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07 Oct 07

Lukewarm Christians
Elder Cheng Wei Nien

A Christian's life should never be on a stand still. As the writer of Hebrews says: "*Let us run with patience the race that is set before us*" (Heb 12:1). A believer should always be on the move, not aimlessly, but as one with a definite purpose and aim, pressing "*toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus*" (Phil 3:14). Unfortunately today, we see many who are either not running at all or running in the wrong direction, calling themselves Christians, but not living the life befitting the name by which they are called. Worldly comforts and material gains so clouded their minds that there is no room in their hearts for the Lord. Lukewarmness should never be in the life of any true believer because the Lord says: "*I will spue thee out of my mouth*" (Rev 3:16). Why is a believer lukewarm? Revelation 3:17 tells us why.

1. Self-complacency

"*I am rich, and increased with goods!*" "Too busy" or "no time" is the usual reason for not attending prayer meetings or other spiritual exercises. Wealth and worldly ambitions are always associated with "no time". The real reason however is not "too busy" or "no time" but rather "too attracted to the world and to self". I am doing quite well, and therefore why "waste time" reading the Bible and attend prayer meetings? As his worldly goods increases, his spiritual strength decreases. This is the usual trend. May the Lord be gracious to such a lukewarm believer.

2. Self-sufficiency

"*I have need of nothing*" says such a believer. It is very dangerous for a believer to be "need of nothing". For this is the beginning of his lukewarmness towards God. "I have been attending Sunday services and sitting through every dull sermon regularly" says this person, "so what more do I need?" Some can even say "I know the Bible inside out" — really? Poor soul, he has forgotten that he needs the cleansing blood of the Lord constantly to wash away his sins as he lives in this sinful world; he needs the Word of God to constantly remind him of his weakness and he needs the Holy Spirit to renew him every moment of his life.

3. Self-delusion

"*Knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable and poor and blind and naked.*" Why are some believers so lethargic and pathetic today? It is because they do not realize what bad state they are in, spiritually speaking. Achievements by their own efforts and the wealth they have accumulated so clouded their minds that they have no room for the Lord in their hearts. They think that they are doing well but not as the Lord looks at it. They think that they are running, but, in what direction? Worldly speaking, they are rich but spiritually, they are poor and wretched.

"*Behold, I stand at the door*" says the Lord (Rev 3:20). Our Lord never wants to spue any one of us out of His mouth, but wants all of us to come to repentance. He is standing at your door. Would you open your door for Him to come in? "*If any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me. To him that overcometh (his lukewarmness) will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in His throne*" says our dear Lord (Rev 3:20–21).

14 Oct 07

Happy is that people whose God is the Lord. (Psalm 144:15)

Elder Foong Kon Yu

Every one of us likes to be happy and successful. I cannot think of anyone who plans to fail. Yet many fail to plan. God has given us ample instructions on how to plan our lives. We all wish to be successful but to achieve success, we need first to define what it is. Some may think of success as having plenty of money. If that were so, then there would be no quarrels in the family of the rich. Yet there are those who think that power or knowledge is happiness. If that is so then those dictators should be very happy but this is not so. The people in power do not show happy faces when they encounter public show of defiance against them. The scriptures tell us that happiness is one who is with God and knows it. "*Happy is that people, that is in such a case: yea, happy is that people, whose God is the LORD*" (Psalm 144:15). "*He that handleth a matter wisely shall find good: and whoso trusteth in the LORD, happy is he*" (Proverbs 16:20).

Since it seems so simple to find happiness, how is it then that it seems so elusive? It eludes many of us because we do not live out a life that is according to what God prescribes. God asked that we listen, pray and control our carnal appetites and be consistent in our fellowship with Him.

Listen. The very important virtue of success is to listen. Listen means to receive clearly, understand and do or behave according to what is being told. Today, God communicates to us through His written word. We are to read our Bibles and to receive the messages that God conveys to us. Listening means putting the precious word of God into our hearts and to apply the principles taught to our lives at all times. To listen is to obey. How often we fail to listen but we wish that others would listen to us. Is it not common to hear people starting a conversation with "Listen" If you listen carefully to God's word and do accordingly, you will surely find both success and happiness. They give us an inner joy that has nothing to do with material gain or worldly power.

Pray. God encourages us to pray without ceasing. The Bible mentions the word "ceasing" seven times and each is related to prayer. We probably know 1 Thessalonians 5:17 very well. "*Pray without ceasing.*" (check out also 1 Sam 12:23; Acts 12:5; Rom 1:9; 1 Thess 1:3, 2:13; 2 Tim 1:3). Without ceasing means "non stop". Praying therefore is a constant communication with God. We thank Him, we seek His guidance and we want to have fellowship with Him as we walk along our pathway of life. Sadly, many pray only in dire times of need. We look up to God only when we are down in desperation. The classic example we have in the scripture is Samson. He was born to serve his people through the mighty blessing of God. He prayed only once and that was his last. He did so only when he was captured by the Philistines (through his own folly of disobedience).

Control our carnal appetites. The world is so attractive that many Christians fall together with their unbelieving friends into the pit. Carnal desires are but temporary. When you age, these attractions become a waste of time to you (sadly, to some this seems like irrelevant). Worldly attractions are but illusions. We cannot retain them and they become a moving target, in case we think we can get hold of it. We can never hold on to any of these. There is no permanent joy in these worldly attractions.

