

A PILGRIM'S Distress



BSSF3

BSSF-3

**A PILGRIM'S
DISTRESS**

Four Common Spiritual Dilemma

**By
Lee Bee Teik**

BYTE SIZE SOLID FOOD SERIES

For the Ordinary Believer



A Reconre Publication

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About the “Byte Size Solid Food Series”

Why Byte Size?

A byte is a unit of information storage in computer chips which is already an accepted means of messaging technology since the late 20th century in Malaysia. *Byte size* also has the same sound as *bite size*, which is to imply that the BSSF Series is to reach readers with small chewable and digestible amounts of the sharing of God’s word. The Reconre Team prays that you will have an enjoyable meal as you ponder on His word while reading through each title in the series.

Why Solid Food?

Living in a developing nation has its advantages and disadvantages, if hindsight assessment of more developed nations may be a guide. We are glad to discover more of God’s creativity through mankind. However, in our hectic rush to advance in technological research, we may forget the One who alone has endowed us with the means to use and enjoy the fruits of our research. Therefore, this series of small books are the result of an effort to feed not only the minds but also the hearts and souls of readers so that they may fulfill God’s vision of remaking them into His image. For this, we need the solid study and meditation of His word from the Bible, and not only the drinking of the milk of the first teaching when we first trusted Christ to be our Saviour and Lord.

The writer to the Hebrews reminds us in 5:11-14...

“We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.”

Reconre hopes that many other home grown writers and publishers will surface to contribute their solid food through the written word so that God’s people in Malaysia will not remain or become spiritually anaemic. That the pen is mightier than the sword still holds true in many ways, I believe.

Finally, let us proclaim with Jude in :24...now,

“To Him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before His glorious presence without fault and with great joy – to the only wise God our Saviour be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore. Amen.”

How to Use this Book

- Take your time to read through the book.
- Pause to ponder in between.
- You may use the main text and later reflections for Personal/Group Study or during your Quiet Times alone with God.
- If used in a group, meet weekly or at any regular interval to share, pray and apply what you have learnt together.
- Suggestion for Personal Reflection:

Spend 30 minutes or more daily [depending on your nutritional deficiency or appetite] meditating on what you have read and talk to Him about it. Better still, take a few days off work and ponder on the reflections with Him by Your side. If you need a venue for this purpose, contact the Reconre staff at www.reconre.org in Malaysia.

Come,

Let us Read...

Let us Listen...

Let us Ponder...

Let us Pray...

Let us Love, Trust & Obey...

JESUS!

A Pilgrim's Distress

Four Common Spiritual Dilemma

Galatians 6:2,5

*“Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will
fulfill the law of Christ...
for each one should carry his own load.”*

Many are the woes of humankind, and Christians do not seem to be exempted from them. When we read through the Bible, God seems to want us to know that well. Whether current personal problems are due to our personal sins, the sins of other people or to being in a broken world generally, we do agree that all of us face problems. This knowledge seems to increase as we grow older. How then do we respond to such a condition? One way is to feel defeated, grit our teeth and endure such inner struggles till all pain and sorrow will be no more. The other way is to try to understand what God may be saying to us about Him and us, about others and us and about ourselves, so that His abundant life in us will become increasingly real each day. So we pray, so read and so we ponder... May He be our Guide as we plot on along this journey of discovery together. Shalom!

- Dilemma 1. Difficulties in maintaining a sense of forgiveness (having been forgiven) and assurance of salvation (having been saved once and for all).
- Dilemma 2. Difficulty in surrendering to God wholeheartedly.
- Dilemma 3. Intellectual doubts and questions that seem to block faith in God.
- Dilemma 4. Difficulties in accepting an imperfect self, church and world.

Dilemma I

Difficulties in Maintaining a Sense of Forgiveness and Assurance of Salvation.

In Romans 8:15-16, Paul teaches us about the witness of the Spirit with our spirit that God is our Father. According to Jewish law, it takes two witnesses to confirm a deed. Then, why is it that many Christians, after being convicted of sin and having repented, still feel that they have not been forgiven? Some feel this guilt again...and again...and again. This condition of ***Guilt-Condensation Anxiety*** is often worsened by the accuser's taunts and lies, as in Job's case and confirmed in Rev.12:10. This type of anxiety often creates a deep spiritual and thus emotional and/or mental problem in us. Recall that the whole person consists of body, spirit and soul (1 Thessalonians 5:23). Consequently, when one part suffers, the other parts are affected as well.

Cause of Guilt-Condensation Anxiety

A person's spirit can be so scarred and wounded that he cannot understand or feel the Father as He really is e.g. He is just and yet merciful.

In our natural life, a toddler learns a language of relationship and feeling long before he learns the spoken language of the mind. One positive example is that of John the Baptist who jumped for joy in Elizabeth's womb when Elizabeth excitedly greeted Mary, their visiting relative.

Our childhood feelings usually continue to affect the way we understand relationships, whether with God or man, long after we have become adults. If we have a tendency to be moody, to feel unloved, unimportant and isolated from the righteous because of some past hurts or sins, we may have greater difficulty in accepting the fact that God has actually cleansed us once we have repented and asked Him to forgive us (1 John 1:9). Our new life in Christ takes time to grow to a stage where we are able to increasingly exercise a child-like faith in Him, a faith like that of Adam and Eve before the fall, and a faith like that of the Son of God in His Father God.

Case Study

Peter the Fisherman turned Shepherd

Let us watch how our Lord Jesus lead the “Heroic-Disillusioned/Cynical Peter through his dilemma of being unable to know and feel God’s grace of forgiveness.

Question 1.

Read Luke 22:31-34

How may we describe Peter?

Suggestion:

Peter over-estimated his ability to be loyal to Christ. He appeared to be

- self-opinionated
- unrealistic
- boastful
- rash
- unwilling to take warning seriously and overawed with his own heroic attitude. However, he did try to care for and protect Jesus from harm.

Question 2.

Read Luke 22:54-62

What was Peter's main problem?

Suggestion:

- He took much pride in his own abilities.
- He seemed to have a lack of short-term memory e.g. just a while ago, he pretended he was a stranger to Jesus, he had vouched to be with Jesus all the way, even unto death.
- His cowardly attitude led to his betrayal of a true friend in order to save his own skin.
- He turned to lying at a time of crisis.
- He was impulsive in speech and action.

Did he show remorse that needed to be changed into godly sorrow, which would eventually lead to repentance?

Question 3.

Read John 21:3

How did Jesus heal and transform Peter?

Suggestion:

Confusing Transition

Jesus is alive! He's for real! It was not Jesus who was a coward for not fighting His captors, Peter was.

By then, Peter was too disillusioned with himself for having failed the Master he loved; he felt unworthy to be His follower, he was certainly not good enough for Jesus!

On the other hand, facing one's real self is not easy...he had become cynical and questioned the practicality of returning to His discipleship. What is better and safer to do in times of confusion? Return to his old trade...fishing. It was something familiar and tangible. After all, he'd been at it for years before meeting Jesus. The "born leader" had an instant group of six followers among his old friends!

Healing of Memories through recognizing Jesus...

Actions that reminded Peter of better times with his Master.

The disciples caught nothing. Jesus arrived and told them to throw the net over at the right side. They obeyed an apparent stranger and caught 153 fishes (compare this event with that in Luke 5:1-11) One of them said to himself,

“Wait a minute, I’ve heard that voice before...I’ve witnessed such a miracle before...of course! It’s Jesus!”

What did Peter do?

Impulsive as usual, though he did remember to be decently clothed before his Master, he jumped into the water and rushed towards Him, momentarily forgetting the embarrassment of having recently repeatedly denied Him!

Question 4

Read John 21:4-23

How did Jesus Minister to Peter?

Suggestion:

However, Jesus, whom they had given up of ever becoming their hero again, cooked breakfast for His tired and bewildered old friends. Beside a fire (there was one in the courtyard of the high priest's house), He performed the familiar "ceremony" of the breaking of bread and the sharing of it with His disciples; He broke the fish too and did the same with it, thus reminding them of His manner of ministry...with a difference. Their nets were not going to break with fish any more...their nets would be strong enough to hold all that He led them to catch! On their side, were they willing to be made broken bread for His sake?

Jesus' attention was then focused on Peter, the bullheaded disciple; Jesus gently asked him the same question three times, not once...

"Peter, do you love (from God's agape to brotherly love) Me more than these...your fishes, your career, your family, your friends...yourself? Peter, am I your Friend of friends?"

Impatient Peter felt hurt...

"Why, Lord, Why ask me the same question three times...Don't You trust me? Is it because of my shameful

cowardly act towards You, that night, that You do not believe me any more?...My Lord, please forgive me...it grieves me to have denied my love for You...but You know that I really do love You..."

Yes, the Lord was so gentle (gentleness being a mark of the Holy Spirit's fruit of humility and love) in reassuring Peter of His love for him, and in accepting Peter's love for his Lord. Peter felt forgiven, reconciled and was re-commissioned to feed and care for His lambs and sheep.

What a wonderful ending...but...Peter, as if to illustrate that the reforming of good habits takes time, immediately got into his old attitude of "*running-away-from-unpleasant-experiences*" again when the Master forewarned him of the suffering ahead. One day, he would lose his freedom to go where he wanted; someone else would capture and harm him. He wanted to know why only he had to suffer.

