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THE PROPHECY

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion – to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of His splendour. (Isaiah 61:1-3)

THE PROPHECY FULFILLED

The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. (Luke 4:18&19)

After reading this from the scroll in the synagogue Jesus said,
"Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing".

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Chapter 1 BELIEVING

The crowd asked Jesus, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" And His answer was, "The work of God is this: to **believe** in the One He has sent". (John 6:28&29) This act requires the greatest trust in God, which shows Him honour. But this act is essential to enter into a relationship with someone we cannot see with our ordinary eyesight. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believed". (John 20:29) He also said, "Everything is possible for him who believes". (Mark 9:23)

This word '*believe*' is defined as – to give credit to anything

– to be fully persuaded

– to put confidence in.

In the Bible it does not mean to hold as a fact in one's memory bank. We meet many people who say they believe, especially Muslims, but they quickly go on to say that they believe Jesus is a prophet but not the Son of God. But it is very important to honour everything in the Bible as God's immutable Word, even if we do not understand. God has every intention of honouring His Word to His children, so the better we believe His Word, the more God can do for us and through us.

There are many references to Jesus being the Son of God. The angel sent by God to Mary – (Luke 1:35); John the Baptist's testimony – (John 1:34); Nathanael's testimony – (John 1:49); the testimony of the disciples in the boat – (Matthew 14:33); Jesus' admission to the High Priest when asked – (Matthew 26:63&64); the centurion's terrified cry during the earthquake which rolled the stone from the tomb – (Matthew 27:54 & Mark 15:39); Mark's testimony – (Mark 1:1); even demons recognised who He was – (Matthew 8:29 & Luke 8:28); John finishes his gospel with the words, "these things are written that you may believe that **Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God**, and that believing you may have life in His Name" (John 20:31). Paul also declares this fact to the Romans – (Romans 1:4) and the writer to the Hebrews also – (Hebrews 4:14).

Isaiah prophesied, "My servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe Me and understand that I am He. Before Me no god was formed, nor will there be one come after Me. I, even I, am the Lord, and apart from Me there is no saviour". (Isaiah 43:10&11)

Then when John Baptist came the Apostle John writes about him, "He came as a witness to testify...so that through him all men might believe". (John 1:7) Jesus came into the world as saviour to make God known. (John 1:18 & 17:3) Jesus' prayer before His arrest was for "all who will believe in Me". (John 17:20)

By His grace God had equipped Moses with a gift to do signs and wonders to help the Israelites in captivity to believe Him. (Exodus 4:4&5) Moses had warned the people of God's plan. "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to Him". (Deuteronomy 18:15) The teachers of the Law prided themselves that they knew it but they were unable to connect because they did not actually believe what Moses wrote. (John 5:46) It is apparently easy to read something, even regularly, yet not give credit to or be fully persuaded. Jesus performed miracles to help people believe, (John 4:48) but He hoped that they would believe Him as sent by God, just as God had enabled Moses to perform miracles. This was important to Him because He came into the world to reconnect "the lost" (all those who are in the kingdom of the devil by default) to the Father. Jesus wanted people to know His Father so He exactly represented Him. (John 10:37&38) Just as the Israelites refused to believe in the time of Moses (Numbers 14:11) they continued to disbelieve when Jesus did the same signs and wonders. Jesus must have appreciated the faith of the centurion and the Canaanite woman so much that He would commend them publicly. Each of them gave the words He spoke their value. (Matthew 8:10 & 15:28) Jesus also promised that those who believe will do the same mighty acts that Jesus did, in the same power of the Holy Spirit. (Mark 16:17&18)

Chapter 2 RECEIVING BY FAITH

We have given credit to, and are fully persuaded that God's Word is true and we have put our confidence in it, so then we are able to receive every promise that is written. Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. (Hebrews 11:1)

"Receive" is to take into one's possession. We are accepting and then owning what has been offered to us. God has made many wonderful promises which He fully intends us to receive if we will. Receiving and owning them demonstrates our respect and honour towards God and also proves His faithfulness.