Be consistent. We are to abide with God closely. Granted that we are only humans and we do tend to glance at some other interest; we cannot stray very far if we keep our eyes focused on God. To be consistent is to be strong and disciplined. We need to work hard and sweat to build our physical muscles. We need to have determination in order to keep our bodies healthy. For this reason, we exercise and eat the right food. The same goes to developing our spiritual strength too. To build our spiritual muscles, we need to exercise and eat right too. Spiritual exercise is to put into practice what we learn from God's word. Eating right is to make sure we have the correct input into our spiritual being. Do not read just about anything that you can find. They may be interesting to the world but they may not be glorifying to God.

The Remedy. We sometimes feel that we are beyond hope. We failed in all counts. You may have neglected God but He has never neglected you. As He was patient with Samson, so He is patient with each

one of us. *“And Samson called unto the LORD, and said, O Lord GOD, remember me, I pray thee, and strengthen me, I pray thee, only this once, O God, that I may be at once avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes”* (Judges 16:28). Samson called upon the Lord God. He sought fellowship with God (remember me) and he prayed for strength to overcome his difficulties. Whatever position we are in we can come back to God if we call upon Him, repent and come humbly before Him. God answered Samson’s only prayer. He will surely also answer our prayers. Amen!

21 Oct 07
A voice from heaven
(Matthew 3:17)
Elder Su Ching Chun

When we read the four Gospels, we often come across the phrase “*a voice from heaven.*” Who exactly is this voice from heaven? This is the voice of God, telling people about the source of salvation, in testimony of Jesus Christ. The most prominent records of this phrase are found in Matthew 3:17, Luke 9:35 and John 12:28.

When Jesus started preaching, John the Baptist was already preparing the way of the Lord and preaching the gospel of repentance. When Jesus came to the river of Jordan, He accepted the baptism from John. In doing so, Jesus was setting an example by submitting Himself under the law of God — an act of spiritual cleansing. Thereafter, the heaven was opened unto Him, and the Spirit of God descended like a dove upon Him. “*And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased*” (Matt 3:17). The first announcement was: “*For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.*”

The disciples who followed Jesus during His three years of ministry had the chance to know Him better — from addressing Him as Master, to knowing that He is the Christ. And when they knew even more about Jesus Christ, they were prepared to lay down their lives for Him. Jesus led His disciples to a high mountain, a spiritual symbolism that they need to know Him deeper. God had promised His disciples that “*there be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom*” (Matt 16:28). A few days later, Jesus led His disciples up the mountain and He was transfigured before them and stood talking to Moses and Elias. This showed that Jesus came in fulfilment of the laws of God and the words of the prophets. As He was talking to the disciples, “*there came a voice out of the cloud, saying, This is my beloved Son: hear Him*” (Luke 9:35). This was the second announcement. Salvation comes only from Jesus; believe in Him and be saved. When Peter wrote the epistles, he testified that he had heard the voice and saw the glory of God.

During the final week before His crucifixion, Jesus arrived at Jerusalem for the Passover. Jesus had intended to fulfil the numerous prophecies He made regarding His impending suffering, resurrection and second coming. There were certain Greeks who came looking for Jesus, wanting to understand the gospel of life. Jesus remarked that those who truly seek Him are like these Greeks, willing to seek the gospel of life, willing to go deep in their spiritual pursuit and therefore God had promised that all those who believe in Him shall have everlasting life.

There were those who came to the Lord to fill their stomachs, to cure their sicknesses and God took pity and provided their needs. However, these people still stand to lose eternal life if they choose not to believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Jesus came down to earth in order to glorify the Father’s Name. “*Then came there a voice from heaven, saying, I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again*” (Jn 12:28). This was the third announcement.

Believe in Jesus and be saved. Forsake the darkness and be a son of the light. How can we ignore the voice of God Himself?

28 Oct 07

What is the Reformation?

Rev Isaac Ong

Up to the 16th century, the power and influence of the Roman Papacy extended and strengthened its hold on Europe. From cradle to grave, the Roman Church controlled every facet of a person's life. The Church determined how a man lived and what he believed. The people were chained to the fetters of the papacy, enslaved to its traditions, and entangled in its yoke of bondage.

The Roman church at its prime was a law unto its own. Popes and cardinals were more powerful than kings and princes. This unrestrained power gave rise to moral excesses in the church. Priests were unrestrained in their greed and intemperate in their lusts. Although there were several attempts to reform the Roman church, the early reformers such as John Wycliffe, John Hus, Girolamo Savonarola were ruthlessly put down.

By the 1500's, the papacy began to loosen its grip because of social and political pressures. The Renaissance also brought about the resurgence of learning. A man was able to learn and read on his own. He was no longer bound by what the priest told him. The Renaissance emphasis on the individual set the ground of the mindset for Protestant teaching that salvation was a personal matter between God and a man without the intermediary of a priest. The authority of the papacy was replaced by the authority of the Bible, which the individual was now allowed and able to read. Faith now resided in the heart of the individual, and not externally imposed upon him by a priest. The expression of that faith was founded upon the Bible, and not upon the traditions of the church. The Reformation returned Christianity and the Bible to the individual.

Different people looked at the 16th Century Protestant Reformation in different ways. The Roman church regards it as religious rebellion. Secular historians describe it as a social revolution. Some church historians see it as an ecclesiastical reformation. Certainly, the 16th Century Protestant Reformation had a revolutionary character, but it was more than just a revolt against the Roman church, it was a spiritual revival.