"What about that fellow behind us...John, the one who's often by your side...would he have to suffer too?"

Typical Peter, one might say!

Jesus was quick to respond,

"Peter, mind your own business; never mind about John...you simply follow Me!"

Question 5

What made the crucial difference in Peter's life?

Suggestion:

It is the unchanging friendship of Jesus which gave Peter the courage to take up his own cross (not Jesus' cross), and follow Him! (Tradition has it that humbled Peter asked to be crucified upside down, during the persecution of the early church, since His Master was crucified with His head up.)

Question 6.

Read the hymn below:

Lord, you have come to the Lakeshore

1. Lord, You have come to the lake shore
looking neither for wealthy nor wise ones;
You only asked me to follow humbly.
2. You know so well my possessions;
my boat carries no gold and no weapons;
You will find there my nets and labor.
3. You need my hands, full of caring
Through my labors to give others rest,
And constant love that keeps on loving
4. You, who have fished other oceans,
Ever longed for by souls who are waiting,
My loving friend, as thus You call me.

Chorus:

O Lord , with Your eyes You have searched me,
and while smiling have spoken my name;
now my boat's left on the shoreline behind me;
by Your side I will seek other seas.

United Methodist Hymnal No.344

“What is the Master saying to me?”

Pause and Reflect

Journal your answer to Him.

Guidelines for Receiving His Healing Grace

[*From *Friends of the Bridegroom*, a Reconre Pulication, p.179-180]

1. Pray with a trusted friend or counsellor for healing from past hurts.
2. Make a list of incidents which are troubling you in order to differentiate between your true and false guilt related to those incidents.
3. Forgive those who have sinned against you, and receive God's forgiveness for your resentment or other sins against that person.

You may like to use the booklet on **Forgiveness and Reconciliation*, a Reconre Publication) to guide you.

4. Confess all known and unknown sins, including any occultic associations.
5. Claim God's promises in the written word literally, for example, 1 John 1:9. True guilt is washed away in a split second after confession but false guilt haunts us by its power to trap us in a vicious cycle of self-condemnation and confession of 'false guilt' (which is one of the common causes/symptoms of chronic depression).
6. Reject Satan's lies in Jesus' Name instead of letting anxious feelings weigh us down and stop us from living joyfully in Him.

Some of Satan's lies may sound like this:

- * "You were not sincere enough when you repented."
- * "You are not good enough for God to forgive you."
- * "God does not really love you because you still feel so terrible."
- * "How can you be so sure that you are already saved?"

We may have to repeatedly reject the enemy's lies throughout our pilgrimage on earth. If he did not leave Jesus our Saviour alone, he will probably not leave us alone too. We have the example of Jesus to follow, i.e. remember relevant parts of God's word and use it as the sword of the Holy Spirit. I find it helpful to speak out the appropriate Scripture verse or passage aloud. The armour of God mentioned in Ephesians 6:10-18 is actually Jesus Himself. Hence, consciously putting on or acknowledging His presence in our lives each day helps us affirm His victory over sin, death and the evil one, on our behalf. Jesus restated this in His high priestly prayer in John 17:11-15. Both portions of Scriptures remind us that the Name (which signifies the character and authority of the person) of the Son of God is our Protector.

7. Give thanks to our Father for His faithfulness to His people.

Reflection

1. What was Peter's sin(s) in Luke 22?
2. How did Jesus show He had forgiven Peter?
3. Why did Peter return to his former job?
4. Are you more like Judas or like Peter or neither?

How sure are you about it? What do others know of you?

What are you going to do about it?

OR

If you are already trying to be as loyal to the Lord Jesus as you know how, rejoice for He is rejoicing too!

Dilemma II

Difficulty in Surrendering to God Wholeheartedly

This problem of finding great difficulty in willingly surrendering our lives to God is so common in real life among Christians. However, it is seldom addressed openly except as a criticism of our lack of commitment to Him. Let us attempt to understand why we sometimes or at all times struggle with this difficulty.

We are created in such a way that we *do NOT* commit ourselves to that which frightens us. For example, we shun loud noises or hissing snakes. This is a *part of the divinely implanted self-defense mechanism*. In the same way, if we see God as someone unapproachable (e.g. like an abusive alcoholic parent), then we will not commit ourselves to Him. Therefore, we need to understand our fellow believers' hidden fears and not reject or label them as being "*uncommitted*" Christians. This difficult condition, when serious, may be called ***Commitment Anxiety*** and is often presented as a type of personality disorder or a neurosis.

Cause

Commitment Anxiety due to the Fear of Facing the Risk of Commitment

“Commitment is the bedrock of any genuinely loving relationship.”

In Marriage

In his book, *“The Road Less Travelled”*, Dr. Peck explains that married couples cannot solve their problems such as dependency & independence, headship and submission, freedom and fidelity, without knowing deeply that the shared struggles through these issues will not actually destroy their relationship. If married couples start off with the vow that, for better or for worse, they will not divorce, then, when they face these struggles, they will not so quickly or easily think of divorce as one of the ways out of such struggles. Commitment holds them through the storms.

This is where community life is essential in helping to preserve relationships by way of reminding married couples of their marriage vows; they are the community of relatives, friends or church members who were witnesses to the couples taking those vows

In Parenting

In the same way, in child-nurturing, commitment transforms the parents from being mere biological parents to psychological parents. Children cannot achieve psychological maturity without the consistent commitment of their parents or guardians to them.

In Our Relationship with God

Is not our commitment to our God long-term? In fact, it is an eternal love relationship that knows no ending. However, how frightening it seems to us to completely throw ourselves into the arms of God if He were like our imperfect father, mother, spouse, child, pastor or friends!

Two Symptoms Needing Special Help

1.

Personality Disorder

A person with such deep commitment anxiety is *unable* to form deep relationships or enter into any commitment *at all*. It is not because she does not want to, but because she has little or no concept of what commitment to another person is like. This is usually because her parents might not have shown any predictable and consistently unconditional commitment to her.

I know a woman who persistently stays away from friends and foes alike in spite of all the love and care poured on to her by Christian colleagues and a few close friends. Finally, she quit her job on the excuse that someone had wronged her. Our hearts ache for these to be able to receive love more freely...yet they are where they are because someone significant to them in childhood repeatedly let them down! I am beginning to understand that, in many emotionally broken adults, the root of rejection and fear of being disappointed again in adulthood began in the womb. In severely affected men and women, some were victims of attempted abortion by their mothers. It did not seem to matter whether they were adopted and loved by another family or not. Others have been repeatedly reminded that they are “accidents” and suffer from the deep inability to receive and feel genuine love from those who really care.

2. Neurotic Disorder

Such a person has an **insufficient** experience of parental love to enable her to commit herself to others deeply. She may commit herself only to a limit set by her. Through one or both parent's chronic rejection or abandonment, she has developed a fear of deepening a specific area of commitment. A person with such a need may only be helped through the commitment of a therapist or mentor who is able to relate to her in such a way as to be a temporary substitute for genuine parental love.

In a counseling situation, a counsellee with this disorder may intentionally or unintentionally behave in such a way as to make the counselor feel rejected by him. This may be a subconscious way of testing the counsellor's commitment to help him.

This disorder may also present itself as non-consummation of marriage whereby the bride is not able to give herself totally to her loving husband because of a subconscious fear of commitment. Yet, it is through the husband's persistent loving acceptance of her that may enable her to finally learn to trust again, even though it may take a long time.

Guidelines for Receiving God’s Healing Grace

1. **Establish** a predictable **trust** relationship with the person walking you through this period of your life e.g. a good friend, a pastoral counsellor.

When trust has been betrayed (the earlier in life the harder it is to trust again) by a fellow human being, it takes another fellow human being to rebuild that trust. Much patience and perseverance is needed for both counselor/friend and counselee as the latter goes through the recovery process. Sometimes he may catch himself testing the sincerity of the helper’s concern. Yet, what a joy it is to witness his own transformation, with God’s intervention, after years of fumbling in emotional darkness.

2. Diagnose and Heal PRIMARY INABILITY to TRUST:

*** Through healing prayers.**

Forgiving your abuser, whoever he/she is, is God’s key to your receiving His healing grace. If you need more help regarding the meaning and process of forgiveness, refer to “*Forgiveness and Reconciliation*” (available in four Malaysian languages from Reconre Sdn Bhd at www.reconre.org). “*Friends of the Bridegroom*” (Chapter 5, at the same publisher) describes in more details one manner of applying healing prayers. Having said that, however, we must always remember that, basically, it is not a technique or a particular training/certificate that heals one’s broken heart but God’s presence in His powerful healing grace embodied in the Person of Jesus Christ, our Friend of friends! Human agents are merely like midwives delivering His grace.

3. ***Change WRONG GOD CONCEPTS:***

- * Through renewal of the mind - correct with Scriptural view of God - Look at Jesus, His Son!
- * Through encouraging conversations with Jesus, Brother and Friend.
- * Through reading Scriptures e.g. Hebrews 2:10-18 and John 15:15 which reveal Jesus' personal commitment to us as the Elder Brother who really cares for His younger siblings.