Jehoshaphat set a good example for his people when they went to fight an army much bigger and stronger than his own. "Have faith in the Lord your God and you will be upheld; have faith in His prophets and you will be successful". (2 Chronicles 20:20) Yet the prophets had advised the army to sing and praise God, not to take up arms against their enemy. God's ways are higher than ours and His thoughts higher than ours. (Isaiah 55:9) His plans are always for our good.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, has given us a very good example to follow. She was willing to receive God's seed when the angel came to her. (Luke 1:35) We are similarly asked to receive Jesus, by His Holy Spirit, into our hearts (or lives). This act of willingness to submit to God's Spirit is how we are born again, as explained by Jesus. (John 3:3-8)

When we accept what God has said in His Word and obey, we open ourselves to every possibility that God promises. Some people we meet ask God to prove He exists but only obedience to His Word by faith can give us the experience of knowing God and seeing His

faithfulness in response to ours. "Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to Him must believe that He exists". (Hebrews 11:6) But amazingly this verse goes on..."and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him". There is a reward for those who seek Him and with God all things are possible. (Mark 10:27) "Nothing is impossible with God". (Luke 1:37) When we receive God's promises by faith, according to Jesus, this means that nothing will be impossible for us. (Matthew 17:21) "This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us – whatever we ask – we know that we have what we asked of Him". (1 John 5:14&15) This is God's love and grace in action, and all because we are receiving by faith.

Jesus tells many things that God wants us to receive by faith. The first is to enter the Kingdom of God as a little child. (Mark 10:15) This means that we are trusting and think simply. We open our hearts to the Holy Spirit to be born again. (John 3:3-7) Our fleshly nature is surrendered and God's seed is planted in our hearts to grow into His likeness. We meet people who say they are Christians, but they mock the born-again experience and refuse to experience what Jesus has decreed a "must". Then He wants us to receive His power so that we can represent Him. (John 14:12-14) The Apostle Paul enlarges on this. "If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And He has committed to us the message of

reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making His appeal through us". (2 Corinthians 5:17-20)

Jesus also wants us to receive by faith our right standing before the Father. It is very important to receive by faith the wonderful gift that Jesus has brought us when He redeemed us. "I pray for those who will believe in Me through their (the apostles') message...I have given them the glory that You gave Me that they may be one as We are one: I in them and You in Me..." (John 17:20-23) We have been made one with Jesus and the Father, holy and righteous, the most gracious and wonderful gift. This is what we can shout from the mountaintops. (Isaiah 40:9)

Chapter 3 PROCLAIMING

The first mention in the Bible of the proclaiming of the Name of the Lord is when Moses asked to see God's glory. (Exodus 33:19) In this sense God's Name proclaims His character. God describes some of His attributes to Moses and His glory is in His goodness. Proclamation is always both public and official; that is, it is completely open to be received as truth because it has the ring of truth, coming from an authority figure.

When God created the heaven and the earth He proclaimed the various parts of the creation, then when He had made man in His image He brought all the animals to Adam to see what he would name them. (Genesis 2:19&20) God was teaching man how to proclaim with His authority. What we say is very important for this reason. David acknowledged that God requires that we speak the truth and

keep what we promise even when it hurts. (Psalm 15:2&4) Jesus said that "men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by our words we will be acquitted, and by our words we will be condemned. (Matthew 12:36&37) Paul advises, "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen". (Ephesians 4:29) We grieve the Holy Spirit when we express bitterness, rage and anger, loud quarrelling and malicious and false statements about others. (Ephesians 4:30) Paul also warns against filthy language and telling lies. (Colossians 3:8&9) James warns also: "Consider what is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue is also a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. (James 3:5&6) But he goes on to say that out of the same mouth come praise and cursing...this should not be. These words of James are very strong but he grasps what power is in proclamation at God's decree.

When Jesus spoke there was such righteousness and power that the things He proclaimed came to pass at once. The awesome fact is that He wants us to continue His work to the close of the age. He makes promises like "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven". (Matthew 16:19) "Whose sins you remit (send back) they are remitted to them, and whose sins you retain they are retained." (John 20:23 KJV) This applies to our forgiving someone so that they are answerable to God for what they have done, or holding their sin in our heart. However the NIV interprets these words differently. "If you forgive

anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them they are not forgiven". This means that we have the authority to pardon someone on God's behalf. But this is a very privileged and sacred trust to be authorised to do this on God's behalf. The teachers of the Law were shocked when Jesus forgave the paralytic his sins, since only God can do this. (Mark 2:5-7)