The Man God Used

Martin Luther was ordained as an Augustinian monk. And he was a good one. He kept his vows and pursued the monastic life with an intensity that went far beyond his fellow priests. In one of his confessions, Luther said, "I kept the rule of my order so strictly that I may say that if ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery it was I." In his reflections in his latter years, he wrote, "I was a frantic saint. I ran through all the churches and crypts and believed everything, their suffocating lies and falsehoods. I celebrated several masses in Rome, and almost regretted that my father and mother were still living, for I would have liked to redeem them from purgatory with my masses and other good works and prayers."

But the peace that Luther sought was elusive until he turned to the Bible. The specific text was Romans 1:17 – "*For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, the just shall live by faith.*" Luther wrote about this experience, "After I had pondered the problem for days and nights, God took pity on me and I saw the inner connection between the two phrases. I began to understand that this justice of God is the justice by which the just man lives through the free gift of God, that is to say 'by faith.' Thereupon I felt as if I had been born again and had entered Paradise through wide-open gates. Immediately the whole of Scripture took on a new means for me."

Luther's discovery of the doctrine of justification by faith changed the world because this truth brought him into direct confrontation with the papacy. John Tetzel, a monk and travelling salesman for the pope, was selling indulgences to raise money to finance the building of St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome. Indulgences were letters of pardon which guaranteed forgiveness of sins. Luther saw this as a perversion of the Gospel.

On 31 October 1517, Luther wrote up 95 statements challenging the scriptural validity of the indulgences, and nailed them to the door of the Wittenberg Castle. This date will be commemorated as Reformation Sunday.

Luther was condemned as a heretic, excommunicated, and he was forced to go into hiding. By then, Luther and his teachings had spread across Europe like water from a burst dam. The Reformation – the Protestant Movement — could not be stopped.

In the days of Luther, “Protestant” was a derogatory term to describe those who opposed the Roman Church. Today, we called ourselves Protestants, but sadly even among Protestant churches, the flame of Reformation has dimmed and is fading. If the Christian Church is to be effective for God, Christians must repent. We must return to the Word of God and the God of the Word, just as Luther declared before the imperial council that sat in judgment of him, “I am bound by the Scriptures that I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God ... Here I stand. God help me. Amen.”

N.B. The “Contemplation of the Cross” will be continued next month.

04 Nov 07

Hold fast the profession of our faith
Elder Chen Wei Nien

Last Sunday was Reformation Sunday. All Reformed Christian churches have set aside the last Sunday of October to remember how our spiritual forefathers had fought to preserve the “profession of our faith” against the corrupt practices of the leaders of the churches during the “dark ages.” However, many of the so-called reformed believers have lost sight of this precious faith which we should dearly hold on to. This faith is to claim God’s promise which is our *“spiritual blessing in heavenly places in Christ”* (Eph 1:3). This blessing has been prepared for us by God — *“According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love”* (Eph 1:4). Every believer must therefore hold fast to such a promise without wavering. Sad to say, many Christians today are not sure if they are really saved although they claim such a promise. As a result, many have no firm convictions of their faith and therefore follow the trends of the time with all kinds of profane doctrines as well as back to the unscriptural practices of the dark ages!

What “profession of faith” must we hold fast to? The scripture says: *“For by grace are ye saved, through faith; and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God; not of works, lest any man should boast”* (Eph 2:8-9). We are told that we are saved not by works but by the grace of God. In contrast, many today claim that this promise comes not from grace alone but from observing practices such as tongue-speaking, visions, meditations, saying mass and rosary, etc. All these are impressive to the uninformed minds but very detrimental to the profession of our faith. Reformation reminds us that we should not go back to the corrupt practices of the dark ages again.

Believers must not be deceived. The apostle John warned us: *“Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world”* (1 Jn 4:1). The devil is very subtle and is all out to destroy our faith in Christ and to seduce us to trust more in visible phenomena such as signs and wonders, tongue-speaking and emotional experiences. Our Lord also warned us: *“For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect”* (Matt 24:24). The apostle Paul too warned us similarly that: *“Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils”* (1 Tim 4:1) and *“evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived”* (2 Tim 3:13). Believers must therefore be careful not to be deceived but hold fast to the profession of our faith that was given to us in the Holy Scriptures and not any priest or miracle worker of our time. We must hold fast to our Reformed Faith.

Believers should have no doubt about their salvation. *“For He is faithful that promised”* (Heb 10:23). God who *“has blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ”* (Eph 1:3) has already given *“His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life”* (Jn 3:16). This is the most blessed assurance and everyone who has truly believed in Jesus is assured of his or her salvation, and no other kind of physical or mental phenomenon is needed. So believers, do not be deceived by all the false teachers and their devil-inspired signs and wonders.

Why do believers still waver despite the Word of God? Believers waver because they are not clear of the Word of God. Many of them do not read the Bible regularly and even on Sundays, do not pay attention to the preaching of the Word of God. As a result, they are not sure of their own salvation and are therefore easy targets for the devil and the false teachers. Adult Bible Class, Bible study groups led by sound leaders and mid-week prayer meetings are essential for all believers if they are to have a clear understanding of the Word of God, and to hold fast to their profession of faith.

11 Nov 07
Father's Love
Elder Foong Kon Yu

We can identify with Gideon in our human worldly reasoning. When we are in difficulties it seems natural we have in mind the same questions that Gideon asked (Judges 6:13, 15). *“And Gideon said unto him, Oh my Lord, if the LORD be with us, why then is all this befallen us? and where be all his miracles which our fathers told us of, saying, Did not the LORD bring us up from Egypt? but now the LORD hath forsaken us, and delivered us into the hands of the Midianites”* (Judges 6:13). If the Lord be for us ... Why has all this happened ...? Where are all His miracles? How shall I be able to get out of this situation?

