

# Spiritual Growth Without Illusions

Andrey Karpekin

## Contents

Stages of Growth

Stages of Faith

The Stage of Success

My Laodicean Condition

The Dark Night of the Soul

A Personal Crisis of Faith

My Crisis of Faith

Life After the Crisis

A Journey Within Myself

My Journey Inward

The Risk of Turning Back

A Longing for a Close Friend

The Journey Outward

Not of This World

The Stage of Love

The Beginning of Love

The Narrow Way of Love

The Best Life

Is That All?

Leaving the Laodicean Stage

Fermentation

Victory Through Laodicea

The Pharisaic Error

Spued Out

The Army of Overcomers

The Non-Overcomers

The Breath of a Gentle Wind

Jesus Only

The Victories of Others

Maintaining the Stage of Success

Ministry Is a Responsibility

Christ's Beloved Church

## Stages of Growth

The life of every person in the developed world is divided into certain stages: birth, daycare, kindergarten, school, vocational school, technical college or university, military service, work, starting a family, raising children, career advancement, professional development or the search for a promising job, retirement, old age, and death. Something may be absent from one person's life, or something unusual may be present. All of this is called a person's life. Each stage of life is tied to a certain age and transitions into another. The first stage implies the inevitability of the last, and every sensible person living within this framework seeks to fill his or her time meaningfully with something worthwhile and interesting.

The life of a believer is also divided into stages. These stages do not end with death; rather, as one transitions into another, they form spiritual maturity and receptiveness, raising the growing person to a higher level. Unlike earthly life, where the transition from one stage to another is inevitable, in spiritual growth a person can stop and cease developing, remaining at the same level for life. A person can also choose the wrong direction and, as a result, fall into heresy and regress.

If in earthly life we consider a person's normal development to be a gradual transition from one stage to another, then for some reason this principle is distorted or neglected in spiritual life. And the one who has managed to grow becomes incomprehensible to many and spends his life in spiritual loneliness, dreaming that someone else will reach his level and be able to communicate with him in spiritual unity and understanding.

What I am trying to describe now is not my invention or discovery, but God's plan for the brief probationary period of a person's spiritual life. And the Lord loves His children with everlasting love, regardless of the stage of spiritual development they are in, even if they have stopped growing. They are His children, born to live forever, who have faith in God and are already learning here on earth the principles of

heavenly life. Do not be discouraged if you see that your spiritual growth has stopped; perhaps this is a springboard for moving to a new level. But everything depends on you. The more a believer grows in Jesus, the more fiercely the enemy of the human soul attacks him, and the stronger the attacks of the world become—and not everyone can or wants to endure this. The war does not cease for a single minute; all the forces of darkness concentrate on those who are growing spiritually. But God protects His children, and nothing can harm them. They are safe as long as they believe in God's power and in His promises to care for them and protect them from evil, if they entrust all their cares and their very lives to the Almighty.

Spiritual life includes the following steps: hearing, awareness, being born again, learning and accepting the truth, first love, searching for spiritual authorities, accepting the foundations of doctrine, missionary activity, serving others, the dark night of the soul, reevaluating one's values, spiritual friendship, searching for one's place in which to use one's abilities effectively, reevaluating spiritual values, leaving behind what is unnecessary, the second dark night of the soul, and agape love. In essence, these are six stages of faith that everyone is capable of completing. Perhaps I have missed something or formulated these stages incorrectly; if so, I ask for your grace. In spiritual growth, it is impossible to jump from the initial stage to later ones while bypassing the intermediate stages, just as it is impossible in the earthly cycle of growth. This is not because I decided it should be so, but because God's plan and the harmony of development are found in it. Another distinctive feature is that some people grow slowly or stop developing, while others pass through these stages very quickly and move upward with confidence. Believers who are in the middle understand the condition of those who are at the beginning of the journey, but they do not always understand—or do not understand at all—the motives of those who have outgrown them.

Most often, growth stops at the dark night of the soul. A person does not want severe trials; he is frightened by darkness and the unknown, resists the fire through which he must pass, and

stops developing, expanding the boundaries of the place where he has stopped. The entire church reaches this level, while further progress takes place only on an individual basis.

The ultimate goal of development is agape love. Upon reaching it, a believer does not stop growing but discovers limitless opportunities for God to carry out His plans through him. This is precisely the goal Christ sets for every person who belongs to Him, so that everyone may know what to strive for without stopping at what has already been achieved. And Jesus offers Himself as their Helper, while respecting each person's desires and honoring his choice. What amazing love!

Spiritual growth is impossible without Christ. Without a personal relationship with Jesus, all truth will be accepted only by the mind, without touching the heart. But this is like building a house on sand, without a foundation. It looks beautiful, just like solid buildings, but only until the first trial or disaster, during which it collapses.

