Your blood You purchased men unto God from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9 AB).

Do you have the assurance that the price for *your* sins has been fully paid? Do you comply with the condition of repentance and confession of your sins to have them forgiven? The Word of God says: “He who covers his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes *them* will have mercy” (Prov. 28:13; see also 1 John 1:8-9). After conversion, we ought to walk with the Lord and keep our record clean by confessing all sins of which the Holy Spirit convicts us (1 John 2:1-2). Do you have fresh date stamps on your receipt?

The Corinthians were very carnal due to a lax attitude, and this disposition seriously hampered their spiritual growth to maturity (1 Cor. 3:1-3,16). Don't enter the new life with a heritage of carnal attitudes and unconfessed sins. They will eventually cripple you spiritually. Jesus has paid the full price to do a complete work in your life. He wants to save *and* sanctify you. Don't leave the throne of grace with hidden sins that have not been confessed and forsaken.

Sentence served. During the first century it was common practice to nail the charge-sheet of a prisoner to his cell-door. The offences for which he was convicted were written on the charge-sheet, as well as the penalty imposed upon him. After he served his sentence, the charge-sheet was removed from the door and cancelled by writing across it in big letters: *Tetelestai* (Fully served). It was then given to him and nobody could ever charge him again for these offences. He had paid the price for his trespasses in full by serving the entire sentence.

In a spiritual sense all human beings are captives of Satan, “for all have sinned” (Rom. 3:23). They find themselves in his death cells awaiting their trial before the great white throne where they will be condemned to eternal death. The prison master is the devil, and no person can free himself of his own accord from this severe bondage, or from the death sentence imposed upon him. To save lost sinners, Jesus Christ willingly served the death sentence that has already in principle been imposed upon all sinners (Rom. 6:23). After His resurrection from the grave, He is in a position to cancel the charge-sheet of every lost sinner by writing in red letters with His blood across it: *Tetelestai* – Sentence served.

“You were dead in sins, and your sinful desires were not yet cut away. Then He gave you a share in the very life of Christ, for He forgave all your sins, and blotted out the charges proved against you, the list of his commandments which you had not obeyed. He took this list of sins and destroyed it by nailing it to Christ's cross” (Col. 2:13-14 *LB*). The Saviour was indeed sent to earth “to bring out the prisoners from the prison, *and* them that sit in darkness out of the prison house” (Isa. 42:7 KJV). His mission to free those who are spiritual captives of Satan, is also reiterated in Isaiah 61: “The Spirit of the Lord GOD *is* upon Me, because the LORD has anointed Me to preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the

brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to *those who are bound*" (Isa. 61:1).

Have all the sins of which the devil accuses you before the throne of God been blotted out by the blood of the Lamb? If so, nobody can ever accuse you again for those sins, no matter how serious they were, because the sentence for them has been fully served.

Victory gained. A third usage of the term *tetelestai* was related to successful military campaigns against the enemy. When a general returned from the battle-field and paraded his captives of war in the streets of Rome, he proclaimed his victory by shouting: *Tetelestai... tetelestai...* By this victory shout a clear statement was made that the enemy was conquered and its power broken: *mission accomplished!*

Although it was His dying-word on the cross, Jesus also proclaimed His victory over the enemy with the shout: *Tetelestai!* To die was a major victory for Jesus, "that through death He might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil" (Heb. 2:14). "Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it" (Col. 2:15).

Jesus conquered the enemy, but has not yet obliterated him. The devil is still very active on earth, therefore we are called upon to share in the victory of Calvary and become "more than conquerors through Him that loved us" (Rom. 8:37). There is a battle to be fought and a victory to be gained.

These were highly dramatic moments when Jesus laid down His life on the cross to become the Saviour of a lost world. It introduced the dispensation of the New Testament, which made a wonderful difference in the relationship between God and mankind. The veil in the temple was torn in two from top to bottom (Matt. 27:51). This ensured free access to the throne of grace for every person. During Old Testament times, only the high priest could enter the Holy of holies once a year to bring a blood sacrifice for the atonement of Israel's sins. However, the broken body and shed blood of Jesus were part of a once for all sacrifice to atone for the sins of the world. Lost sinners who accept this sacrifice by faith don't need human mediators, such as priests, to approach the throne of grace on their behalf:

Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, and having a high priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith (Heb. 10:19-22).