4. ***Work on General Decision-Making*** because our wills usually find difficulty in trusting others and ourselves. Therefore, we may have developed a way of playing safe. We may often casually say, "Yes" or "No" at the same time, when asked to make a decision. In extreme cases, the person in such a dilemma may be on the verge of a breakdown e.g. she may find great stress in deciding what to eat, what to wear and what to buy. This type of outward behaviour often badly affects courtship and marriage. It is my guess that many initially sincere and beautiful relationships have been damaged by this infirmity.

Dr. D.A.Seamands explains:

"My will is my whole personality engaged in decision-making. Therefore, if my personality is seriously damaged, I will have much difficulty in decision-making. The person affected may say to herself,

'I am fearful of failure due to any wrong decision I may make...Indeed, "God may shoot me down!"'

At the back of such fear in decision-making is the **wrong idea** that **God has only ONE way for me...** which hints at perfectionism [Dilemma IV]

So, **how would you** help build up the muscles of your will?

* **START** with **small** decisions **for the day** e.g. *deciding to queue up at the post office to pay bills (if it is your job requirement) instead of letting the fear of getting tired hinder you from doing what is necessary (a subconscious excuse for not having to commit yourself to a task, which may be interpreted by your boss as laziness).*

Remember:

Emotionally and practically, it is better to make a tentative decision and then change it, adapting and learning where necessary, than *not* to make a decision at all.

Let us now watch how our Lord Jesus responded to someone who had great difficulty committing himself to God for salvation and lordship in his life. Then we will contrast this person's response to Jesus with another seeker's response to Him.

Remember, the focus is on one's ability/inability to trust and commit himself to God, like a little child jumping down from a height into his waiting father's strong arms.

The “Lonely Zaccheaus”

Question 1

Read Luke 19:1-10

How would you describe Zaccheaus?

Suggestion:

Zaccheaus was a rich chief tax collector, probably with the ranking of “Pengetua” (Chief) of our Inland Revenue Department. Being corrupt and hardhearted towards those who were poor, he was despised by the people for probably being stingier than Scrooge; a real sinner indeed!

Question 2.

What was his probable background? [speculations]

Suggestion:

He appeared to have grown up through financial hardship. Did his father die early so that he had to fend for himself and the family? Yes, he made it to riches...but was so used to hoarding and hoarding and hoarding that he had no time to make friends nor was he really bothered about it! But...nearing middle-age (presumably, as he could still climb trees easily), loneliness began to creep into him..."I think something is wrong with me...I can't smile, I can't laugh, people walk away from me as I approach them... children fear my footsteps...O God, if You are there, please help me!!" For the first time in his life, lonely Zaccheaus searched for answers to his spiritual life.

Then he heard of the Man who could perform miracles, the Man who taught as nobody else had taught before...yet He was a guardian of children and women, the sick and the poor..."I must see Him...but will He see me if He knows how bad I am...?"

Can you identify with Zaccheaus?

Question 3.

What was Zaccheaus' view of Jesus?

Suggestion:

He saw Jesus as a holy and compassionate man of God. Therefore, he felt unworthy of Him. Yet, his curiosity overtook his fears and he tried his best to see Him.

What do you say?

Question 4.

How Did Jesus heal and transform Zaccheaus?

Suggestions:

Jesus knew Zaccheaus' needs and heart; He, unlike many of us, took the initiative to meet him face to face. He looked into his eyes...and spoke to Zaccheaus like a good old friend. He even invited Himself to a stranger's house!

Pause and reflect.

Question 5.

Did Zaccheaus respond ?

Yes, he had never felt more accepted in his life before! He forgot about being self-conscious...and happily welcomed Jesus home!

Indeed, though Scripture does not record what Jesus discussed with him on the way to or at Zaccheaus' home, we may safely deduce that:

Zaccheaus had his wounds healed by receiving God's friendship. He meant business with God because when his primary need of God's friendship was met, he could quickly let go of his secondary need of money. He then made restitution for his sinful behavior by giving 1/2 of his wealth to the poor, and returning four times of that which he owed to others.

Was Zaccheaus a fanatic?

Discuss.

Question 6.

What then was the diagnosis of Zaccheaus' problem?

Money neurosis. The addiction to money was a weakness, because to him, money only met a secondary need that probably arose from a difficult childhood. That led him to the sins of:

Corruption & Stinginess (keeping more than what one needs when others are in need)

His primary need for acceptance and love was met by the healing of his emotional wounds through friendship with Jesus, the holy and kind Son of Man and Son of God.

Therefore, once his eyes were opened to the truth about God and about himself, he immediately willed to let go of his old addiction for the sake of his newly found friend, Jesus.

Let us now contrast Zaccheaus to the rich ruler Jesus met.

Question 1.

Read Luke 18:18-25

How would you describe this ruler?

Suggestion:

The ruler was very rich. He had probably inherited his wealth and possessions. These have become a stumbling block for him to receive eternal life that can only be found in a right relationship with God.

Add your own points.

Question 2.

What was his primary gain? [A primary gain is something of first importance]

Suggestion:

Material goods and the ringgit sign...RM!

Is this reasonable?

Question 3.

What was his secondary gain?

Suggestion:

Eternal life (friendship with God) because to him, eternal life is like one of his souvenirs, a piece of antique or a mere hobby. Hence, when he had to choose between one or the other, he hung on to his primary gain of wealth while quickly releasing the secondary gain of eternal life.

Question 4.

What was the diagnosis for his problem?

Suggestion:

Love of money, which is a sin in God's eyes.

Give your views and discuss.

Reflection

1. Is there any area of my relationship with God that I have found difficult to understand or to honestly cope with?

If so, what is it? If none, does anyone I know have such a problem?

How do I help them?

2. Have you ever surrendered your life to God before?

- If so, when? Recall and journal the events that led to the decision and the events that followed that decision for 5 years.
- If not, why? A song writer once asked...

*“What will you do with Jesus,
Neutral you cannot not be;
Some day your heart will be asking,
‘What will He do with me?’”*

Tell God all about your ability/inability to trust Him wholeheartedly and seek His help if you cannot. He is gentle and kind, not like our earthly authority figures. Tell Him of any difficulty in surrendering your whole life to Him...personal, family, vocation, etc. and wait to hear Him speak to you.

You may want to write a letter to the Lord Jesus stating your trust in Him or your doubt of Him. Seek His healing grace to ripple deeply into your whole being, created for His joy.

3. Give thanks for His forgiveness of all your sins. Be specific if you wish.

Dilemma III

Intellectual Doubts and Questions that Seem to Block Faith in God

I have a few friends whom I knew before they personally knew the Lord Jesus. They were rather vocal in their enthusiasm for the Lord and His concerns when early in their Christian life. Sadly, after a few short years, they began to feel and think that God was unfair, usually in a general sense. Then they once more become vocal but this time around, came up with reason after reason for not needing or wanting to trust and obey Him.

Many times, I had no way of answering their questions to their satisfaction. At times I could only quietly pray for them. I was glad, therefore, to be able to understand their problem better, in the last few years. This has helped me to be more compassionate towards them even though I may disagree with many of their views about our beloved heavenly Father God.

We will now discuss three common causes of intellectual questions and doubt about God's existence and character.

Common Causes

1.

Intellectual Doubts and Questions Arising from Emotional Roots

Reminder: The human being, a Self, is a person who:

Thinks
Feels
Acts

Therefore, our thought patterns, emotions and behaviour all affect one another. In this section, we will explain how many persistent intellectual doubts about God arise from problems of the emotions rather than, primarily, from the mind.

This type of doubt:

- * Differs from those that arise from a lack of understanding of Scriptures, due to poor exposition/teaching, and from willful sinning due to moral choices.
- * They are not rationally solvable because, reckons Dr. D.A.Seamands:

“True intellectual doubts need answers but emotionally rooted doubts answer needs.”

This means that no matter how many good answers are provided for such a doubter, he still prefers to stay in doubt because the questions he poses to himself or others distract

him from the real pain in his inner being. These doubts also drive others away from his real, often insecure, hurting and fearful self. His is a lonely life indeed. But God still cares for him, whether he admits it or not.

Example

A Chinese widow said to her son before she died,

“If you are not with me when I die, you are not worthy to be my son.”

The son, a caring and sensitive child, was not on time, through no fault of his, to witness Mum’s death. Thereafter, he believes strongly,

“I have committed an unpardonable sin (as he could no longer apologise to his mother) because I was not present when my mother died.”

When faced with conflicts with his boss later on, he falls into a deep depression because he has transferred that false guilt in relation with his mother to his boss. He feels excessively anxious when his boss (another authority figure to him) disapproved of his work.

Therefore,

The subconscious rationale of such a doubter of God’s approval and acceptance in His Son is:

“It is less painful to bear the pain of doubt than that of an unhealed wound.”

He constantly (sometimes subconsciously) doubts God's sincerity when He says, for example,

“I have loved you with an everlasting love”!

He has subconsciously learnt to put God at arm's length so that he will not be hurt again! Consciously, he may come up with reason after reason to prove that God is not loving e.g. He may argue...:” How can a loving and powerful God allow evil to persist in this world, in my family, in my life?” Why does he do this? It may be that if he admits that God is love and is able to help him, then he will have to reveal his wounded heart for a diagnosis and treatment. But this step may make him more vulnerable; further hurts will be too painful to endure. Sadly, this trend of conscious or subconscious thought prevents true grace to comfort him and heal his wounds.

Let us CONTRAST the above problem with the next...