Agape love is also unique in that it is available at any stage of faith, but it is given as immediate help to show a person a better prospect for growth. However, it does not take full possession of the heart because the person is not yet ready for it. He cannot independently make this gift the driving motive of his life simply because he does not understand the obligations and responsibility involved. But in the process of growth, as he strives toward this goal, he reaches it and becomes ready to accept love in all its fullness, becoming a part of it. This can be compared to a child in a family. He sees the advantages of family life, lives in the love of his parents, enjoys their tenderness and protection, and depends on their care, but he is not yet ready to start his own family because he has not yet grown to that point. Yet even as a child, he begins to dream about the wonderful family he will have. I think each of you had similar thoughts in childhood and has observed them in your own children. But the moment comes when a person becomes mature enough to start a family and enters into marriage in due time.

In the same way, in our spiritual development we strive to attain the full stature of Christ. And at a certain stage of this growth, God Himself places responsibility upon us, gives us the gifts and talents necessary for service in the church, and endows us with special power and influence at His discretion.

When I am ready to receive something greater because the time has come, but I do not ask God for it and hide my hands behind my back, I risk stopping in my spiritual development for many years and treading water in the same place, becoming an outside observer or a critic of various events.

The choice is mine, and God will give me exactly what I choose. I choose love and move toward receiving greater love, which is the more excellent way.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Please read Mark 4:26-32; 2 Peter 1:3-11; Hebrews 5:12-14; Ephesians 3:16-21; 6:10-18; Philippians 3:13-18; 4:6-7; Hebrews 13:20-21; Romans 5:1-5; 1 Peter 1:22; 1 Thessalonians 5:23; Revelation 22:17; Ephesians 4:13-16.
2. Did you learn anything useful for yourself?
3. What did you understand?
4. Is the expression "the dark night of the soul" clear to you?
5. Do you see spiritual growth in your life?
6. Do you have spiritual goals that you dream of attaining?
7. What role does love play in spiritual growth?
8. Do you believe it is possible for an ordinary person to come to know agape love and live in this state?
9. How can I determine what spiritual level I am at?
10. What does God do in my spiritual growth?

## Stages of Faith

If, at the very beginning or during the process of our spiritual growth, someone tells us what we will have to go through and experience in the future, we will better understand what is happening and will be prepared for all the coming changes about which we were warned. This would be a very great blessing for each of us.

The faith of every Christian passes through certain stages of development. Each subsequent stage replaces the previous one and is based on what has already been experienced.

Wise people have studied this kind of growth and discovered that the path of every believer passes through six stages, which I will describe in this and the following chapters. These stages must be understood correctly so that we will not be surprised by the trials, changes, darkness, and disappointments in ourselves through which each of us will pass. When I know what awaits me ahead and what I need to attain, I see the goal and move toward it. My life is hidden in Christ, and I cannot explain how spiritual growth takes place within me, but by the spiritual person's "outward appearance," I can determine which stage he is in.

When the Lord shows me an ear of grain—what it was like and what it came to look like before the harvest—it becomes very easy for me to determine where I am and how I should move forward.

But spiritual development has its own laws. For example, wheat requires a certain amount of time for sowing, ripening, and harvesting, and every farmer knows these times. In spiritual growth, however, a person may stop, cease growing altogether, or return to where he came from. These are not very pleasant events, but if they take place within the body of Christ, there is hope for healing and restoration if believers continue moving forward. Growth can also become a rapid process if my heart is open to it, if I already know much, and if I continue learning new things. And if my neighbor tells me what is happening,

shows me this path, and explains what I will encounter along it and what I should not fear, then I can travel very quickly along the trail that has already been blazed, seeing the blood and reading about the experiences of the pioneers.

Some of you may read about this progression and say that none of it is true because you have not experienced it. In that case, such people can confidently be shown that they have become stuck somewhere, because something is wrong with their spiritual growth.

But let us consider these six stages of faith in order.

I myself came to God out of the world, and I know what a worldly person experiences when he begins to grow. It is difficult for me to understand what a person born into a family of believing parents goes through, but he too is born again at some point and passes through the same stages of growth, though in a different way.

#### 1. Becoming Acquainted with God. First Love.

At some point, all of us came to know God personally when He appeared in our lives in a wonderful way. It is like a brilliant flash of light in the kingdom of darkness. I saw how beautiful this light was and how great God is; I heard His call, and my heart responded to it. My new experience of being born again is unique and unlike anyone else's, but it is present in my life, and I greatly enjoy telling others about it, reliving this joy each time and recalling new details of what drew me to Jesus. I have understood so little thus far, but I know the One Who died for me, and I can speak about it so passionately that those listening to me will become filled with joy or even shed tears of tenderness. I myself have heard many testimonies about how God saves, how He plucks a brand out of the fire and makes it His own. And I recognize this voice of God. The Lord gives me the ability to understand Him and heed the promptings of the Spirit.