This is a despairing observation but I am sure that just like Gideon, this crosses your mind at one time or another as it did to mine. This is especially clearly pronounced when you are in great difficulty for the first time as a new Christian. This is our doubt — *“... but now the LORD hath forsaken me ...”* Gideon heard of how God delivered the Israelites from Egypt and how the Lord led them through the Red Sea, the River Jordan and helped them win so many wars. Gideon was looking at the Tabernacle that stood at Shiloh. It was the “tent of meeting.” It declared the perpetual presence of God in the midst of the people. Yet, in the mind of Gideon (as in some of ours), he thought “ah, but those were happenings in the past. That era of God’s presence and His miracles are now all gone!” This is a timeless question whenever men face difficulties. If God were the benevolent Creator, why does He allow war, famine, and misery to come into this world? Suffering by those who are God’s very own is even more perplexing. What is the point of even existing here on earth if we constantly face difficulties, many of which, are beyond our understanding and hope?

God, in His grace, always answers with quiet assurance. He assures Gideon (and us) of His presence. *“The LORD is with thee”* (Jud 6:12). The Lord also assured Gideon that he will have the power and might from God (Jud 6:14). Notice that the Lord did not attempt to provide an explanation of Gideon’s difficulties. He also did not rebut Gideon’s queries. God simply outlined to Gideon about the plan to victory. To Gideon this was enough assurance to follow as the Lord directed.

The secret of Gideon was that he believes in God and that He will deliver. It is as simple as that. This was Gideon’s first step to victory. Learning to trust is the big hurdle that we need to get over. God need not reveal to us the reasons as to why certain events happen. We are to rest with confidence in the sovereignty of God’s prerogatives over our lives. Each event has a lesson for us to learn. We should avoid being engrossed in the circumstances and trying to find out the reason why. This may cause more frustrations and bitterness. Our faith will waver as we keep guessing for the reasons as to why we are in the midst of this “tribulation.” The reason is really not important, else God would reveal it to us. Just trust in God for deliverance.

Romans chapter 5 gives us an important insight. *“And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; And patience, experience; and experience, hope”* (Romans 5:3-4). Faith is never really tested until difficulty comes. When we assail and emerge trusting, our walk with God takes on a new dimension. Yes, God allows trials to enter the life of every believer. The purpose however is never to tempt defeat. Every trial has two purposes. It is to bring us through and to build us up.

Is it easy to trust in the Lord? Yes, if you trust in God’s leading. No, if you do not. We are Christians. We are the children of God as we bear His name (Christ). *“Even every one that is called by my name: for I have created him for my glory, I have formed him; yea, I have made him”* (Isaiah 43:7).

If you look at a newborn baby and do an honest assessment, you will find no beauty. The skin is all wrinkled and red; the eyes are shut and a little swollen, and when he cries, he yells at a deafening level. What is this appearance to the father? This will be his thought: this is the baby of my flesh and blood. The baby is the most beautiful thing, and the father even imagines that the baby is smart and intelligent when the tiny hand is able to grip the father’s finger. Any negative remarks about the baby will be filtered off

through the father's ears. He would do anything to protect his bundle of joy. This is an example of an earthly father. Make this comparison. God created us from nothing. He sends the Lord Jesus to die in order to redeem us so that we can be in heaven with Him one day. We have the privilege to call him our Father. What do you think of His love? How much more are you worth to Him? Thank you, Father, for your love.

18 Nov 07
Do not murmur
Elder Su Ching Chun

“Do all things without murmurings and disputings” (Phil 2:14). The Philippian church was founded during the Apostle Paul’s second missionary journey. The members and Paul shared a close relationship as they brought great joy and encouragement to Paul. Paul wrote to the Church and encouraged them to be humble, to love one another and to pursue God’s work with one spirit. As Paul praised them, he also encouraged them to seek harmonious relationships with each other and to *“do all things without murmurings and disputings.”* Why is it important that one should not murmur?

Murmuring implies that God is not faithful. The Israelites started murmuring only a month after Moses led them out of Egypt. They felt that their situation in the wilderness was worse than in Egypt and started to murmur. This was a sample of their complaints: *“Would to God we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the flesh pots, and when we did eat bread to the full; for ye have brought us forth into this wilderness, to kill this whole assembly with hunger”* (Exod 16:3). *“We remember the fish, which we did eat in Egypt freely; the cucumbers, and the melons, and the leeks, and the onions, and the garlick: But our soul is dried away: there is nothing at all, beside this manna, before our eyes”* (Num 11:5-6). What happened after all this murmuring? Punishment came down hard on the people and they paid a great price. Moses said, *“for that the LORD heareth your murmurings which ye murmur against Him: and what are we? your murmurings are not against us, but against the LORD”* (Exod 16:8). By murmuring, the Israelites doubted God’s faithfulness in delivering them from all harm and danger. For this, a whole generation of the people did not get to enter the Promised Land as punishment.

Murmuring disrupts the harmony of a church. Believers should display maturity of their spiritual lives by not murmuring. Murmuring causes one to be disheartened and to lose the fighting spirit. Even Moses suffered from it (Psa 106:33). Likewise, if church members constantly murmur, the church will lose her harmony and her ability to work as one. Let us draw an example from the Israelites and be cautious not to repeat their mistakes. Let us work with one mind and spirit for the Lord in the church.