2.

Questions and Doubts due to a Wrong Understanding of Scripture

A person who questions and doubts out of a wrong understanding and use of Scripture has, usually, been misguided into thinking that God is unreasonable, inconsistent and unapproachable. Adults who pass on these misconceptions do not realise the harm done to their younger (whether in age or faith) listeners.

Example:

Sunday School teacher: *“God will punish you if you run around and don’t listen to me.”*

Child: *“May be that was God before He became a Christian.”*
(brought up
by gracious
Christian parents)

The child’s answer is a theological truth. The Christian God is not like what her teacher said He was (read John 3:16,17).

However, another child who believes her teacher’s view of God will grow up with the idea that God is like someone out to punish her as soon as she makes a mistake! She will, very likely, not look forward to meeting with God during her *“quiet times”*.

- * What the Sunday School teacher taught, however, is part of the whole truth. In history, God’s truth is revealed progressively. Even in personal experience, I find that God reveals certain aspects of Himself to me at different stages of my chronological and spiritual life. I became aware of this only in my late teens while living away from familiar home and church influences. Sitting in my rented room, I suddenly realised how He was revealing Himself to me...
- * In the Old Testament, God revealed Himself to His people mostly as Someone awesome and fearful. At times He even seemed unkind and irrational. For example, if an unqualified person touched the ark of the covenant, he would be struck dead [1 Chronicles 13:9,10]. Holiness and love did not seem to co-exist!

- * In the New Testament, however, because Jesus, God’s beloved Son, came to die for our sins, our understanding has become much clearer. God is just and yet abounding in grace (un-deserved and un-earnable mercy). We can believe Him because of what Jesus has done for us. In His love for us, He fulfilled justice for us. Holiness and love do actually co-exist.

Now we come to the third cause...

3.

Intellectual Questions and Doubts due to Our Wills and Moral Choices (Volitional Sources).

Some of those who pose incessant questions construct a theology to fit their disobedience of God’s word.

Examples

a.

Those who persistently commit adultery sometimes quote God’s friendship with Abraham (a man who had physical relationships with more than one woman in his household) to justify their actions. *“If Abraham, a friend of God was allowed to do it, so can I! You better shut up and mind your own business!”*

b.

Those who enter into relationships with non-Christians often say that they are trying to witness to them. They often find it hard to part company when the other party refuses to share their faith in Christ, and eventually they get married. Many often regret their decision later. In God’s mercy, He

allows them to pray their spouses into His family. Others warn their Christian friends never to repeat their mistake.

“Just as our faith colours our living, so our living colours our faith.”

D.A.Seamands

For a more thorough reading on “Doubts”, please read Os Guinness’s “*God in the Dark*”. In the book, the author discusses seven main types of doubts that Christians harbour, their causes and how to handle them in order to grow in trust of our God.

Guidelines for Receiving His Healing Grace

1.

For Emotionally Rooted Needs

Healing is needed for emotional wounds in order to have a right concept of God. This will lead to a living faith in Him.

Examples

a.

A lady, who suffered from incest in early childhood, could not trust God as her heavenly Father. How could she when her adored protector father turned out to be her aggressor? She had to bury that pain while being kind to him in return. Such a victim of childhood incest finds it less painful to bear the pains of doubting God as her loving caring Father than to face up to the fact that her own earthly father had betrayed her trust. To learn to trust again, she needs to forgive the aggressor and be healed from the pain of the old

problem in her experience. This pain is often too traumatic to recall and handle alone. She needs the support of an understanding friend, an assistant from God.

b.

In Luke 24:36-53, Jesus' resurrection was too good to be true after the disciples had suffered the deep disappointment of His humiliating capture and death at the hands of His enemies. Luke added:

"...they disbelieved for joy..." Luke 24:41

It took the demoralised disciples some time to freely enjoy Jesus' resurrection! They had thought that He had betrayed them by submitting to His enemies.

The disciples wanted to believe but could not bear the pain of their Master apparently letting them down...again? Did He not betray their trust in His power, and in His stand for truth, by not resisting unjust captivation and crucifixion? However, Jesus did not judge them; He understood their fears and hurts; He helped them believe by:

- showing them that He was a real person, not a ghost.
- explaining to them that what happened to Him was not a surprise (i.e. He did not betray their trust in Him as the Messiah, Master and Friend). He reassured them,

"I can and I will save you! Then, it just wasn't time yet."

What was the resultant change?

They believed once more; their fears turned to sustained joy! Even when He finally left them to go to His Father,

they knew they would meet Him again in His glory! We need to help each other trust Him again...and again...and again...

2.

For Rationally Rooted Needs

*Take time to explain who God is
(i.e. help the person increase his educational and
theological/biblical understanding of God).*

Since the problem originated from a wrong understanding of Scriptures, the therapy is to offer a right understanding of Scriptures. We can be very hurting to others or ourselves very much through the wrong interpretation of the word of God.

Begin with the last word of God in the New Testament, not only the first word in the Old Testament. Who is the Word of God? Jesus Christ (Proverbs 8:22-31, John 1:1-5,14 & Rev.22:12-16). Encourage the person to renew his mind by reading the gospels slowly, watching Jesus' every move while listening to His every word. Gradually, he will learn to trust Him more and more.

3.

For Volitionally Rooted Needs

Pray for repentance and forgiveness of particular sin(s).

*“Sometimes, we believe in order to obey.
Sometimes, we must obey in order to believe.”*

D.Bonhoeffer

When we disobey God and then refuse to repent, we have a tendency to construct a theology to fit into our disobedience. It is very dangerous to do this because the more we hide our sin, the harder it is for us to recognise it later on. We have a high tendency to bury our sin under layers of further sins e.g. tell a lie to cover up another lie.

Example:

If I repent of my sin of hatred for someone, it is easier for me to love that same person, even if he keeps mistreating me. Otherwise, I may have to keep giving excuses or tell lies for not wanting to sit in the same committee as that person or be friendly to him. Romans 8:15-16 talks about the witness of the Spirit with my spirit agreeing with each other that God is our Father. This is according to Jewish law where it takes two witnesses to confirm a deed. It is a biblical principle. Therefore, if my spirit stubbornly disagrees with the Holy Spirit in me, how can I walk with God with a childlike faith and enjoy His presence forever?

Reflection

1. Ponder on what you have just read.
2. Ask the Holy Spirit, the Counsellor par excellence, to reveal to you what the Lord Jesus is saying to you.
3. How would you respond to God's still small voice?
4. If you wish, share your findings with a friend. Ask him/her to make you accountable to him/her as you return to your first love for God and seek to sin less and obey Him more in daily life.

Dilemma IV

Difficulties in accepting an imperfect self, church and world...

Perfectionism

A Gospel of Works in Disguise... Facing it Head On

Galatians 3:22-25 (NIV)

“But the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe.

Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law.”

Until a few years ago, I assumed that perfectionists are people who are so efficient that their finished products are near perfect. Being a rather relaxed type of worker who needs to make great effort to cope with details, I never did identify with my being a perfectionist at all. However, when God placed His finger on my troubled soul in 1991, I could not run away from the fact that I too had been suffering from this “infection”. Perfectionism is like a common cold viral infection in that it may be easily transmitted to those around us, especially those under our authority. As the Master Surgeon made known to me the diagnosis of my damaged worldviews, views of God, self and others, I felt as if He was performing emotional and mental surgery on me. [1]

For days, and then weeks, I felt I was in a daze as I carried out my daily household routines. Sometimes I cried uncontrollably, at other times I just wanted to be alone. All the time I felt like I was laying myself before the Lord who was performing a surgery. At times tears just welled up in my throat and I sobbed uncontrollably till a burden was lifted off me. In a beautiful manner, with every flow of tears, I felt washed of the raw emotional wounds which I had carried for years, not knowing what to do with them. After a while, my emotions stabilised and I began to feel as if I was coming out of deep anaesthesia after a successful operation. I was tired but joyful. I felt relieved that, at last, I understood why I had developed certain unhealthy thought patterns in my life.

That was not the end of the story. It took about two more years before I realised that my views of God, self, others and the world generally, had changed significantly. I was glad to be a little baby in the arms of my Father all over again. Renewal of the mind and transformation of life by the Holy Spirit takes time. That valuable lesson has made me more patient with others and myself.

The Lord has opened my eyes so that I can now make a similar diagnosis for those who come to me. For those who seek help, there is joy. For those who choose to remain in their old selves, this trap of performance continues to bring oppressive sorrow to themselves and their loved ones. My purpose in writing this section is to help readers become aware of this malady that is so common among many sincere Christians, whether in the East or the West. My hope is that they too will receive His healing grace.

What Then Is Perfectionism?