At this stage, I am overwhelmed by a storm of feelings and emotions, and I tell all those close to me about what has happened to me. And if I possess the gift of persuasion, I can

help others come to know God and lead them to Jesus. I have a new Friend. He is so wonderful! And I love Him so much!!! I am ready to speak about Him for hours, listen to others speak about Him, and rejoice in Him. I am ready to go wherever He tells me to go, and in every brother or sister I see a teacher and mentor for myself.

My knowledge is extremely limited, but I have an experience, deep feelings, and a storm of emotions that simply overwhelms me. I am alive; I have been born for God; I will live forever!!! God loves me, and I not only understand this—I know it!!! Oh, if only I could always remain in this state! If only everyone were like this! Then we could tell the whole world very quickly and help people find Jesus.

At this time, I greatly need a spiritual mentor who will teach me correct concepts, explain the order and teachings of the church to me, and help me move to the next stage. If there are no such people, I may become stuck at the first stage, make my experience the foundation of my faith, and live by it, constantly recalling in my stories what I experienced and how I found God. Oh, how wonderful He is! I do not yet have any theology, but I have Jesus, and that seems sufficient to me.

Spiritual literature can also become my mentor, and with its help I am able to move to the next stage of faith.

## 2. Discipleship.

The world of the Bible is so wonderful! I could not even have imagined how fascinating and instructive this Book is. And what wonderful works have been written by those who studied the Word of God and then decided to write books about their discoveries! I gladly learn from these people. I am ready to listen to anyone and everyone. I am deeply interested in learning everything new. How grateful I am to God for this abundant light of revelation, and how grateful I am to those who came to know God and shared this knowledge in their writings. Through these works, I become established in my faith. I understand that my church is the true church, that it has the most correct teaching, and that my mentors are the wisest

people in the world. I have spiritual leaders and authorities whom I am ready to heed and follow wherever they direct me. And what a joy it is to attend and listen to various seminars! How wonderful it is to learn everything new and useful! And I continue learning.

The Bible has become my bread of life. I discover new dimensions within it, understand God even better, and marvel at how great and wonderful He is. I never grow tired of learning, and everything is very interesting to me. I know the One in Whom I have believed, and I believe that He is my Savior. And I already understand how He saves.

If, at this stage, I come across the materials of the School of Agape Love, I will gladly immerse myself in this field of study and sink my teeth into it, joyfully awaiting new lessons and revelations. It is so wonderful to learn at the feet of Christ!!!

But stagnant water becomes foul. There is a danger of becoming stuck at this stage of faith, which will involve remaining a perpetual student, meticulously analyzing every law and rule, and comparing all these discoveries with reality.

I risk becoming a Pharisee or a scribe. And that does not frighten me, because what could be better than the study of God? My whole life is devoted to this, and I am very strict about every kind of deviation from the proper course. I am ready to defend my convictions to the end, and no one can persuade me otherwise, because I have built my faith upon the Rock, and here I stand!!!

And I do not care what others think; I am more concerned with how it is written. No one will be able to change my mind. And I feel such a desire to make a banner that says, "I am right because I believe in God!" so that it may become the brightest testimony to the whole world and the entire church.

But God draws me onward, and He offers me the opportunity to share all of this with others, and I move to another stage.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Please read Mark 4:26-29; Deuteronomy 8:2-3; Isaiah 50:4; 2 Timothy 3:5-7; Matthew 10:24-25; Proverbs 2:1-9.
2. What new and useful things did you learn?
3. Why does knowing your path give you an advantage over not knowing it?
4. Do the stages of the spiritual growth of faith apply to unbelievers?
5. What part does God take in my spiritual growth?
6. Why am I not given an understanding of the process of spiritual growth from within myself? Why does this remain a mystery? If it were revealed to me, would I then be able to cultivate it in other people?
7. What should I do if I see that I have become stuck at a certain stage and am not growing any further?
8. Why does God not immediately give me the advantages of the final stages, but instead lead me along the difficult path of growth?
9. If everything we are studying here is unfamiliar to me, does that mean that I am spiritually dead?
10. How can spiritual growth be accelerated?