Murmuring causes one to lose faith. The Apostle Paul went through great ups and downs in his life. In the prison, he was able to proclaim that with Jesus, he can live through all situations. We are believers, knowing the same Christ that Paul knew. Although we did not go through what Paul went through, can we say like Paul to trust in the Lord in all situations? We must have faith in God who will see us through our life journey when we trust in Him. Never let murmuring creep into our lives to disrupt our trust. Let us also learn to give thanks in all situations. This way, sweet praises unto the Lord will come out of our mouths instead of words of murmur.

25 Nov 07
As He was wont
Rev Isaac Ong

We begin our journey of contemplating the cross at the Mount of Olives. Hours before that, our Lord Jesus and His disciples had just finished the Passover feast. During the feast, our Lord had taught the disciples the meaning of servant-hood and humility by washing the feet of the disciples. He had indicated the man who would betray Him. Judas Iscariot would sell our Saviour for the price of a common slave — a measly thirty pieces of silver (what a price for a soul, and yet how many a man has sold his own soul for less). During the course of the Passover feast, our Lord Jesus told Peter that he would deny Him three times before the cock crowed, and that the disciples would be scattered like sheep without a shepherd. However, our Lord prayed for the disciples. *“I am no more in the world, but these are in the world...keep through Thine own name those whom Thou hast given Me, that they may be one, as we are. While I was with them in the world, I kept them in Thy name: those that Thou gavest me I have kept, and none of them is lost...I pray not that Thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that Thou shouldest keep them from the evil”* (John 17:11-15). What assuring and comforting words in a time of impending uncertainty and trials.

After the Passover feast, our Lord and three disciples (Peter, John and James) went to the Mount of Olives, and the Garden of Gethsemane. Some say that the name means a valley of fatness. Others say that it means olive press. Whatever the case, Gethsemane was a familiar place to our Lord Jesus. Luke says that Jesus *“went, as He was wont, to the mount of Olives.”* A few days earlier Jesus passed by that way with the multitude crying, *“Blessed be the King that cometh in the name of the Lord”* (Luke 19:38). Gethsemane was our Lord’s common retreat. Now, it would be the last place that He would spend His final hours of freedom.

As familiar as He was with Gethsemane, this trip would be different. This would be the culmination of His three years of public ministry. This would mark the beginning of the end of what our Lord Jesus came to do. He came to *“do the will of Him that sent Me, and to finish His work”* (John 4:34); that work was to *“save His people from their sins”* (Matt 1:21). That work would require our Lord to *“give His life a ransom for many”* (Mark 10:45).

Our Lord Jesus was fully aware of the significance of that early morning visit to the garden of olives, and it would cause the greatest anguish yet to His pristine soul. There, our Lord Jesus would agonize as He had never agonized before.

What about the disciples? After all, they who followed Jesus were also *wont* to go to the Mount of Olives. Did they sense something different on that final visit? Were they aware of our Saviour’s divine purpose? Or was it just another visit?

What about the rest of the people in Jerusalem? Remember that it was Passover. Did they know that this Passover would be different from all the past Passovers that they had kept? Or did they keep this Passover as they were *wont* to do? As darkness took hold, and they turned in for the night, were they aware of the darkness of sin that had descended upon their souls?

What about us? We have the benefit of the inspired Word of God. Through the Holy Scriptures, we know the heart and mind of our Saviour better than Peter, James and John. We are saddened at the weakness of the disciples; we are offended by the treachery of Judas Iscariot’s betrayal; we are also keenly aware of the fierce grip of sin upon our own lives. We, who have been redeemed, would also know the sacrificial love of the Son of God poured out for sinners. And we who are *wont* to name the Name of Christ, claim the benefits of His grace, and call the Christ on the Cross as our Lord and Saviour. It means that we can never again be indifferent or unaffected the next time we look at our blessed Christ Jesus.

02 Dec 07

Is Christ in our Christmas today?

Elder Cheng Wei Nien

“But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth His Son, made of a woman, made under the law, To redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons” (Gal 4:4-5).

Once again, Christmas is round the corner. People of the whole world, Christians and non-Christians alike, are getting ready to celebrate this long awaited once-a-year big event. The shops in town are lit up with colourful lights and all kinds of attractive merchandise are being displayed to attract customers. Being in the festive spirit, pubs and entertainment centres are also brightened up to join in the fun. Of course, being Christmas, there must be Christmas trees, Christmas carols, Christmas decorations and even ‘Father Christmas’ and Christmas advertisements all over the place. The question is: “Where is Christ whose birth they are supposed to celebrate, in the middle of all these activities?” I am afraid to say that, in the midst of all this excitement, Christ has long been forgotten. This sad and regretful condition prevails even in some Christian Churches today.

“But when the fulness of the time was come.” The timing of Christmas was not planned or decided by men. It was by God’s own appointment. God, in His eternal past, has decided that sinful men need a Saviour. Ever since Adam and Eve rebelled against God, sin entered the world; and all have sinned and the wages of sin is death (Rom 6:23) both physical and spiritual. Before Jesus came, the Jews were under the condemnation of the law even though they offered animal sacrifices year in and year out. *“For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins”* (Heb 10:4). The Gentiles like us were in total darkness, not even aware of their condition of total depravation. However, God not willing that we should perish, had set a time when He will carry out His plan of salvation. The fullness of His time came on that night when Jesus was born in that little town of Bethlehem. Herein was the beginning of Christmas, not in the manner we see Christmas today.