Yet it seems that this is the extent to which God wants His children to continue the works of His Son. It is therefore very important to be always truthful and speak wholesomely. David also wrote in the same psalm as above (Psalm 15:1-4) "Lord, who may dwell in Your sanctuary? Who may live on Your holy hill? He whose walk is blameless and who does what is righteous, and speaks the truth from his heart and has no slander on his tongue, who does his neighbour no wrong and casts no slur on his fellow man...and honours those who fear the Lord". We are actually commissioned to speak on God's behalf. (Matthew 28:20)

First we confess with our mouth, "Jesus is Lord". We are proclaiming our faith. (Romans 10:9&10) We believe with our heart and are justified, but confess with our mouth and are saved. "Everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord will be saved. (Romans 10:13)

Once we are in the family of God we have the responsibility to preach the Good News. "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling...as you hold out the word of life". (Philippians 2:12-16) "How can they (the lost) call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they (God's children) preach unless they are sent? (Romans 10:14&15)

Jesus has already told the story of the workers in the vineyard. (Matthew 20:1-16) He has proclaimed that the gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony before the end of the age. (Matthew 24:14) When he sent out the 72 He said the harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few...to ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers. (Luke 10:2) And even more amazingly He said that if the people we meet listen to us they have also listened to Jesus Himself. (Luke 10:16)

Chapter 4 PASSING ON THE MESSAGE

It seems to us, the writers, that most Christians do not understand the importance of passing on the message. They are aware that they should do good deeds and be "nice" people; that they should invite people to church and work hard and give generously to present their church attractively. But many, or even most, do not consider themselves worthy to actually represent Jesus with His authority and power. We believe this has come about because some churches encourage a prayer which states that we are unworthy to come to the Lord's table, yet Jesus plainly stated, "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood you have no life in you". (John 6:53) But the Great Commission commands that all disciples go in His authority to make other disciples. The truth is that we, in our own power, are not worthy, but Jesus has called us, empowered us with His Holy Spirit so that we rely on His authority which has been delegated to us by His choice. He has given us the most precious gift, His righteousness in exchange for our sinful nature. (2 Corinthians 5:21) Most

interestingly, it is as we pass on the message that we understand His power working within us to grow us into His likeness. (Ephesians 1:19) Simple obedience to His Word, written and spoken into our hearts, produces the fruits of this imputed righteousness. "This is the new covenant I will make...I will put My laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be My people...they will all know Me...for I will forgive their wickedness and I will remember their sins no more". (Hebrews 8:10-12)

Jesus gave clear instructions for passing on the message. To His 12 disciples He gave power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases and He sent them out to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick. (Luke 9:1-6) Jesus sent His word through His disciples and they saw the effect. As they represented Jesus His power continued to flow. Then He sent out 72 more because "the harvest is plentiful and the workers are few". (Luke 10:1&2) But this time He warns them that they will be like lambs among wolves. He also told them that if the people listen to their preaching they are listening to Jesus but if they reject the messengers and their words they have also rejected Jesus Himself, and not only Jesus but also the heavenly Father too. (Luke 10:16) It is recorded that the 72 were truly amazed at the results. "Lord, even the demons submit to us in Your Name". (Luke 10:17) But Jesus was not at all surprised because when He conferred His authority He knew that this power was enough to overcome every attack that the enemy threw at them. What He wanted them to rejoice at was that their names are written in Heaven. (Luke 10:20) "They overcame him (the accuser of the followers of Jesus who are His brothers and sisters) ...by the word of their testimony and that they did not love

their lives so much as to shrink back". (Revelation 12:11) Thus they proved their obedience and their love and honour for Jesus. (John 14:15&23) Jesus made a very strong proclamation to His disciples and the crowd who were following Him. "If anyone is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when He comes in His Father's glory with the holy angels". (Mark 8:38)

The message is very simple – "The Kingdom of God is near you". (Luke 10:9) In Jesus' own message He adds, "Repent and believe the good news". (Mark 1:14) – There is therefore no excuse. When Jesus called His disciples He asked them to follow Him – and He will make them fishers of men. (Mark 1:17) Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, does all the necessary training which begins as soon as we "sign up".