## The Stage of Success

There is nothing more interesting and exciting than growing in God's garden, in God's family, and watching how others develop. It is such a joy to realize that you are a member of the body of Christ, that you belong to the royal priesthood, that you are a branch on God's vine and a branch of the olive tree, and that you are God's child. Whatever stage of development you may be in and wherever you may have become stuck in your growth, you are one who belongs to God and is the object of His special care and attention. If only we could see the tenderness with which God works for us, the love with which He attends to every detail of our lives, and the patience He shows toward us, His beloved children, our journey would be much easier and more fascinating. But we have been given the eyes of faith to comprehend all this without seeing God, while trusting Him as little children trust their parents.

To enter the Kingdom of Heaven, we must become like children and, like a little child, give our lives to God and accept with childlike trust what He gives us. But infancy is necessary in order to enter the Kingdom, and God does not plan for a person to remain an infant. The Lord nurtures everyone who enters His garden and is planted in His flower bed.

At a certain point in my development, I move to the next stage of faith, where all my brothers and sisters are waiting for me, actively engaged in God's work, helping one another, and caring for new members of God's family. I enter a new and fascinating world of fellowship.

### 3. The Stage of Success.

All the knowledge I have accumulated finds practical application in every area of church life. Whereas I once needed teachers, mentors, spiritual leaders, and authorities, I now become such a person myself. Those who have only recently come out of the world greatly need my counsel, explanations of difficult passages of Scripture, prayerful support, and guidance. I already know what talents God has given me and what success

accompanies me in every work for God that I undertake. My experience of life in Christ is so unique and so different from the experiences of others that I gladly share it with fellow believers, inspiring those around me to work for God.

I see how my words reach many hearts and convince those around me that life with God is better. Observing my success, my older brothers decide to entrust me with leading a small group or even place an entire congregation under my care, ordaining me to this ministry. And I, understanding my full responsibility before God and people, accept any new duties and do what has been entrusted to me.

The enemy of the soul constantly tries to trip me so that I will fall and disappoint my brothers and sisters, but in their love they support me and help me rise and continue onward.

I comprehend the science of Salvation and can convince people that life with God is better, more beautiful, and more interesting. Everything I touch and undertake becomes blessed and successful, and I understand that every undertaking and work of God is destined for success. This truth inspires me to take on everything and to see the abundant blessings that are poured out upon me.

And when a trial comes or the struggle intensifies, I run to the One Who is always near and never grows weary.

My entire church reaches this level of maturity, and together, as one united body, we carry out God's mission in this world and confidently grow from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord. As we behold Christ by faith, we are transformed into the same image and likeness. What a joy it is to realize this!

Our evangelistic campaigns have attained theological perfection, and every truth about the plan of Salvation is revealed before the world in all its fullness and beauty. It cannot be disputed, but it can be accepted and mixed with faith—or rejected as one walks away into darkness.

At this stage of faith, I see many of my brothers and sisters become disappointed and discouraged, lose their enthusiasm, burn out emotionally, and experience something I do not understand. Some of them leave our ranks forever, leaving us with many questions and much bewilderment. Arguments, gossip, and disagreements become spiritual bread for many of us, which some share with others with special enthusiasm. God's work grows and moves forward, while believers become strange and unpredictable. It is not always easy to understand what is happening, but newly baptized church members bring fresh joy and compel me to work tirelessly. And I grow. It seems that everything will always remain this way and that our whole family will continue living together in the garden of God's love. But this is only the third stage, and at a time known to Him, God leads me to a dark wall and calls me to move forward.

And strange things begin to happen in my life. I realize that I am tired, emotionally empty, burned out, and losing strength. I go to the Source and drink, but I am not satisfied. My heart is surfeited and no longer tastes the flavor of life. I understand that I must move forward, but where? Before me are darkness, the unknown, and a black fire that burns but brings no joy. I look back and could return to the place where I grew so wonderfully, but the mysterious power of God draws me into the darkness, into a dark forest that seems as though it will never end. And there is no one beside me who can explain what is happening; I must walk this path in complete solitude.

I begin to have many questions for God. Sometimes I even shake my fists toward Heaven, crying out to the One Who remains silent. I berate myself and uncover very unpleasant things in my life.

I was told about love and that it truly exists. I have even seen those who say that they love, yet I see nothing but darkness in my own life and do not know what to do. Although outwardly I am still just as active and cheerful, and all my projects for God continue moving forward and succeeding, inwardly very little brings me joy anymore. Yet outwardly I continue smiling and giving others inspiration and blessings. I read about Job and

understand that a battle is being waged over my life and that God allows trials in it. I read the sorrowful psalms and find myself in them. Darkness has covered me. What should I do? Where should I go? Ahead lie gloom and the unknown. And it seems that God does not hear me. Perhaps I should return to the world? But there is death there. Perhaps I am in the wrong church? I search for something else. Although they do not live according to the Bible there, at least there is some variety. But even this does not solve my problem.