The **desire to be perfect** is a God-planted **virtue**. But since the fall, this desire has turned into a **vice** called **perfectionism**. The latter is a lifestyle lived according to the belief that religious or moral perfection can be attained in our daily life in this world. Hence, a perfectionist experiences intense frustration in his or others' imperfection because, in reality, perfection is not attainable on this side of heaven. This results in certain patterns of thinking, feeling and behaviour that gives the person a certain damaged worldview: By writing thus, some of my friends ask whether I am advocating laziness and inefficiency. I answered, *"No, because perfectionism is expecting perfection from self and others, which is unreal. But we must strive for excellence in whatever we do by doing our personal best, not compared to others. In fact, a recovering perfectionist will feel and know the true freedom for his best action as he is no longer fearful of making mistakes. Every task he undertakes has become lighter!"*

In essence:

- The ideal has become → An idol.
- A spiritual reality has become → A counterfeit for real spirituality because this belief has made the person excessively conscientious and overcritical in spiritual “*achievements*” in order to receive acceptance. This is NOT grace.
- The received has become → The achieved.
- A divinely given gift has become → A humanly attained prize.
- The search for excellence has become → The struggle for supremacy.
- An undeserved relationship (freely given to Adam and Eve) has become → A deserved attachment. (one-up-manship i.e. “It is my work that gains favour from God, resulting in a competitive attitude towards others, especially so in Christian vocations)

The empty open hand has become → The grasping clutched fist.

Indeed,

“The fear of the Lord (the true God) is the beginning of wisdom”

BUT

“The fear of the wrong god (especially if he appears to be like Pharaoh in behaviour) is the beginning of neurotism.”

Theological Overview for the Above Struggle
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NB:

Please do not hurry through this section. Pray as you read and allow the Holy Spirit to be your teacher where necessary.

Biblical perfection is a level of maturity and sanctification in which the perfection of Christ is imparted to us. This impartation is effected by the indwelling and infilling Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit enables us to live a life of habitual victory over sin, and enjoy God’s presence increasingly here on earth.

Just like justification (a fair treatment of our sins through Jesus’ death in the sinner’s place), *this enabling is a gift of God’s grace*

His perfection is received and lived by faith and is basically a matter of a deepening relationship between Jesus and His body-the church community. It does not depend on our perfect performance but on faith or trust in **HIS** Performance.

This process is called by several names, some of which may be very misleading, such as:

1. living a higher life
2. being filled with the Holy Spirit.

Descriptive phrases like these, unfortunately, cause some Christians to be contented to live life at a lower level or be partially-filled with the Holy Spirit.

This process of receiving Jesus' perfection, in fact, is GOD's will for every Christian. It is NOT optional!

Genuine increasing maturity is the *true pursuit of excellence out of gratitude* to having been accepted and loved by God for who I am.

The attitude is: ***"I want to be the best for Him because He loves me so much."***

The incentive to be our personal best for Him is **NOT GUILT**. God uses guilt primarily for non-believers before their conversion (compare John 3:16-17 with John the Baptist's call to repentance). That is why, in order to help ourselves renew our minds in this matter, we need:

- * to discipline ourselves to spend time, alone and regularly, in His presence

- * to be bathed in His grace
- * to feel His secure covenant love
 - so that
 - our hearts will be encouraged to be grateful to Him.

There are no short cuts.

We often have a strong tendency to think and feel that we can achieve spiritual maturity by our own efforts; we often forget:

that spiritual maturity is received, not achieved, as He changes us in His presence.

THEREFORE, a Christian with deep needs but who persistently refuses to come to Him for refuge cannot experience much inner change.

Those insecure in justification (unsure of full and permanent salvation in spite of Jesus's words in John 10:27-30 & 17:12), and then goes on to seek holiness, are actually perfectionists. They compulsively strain to make themselves acceptable to God. Somehow, they measure their relationship with God by effort and achievement. This attitude leads to *tendencies* to place:

performance	above	relationship with God
conduct	above	faith
deeds	above	trust
achieving	above	receiving
work	above	worship

Neurotic Christian perfectionists have a drive to achieve to live under the tyranny of the “oughts” and the “shoulds”. They try to placate their anxiety of not being able to achieve by a *false humility*. **How?**

They overcome their anxiety, for example,

- * *by belittling themselves* (it is less painful to reject or criticise ourselves than to be rejected by others)
- * *by an overemphasis* of doctrines, duties, rules, convictions, standards and issues.

Many also suffer from *mood swings*. Many of such believers take the *means of grace and turn this into performances* e.g. repentance, Bible Studies, prayers, extra church work, full-time Christian ministries become mere duties to complete rather than something anticipated with freedom. For example, when they miss a few days of their quiet devotional times with the Lord, they feel extremely rejected by God. This negative feeling, if transferred to those around them, may cause them to become irritable or to withdraw with terrible feelings of self-dislike.

This **lifestyle** often leads to a sort of ultimate despair, an emotional and spiritual breakdown or a withdrawal from people, situations and even God.

Pause and Ponder

Reflection

1.

Is being filled with the Holy Spirit a *one off event* or a *repeated event*, depending on how much God can have His ways with us?

What is your personal experience regarding being filled with the Holy Spirit?

2.

a. Are we caring enough to look out for those trapped in extreme perfectionism and continuously assure them of our unconditional acceptance on behalf of Christ, even if we disagree with their words and behaviour?

b. Is this caring more enhanced by churches run like large corporations or churches run like family households?

3.

a. Many vocational Christian workers cannot cope with their own interpretations of the definition of a “*normal workload*” in Christian work. They may interpret a reasonable job performance expected of them as an excessive demand to overwork. Hence, it is better not to be trapped in the “*full-time ministry*” than to have to face one’s limitations.

b. Is this nagging feeling of needing to be perfect a reason why so many hardworking Christians prefer to be lay leaders rather than full-time pastors so that they may opt out easily when church work appears to be intolerable?

c. Name and pray for pastors, whom you reckon may be suffering from extreme perfectionism, to know the freedom of God's powerful grace in their lives and ministries.

Pause

An extreme perfectionist continues to feel that he is not being accepted by other people in spite of frequent reassurance. The old tape in them sings...

"They won't like me if they find out about me..."

Consequently, he intentionally or unintentionally puts up a mask in daily outside relationships, often unintentionally. Others do not seem to be able to get near for fear of her flare ups or cold shoulder. She appears not to care when, actually, deep inside her, she needs the love of others.

"Perfectionists are those who take great pains to give them (painful problems) to others, often in the neck."

D.A.Seamands

In closer contact, such as in marriage or a working partnership, problems may emerge due to thought, speech or behaviour **patterns** such as:

i.

A common self-talk that may be going on in a perfectionist's mind:

"I'll beat myself down first before you do it because that's what I know you are going to do and you will do it."

ii.

An oversensitivity to others' approval or disapproval. He feels that others are putting him down or are looking up to him when those people may actually not be aware of him at all! e.g. a beautiful woman consistently says, *"I am ugly..."* to her friends before they make any comment about her appearance. Most times they were not even thinking about her looks.

iii.

An overcritical attitude towards *"others"*. The subconscious reasoning goes like this... *"I feel better if I prove you wrong or bad in this issue because your imperfection shows up the 'fact' that at least I am better than you or I am not the only wrong or bad person around!"*

When others feedback to them because of their behaviour or speech, they feel even worse; they feel disliked...and the vicious cycle goes on. This attitude pattern may spiral into the trap of self-pity, self-anger and self-hatred because *"their seemingly unfair views of me may be true...I am really a terrible person whom many dislike!"*

iv

Getting easily angry with others, especially their respective spouses, when they do not accept them as they are. They over-react to spouses in order to show that they are better than what the latter think of them or that their spouses are as bad as they are (i.e. the *"not good enough"* feeling is compensated by the *"good enough"* rationalisation)... similar pattern to (iii) above.

These ways of outlook can exist over various degrees and all of us have this *"Viral Infection"* of perfectionism in some way till God completely takes us away from the

presence of sin. (While in this world, we have been saved from the guilt of sin and are being saved from the power of sin, but not yet from the presence of sin.)

The last thing to die in all of us is the notion that we have anything to contribute at all to our salvation. We will finally realise this at death. BUT, the joy is that for His people, there *is* the resurrection! Meanwhile, let the recovering perfectionists seek God's strength to prevent this infirmity of the flesh from leading us into sin. Perhaps the hymn writer's words echo our thoughts...

Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me,
Let me hide myself in Thee;
Let the waters and the blood,
From Thy wounded side which flowed,
Be of sin the double cure,
Save from wrath and make me pure.

Could my tears forever flow,
Could my zeal no languor know,
These for sin could not atone;
Thou must save, and Thou alone:
In my hand no price I bring,
Simply to Thy cross I cling.

Augustus M. Toplady

Pause

Not only is grace *freely given by God alone*, our will to choose Him is *also freely given by Him alone*. The *only* cure for the viral infection of perfectionism is **GRACE in every part of us**. We have nothing to offer Him except our sins.

Understanding the Development of the Perfectionist's Distorted Views

I. The True and Unique Self (our potential selfhood in Christ)

The Selfhood or the Personhood of a human being is the Personality in Christ originally intended for Adam and Eve by the loving God.

The Potential of a human being comes with certain inborn *gifts*. Together with these gifts come the person's specific *needs*. These gifts will get to be *developed* through the fulfilling of those needs, and those needs may only be *fulfilled through parental grace* (undeserved and unearnable mercy). ***BUT, since the fall***, this development of the person takes place through parental ***DYS***grace (damaged grace).

Examples:

1.

In traditional Chinese culture (not folk religion), the *present* external success, greatness, goodness, money or family education overrides *future* considerations. This philosophy, therefore, defines the value of people, especially that of children, in the eyes of their parents, according to what they can produce for the parents or elders. [4] Hence, grace is not a norm here.

2.