For us, the writers, our challenge came because when we met Jesus and understood His desires and purposes from His heart to ours we could not help but say, like Isaiah, "Here am I, send me!" (Isaiah 6:8) Jesus does not mind if we make mistakes while learning for the very reason that He promises to MAKE us fishers of men. It is and has always been His power and authority that works in and through us as we trust and obey His leading. When Jesus proclaimed His message people were set free, did find the Lord's favour, and were extraordinarily drawn to Him as He travelled from place to place. He must have been the most beautiful person to hang around with when He was here on the earth and His preaching must have been amazingly powerful in authority. The Bible says that Jesus is the same, yesterday and today and forever. (Hebrews 13:8) If we are designated by God to be His ambassadors (2 Corinthians 5:20) and the

Holy Spirit is in our hearts then God would be doing the same things in our generation if we have His faith.

Chapter 5 CONTINUING JESUS' WORK

We have been given authority, right standing with God, a commission and the means to continue Jesus' work. The Holy Spirit has also equipped us with His "tool-kit", any and every gift that we could possibly need to use with our faith and His love in our hearts. (1 Corinthians 12:4-11) Jesus Himself was anointed with the Holy Spirit and power, and went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with Him. (Acts 10:38) In the Great Commission He assures His disciples that SURELY (certainly) He is with us always, to the end of the age. (Matthew 28:20) Though He is in Heaven at the right hand of God He has sent His Spirit to work in us and through us until He returns. This is the plan of the Father and He is relying on our obedience. He is the Head and we, the "church", the family of God, are His body. (Ephesians 1:22) He directs and we act on that direction. This is the "mystery" of the gospel of Christ (the anointed One and His anointing). (Ephesians 3:6) "Christ in us, the hope of glory". (Colossians 1:27) Glory for whom? "Do it all for the glory of God!" (1 Corinthians 10:31)

It is now up to us to respond to His call. Jesus actually chided His disciples because they had so little faith. (Matthew 17:20) "If you had faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, move from here to there and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you". Should we go around commanding mountains to move? We must

remember that Jesus only did what the Father wanted. (John 5:19&20) As His ambassadors we wait on His instructions. It is very important to be constantly in communication with the Holy Spirit within our hearts. Nevertheless we are always ready and bold to obey that soft voice within. God is not a hard Master; on the contrary, He is a patient teacher. It is easy to make a well-intentioned mistake but He does not mind fixing it up when we recognise and confess that we have not got it right.

In the Acts of the Apostles the stories are mostly very positive, because the disciples responded to the wooing of the Holy Spirit in a natural way, which enabled God to do His supernatural part, the signs and wonders like Jesus had done while He was teaching them. There are however also stories of very negative responses which Jesus had already warned about. "There is a judge for the one who rejects Me and does not accept My words; that very word which I spoke will condemn him at the last day". (John 12:48) Those who rejected the message given by those who are the representatives of Jesus are in this position too.

But God's promises are written for our encouragement. "He who listens to you listens to me; he who rejects you rejects Me...I have given you authority". (Luke 10:16&19) It seems that anyone who listens to us receive God's favour. If the one we meet is a Divine appointment then we can be confident..."that He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus". (Philippians 1:6) This is God's heart of generosity and love because when Jesus was born the angels promised that God's favour brings also His peace. This is the great importance of inviting people into the Kingdom, the

family of God, because Paul reminds us, "how can they hear without a preacher?" (Romans 10:14)

Jesus' preaching was the wisdom of God delivered with love. There cannot be an attitude of "I'm right and you are wrong". Jesus was always so gentle with people except the Pharisees who had this wrong attitude. We need to know what we believe so that we are not swayed by proffered arguments, but Paul advises not to enter into doctrinal differences. (2 Timothy 2:14-25) Words of wisdom and a desire to bless each person we meet, aware of the Holy Spirit's voice so that we can bring that blessing to reality and encourage people to not just believe but to receive from Jesus, convey the love of God. If people feel loved they are more open to receive, and experience the Lord's favour.

Chapter 6 THE LORD'S FAVOUR

David made many mistakes but he was convinced of something very important. "You (God) created my inmost being; You knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise You because I am fearfully and wonderfully made...Your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in Your book before one of them came to be". (Psalm 139:13-16) David was convinced this is typical of God's attitude to all He has made in His image. Jeremiah writes on God's behalf, "I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness". (Jeremiah 31:3) John writes that God IS love and He shows love, and His love is made complete in us if we love one another. (1 John 4:8-12) Jesus could say that the prophecy is

fulfilled, (Luke 4:21) because sending Jesus to redeem us was the greatest favour God could give us.