“God sent forth His Son.” To save us, God did not send an angel or a mighty man. He sent His own and only begotten Son, our Lord Jesus. It was on that very first Christmas night the angel announced: *“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour which is Christ the Lord”* (Lk 2:11). This was the night God showed men that He *“so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life”* (Jn 3:16). This is what Christmas should mean to every man and woman whom Jesus came to save. The centre of our celebration must therefore be Christ our Saviour and no other. No commercials or any form of worldly entertainment should come into our remembrance of the birth of our Lord and Saviour. Believers should take this opportunity to go and announce the good tidings to the world instead of joining them in this senseless celebration.

“Made of a woman, made under the law.” The Son of God, for our sake, came to the world, *“made of a woman”* became a full man and dwelt among men like us. *“He was in the world, and the world was made by Him, and the world knew Him not. He came unto His own, and His own received him not”* (Jn 1:10-11). This is exactly our condition today. He came to save us but men of the world know Him not, neither receive Him. Men and women hold great celebrations of Christ’s birthday but know not who He is nor do they bother to find out. They only want to enjoy and have lots of fun. True believers should therefore not join them but should come to Christ with thanksgiving and make His name known throughout the world and tell people the true meaning of Christmas.

“To redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons.” *“For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God”* (Rom 3:23) and *“the wages of sin is death”* (Rom 6:23). The purpose of Christmas is for Christ the Son of God to come to the world to redeem us who are under the curse of the law. Under the law, we must all die as sinners but the Son of God came to die for us so that we, sons of men, can become sons of God. *“But as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name”* (Jn 1:12). This must be the very reason why we celebrate Christmas. We celebrate not only Christ’s birth but also our becoming the sons of God. Dear

friend, are you a son of God? If not, why not come and put your trust in Jesus and you too can become a son of God.

09 Dec 07

Your Sin will find you out!
Elder Foong Kon Yu

Human beings have pursued wicked ends and committed appalling crimes with the hope that they can escape justice. Tyrants, terrorists and dictators tend not to die on their beds. However, they lived in fear and constant vigilance so that they would be able to wake up to see another day. Emperors who ruled with absolute powers are all gone. They need the same lying space for their dead bodies as anyone else. Sometimes it appears that evil goes unpunished in this world. We can see God's justice in this world from time to time. The practical principle is that God is dealing with men and women in such a way as to expose their rebellion against Him. This means facing them with the consequences of their sins.

Moses warned the tribes of Reuben and Gad when they refused to help their brethren fight the Canaanites that they have sinned and that their sin will find them out. *"But if ye will not do so, behold, ye have sinned against the LORD: and be sure your sin will find you out"* (Num 32:23). The Israelites had to endure forty years in the wilderness for their sins before they can enter the Promised Land. The warning, "Be sure your sin will find you out" has been echoed down the centuries knocking at the door of human conscience. It enshrines the principle of God dealing with us in such a way as to cause us to bear the consequences of our sins during the course of our lives.

The experience of Jonah is an example of the sin of a believer finding him out. Jonah has been given a task by the Lord, but he has gone his own way and broken his covenant with God. In the beginning, his plan seemed to work very well. He found a ship and the wind was just right to help him speed on his backsliding way. The storm arrested Jonah's progress towards his wayward journey and the rebuke of the captain confronted him with just how low he had sunk. Jonah soon discovered that *"it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God"* (Heb 10:31).

While the pagan sailors cried to their non-existent gods, they were trying to find who caused the misfortune. They decided to cast lots since no one owned up. The most popular phrase throughout history is "not me". How often we say "not me" too! Jonah 1:7 *"And they said every one to his fellow, Come, and let us cast lots, that we may know for whose cause this evil is upon us. So they cast lots, and the lot fell upon Jonah."* It may seem superstitious to cast lots and this was frequently used during the Old Testament period. To us casting lots is a gamble with chance but with God, nothing is by chance. Proverbs 16:33 *"The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the LORD."*

The sailors must have thought that they were doing all right. The sinner was Jonah! It is natural for them to think as such because human beings have a low view of sin. With that goes the concept of limited guilt. Sin is defined as really big sins — murdering, robbing or being convicted in court. Thank God, that He is patient and gracious to let each of us see how wretched a sinner we are. The sailors asked as to who Jonah was. To which Jonah replied *"I am an Hebrew; and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, which hath made the sea and the dry land"* (Jonah 1:9). Jonah proceeded to explain who his Lord is. He is the God who created man, the sea and the land. He is the Creator of all. God uses every opportunity for His glory. A runaway servant became a missionary on board a ship in the storm.

The sailors did not sigh with relief because they had discovered who was to blame! They were led to think more deeply about what Jonah had said about his God. They realized that if God were angry at a backsliding believer like Jonah, how would God deal with polytheistic pagans like themselves? They were crying to their impotent gods moments ago. They realized that they were not innocent bystanders caught up in someone else's problem. They had to answer for their own sins too. God has shown them through Jonah that they also have a hope in salvation.