In Hinduism, ***Karma*** is the accumulation of deeds done in this world and ***Samsara*** is the rebirth according to the karma of the person while ***Moksha*** is the end of births and

is usually characterised as *an anonymous, impersonal and blissful state* [5].

With this philosophy in life, those who are suffering will be unlikely to better themselves very much. They may see their predicament as a punishment for former badness. On the other hand, those better off may not be willing to bow down to treat the less fortunate (e.g. treat the disabled poor as equals even if they offer some help as they have caused their own problem). They will only strive to enter into the elusive bliss themselves.

3.

In Christianity, fallen selfhood is the will to be myself independent of what the Creator has for me. This *selfhood* is to die. However, it is *not replaced by a “nothingness”*, **but** *by the will and presence of GOD the Creator and Designer of the person*. This is because the true GOD wants to have fellowship and friendship with him.

However, the man or woman in Christ does not cease to be himself or herself with a unique personality. “To die to self” means ‘to completely accept God’s will for his life’. Consequently, the person is whole because he has become what God purposes him to be. The real self is only complete as that person, together with the community of God’s people, is conformed to the true image of the living God again.

For this conformation to eventuate in fallen people saved by grace, agape (mercy which is unearnable and undeserved) is needed to nourish and to nurture the imperfect child. Agape love also includes discipline, instructions and limits set for the reception of such love under authority. Viewed from

such an angle, all human beings in this world, including Christians, are perfectionists in the way of recovery, by God's amazing grace.

II. Direct and Indirect Means of Experiencing Parental Dysgrace

A child grows up with the need to BELONG i.e. to have ROOTS. Those entrusted to help him receive this sense of belonging often make mistakes, resulting in the child not experiencing complete security in the family.

Graceless Christian homes, with excessive legalism, can produce as much wreckage as graceless non-Christian ones. Children may be forced to cooperate with non-essential religious activities. This is a form of coercion.

For example, in the development of "who I am" (self-identity), a person's sexuality is part of that identity. Hence, in sexual abuse, the victim is unable to accept herself/himself as a whole person because someone has intruded into her/his life without her/his permission. The moral code set by the Creator (whether I know Him or not) has been violated.

This also applies to the effect on the victim of any sort of **abuse**. Why?

When I am forced to do something against my will (coercion), the image of the other person, unasked, is stamped on me directly. Consequently, I will be less of my real self. This influential coercion may be subtle, more often than we would like to acknowledge, through the influence of peer pressure, the media and popular culture.

Of course, we would prefer to say that we have a choice of accepting or rejecting those influences. It would be too embarrassing to confess that we were forced to accept those ideas, because we are not ready to face our weaknesses.

When the legitimate needs of a child are not met, something happens without the conscious awareness of the child. He does not sort out the dynamics of parental dysgrace upon him in adult logical ways. He just feels it, and if not allowed or encouraged to work it out by talking it out, he will act it out in the way that seems best to him (read chapter 4 of *Friends of the Bridegroom*). Some still grow up normally or even more stable than others who have not been so hurt; while others succumb to delinquency, neurosis or even psychosis. Several factors must surely have acted together in a mysterious way as the child develops into an adult. As God's people, we believe He knows and loves that person. God is watching, guiding and waiting for him to return, willingly, to His original intention for his life.

III. The Development of a False Super-Self

Because his real self is not accepted as he is, the child redirects his energy from growing into who he is, to become someone else...so that he will be accepted. He wants to become a super-self. Hence, *the search for glory* begins. Since the fall, this search exists in *all* of us. To be this idealised self now becomes the chief goal. It consumes all our emotional and spiritual energies. It is the search for glory, whether it is through secular or Christian careers. Many pastors have become superstars while others play politics to impress their friends and foes in their church.

The expression of such wrong ambitions may take several forms, the commonest of which are competition, jealousy, dominance, withdrawal from people for fear of failure, compliance or a doormat attitude.

“I am *unique*” changes to

“I am *special* to somebody (everyone is)”

changes to

“I am *better* than others” (problem).

Then,

“My *needs* become my ‘rightful’ *claims* on others”

changes to

“I am *entitled* to what you have” (problem).

Therefore, my *real self* (private) whom *God intended* to be, gets *lost and alienated from my super-self* (public).

This is why, at the heart of a person there is intense loneliness before regeneration .

**There is conflict of goals....
"to be or not to be myself".**

**LET US PAUSE FOR SOME QUIET REFLECTION IN
THE LORD'S PRESENCE
BEFORE WE MOVE ON.**

Who am I?

Read Psalm 139

Whose am I?

Read Isaiah 43

God's Goal for All His Children

In contrast, to **grow into CHRIST** is to grow in an **environment of GRACE**....which is of love (which we do not deserve and we cannot earn, no matter how hard we try as God is holy and requires perfection from His people), of acceptance and of gentle, patient waiting for us to become like Christ, through the process of the Holy Spirit's transformation.

Someday, the super-self is to die...this is what the Bible calls **Death of Self**. That is the cross that Jesus talks about in Matthew 10:34-39. **It is the self dying to the belief expressed in the self-talk,**

"I have something to contribute to my being".

Jesus showed us what complete submission to God's will is when He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane,

"Father, nevertheless, not My will but Yours be done."

He obeyed till His Father's will was done through Him. He did it for us so that we too can submit to God.

Sometimes God has to bring us to such a hopeless, helpless stage before we will admit this to Him - that it is by Grace alone that we have been created and saved...and it is by Grace alone that we now breathe, serve and enjoy life! No wonder, then, the hymn writer proclaims:

*“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me;
I once was lost but now am found,
Was blind but now I see!”*

Indeed,

*“How marvellous, how wonderful, is my Saviour’s love
for me!!”*

Hallelujah to the Lamb of God who took away our sins!

Pause

Read John 3:16-17 again...

IV. The Main Characteristics of the Super-Self

a.

The need to be perfect, in the fallen sense, is the need to please others. Actually, more often than not, the others are also so damaged that they probably do not have the faintest idea what they really want from us.

Further more, the self-talk: *“If only...”* produces despair in the perfectionist because it is like living the rest of one’s life knowing that he cannot undo the bad that has taken place in his life. The phrase “if only” is a sign of brewing despair that may lead to an utter loss of hope for transformation. On the other hand, the word “thankfully” frees us from despair and energises us to sing for joy to the God “who does all things well”, even to the point of changing bad into good for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28)!

b.

Distorted priorities often show up as an overemphasis on things that are by themselves good gifts, in particular:

beauty

athletics

intellectual ability

sports

fun

material wealth

success (even if spiritual)

Even those who help the poor and seek to live a simple lifestyle are not exempted as they may feel superior at being different.

We may ask,

“WHY CAN’T I GIVE UP these distorted priorities???”

The answer is:

“If I give them up...even if they are terrible things...I would be ORDINARY!”

Fallen men and women do not, by choice, want to be our real ordinary selves.

Watch Jesus in John 1:29-34. He was so ordinary that even His cousin for 30 years, dear John the Baptist, could hardly believe his eyes and ears when shown and told the identity of the Lamb of God. He did not know that cousin Jesus was so special in God’s redemption plan for the world till he saw the sign of the dove descending on Him!

c.

The need for a scapegoat

One may ask,

“As a perfectionist, I have to live with the reality of my imperfections and failures. But HOW do I cope with my unattractive nature?”

The only **natural** way out of this dilemma is to maintain that myth of a super-self by blaming others, whether they be people or institutions. It cannot maintain itself any other way BECAUSE when I let go of the scapegoat, I HAVE NO DEFENCE!

John said, “...*Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*” John 1:29

Christians do not need a scapegoat since the New Testament times because **we have the LAMB!** We can be naked in our failures (not in the form of exhibitionism but of realism) because **HE has clothed us with His righteousness. Jesus has done EVERYTHING needed to be perfect for us.**

THIS is the Good News (1 Peter 2:24, 25)!

d.

An angry need to prove ourselves right.

Every perfectionist seems to have this need. At times, it becomes a RAGE directed at someone...self, others and God. This is why forgiveness is so vital. Face your anger with God. BEWARE of:

- * An over-interest in good courses to fight about.
- * A prolonged acute sense of injustice.

* A need to “set it right” meaning “I have to prove I am right”.

ACTUALLY:

God will bring justice to pass in His way and time. We need to be **humble** and **gentle**.

The attitude that “*I have to minister out of strength*” is wrong! Many mistake gentleness for weakness when it is really a strong and beautiful gift from God.

Dr. D.A.Seamands accurately portrays the traits of a perfectionist through these words which may be sung to the tune of “Great Is Thy Faithfulness”:

Great is My Faithfulness

From: *The Perfectionist's Hymn of Praise*
by D.A.Seamands,
Publisher: Hopelessness Publishing Company

Great is *my* faithfulness
O God *my* Employer!
There is no shadow of turning with *me*;
I changeth not Thy expectations *I* fail not,
As Thou has been, *I* always wilt be.

Great is *my* faithfulness,
Great is *my* faithfulness,
Morning by morning new service *I* see;
As Thou hast been *I* always wilt be,
Great is *my* faithfulness, Lord unto Thee.

Pause and Ponder

Reflection

1. Can I identify with the words of the above song?

Pause

2. Read Ephesians 2:8; Romans 7:21-25; Galatians 5:1
3. Have you ever felt the restfulness of God's secure love?
4. Do you know that once a person is God's child, he/she is eternally so?