Nevertheless, our sins and the sins of others towards us have left us with "scars", and the devil will use these to tear us down, even to suicidal thoughts and actions. We have already talked about believing and that receiving is an integral part of that. **The Lord's favour must also be believed and received by faith.** No matter what we think about ourselves or what others think or say, we choose to believe what God says. As we recognise what Jesus has already achieved for us and what the Holy Spirit speaks to us through the written Word and into our hearts, our relationship with God gets stronger because we choose what God says over what we or others say. Luke wrote that God said David was a man after His own heart. (Acts 13:22) David wanted to know God's heart, seeking always to understand God's purposes. This was why he was so confident of the Lord's favour to him, in spite of his weaknesses and mistakes. The Psalms record a great deal about David's relationship with God, and his conversations and questions about the hard issues of life.

From the beginning God has always extended favour to undeserving people. Adam and Eve enjoyed His presence in the garden in the cool of the day. (Genesis 3:8) Abraham was frequently promised blessings. (eg Genesis 12:2&3, 14:20, 15:19, 17:4-8, 18:3) God blessed Isaac and Jacob and Joseph too just because He loved them. God never changes His character and He knows our weaknesses. The whole purpose of His promises He makes to us is to lift us up from the "ashes" of our lives which have been marred by our own sin and the

sins of others towards us. His love has a creative power to heal. He promises that love never fails. (1 Corinthians 13:8)

His first act of favour is to woo us with His Holy Spirit to join His family. Jesus has fulfilled the legal requirements for us when He died on the Cross to pay the death penalty for sin. This adoption into His family is not earned or deserved but love and grace in action. But having been adopted into His family we have all the rights and privileges available to us, if we will believe and receive them. The teachers among the Jews and many teachers of the Bible have made the Bible into a law book of do's and don'ts, yet Jesus taught that God's Law is Love. Jesus has once and for ever dealt with our sins – He has done away with them! (Hebrews 9:26) When we confess any failing God is faithful and just (to Jesus!) to not only forgive us but also to PURIFY US. (1 John 1:9)

God also likes to fill our hearts with His love so that we overflow to others. This also is a gift of His grace. Paul, the Apostle, wrote that he prayed that not only would Christ dwell in our hearts but that we would be rooted and established in God's love. (Ephesians 3:17) When we plant something in the garden we carefully tend it and water it until it is established. We allow it to settle, not poke around to see if it is settling. This is the concept, but our wounds and scars "itch", so we often poke around and doubt that God means what He says. Laying down and leaving our sins and failures at the Cross needs to be practised regularly until we are established in God's love.

God has made us for relationship with Him. This is the whole reason why Jesus died – to connect us to the Father. We are not required to be "religious" with Him. Fearing God does not mean we

are to be wary of Him and certainly not to try to avoid Him. Crudens Concordance (page 209) explains that the fear of God means that reverence for God which leads to obedience because of one's realisation of His power as well as His love to man. The Holy Spirit convicts of sin, but this is supposed to make us want to be clean again. He also convicts of judgment but this also is to encourage us to call on God's mercy and grace or favour. Even in the garden of Eden God hoped that Adam and Eve would cry to Him for forgiveness, but they did not. Instead they blamed each other and made weak excuses. This is not the way to restore relationships, but repentance, being and saying sorry is most acceptable to God. The Holy Spirit also convinces us of righteousness. (John 16:8) We have been given our right standing with God as a GIFT. Do we believe it and have we received it? God's wrath (His revulsion of sin) has been assuaged by the blood of Jesus. He does not count our sins against us any more. (2 Corinthians 5:19)

Chapter 7 THE VENGEANCE OF OUR GOD TO COMFORT ALL WHO MOURN

This seems a very strange concept, but mourning or grieving is to do with loss. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted". (Matthew 5:4) Mourning is because we are acknowledging that we cannot fill our need ourselves.

The Psalms are full of David's mourning and crying for justice.

People coming against him – "Contend, O Lord, with those who contend with me". (Psalm 35:1) Then a few verses later (v9) he says,

"Then my soul will rejoice in the Lord and delight in His salvation (deliverance)".