A big earthquake occurred at the moment that Jesus died, and many of the deceased saints rose from their graves when Jesus was resurrected (Matt. 27:51-53). Jesus broke the power of death so it cannot contain and lay hold of those who have received the gift of eternal life. Jesus said: "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, even though he dies, he shall live" (John 11:25).

After the three hour long darkness which prevailed immediately prior to the death of Jesus, the sunlight burst through the clouds and shone vividly. Golgotha was bathed in a new lustre and the testimony of these events would, through the centuries, dispel the darkness of sin and lostness in the lives of millions of people. Everyone of us who has become a partaker of His saving grace has been sent to proclaim the praises of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvellous light (1 Pet. 2:9).

When the Roman soldiers “saw the earthquake and the things that had happened, they feared greatly, saying, Truly, this was the Son of God!” (Matt. 27:54). Even heathen people, who were ignorant of Messianic prophecies in the Old Testament, came trembling to the conclusion that Jesus is the Son of God. The Lord offers reconciliation through the blood of Christ to people from every nation, tongue and tribe, even to the ends of the earth.

Because Jesus was prepared to make Himself of no reputation and descend to the lowest depths of dying on a cross in the place of lost sinners, God raised Him from the dead. He highly exalted Him and gave Him a name which above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:6-11).

Every person on earth will have to bow the knee before Jesus Christ and confess that He is Lord and God. It is the duty of believers to prepare all people for an encounter with Christ. They are invited to bow before His throne of grace now to receive Him as their Saviour. If they refuse the offer they will, on judgement day, appear before Him at the great white throne where He will condemn them to the lake of fire. He is either your Saviour who has saved your soul, or He will be your Judge to condemn you to hell because of your sin and unbelief (cf. Acts 17:30-31).

The shadows of the church dispensation are stretching and time is running out. Let us make the most of the remaining time by redeeming it to serve the Lord and extend His kingdom on earth. Like Jesus, we should be urgent about our mission: “I must work the works of Him who sent Me while it is day; the night is coming when no one can work” (John 9:4). The night of God’s judgements in the great tribulation is rapidly approaching and there is still much unfinished business in His kingdom to be done before the trumpet will sound. The lost must be saved and Christians must be prepared to appear before the heavenly Bridegroom.

10. The Marriage of the Lamb

The true church of Christ is also described as the bride or wife of the Lamb (Matt. 25:1-13; 2 Cor. 11:2; Rev. 19:7-8). It is important to realise that after having been saved we should not lapse into spiritual idleness as though we have already reached our destination. Every Christian has a high calling of God in Christ Jesus (Phil. 3:14), and salvation is only the beginning of a long process of sanctification and spiritual growth. We need to increase in holiness to appear before Christ without blemish. Appreciate the fact that Christ gave Himself to save *and* sanctify us: "Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for it, that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the Word, that He might present it to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that it should be holy and without blemish" (Eph. 5:25-27).

After the first purging of our sins the Lord Jesus also wants to sanctify us completely so we can be blameless on the day when we appear before Him. Do not be discouraged by your present dark circumstances and the contempt with which a wicked world treats us. Cling to the promises of our wonderful future in heaven and actively continue to prepare for that life.

During the first coming of Jesus there was great hostility against Him and His small group of true disciples. He said that He would go to His Father and they were afraid to remain behind alone. But the night before His crucifixion the Lord Jesus made the following comforting promise about meeting them again and taking them to heaven: "Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And 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" (John 14:1-3).

This promise was made after the analogy of traditional Jewish marriage customs in biblical times. The first important step in the Jewish marriage was betrothal, which comprised the conclusion of a marriage covenant. In the time of Jesus it was customary that such a covenant was concluded because of the initiative taken by the prospective bridegroom. For this purpose he travelled from his father's house to the home of his prospective bride. There he negotiated with her father on the bride-price (*mohar*) which he had to pay. After the bride-price was paid the marriage covenant was concluded. From that moment onwards the future bride was declared to be separated and dedicated only to her future bridegroom. As confirmation of the covenant they drank from a cup of new wine over which a blessing for the betrothal was declared.

In biblical times the Jewish bridegroom departed for a lengthy period after his betrothal to prepare an apartment in the house of his father for his bride and himself. Having done so, he would then return to her home secret-

ly at night to be reunited with her and take her with him to his father's house, where the marriage feast would be celebrated. This is analogous to Jesus preparing a place for us in the Father's house and returning to take us there as promised.