And I stand before this wall, wondering what I should do next. Who could help me? No one taught me about this or warned me.

Yet I want to grow. And somewhere deep in my soul, I understand that God is near, that He has not abandoned me, and that He has prepared something better and more interesting for me. I rely on Him by faith alone, grit my teeth, and take a step of faith. How dark this dark night of the soul is! How painful it is to pass through it! How deeply I long for all of this to end.

Various circumstances in life can bring my soul close to this condition, and God uses them and Himself leads me into this state. But I will learn this later, after I have traveled this path. How lonely it is here!

And I move to the next stage of faith and become immersed in myself, in my thoughts and feelings, while remaining cheerful and active for those around me. What a performance! How ashamed I am! But I continue walking by faith.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Please read Jeremiah 6:16; Genesis 39:3; 1 Peter 2:9-10; 2 Corinthians 1:21-22; 2 Chronicles 20:20; Joshua 1:7-8; Proverbs 2:3-11; Job 3:23-26; Ecclesiastes 3:1, 5, 12-14; Revelation 2:2-5; and 2 Corinthians 6:6-10 in light of our chapter.
2. What did you understand? What Bible verses came to your mind?

3. Is the third stage really only the midpoint of the journey of spiritual growth? What will come next?
4. Why does God plan a time of personal sorrow for each of His sons and daughters?
5. Why is the dark night of the soul necessary?
6. Are there Christians who develop through different stages of faith?
7. Why does the Lord grant success in spiritual growth and ministry, only to lead a person down into darkness afterward?
8. How can I distinguish between the dark night of the soul that comes from the Lord and sorrow caused by my sins?

## **My Laodicean Condition**

As I grow spiritually and move from the stage of discipleship to the stage of success, I begin to understand that I have grown. New and additional knowledge and revelations help me understand matters of truth more clearly, while my senses become trained to discern both good and evil. I begin to be entrusted with responsible ministries, which at first cause me fear but later awaken a special interest and a desire to engage in them.

At the stage of success, I acquire a fullness of knowledge and can distinguish truth from error. I have the right answers for every situation in life. I can boldly oppose those who are mistaken or preach heresies. Truth is unique in that it always remains true and always defeats every error. Knowledge of the Bible shapes my mind so thoroughly that I filter every situation and every teaching through a biblical worldview.

The Word of God is written upon my heart by the finger of God. At the right moment, the necessary verses from the Bible come to my memory to show me how to live correctly or to help me recognize danger in a particular teaching or activity. Every undertaking I begin achieves a certain measure of success. I understand that with God I can take on anything, and He blesses everything.

My heart sings with joy as I see God's wonderful works in my life and in the life of the church. As I fellowship with Christians who are like me, I come to understand very important things that have been revealed to other people, and together we share our experiences of spiritual growth.

Not knowing the ultimate goal toward which I must grow and which I must attain, I prefer to live within what I can see and understand. If I stop growing upward, I begin to grow outward. I acquire new knowledge. I can plan and carry out any undertaking. I can become a teacher and mentor to people who have recently believed and have just joined the church. And if I desire, I can train to become a pastor and engage in pastoral

care. In a word: I, I, and I—together with God in every spiritual sphere.

My outward growth impresses me so much with its size that I begin to realize I no longer have enough room within my expanded condition, and I start inventing something unique. I need new spiritual sensations and vivid experiences with which to amaze others. Simple reading, repeating what I already know, and reflecting on what was revealed to me long ago no longer satisfy me. I want something new, “delicious,” and unique.

Because I am surrounded by friends who are just as “broad,” we begin forming interest-based clans that are difficult for other fellow believers to enter. We become special in order to attract attention and amaze others with the achievements and discoveries we experience. The entire life of our church appears before us like an open book. We know all the distinctive features of our spiritual fellowship. We know the abilities of every church member and have a general idea of what can be expected from each person. Sometimes we gather to pick someone apart, discuss another person’s bad behavior, and prove to ourselves that we have attained something special on our spiritual journey and that we have so many opportunities for ministry that it simply takes our breath away.

When we hear Christ’s warning that we are lukewarm and must not remain in this lukewarm condition for long, we generally agree with this rebuke because the Lord said it. And in order to rehabilitate ourselves somehow, we devise new forms of ministry through which we try to prove to God that we are hot.

But the Lord loves us too much to leave us stewing in our own juices, and in His love He creates a crisis and a certain darkness in the life of each of us to help us obtain something more important.

Each of us experiences a personal crisis that can be understood only by the one passing through it. No person can help me during this time or walk this path in my place.

I see the success I have at the stage of faith in which my entire beloved church remains. And I can return there at any time to continue doing what is ordinary and familiar. Spiritual darkness, although it brings me closer to Christ, does not offer any great prospects for public success.