Health problems – "O Lord my God, I called to You for help and You healed me". (Psalm 30:2) "O Lord, heal me, for my bones are in agony, my soul is in anguish". (Psalm 6:2&3)

His own folly – "Have mercy on me O God, according to Your unfailing love...for I know my transgression...create in me a pure heart". (Psalm 51:1,3&10)

At injustice – "Give ear to my prayer...may my vindication come from You". (Psalm 17:1&2)

Trouble and grief – "You, O God, do see trouble and grief; You consider it to take it in hand...defending the fatherless and the oppressed, in order that man, who is of the earth, may terrify no more". (Psalm 10:14&18)

These are just a few examples but there are examples for rejection, (Hagar sent away, Genesis 21:17-19), human loss, (The loss of the baby born to Bathsheba, 2 Samuel 11:11-25), financial loss, (The Philistines taking the wells that Isaac's men dug, Genesis 26:19-22), loss of reputation and position, (The story of Joseph, Genesis 39 and 41:41).

The Bible says that God says, "It is Mine to avenge, I will repay". (Romans 12:19) These words can have two interpretations, depending on who we think God is. The context is talking about us not taking revenge, and leaving room for God's wrath. We have already written that God's wrath has been satisfied by the blood of Jesus. However He is a God of both holiness and justice and He is jealous for His own children. (Exodus 20:5&6) He says he shows love to those who love Him. This means He is heavily on the side of His family, and will defend

them every time against every attack of the enemy, physical, mental and spiritual. This truly is His favour. It is a very foolish thing to run from Him when trouble strikes unless you are against Him.

Paul writes about how this love and protectiveness works. "If God is for us, who can be against us"? (Romans 8:31) Christ Jesus is at the right hand of God interceding for us. There is nothing that can separate us from God's love. Paul is convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38&39)

But if we believe that God is still full of wrath and we run from Him we have chosen to agree with God's enemy, just as Eve did in the garden. John warns that the one who fears is not made perfect in love, because fear has to do with punishment. (1 John 4:18) We, the writers, meet so many people who have run from God when trouble struck. Yet all we need to do (because of Jesus) is to come running into God's loving arms, mourning. Long before Jesus came in the flesh Isaiah wrote that He said "Here am I. All day long I have held out My hands to an obstinate people, who walk in ways not good, pursuing their own imaginations – they say (to Me) 'keep away, don't come near me'". (Isaiah 65:1,2 &5) There is always, with God, a blessing when we come to Him because He has promised, and He is always full of love, grace and mercy.

Chapter 8 THE CROWN OF BEAUTY

What is God's definition of beauty? If our life is in ashes because of our troubles, what is God offering? God is enthralled by beauty. (Psalm 45:11) This psalm is titled as a "Maskil" or instruction, and is also a wedding song. First it glorifies the king, riding forth with splendour and majesty, in the cause of truth, humility and righteousness. The writer prophesies that this king's throne will last for ever. But His bride will be gloriously "dressed", and this "marriage" will be prosperous and joyful as the bridegroom/ king takes His bride. The instruction for the bride is to forget her father's house and to honour her bridegroom. He makes her a promise that her sons will take the place of her father and become "princes".

Our beauty lies then in our relationship with Jesus, our King. David wrote, "Those who look to Him are radiant". (Psalm 34:5) Solomon considered that any beloved is beautiful. (Song of Songs 1:10,15; 2:14; 4:1; 6:4; 7:1)

When God is mourning the unfaithfulness of Jerusalem (and His people) He describes how He found them and how He made them beautiful. "I put a beautiful crown on your head...You became very beautiful and rose to be queen. And your fame spread among the nations on account of your beauty because the splendour I had given you made your beauty perfect". (Ezekiel 16:12-14)

David, who had such an intimate relationship with God, encourages us to worship the Lord in the splendour (magnificent beauty) of His holiness. (1 Chronicles 16:29; Psalm 29:2; Psalm 96:8) This is so we reflect His countenance as we look to Him. When His church (Zion) is reflecting Him God shines forth in perfect beauty. (Psalm 50:2) He who walks

righteously and speaks what is right...will see the King in His beauty.
(Isaiah 33:15&17)

But Isaiah describes what Jesus looked like when He bore our sin on the Cross. "He had no beauty". (Isaiah 53:2) Any sin dulls or even nullifies our God-given beauty, and our reflection of God's radiance and splendour. The shining of our crown of beauty depends on us living in His presence and keeping clean. Jeremiah laments because "she who was a queen has become a slave...all the splendour has departed from the daughter of Zion". (Lamentations 1:1&6)

This concept is not found in the New Testament, except where Jesus refers to the righteous shining like the sun in the kingdom of their Father, (Matthew 13:43) and when Paul is encouraging us to "do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe". (Philippians 2:14&15) But Jesus teaches us that we are the salt of the earth (for flavour) and the light of the world (for colour). (Matthew 5:13&14)

A crown is mentioned though in Revelation when the elders fall before the throne and worship Him who lives for ever and ever, laying down their crowns. (Revelation 4:10) It would seem that this crown of beauty is what we have to offer back to God for all He has given us in our earthly life.