The first statement that we can make when studying this analogy is that the sanctified church of Christ is His bride (Eph. 5:22-23). Just as the Jewish bridegroom took the initiative by leaving his father's house to travel to the house of his prospective bride, Jesus left His Father's house during His first coming to come to the world, which is the habitation of His future bride. Through His death on the cross He paid the full price to redeem His bride so she can belong to Him. Paul said to church: "You were bought at a price" (1 Cor. 6:20), while Peter also confirms that we were redeemed with the precious blood of Christ (1 Pet. 1:18-19). During the same night when Jesus made the promise to the early disciples that He was going to prepare a place for us, He instituted Holy Communion. He passed the cup with wine to His disciples with the words: "This cup is the new covenant in My blood" (1 Cor. 11:25). That was a confirmation of the eternal bond that we have with Him through His death on the cross.

As the Jewish bride was declared to be holy and only dedicated to her bridegroom, we also have an obligation to appear before Christ holy and without blemish. Paul says that our hearts must be "blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess. 3:13). That includes our entire life: "Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit, soul and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it" (1 Thess. 5:23-24; cf. 1 Pet. 1:15-16).

After concluding the marriage contract the bridegroom returned to his father's house where he stayed for about a year to prepare a place for him and his bride. During this time he didn't see his bride and she kept herself busy making a wedding garment and collecting necessities for the married life. As Christians, we are in the same situation. During the present time of seclusion when we wait on the Bridegroom to return we must work on our wedding garment (Rev. 19:8) and prepare ourselves on our future position in heaven. We also have the responsibility to extend the invitation to become members of the bridal congregation of Christ to all people. There is also a real danger that we may be tempted by Satan during this time and seduced to become untrue to Christ, thereby backsliding from our holy relationship with Him.

Paul said to the carnal Corinthians, who were poorly motivated to heed the command to holiness (1 Cor. 3:1-3), that they would actually break their relationship with Christ and become victims of a satanic spirit of deception: "I am jealous for you with godly jealousy. For I have betrothed you to one husband, that I might present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds be

may corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ" (2 Cor. 11:2-3). From the parable in Matthew 25 it is also evident that five of the virgins had too little oil in their lamps. That is an indication that they didn't walk in the fullness of the Spirit and were therefore not worthy to appear before the Bridegroom and accompany Him to His Father's house. There was a serious shortcoming in their lives.

At the end of the year of seclusion the Jewish bridegroom fetched his bride to come and stay with him. She knew more or less when the time was ripe, but not the exact day when he would come. He usually came at night because it was a secret meeting between him and her. She went out on the road to meet him, and on this occasion he didn't show himself to the rest of her family members. His arrival was preceded by a shout, which was the good tiding that the bridegroom had come for his bride (Matt. 25:6). By then it was too late to make further preparations for the coming of the bridegroom.

In a similar way the heavenly Bridegroom will secretly come for His bride at the end of the church dispensation. He will meet her outside planet earth in the air, and on this occasion He will definitely not reveal Himself to the rest of the world. His coming will also be announced by a shout: "For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words" (1 Thess. 4:16-18).

After this meeting the bride will first appear before the judgement seat of Christ, where every member will be rewarded for his or her service to the Lord. After that, the marriage will be contracted in heaven when the bride will, spiritually speaking, become the wife of the Lamb. The first task of the glorified church will be to judge the world in righteousness with Christ. Paul says, "Do you not know that the saints will judge the world?" (1 Cor. 6:2).

In a governing capacity the church is depicted as 24 elders who are gathered around the throne of Christ in heaven. When Christ opens the scroll of God's judgements upon a wicked and sinful world at the beginning of the tribulation period of seven years, the elders will sing to Him: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals; for You were slain, and have redeemed us to God by Your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and have made us kings and priests to our God; and we shall reign on earth" (Rev. 5:9-10). They are looking forward to the time after the tribulation period when they will return to earth with Christ to rule as kings with Him in His millennial kingdom.