I understand that I will have to continue onward alone, and I cannot even imagine what awaits me at the end. Unfortunately, we were not taught what we must grow into or what lofty goal we must attain.

I have the power to return to the place from which the Lord desires to lead me out, or to go where I do not know and attain what, in this darkness, I cannot even imagine.

No matter how much anyone may criticize Laodicea, it is quite successful in its ministry and in gaining new church members throughout the world. We already have proven evangelistic programs that illuminate the darkness and draw new people to Jesus. Our books destroy many stereotypes and teach people how to live correctly. We have been given the Spirit of Prophecy, and we know what awaits us at the end of time and exactly which events must take place before Jesus comes. We clearly see prophecies being fulfilled in the political world, and we understand the times. As a worldwide organization, we have reached such a level and such a scope of activity that no one can find any dark stain in the teachings of our church that would testify against us. We have the truth. Yet despite all this, we still remain God's sinful children who desperately need the Savior.

The most interesting thing is that, as a church and as God's people, we all grow in our faith to a certain stage of success, after which we can no longer continue growing together. Further spiritual growth takes place only on an individual basis. The church cannot experience a crisis of faith—it must believe, whatever the cost. In this sense, the church is the most stable social structure, enduring every political and economic crisis without changing anything in its teaching, even when pressure is placed upon it from outside.

But Christ addresses each Laodicean personally in order to lead him out of the lukewarm condition. A Laodicean is a person living in the Laodicean period who is a member of the Laodicean church.

Jesus gives the most solemn rebuke, in which He reveals the prospects of spiritual growth through a relationship with Himself and through accepting and putting into practice the counsel that unmistakably points to the acquisition of special heavenly blessings.

But we cannot obtain these blessings as a church because they are directed to me personally and are given in order to change my heart. And with this changed heart, I can adorn and transform any church and any spiritual community.

The message to Laodicea is directed toward my personal spiritual growth. It identifies me as an overcomer if I follow the counsel of the Faithful Witness and buy what He offers me.

Whether I want it or not, this message in Revelation 3:14-22 teaches me that I must grow and move into a new stage of my faith in order to attain that very love which can be bought only from Christ.

I may pass through this growth without understanding it and continually stumble over my ignorance. But how good it would have been if someone had told me about it earlier and instructed me.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Please read 2 Timothy 3:1-5; 1 Corinthians 8:1-3; 10:12; Romans 11:20; James 1:22-25; 3:13-18; Hebrews 5:12-14; 10:38-39.
2. What other Bible verses came to your mind?
3. What did you understand?
4. Has my ministry become an attempt to prove my usefulness to God?
5. Has my spiritual development become a cause of hidden pride?
6. Am I able to admit that I may be mistaken?

7. Am I seeking new spiritual experiences instead of deep fellowship with God?
8. Am I living on memories of past spiritual experiences instead of a present life with God?
9. Am I hiding behind ministry to avoid the need to change myself?
10. Why does Christ specifically counsel us to “buy” gold, white raiment, and eyesalve?
11. Am I willing to lose my former understanding of myself so that Christ may reveal something greater to me?
12. Why does Christ stand at the door and knock on the doors of those who consider themselves believers and have already entered into a trading relationship with Him?
13. Am I building my Christianity around myself?
14. Do I possess the love that can be bought only from Christ?

## The Dark Night of the Soul

Something dark happens in the life of every person—something he has never experienced before—and by nature we try in every possible way to avoid this event or drown it out with something good. But those who believe in Christ move steadily toward this moment and will not be able to avoid it. Sooner or later, everyone who comes to know God and grows in Him approaches such a condition. It is something like a dark forest through which I must pass. And the more light is poured into my life, the more likely it is that similar trials of my faith will soon begin and “knock me out of the rut” of my familiar experiences.

Perhaps this could be given another name, but I conditionally define this state as the dark night of the soul. I myself passed through this time without understanding what was happening to me. I felt very sorrowful and lonely, and I could only hold on to Christ by faith, rely on His assurances of love and faithfulness, and continue moving forward. I know many brothers and sisters who have also experienced something similar. And no one has avoided it.

But there is also one distinctive feature in this trial. When such an event enters my life, I can pass through it, or I can turn back and remain where everything is familiar and known, where it is light and everything is clear. The soul does not want to enter the fire; with every fiber of its being, it resists every trial.

At the very least, however, we need to know that such a trial takes place. If I know this and ask God to be with me and lead me through it, then when it comes, it will be easier for me to endure everything. Oh, how I wish someone had told me about this earlier. Forewarned is forearmed. In our school, we learn about many good things before they draw near. And they will come. Although everyone's trials and experiences are different, and our perceptions differ, there is only one path that all of us must travel, and it is very narrow. We have One Teacher, the curriculum is the same for everyone, and one textbook has been given to all of us for all ages.