It is the Old Testament that outlines God's dreams and plans for His family, the precepts and ways for relationship with Him. He reveals His heart very plainly, directly and through His prophets, speaking on His behalf. Israel (God's first chosen people) was holy to the Lord, the firstfruits of His harvest". (Jeremiah 2:3) "How gladly would I treat you like

sons, and give you a desirable land, the most beautiful inheritance... I thought you would call Me Father". (Jeremiah 3:19) God wanted to confer His dignity, His splendour, His characteristics on His children, to be that reflection of Himself. David's revelation is to ascribe to the Lord the glory due to His Name; worship the Lord in the splendour (beauty) of His holiness. (Psalm 29:2) But this is not possible in our own strength; it is only by reflecting God that we acquire it. (Job 40:10) Nevertheless it is God's desire that His children fulfil the plan He conceived from the beginning – for us to be arrayed in His glory and splendour for His honour and praise – to be a kingdom and priests to serve God. (Revelation 1:6) We are to be "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that (we) may declare the praises of Him who called (us) out of darkness into His wonderful light". (2 Peter 2:9)

Chapter 9 THE OIL OF GLADNESS

Oil is for anointing, representing being smeared or covered by the Anointed One, the Christ. Jesus has given, as a gift, His presence and His glory, to every one who has desired to be "in Christ".

The rituals of the old covenant were given to Moses in great detail – the formula of the anointing oil and its purpose, (Exodus 30:22-33) which was to make everything it touched most holy. Each priest was anointed and later kings were too, and the concept has been carried down to this day. But though it is significant in God's sight we must cooperate with God to bring the actuality of holiness to our lives. Although kings and priests under the old covenant were anointed to

be most holy, they mostly did not take its meaning and its incipient power seriously. This, like everything else God offers us, must be appropriated by faith, by believing and receiving. Our human minds cannot fathom the awesome mind and purposes of God, but He means what He promises and just simply believing Him brings about the promise. This is explained clearly in Hebrews (11:1&6). "Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see...without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to Him must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him."

So why is it oil of gladness? When we are holy in God's sight we are also blameless, freed from guilt. The guilt of sin is a heavy load on our spirits, and our desire is to hide in shame. In the world people do brazen it out and try to justify themselves but this does not remove the problem; actually it entrenches it and we become deceived that we are all right. But a clear conscience is a light and clean conscience. Forgiveness of sin was so important to our God who made us that Jesus, the Anointed One, died on the Cross to deal with it. The Anointed One imparts to us this oil of gladness and the more oil, the more gladness. Isaiah prophesied it. (Isaiah 10:27) "In that day their burden will be lifted from your shoulders, their yoke from your neck; the yoke will be broken (destroyed) because you have grown so fat (so rich in the anointing)."

John writes about this anointing. (1 John 2:20-27) The Holy One gives it as a gift. It has been received by hearing the Word and believing, and remains in us. Because it is a gift it will never be taken away yet John writes that our challenge is to remain in Him because this

anointing is real. We are to continue to learn from Him as He will teach us how to be holy, surrendering our faults and defects at the foot of the Cross, allowing His blood to cleanse us one step at a time. This anointing, this presence, is not just to benefit us. This glory, this anointing, breaks any yoke it touches. Jesus was anointed so that He could do good works. (Acts 10:38) It is God's intention that the works of Jesus continue to the close of the age. The greatest joy and gladness comes when we have been instruments of God's purposes for others so that they too can receive the oil of gladness.

Chapter 10 THE GARMENT OF PRAISE

The priests of the old covenant were clothed in elaborate garments. They were sacred to be worn in the sanctuary, representing the presence of God. The priests wore a plain ephod (garment to cover the upper body) but the high priest's garment was blue, purple and scarlet adorned with gold. Attached to this was a breastplate with 12 precious stones representing the 12 tribes of Israel. He also wore a robe, decorated at the hem with pomegranates and bells. On his head he wore a turban and across his chest he had a sash. These garments were ordered by God, each for a special reason which God did not explain, but expected to be worn to minister as a priest. (Exodus 39:1-29)

Zechariah explains more about these garments. (Zechariah 3:1-9) Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes and the angels were told to take them off. The angel of the Lord says, "See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put rich garments on you". The other angels put a clean

turban and clean garments and Joshua was "commissioned". This is what the Lord Almighty says, "If you will walk in My ways and keep My requirements, then you will govern My house and have charge of My courts, and I will give you a place among these standing here...You are men symbolic of things to come".