Christ and His saints will return to Jerusalem: "In that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which faces Jerusalem on the east... Thus the Lord my God will come, and all the saints with You" (Zech. 14:4-5). That will be the public appearing of Jesus Christ, which is clearly distinguished from the secret meeting which He will have seven years earlier with His bridal

congregation. On the second occasion Christ will be revealed in all His glory together with His body, or congregation: "When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory" (Col. 3:4). The Lord Jesus will return to judge His enemies at the battle of Armageddon (Zech. 14:2-3; Rev. 19:19-21), to save the remnant in Israel (Zech. 12:10), and to institute a government of righteousness for the whole world (Isa. 2:2-4; Jer. 3:17).

When the Lord Jesus returns to earth in might and majesty, all people who survived the great tribulation and the battle of Armageddon will recognise Him and be reconciled to Him (Zech. 13:8-9; Matt. 24:29-30). The marriage supper of the Lamb – that is the feast after the marriage ceremony – will form part of the events by which He will be revealed on earth. The believers in Israel and the nations who were saved after His second coming will be guests on this illustrious occasion: "Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready. And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen represents the righteous acts of the saints" (Rev. 19:7-8).

The glorified church is here called the wife of the Lamb as the marriage was already contracted in heaven. Her marriage garment reflects the degree of holiness that individual members attained when they were still on earth, waiting for the Bridegroom. Works are clearly relevant here as the fine linen represents the righteous acts of the saints. The saints are those Christians who's lives produced works that befit repentance. That is symbolised by the gold, silver and precious stones with which the believers, according to 1 Corinthians 3:10-12, have built upon the foundation, Jesus Christ.

The marriage garment is like a marriage relationship – we have to work on it. This garment must not be tainted by sin, neither must it have wrinkles because it was folded up and stored somewhere. But remember that the work in preparing this garment can only be done through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. It is not what you do for the Lord in the strength of the flesh that counts but what He does through you. That is why "it was granted" to the bride to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright. Like the servants who received the minas, the bride is not a passive recipient of the spiritual power and grace that she receives. She has to use it by actively making herself available in the service of the Lord.

Every believer can be more holy or less holy, just as he can bear more fruit, less fruit or no fruit in the kingdom. Some of them bear thirty-fold fruit, others sixty-fold and some even hundred-fold. The one earns ten minas with the one that was given him, the other one five and the third one nothing. The question is: where do you stand with regard to sanctification? Is the old man crucified and does the Holy Spirit have full control of your life? If so, then you will bear much fruit and your wedding garment will also be richly embroidered with gold-thread. Make very sure that you are a member of the

glorified bridal congregation that will soon stand beside the Lord Jesus at the marriage of the Lamb:

“At your right hand stands the queen in gold from Ophir... The royal daughter is all glorious within the palace; her clothing is woven with gold. She shall be brought to the King in robes of many colours... With gladness and rejoicing they shall be brought; they shall enter the King’s palace” (Ps. 45:9,13-15). With a view to this glorious future that awaits us we must exert ourselves to live holy and please the Lord in everything we do. This should not be viewed as an unattainable ideal as the Lord will help you to achieve it. You will not attain a standard of perfection now, but you must keep moving in the right direction. Paul says, “Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me” (Phil. 3:12).

There must be visible progress in your spiritual life. To be able to experience that, the message of enduement with power from on high during Pentecost should be seriously considered. This power enables us to grow up spiritually, work for the Lord, resist the devil and prevail over temptations, and also to appear before Christ at His coming with a worthy wedding garment – that fine linen which represents the righteous acts of the saints. The last command of the Lord Jesus in the Bible deals with continued holiness and spiritual growth. He joins it to a promise of rewards of grace during His second coming: “...he that is righteous (just, upright, in right standing with God) let him do right still, and he who is holy let him be holy still. Behold, I am coming soon, and I shall bring My wages and rewards with Me, to repay and render to each one just what his own actions and his own work merit” (Rev. 22:11-12; *AB*).

Do not abide by the standard of your spiritual life in its present condition. The unsaved, as well as those who only have a form of godliness, are called upon to come to the Lord Jesus for salvation; carnal believers should fully surrender themselves to be filled with the Holy Spirit, while Spirit-filled Christians should strive towards higher levels of holiness and service to the Lord. Come and drink from the fountain of life and draw from the riches of the Lord’s grace. He does not only have grace for salvation but also for victory and the rendering of service in His kingdom. His grace wants to lead you towards this goal in life:

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ (Titus 2:11-13).

Shortly we will appear before Him in glory!