Read John 10:25-30.

Either way, talk to Him about your discovery.

V. The Tyranny of the Oughts

When a perfectionist finally realises that he cannot be the Super-self he sets himself out to be (an ugly unrealistic, unattainable godlike expectation of self), he may wallow in utter frustration, deep depression and intense anger against a sense of injustice and unfairness.

Often, RAGE (impulsive explosive anger) is produced against:

self,

others and

God

because the voice of a damaged/false conscience haunts him with:

“You are not good enough!”

As he never can attain the ‘*good enough*’ standard, he feels a deep sense of resentment against the distorted image of an unfair and unjust God...

“God, why...WHY do You make me like this?”

Sadly, this sort of attitude usually leads to more harm to the true self...

VI. Hurts, Humiliations, Fears and Anger.

For sincere believers, all these negative feelings lead to a terribly...

VII. Low Self-Esteem (Self-Assessment)

PRIDE + LOW SELF-IMAGE = LOW
[wrong type] [outlook/view] SELF-ESTEEM
[value]

For such a person, any act of service has to be publicly praised or recognised (so that he will be able to have some good feelings about his value/worth). Jesus pointed this out to the Pharisees (Matthew 23:5-7).

It is not wrong to want to feel good for God wants us to be joyful in Him. What is wrong in the above dynamics is that the wrong approach has been taken to feel good. *If a person cannot live happily without something or someone (except God), then that something or someone has become an addiction to him or her.* Among people carers, including

nurses, doctors, social workers and pastors-missionaries, this is often seen as a *possessive syndrome*, underlying which is a *deep and sick need to be needed by others*.

The hurting perfectionists may then spin into the following spiral of attitudes :

From
self-belittlement and self-accusations/blame
to
self-atonement to
to
self-torture and self-destruction.

Some Severe Symptoms of an Extreme Perfectionist

1. ***Self-belittlement***, which is of **The Permanent Penitent Publican**, where the super-self (of false humility/self-pride) is still there even though **self- belittlement** is excessive. He also cannot accept compliments easily because he dares not let others see his pride as he wants others to see only his humility.

“There is no pride and therefore no modesty in heaven.”
C.S.Lewis

Many of us may need to learn to say, *“Thank you!”* without adding a negative comment, when complimented. If we still feel uncomfortable, we may like to add; *“The Lord is good!”* Self-effacement (negative) is one part of our Asian culture that needs to be transformed to self-acceptance (positive).

The Tragedy is that:

A lot of energy is lost when a person tries to impress others. Sometimes, this leads to self-accusation in order that others will say, “No, no, you are not like that...” How many of us demean ourselves in this manner due to our upbringing? Too much of such speech makes us sound like we are telling the Creator He has made a big mistake when creating us! If we can say that God has made a mistake, we imply that we know better than Him.

2.

Self-accusations lead to *self-blame*, which may in turn lead to *self-atonement*. The perfectionist has reached *a dangerous stage (AWAS!)* that could bring serious trouble.

This is because such a person suffers from: **The Penance of Perpetual Regret**. This means that he needs to **repeatedly** punish himself in order to feel forgiven.

3.

Self-atonement sometimes leads to *self-torture*, a form of atonement. The perfectionist has reached *a pathological stage*. **The person desperately needs help.**

Teenagers who commit suicide are usually perfectionist children who wish to get out of this awful trap of perfectionism, where they are expected to attain the unattainable. Indeed, it is only by the grace of God that many of us do not reach this stage before someone helps us feel God’s unending true love.

VIII. False Perfectionistic Solutions

These are often *subconscious solutions* which commonly give rise to three common possible personality traits. A given person may show one or the other trait of behaviour at different occasions. (The author recognises in herself the behavioural swings from one form to another as the Lord was delivering her from her particular version of perfectionism.)

Solution 1. By Domination

Such people have the need to be the best before they feel good. They have a basic need to feel superior. In my personal abnormal development as a child, I was expected to be first in the class each term and year just because I happened to be first in kindergarten. Fed by my own pride, I became fearful of not being the best in school, and eventually, I feared failure. This fear of examinations actually led to a drop in my position in class in later years as I became afraid of exploring new methods of study. Yet, on looking back, I can see the Lord's hand breaking my foolish pride and gently disciplining me through the painful years during my university days.

Often, they may be quietly *“against”* people because as people are competitive, they need to either win others in a given situation or win them over e.g. in grades or sports or career. Others do not like this type of behaviour. I found this out the hard way during secondary school days when a good friend tried to tell me that I had hurt a non-Christian classmate. The last thing I wanted was to be a stumbling block to someone. She cried as she spoke to me. I cried when I

reached home as I did not understand myself then and I felt hurt by the comments, though I apologised. I was simply trying to love God by doing my duties as a prefect, or so I thought.

Solution 2. By Being Doormats

The need to be needed is strong in this category of perfectionists because *“If you need me, then, perhaps, I am not so small/weak/helpless after all.”*

Such a person behaves like a doormat and outwardly may be meek and wrongly mild for Jesus was meek (gentle), but NOT mild.

Another version of this solution is to keep telling others how useful they have been to others, and how much they are appreciated. One telling sign between them and healthy helpers is that they are reluctant to help those who have nothing or little to give back to them.

In real life, taken to the extreme, if a man having Solution 1. behaviour marries a woman using Solution 2. behaviour (which is rather common), and they end up having marital problems, quoting Ephesians 5:22-24 about submission during counselling would not be appropriate. It will make the problem worse. Why? This is because the man may be a sort of sadist who may interpret Paul’s exhortation as a right to demand unreasonable submission from his wife. On the other hand, the woman may be a sort of masochist who feels that she deserves being abused by others. Such counselling can make the union tragic even though they may live together out of their individual emotional needs! Each

spouse needs to be counselled individually before being brought together as two renewed persons in their renewed marriage relationship.

Solution 3. By Resignation or Withdrawal

A person having Solution 3. behaviour needs a lot of emotional space. Therefore, to prevent his imperfections being discovered, he keeps people at arm's length. Why does he do it? This is because he fears being rejected if they know about his real self (which he holds in low self-esteem). Thus, he may appear to like being alone and be called a loner. However, the reality is that he too, like all of us, longs to be accepted and loved as he is, by the real community around him.

If a man with Solution 3. behaviour marries a woman with Solution 2. behaviour, they will be happy if they are not too extreme in their needs. They may compliment each other. How? In this case, the wife will submit to her husband when he wants to be left alone. But if either or both of them suffer from extremes of such personalities, then the marriage will be likely to have severe conflicts. Why?

While the husband wants/needs absolute freedom to be alone most times, the wife will feel left out and runs after him. Both will feel frustrated after a while as neither achieves what he or she had expected out of the marriage. The wife wants to be needed so that she could feel of value, while the husband wants to be left alone for fear of rejection if his real self is over-disclosed.

Redemption comes when we realise that one of the functions of marriage is to help us learn NOT to be so extreme. Then we will not feel so lost and trapped!

Question: Is there hope for perfectionists?

Christ's Cure for Perfectionists

Perfectionists are commonly found in churches (or any religious settings) because the system feeds them with rules, regulations and standards which remind them of the Pharisaic lifestyle. Of course, not all sincere imperfect Christians are perfectionists. Other sin related infections are common too e.g. slander, gossip, foul talk, greed and immorality.

The only cure to such an infirmity, perfectionism, which leads to the sin of pride and sinful ambition, is **grace and grace alone**. In a community of grace, one is appreciated and accepted for what he is and where he is *at his particular stage of growth*. Without the understanding and experience of true grace, a perfectionist has an intense need to find his own solution towards being able to feel deeply loved and accepted for who he/she is, in order to maintain his/her sanity.

His feelings and reasons often run like this:

"If I get over this hurdle of achievement or acceptance, I'll be O.K."

but it will never be so because there is always another problem over the hill!

Note: Therefore, let us be encouraged by the wisdom and comfort of Jesus' sense of reality. He knows ours is a broken world but we are not without hope because He says,

“In this world you will have tribulations, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world!”

John 16:33

An Example of God's Grace

Read Matthew 20:1-16

It is a parable of GRACE versus a sense of injustice. In it, Jesus showed the difference between:

Generosity Based Gifts (God does not offer us His love in proportion to our performance e.g. a denarii for both one or twelve hours of work. He wants to give; He is generous.)	versus	Performance Based Gifts (Unbalanced concept of the God of the whole Bible; He is calculative. He loves those who can do more for Him.)
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It took me so long to understand, through experience, Jesus's words,

“So the last will be first, and the first will be last”.

In God's eyes, there is no heirarchy of importance among His children. All are equally loved, forgiven, reconciled, healed and nurtured.

Practical Aspects - How May We Help?

Remember:

We are to discover the cause of our problems NOT to accuse/blame someone who wronged the counsellor, BUT to help ourselves receive God's healing grace.

1.

* *Slow down* the process of *healing expectations* (because perfectionists want to be in a hurry to get perfectly cured)! *Healing* is a process, and it may be *lengthy* as we are dealing with a *LIFESTYLE which has taken years to develop!*

If you are recovering from perfectionism, learn to *relax* and *relate* with your pastoral counsellor. You may need to go off on a *real vacation with no homework and no obligations attached.*

Homework?