Jesus has more to say, calling the garment a wedding garment. Those who were called into the wedding banquet of the king were given a garment to wear but one came as he was and was rebuked and then arrested and removed. (Matthew 22:1-14) These garments represent being made clean and holy to be in the presence of God. Our sins weigh heavily in our spirits but when we are clean Isaiah explains, "I delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God. For He has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. (Isaiah 61:10) David describes this bride of the king. "All glorious is the princess...her gown is interwoven with gold. In embroidered garments she is led to the king...with joy and gladness..." and "the king is enthralled by this beauty". (Psalm 45:13-15&11)

This garment of praise is identifying our relationship with God. Jude writes about hating clothing stained by corrupted flesh. (Jude 23) If our "garment of righteousness" is our visible witness to God it is also a visible witness to other people. When Jesus was on the mount of transfiguration His clothes became brilliant white – white as the light. (Matthew 17:2) In the message to the church of Laodicea they were counselled to buy white clothes to wear. (Revelation 3:18)

This glory we have been clothed in is not only honour and praise to God but those who see us will also praise God because of it. Jesus told His disciples to stay in the city until they have been clothed with power from on high. (Luke 24:49) Luke writes this again, "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift My Father promised". (Acts 1:4) This garment seems to be very important to God and to Jesus.

But why is this needed against despair? Trying to be a witness to honour Jesus is impossible without the Holy Spirit as guide and without His power to change our rebellious natures. When you love Jesus and want to represent Him, but fail in your witness, it is easy to give up and we meet many people who have. They talk about hypocrisy in the church or irrelevance to their life, just because they never knew that Jesus wants us to accept His garment of praise. It is our outwardly expressed right standing before God which we cannot earn or even deserve, yet it is the gift of God to be received with gladness.

Chapter 11 OAKS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

Oak trees have very interesting characteristics. They are sturdy trees that grow to a great height and live to a great age. There are more than 600 species, some of which are used for wine barrels and the bark of some has medicinal qualities. Some cultures considered the oak "a cosmic storehouse of wisdom, embodied within its towering strength". The oak can withstand incredibly strong storms like tornadoes and hurricanes. Even when they are stripped of their leaves oak trees survive because of their strength, their curvy

branches and their incredible root systems. Its main root is called a taproot and grows straight down into the ground, providing nutrients and moisture for the growing tree. Their fruit (acorns) is food for many animals. Oak trees symbolise humble beginnings, longevity, patience, faith, power, endurance and strength. Oak trees tend to flourish in drier climates with deep soil and adequate moisture. They are quite resistant to pests and disease.

These characteristics are easy to transfer to the spiritual. God's plan is that His family are sturdy and aim high and live productive lives. There are so many different types of people, race, colour, language, personality types, with different interests and talents. Because we have been made resilient we can withstand the storms of life, especially with His help. Even when we are stripped of what brings us life-giving water, the Water of Life will keep us going, because our Life is deep in Jesus. We can bless many people when we use our gifts, the fruit of our relationship with the Father. The oak tree's symbolic qualities match that of a follower of Jesus. Jesus was so humble, knowing His strength in the Father. Peter writes about clothing ourselves with humility. (1 Peter 5:5) When we prosper we can become slack in our relationship with God but when times are harder we are more inclined to dig deeper and pray more. God has made very clear promises about how we overcome "pests" and "disease", so we should be very resistant in His power and by His Word.

When we become like the oak tree that God has planted we glorify Him, and bring Him honour. It has been said (in the Westminster Confession) that "man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever".

Jesus came to save us for this purpose. He has called us into the family of God, dealt with our sin which would have prevented us from this fellowship. The prophecy in Isaiah was fulfilled when Jesus finished His work on the earth but He is relying on the family to continue it to the close of the age. We will gladly trade our ashes, the failings and failures, for the beauty that He offers if we are seriously in love with Him – the King of kings and Lord of lords.