Notice that the storm raged on even after Jonah's confession. Our notion is that upon admitting an error, there should be instant forgiveness and that all will be forgotten. The continuing storm teaches us that saying sorry is only the beginning. God's mercy is never given at the expense of justice. After confession,

we are to turn to God and seek His mercy. It is in this context of readiness to face the appropriate penalty that the Lord is pleased to give remission. True repentance accepts the justice of a righteous God. The storm does not abate. The Lord continues to pursue Jonah and the sailors to the end that they might know into whose hands they have fallen. He is chasing them to win them to Himself. Have you been scheming and running away from the tasks that God has given? Be forewarned that God is never slack, neither will He slumber!

16 Dec 07

The Mighty hands of God (Psalm 8:3)

Elder Su Ching Chun

David was a king who knew God. David knew that his purpose was to do God's work and he eventually became a king that was pleasing in His sight. In Psalm 8:3-4, David said "*When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; what is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?*". Through these verses, David recognized the greatness of God and how small he was. David praised God with this psalm.

Likewise, Moses said "*LORD, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God*" (Psalm 90:1-2). Moses, like David, recognized the mighty works of God. They both praised God.

The Apostle Paul worked relentlessly for God, testifying the Gospel through his missions. He told the people in Athens that they must know the Creator of the heavens and the earth, and we are also His creation (Acts 17). We must seek God, for He is the Saviour and He will judge us one day.

We see a commonality here: God's servants' understanding of the greatness of God and hence receiving the strength and talents to accomplish good work for God. Below are some examples:

1. King David feared God. God blessed him and the country prospered during his reign. David wrote Psalms to praise God, give thanks and to pray. Psalm 23 was written to describe his life's encounters, among many other Psalms of different themes.
2. Jehoshaphat and Hezekiah faced enemies invading the country. In those dire times, they looked to God for help. God delivered them through his own mighty works (2 Chron 20, 32).
3. Jeremiah and Ezekiel received help from God to deliver His message to the people during dire times of the nation. The Israelites were able to pass through those dangerous times safely (Jer 1, Ezek 1).
4. Ezra and Nehemiah returned to Israel and received help from God. Ezra taught the Israelites the Word of God and uplifted their spiritual lives (Ezra 7:6-9, 28). Nehemiah organized the rebuilding of the walls after overcoming many difficulties. This again was help coming from God (Neh 2:8,18).

If we are able to walk in the way the above-mentioned servants of God treaded, we are able to receive blessings from God to accomplish much for His glory. The Bible tells us that faithful servants will be greatly blessed. "*Well done, good and faithful servant; thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord*" (Matt 25:23). God is faithful, He delivers what He promises. Amen!

23 Dec 07

The wonder of the Christ (Isaiah 9:6)

Rev Isaac Ong

A man bought a beautiful diamond ring for his wife. He had the ring placed in a nice gift box, and wrapped with shiny paper and ribbons and bows. The wife saw the gift-box and fell in love with it but she never unwrapped the box to see the real gift — the diamond ring. Sadly, there are many people who celebrate Christmas in the same way that this lady looks at her husband's gift. They are captivated by the externals — the lights, the decorations, the tinsels, the jingles and so on — but they never come to know the real Gift.

Under the reign of the wicked King Ahaz, the nation of Judah was in a state of political and spiritual darkness. Judah was besieged by Israel and Syria. God sent Isaiah to Ahaz with words of encouragement, *“Take heed, and be quiet; fear not, neither be fainthearted... Thus saith the Lord GOD, [this conspiracy against you] shall not stand, neither shall it come to pass”* (Isa 7:4-7). Furthermore, Isaiah presented Ahaz with a gift, *“Ask thee a sign of the LORD thy God”* (Isa 7:11). Even though Ahaz knew that the gift of God's deliverance was his for the asking, he refused. *“I will not ask, neither will I tempt the LORD”* (Isa 7:12). Ahaz had made his own plans for his future, and those plans did not include God. Ahaz turned away from God only to find despair, defeat and darkness (Isa 8:22).

Isaiah saw the darkness but he also saw the impending light — a light that God would send from heaven. And he said that the darkness would not be forever. *“The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined”* (Isa 9:2). There is going to be joy where there has been sorrow; light where there has been darkness; deliverance where there has been oppression. The reason for this change is predicated upon God sending a light. That light is the birth of a Child and the gift of a Son. *“For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace”* (Isa 9:6). The child in Isaiah 9:6 is undoubtedly the Lord Jesus Christ. He was born as a child; and that speaks of His humanity (Gal 4:4). Christ was also given, and that speaks of His deity (John 3:16). Isaiah 9:6 also introduces the titles of Christ. He is the *“Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.”*

WONDERFUL IN HIS BIRTH

We do not usually address our Lord Jesus Christ by this title, but it describes who He is and what He is like in the eyes of men. “Wonderful” describes His Person and His life. “Wonderful” speaks of the distinctive quality of Christ, the excellencies of Christ.

Christ was wonderful in His birth. He was born of a woman, but He was also set apart from humanity. He was born as a babe in Bethlehem's manger, but His birth was unlike any other because He was conceived of the Holy Spirit, and born of a virgin — a miraculous birth. His birth and the place of His birth were prophesied by the prophets hundreds of years before He was born. His birth was announced by the angel. His birth was attended by the shepherds. His birth was the subject of praise and hope.

This is the unique difference of the Christian faith. Other religions are man's attempts to reach God. Christianity is God reaching down to man. God was *“made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father) full of grace and truth”* (John 1:14).

WONDERFUL IN HIS WORKS

Christ was wonderful in His works. He was wonderful in His teaching. When He taught, the people were astonished because He taught them as one having authority. Christ was wonderful in His works of miracles. He healed the sick. He made the blind to see and the lame to walk. He fed the multitude after He called on the wind to cease and calmed the storm. Christ was wonderful in His life. He was holy and sinless. He *“did*

no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth” (1 Pet 2:21-22). He “was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin” (Heb 4:15).