Nothing.

You may even need to stop praying your usual prayers or reading the Scriptures in a fixed manner.

Why?

This is because your blinkered eyes will extract incidents in Old Testament passages on disobedience and punishment and use them personally, thereby producing more guilt feelings (if due to false guilt) and further lower your self-esteem.

2.

*** *Allow the Holy Spirit to give you some insight in discovery.*** You may be shocked by the extent of influence this type of thinking and feeling has on your life. Suddenly, you feel as if a curtain has been drawn aside for you to have a clearer view of the meaning of your thoughts, feelings and behaviour patterns. You need to talk to God directly as soon as possible instead of just depending on others to pray for you. In this way, you will know first hand that God loves you. For example, Ask the Holy Spirit to show you and give you an inner source of checking every time you sense that you are about to belittle yourself (a self-condemning of yourself).

Remember:

Self-despising is NOT humility.

It merely causes great difficulty in receiving love and affirmation.

In marriage, both spouses may not be able to receive love even though they need it so much. Such a stage of relationship is very painful and confusing at times. However, once both parties recognise the diagnosis and come humbly to Him in prayer, I believe He will surround them with His unfailing love. He will forgive, heal and renew their marriage for His honour and their good. Truly, God can and will restore the years the locusts have eaten (Joel 2:25). He has showered His grace in this manner to many couples who have sought His face and I am sure He will do this for many more.

3.

** Allow the scapegoat to go!*

Example:

When the old tape says,

*” I would have been alright **if** my mother were different..... ”,*

STOP thinking and speaking that way! Sadly and commonly, in marital counselling, the scapegoat may be the spouse.

or

“I take the blame for someone else’s sin.”

This line of thinking also implies a failure to assess responsibility correctly.

4.

** WATCH OUT!*

Usually, the person has a certain ritual/pattern of doing things:

Example:

i. A fixed pattern of prayer in devotional life such as holding the husband’s hand while praying or speaking in a particular tone. If her pattern of prayer is broken, she feels guilty as “Screwtape’s Letters” accuse her of disloyalty to God.

ii. A fixed style of or content in preaching such as healing and healing and healing...or social work and social work and social work....or missions and missions and missions...

This lifestyle becomes pathological when it produces obsessions, compulsions and phobias.

A few months ago, I met a young Christian man whom I was later told, suffered from the compulsive-obsessive disorder. The moment he saw me, he spoke at great speed on a certain topic with sincere intensity till I had to politely order him to stop and listen to me instead. I was surprised that he stopped immediately without embarrassment. This may imply that he was speaking for speaking sake, not for the sake of conveying a verbal message.

Question:

“Are you REALLY FREE from obsessions (addiction to certain ideas) and compulsions (addiction to certain actions)?”

5.

* Teach the person in recovery to **BECOME AWARE** of an ***intense desire to be better than someone else***. This often leads to competition in Christian service which may split friendships and churches.

6.

* Teach him also to **BECOME AWARE** of false premises (assumptions on which he forms the basis to live his life).

Examples:

a.

“The All or nothing at all” type of thinking...This is DANGEROUS in married life because no one can deliver 100% something he promises. There needs to be a willingness to give and take! This is necessary in any marriage because, generally, a certain temperament type goes together with perfectionism. Though more perfectionists are found among those with the rigid J-lifestyle (Myers-Briggs term), the hope is that as the recovering perfectionists are renewed and transformed, they will become more accepting of self and others and more flexible in the lifestyle of the P-type, to the praise of His glorious grace!

Another version of such a distorted mind-set is ***the only one way/job/thing/person for me*** thinking. This means that if the person makes a mistake or an event goes wrong one time, everything that follows goes wrong too. If not careful, the recovering perfectionist may become so discouraged that he falls deeper into the trap...and may even give up trying.

Renewed thinking:

“If a work is worth doing, it is worth doing any way, even if it ends up badly! As long as I have done my best, I shall not be shamed of my work.”

b.

“Everybody OUGHT to like me...” thinking will lead to a ***“What’s wrong with me that not everyone likes me?”*** response when faced with criticisms i.e. such a person becomes supersensitive to criticisms.

Renewed thinking:

Look at *Jesus! NOT all people like Him, yet He loves them all!*

Repentant and recovering perfectionists need to renew their minds with God's word daily. They need to experience His abundant life on earth as they feel and understand His love for them in every part of their lives.

Let us now take a look at how Jesus ministered to perfectionist Martha, older sister to Mary and Lazarus...

The “Busy-Controlled Martha” Lifestyle

Question 1

Read Luke 10:38-42

How would you describe Martha (symptoms and signs)?

Suggestion:

Distracted, preoccupied with work, controlling, impatient, envious, a kill-joy...? Add your own descriptions. Discuss if you are in a group.

Question 2

What was her main problem? [Diagnosis, speculations from observations]:

Suggestion:

** **Pathological grief** (see *Friends of the Bridegroom*, chapter 14)

Single, responsible for siblings...after parents died? Strong “Big sister syndrome” - where she felt over-responsible for her younger siblings and could not relinquish them into adult life. She did not seem to be able to do enough for them and yet blame them for her own *self-perceived failures*. Often seen in possessive syndrome or in people addiction. This often leads to:

** **Perfectionism**

Where the person is afraid of losing control of herself due to a low self-esteem, which, to her, depended on her performance of daily domestic duties and occasional hospitality.

When transferred to others around them, that fear often becomes a controlling power over others shown in unrealistic expectations of others in order to cover up one’s own limitations.

Question 3

Read John 11:20-27

How did Jesus heal and transform Martha?

Suggestion:

Grieving Martha looked at Jesus, Jesus looked her in her eyes, expressing *His acceptance of her as she was*. She was thus encouraged to frankly express her need of Him. The dam burst, and her pathological grief surfaced. She really needed to be understood by a close friend.

Question 4

What does this mean? (careful speculation)

Suggestion:

In Jewish culture, as in Asian ones, the man is the head of the family. Probably her father had died and she was single [widowed? never married?] This leads her into placing all her hopes for her family on Lazarus, the man in their household. When Lazarus died....her hope of a man to head her family was dashed....she couldn't "tahan" [cope] any more! She ran to Jesus for support...Jesus was their trustworthy male friend...she became vulnerable.

Jesus directed her need to Him as her eternal Master, Lord, Brother and Father. He would never leave her or forsake her because He is the resurrection and the life! What a wonderful discovery for Martha! Her deep emotional needs were met at last!

Question 5

Read John 12:1-3

Compare and contrast this scene with the one above.

Suggestion:

Martha offered the same service...but willingly now. Her grumbles had disappeared; lazy Lazarus may laze around...boleh (fine, no problem-lah); perfume wasted “pun boleh” (also fine). Can you imagine what she would have said if Mary had poured the perfume on Jesus before her transformation!?! (“You are wasting all my savings for the family!”)

Martha’s attitude had been changed - her longing for personal and family security was fulfilled by her newly recognized Friend, Jesus; His grace had been received - so she could then extend that same grace to others she loved! Indeed, grace received leads to grace poured out for others. What liberation! What joy!

Question 6

What made the crucial difference in Martha's life that led to her deep transformation?

Suggestion:

It was Jesus acceptance of her as she was while reassuring her of His eternal friendship! No matter what others/she think(s) of Martha, Jesus will always be her Friend! As Jesus accepted her real unmasked self, His faithful friendship gave her courage to be her real self before self, others and God.

PAUSE TO REFLECT ON WHAT YOU HAVE READ.

Resistance to His Healing Grace

The person in need of God's healing grace in any area of his life has to be aware of his unguarded resistance to God's healing grace. Here are three main reasons for this possibility. Gauge whether you may see yourself in the shoes of those mentioned:

1.

The counsellee is unable to face the truth of his background and the effects it has had on his life. He may be strongly deny the root causes for his problems and may fall into self-deception. Deep denials sometimes surface as phobias or panic attacks to distract him from the real stumbling blocks to his maturity in Christ.

He needs to ask friends to intercede on his behalf, to be led by God's Spirit of truth and grace, and to be open to his teaching and correction..

2.

He may have been Bible-bashed. Bible-bashing the poor needy person without discernment and wisdom may cause more harm than good. This is like what Job's friends tried to do with him in their zeal to help. Such treatment will only further deepen his wounds and complicate his problems. The word of God is a double-edged sword; handled wrongly, it will cut both ways.

We must seek God's counsel through diligent meditation and obedience of His word. Otherwise, we may end up like the religious leaders of Jesus' time. Dependence on money and Pharisaic religious power overrode authentic spiritual power in Judas' life.

3.

Impatience on the helper's part may cause undue suffering to the counsellee. If confronted with a painful experience before he is ready to face it, the hurting counsellee may lose his purpose for life or relapse into his old way of thinking and feeling. Years ago, I had to learn this the hard way while working with a patient with a severe neurosis.

We need to learn to wait and watch with the Master Healer for the right time to give the truth that will meet deep needs. The counsellee also has to repent and forgive others before he may be ready to receive God's healing grace.

PAUSE TO REFLECT ON WHAT YOU HAVE READ.

Reflection

1. Am I a type of perfectionist?

If so, which type?

2. What does the grace of God mean to me?

3. How may I convey a sense of God's grace to my loved ones, to my brothers and sisters in Christ and to others that I meet day by day?

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