When a tree is small, it is very easy to shape it and direct its growth. Unnecessary branches can be pruned, young branches can be bent in the right direction, and excess shoots and fruit can be removed so that they do not drain the tree's vital strength. But when the tree has grown, it is already formed, and what is unnecessary must simply be chopped or sawed off.

God leads His children as a people, but at the same time He conducts individual lessons with each person. He gives and brings to light the distinctive traits and gifts that belong to that person. And with the student's consent, the Lord develops these talents for service to others and for His glory.

Not everything is accessible to me, and I cannot become everything. But if I desire to master a particular field of study and devote time and mental effort to it, I will certainly learn something and discover something new for myself.

The dark night of the soul is that unusual condition into which I enter in the process of my spiritual growth. Sometimes it comes without any apparent reason, or the Lord may create a crisis in my life through illness, injury, some kind of attack, or something else. But I begin to understand that darkness has enveloped my life. Spiritually, I feel very unwell. I do not want to do anything, and every earthly undertaking loses its meaning. Yet I continue doing these things because I am accustomed to living this way, or because they simply must be done and there is no one to replace me. Fears, doubts, and disappointments arise. I begin to reevaluate my entire life and everything I possess, weighing it all and casting many things aside. It is difficult to describe exactly what is happening, but it is something like apathy and deep sorrow. My friends, who do not understand what is happening to me, begin trying to comfort me in their own way, but it does not help.

A person can leave such a condition by occupying himself with something useful and familiar. There are many such activities. And I can turn back, as many people do. Or I can continue forward, trusting the Lord and relying on His wisdom and His promises that He will always be with me.

It is like a revolution in the soul: I can no longer live in the old way, but I do not understand how to live in a new way. My previous experiences and knowledge have reached maturity and no longer bring the same joy they did at the beginning. They have become familiar, and I want to grow; I want to explore the spiritual world. A desire arises to enter deeply into the world of the Bible and immerse myself completely in new revelations.

And the Lord leads me to this time. The fire of trials is something I cannot avoid in my earthly life with God. It is the fire that brings spiritual pain and distress but does not kill. In earlier times, God allowed certain things to happen and did not hasten events. But now, what is taking place around me tells me that I should hurry; otherwise, I may be too late and miss something very important.

Why is the dark night of the soul necessary? I am made in such a way that when everything around me is rosy and sunny, I consider it the height of bliss and make myself comfortable in those circumstances. I do not plan difficult trials. If water were told that it must flow uphill, it would not make such a decision; it would search for low places to fill. In order for it to rise uphill, it needs outside help and special equipment, because water has no power within itself to accomplish this. In the same way, my growth is not an inherent quality of mine, but a process directed by God, Who places the laws of this development within me and sustains them when I begin to submit to them.

As I experience the night of the soul, I allow my heart to pass through a process of cleansing and rethinking many things. Sorrow, anxiety, fears, and other things torment my soul, and I begin to understand that I desperately need the God in Whom I already believe. But now I need Him as the One to Whom I can cling and hold fast. Turning back will offer me no future prospects; I will simply continue doing what I already know and know how to do, while the future lies in darkness. I do not understand what awaits me ahead, but that is precisely where the Lord draws me, and He does not leave me. I sense Him; I

believe that He is near. He is faithful to His promises, and they strengthen me, and I know that I will not remain alone. My relationship with Jesus becomes very personal and very close, for He alone understands me and truly supports me. And the Savior gives me confidence that there will be light ahead—bright light. There is something great and inaccessible there that I do not yet know.

I cry out day and night and believe that He hears me. My soul passes through the land of darkness.

The enemy of the soul tries to offer me his own solution to these experiences. He has doctors, pills, alcohol, entertainment, travel, a world of laughter and foolishness, and every kind of show. Or he simply says to me through those close to me, “Curse God, and die.” But this world does not interest me. God has laid a foundation in my heart, and I will build my house with God; I cannot do otherwise.

I remember the heroes of the Bible. All of them experienced something similar, and their experience of victory strengthens me.