WONDERFUL IN HIS DEATH AND RESURRECTION

Christ was wonderful in His death. At Christmas, we celebrate His birth. But His coming at Bethlehem is only part of God’s redemptive plan which culminated at the cross on Calvary. The perfect Christ died on the cross to give His life a ransom for sinners. The centurion at the foot of the cross, watching the crucified Jesus concluded, *“Truly this was the Son of God” (Matt 27:54).*

That the eternal Son of God should die at all is a thing most wonderful. Consider this, He who knew no sin was made sin for us; that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him (2 Cor 5:21). He who is the truth, the way and the life, gave up His life a ransom for many (Mark 10:45).

Most wonderful of all is Christ in His resurrection. That is really the foundation of the Christian faith. Because Christ lives, we shall live also. And it is in Christ that we look for that *“blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13).*

WONDERFUL IN HIS REDEMPTION

Christ is wonderful in all that He is, in all that He had done, and in all that He will do. But lest we be like the man who looks at wrappings and bows and ribbons, and forget about the Gift, and to whom the gift of God’s Son was given, Isaiah 9:6 reminds us, *“For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given” (Isa 9:6).* The phrase — “unto us” — tells us that the Christ Child was born, and the Son of God was given for our benefit. Christ is wonderful in all things but the wonder of it all is that He was given **to us**.

The work of salvation surpasses everything that God has done, even creation. In creation, God only spoke a word, and it was so. In redemption, God had to sacrifice His only begotten Son to be so. Christ is the gift of the God that excels all other gifts.

“For unto us a child is born” for our good, for our profit, for our advantage; not for angels, but for sinners like you and me. This is the Light that Isaiah talked about that would dispel the darkness.

The shepherds saw the wonder of Christ on the first Christmas day, and they were transformed by that encounter. They returned glorifying and praising God. That evening was supposed to be another mundane evening out in the fields. But in Christ, they were no longer just shepherds, they had become the servants of God. What an experience, what a change. What wonder!

If there is one thing that we should keep in our mind and heart this Christmas, it’s that we will not just enjoy the singing of carols and the company of families and friends — these are merely the wrapping paper, and ribbons and bows. But that we come to know the Christ who is called Wonderful.

Blessed Christmas, and may our Lord fill your hearts and homes with His joy and peace.

30 Dec 07
My soul doth magnify the Lord
Pr Wu Tien Te

Time really flies by! We just celebrated Christmas last week and we are threading on the last few days of the year 2007. We thank God for His provision and protection in the year past, enjoying His peace and joy. As we give thanks to God, let us also spend some time to reflect upon ourselves to see if we have led a God-pleasing life? If so, what will we do for the Lord in the New Year ahead? Today, we shall ponder on the words "*my soul doth magnify the Lord*" (Luke 1:46) to see how Mary led her life through her faith and obedience to God.

Obeying God

God's plan for Mary was an especially difficult thing to do for a virgin. In the Jewish tradition, to be pregnant before marriage is a very embarrassing situation which can result in the annulment of the marriage by the groom. In certain cases, the woman risks being stoned. Under such pressures, Mary continued to display obedience as she knew the words of God carried power (Luke 1:37). It was such faith in God's words that she cast potential misunderstanding and stigma aside to proclaim "*behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word*" (Luke 1:38).

God has a plan for everyone. However, we often find ourselves not willing to submit to God's plan for us. God chose Mary because Mary was willing to submit herself to God's plan. Mary chose the way that God has laid down for her. Mary knew that it did not matter what the outcome would be because it was God's plan and He is Lord. She will do what the Lord says. She was obeying God.

Humbling oneself

Mary said "*for he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden*" (Luke 1:48). Mary humbled herself before God, calling herself God's handmaiden. During her time, people were adverse to being called servants and handmaidens. Mary knew her place and never did she think it was possible that Jesus would be born through her. Mary realised her unworthiness and certainly knew that this special selection was not because she was exceptional. It was a special blessing from God. Indeed, God often selects seemingly humble and ordinary people to accomplish great things for Him. To people, those selected do not seem to possess much talent nor strength but to God, it is in His plan to select and use those that God deems fit to do so. Are we like Mary? Let us all humble ourselves before God and submit ourselves to His service.

Keeping God's Words in the heart

Mary suffered fairly much in her life. When she brought the child Jesus to the temple, Simeon blessed Jesus but said to Mary "*Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also*" (Luke 2:35). As mother of Jesus, Mary has encountered joy and glory, hearing the voice of Gabriel, the shepherds' visions and visit from the wise men. Mary also encountered darkness and pain during Herod's attempt to kill Jesus and when Jesus went to the cross. Each time, it was like a sword shall pierce through her own soul. While Mary could not understand why every time, she "*kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart*" (Luke 2:19).

A person who ponders upon God's words in his heart is one who will more likely be able to appreciate God's wonderful works. When we ponder upon God's words, we realise that every single happening involves God. On the other hand, those who do not become dull in the spirit and are slow to realize God's hands at work.

So dear friends, as 2007 goes by, let us gear towards the New Year ahead. There are many things we have yet to accomplish so we must all make haste while we still have breath to do so. We pray that the Lord will help us in the new year. I wish all a blessed new year and the strength to serve our Lord fervently!

---The End---