Time passes, and I am still alive. Ahead, I see light—beautiful, new, and amazing light. I enter the next grade and understand that something new is being revealed to me, something I did not know before. I begin searching for depth. I seek it in truth and in relationships, and I find it. I have begun to view the world more seriously and have sifted much that was unnecessary from my soul. The purity of these revelations draws me. And it is so interesting! Suddenly, I realize in my heart how greatly I lack love, and I ask for it. I see the light, move toward it, and discover a new world.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Please read 2 Corinthians 1:8–10; 2:4; Philippians 3:12–14; Deuteronomy 4:30–31; Psalms 22:11; 25:16–18; 34:19; 39:2–3; 50:15; Ecclesiastes 1:18; Matthew 24:21–22; John 16:33; Romans 5:3–5; 1 Peter 1:6–9; Revelation 7:14.
2. Was anything new revealed to you?

3. Is the expression “the dark night of the soul” clear to you? Or do you have another definition for this condition?
4. Have you experienced something similar? If so, how did you emerge from it, and where did it lead you?
5. Can such trials be avoided?
6. Why is God not opposed to our experiencing tribulation in the world and in our spiritual growth?
7. What should I do if I have not yet experienced anything like what is described in this chapter? Should I prepare for it?
8. Can I create a time of sorrow for myself through my own sins?
9. Are mature Christians ever happy? Or is sorrow the lot of every believer?

## A Personal Crisis of Faith

As we study the psalms of David, it is not difficult to notice how he describes his experiences and the crises through which he passed during his spiritual growth. These revelations did not enter the Bible by accident, for they carry a message about what may take place in the heart of a believer when he is going through an experience or growing in his faith.

A crisis is when the old no longer satisfies you and sometimes even disappoints you, while the new is still unclear and remains a mystery. It is that moment in life when, in your understanding, everything becomes bad, when a certain turning point occurs in your mind and you have to resolve things in a new way. It is important to understand that although a crisis is a problem for the person passing through this stage of life, in its essence it opens new opportunities for further spiritual growth.

A crisis of faith is when doubts enter your life, along with disappointment in people and in God's silence; when the heart is surfeited with information that no longer satisfies, while the soul languishes in emptiness; when reading, fellowship, and prayer bring no joy; when you feel abandoned and do not know where to go.

A crisis of faith, also known as "the dark night of the soul," takes place in the life of every believer. This time is an important point at which values are reevaluated. One person may turn away from God and become a cynic and critic; another may return to his former condition of faith and continue living in the customary way. But someone else moves toward the unknown and removes from his life what has suddenly changed from something important into something secondary.

In His wisdom, the Lord has provided this time for each of us because a crisis reveals what my spiritual house is built upon and what materials it is made of.

The parable of the wise and foolish builders who built their houses upon rock and sand teaches that a crisis will certainly come. Whether I want it or not, my faith will certainly be tested.

The foundation of my faith may be built upon the authority of wise people, a particular tradition, the familiar pattern of church life, my feelings and emotions, or success and prosperity in spiritual life. In other words, favorable circumstances are created that help me grow spiritually very quickly.

But we live in a world where sin reigns, where the winds of every kind of false teaching rage, and where betrayal and deception are encountered at every step. All these things are directed toward depriving me of faith and destroying my soul. God does not create enticements and temptations for me, but He permits them in my life in order to teach me to resist this evil.

The crisis of my faith is not something unexpected to God, but a natural stage of growth which I will inevitably enter. The Lord knows that each of us will someday enter this condition of the soul, and He remains near so that He may pass through this dark forest together with us. If I understand that such crises are part of God's plan for my spiritual growth, it is easier for me to endure this time and see the ultimate goal of my journey, which God has defined as love from a pure heart.

The path of love always passes through many interesting crises. Before filling my vessel with His precious oil, the Lord desires to cleanse it of every impurity, and a crisis becomes the instrument through which this cleansing takes place very effectively and quickly.

My spiritual growth in faith opens my eyes to many sins of other people and to the hypocrisy of some ministers. The enemy of the soul will certainly try to use this to make me disappointed in my faith, whispering to me, "Look where you have ended up. There are nothing but sinners and hypocrites here." Then he instills in me indignation at such behavior and disappointment in people.

But my problem is also that I myself am no better than these people and am just as much a sinner. And the Message to Laodicea delivers the final blow by revealing that I am lukewarm and do not even know it.

For God, this is the long-awaited moment when He can move me to the next stage of my faith and help me understand myself, and then lead me to begin searching for true values and appreciating what I had never noticed before and did not even suspect existed.

I remember how my first love for God inspired me to devote the best of my time completely to searching for important truths. I remember the fire within me kindled by new revelations from God that inspired me to continue onward. During the first stage of spiritual growth, all these things were very important and occupied their proper place in my life.

But the Lord desires to give me greater light about His love and longs for this love to live within me. For this purpose, He immerses me in darkness and leaves a small window of Light that the darkness cannot overcome.

I continue searching for God in this darkness, but I do not find Him. I continue praying, but I feel emptiness. I continue reading the Bible, but I receive no new revelations. In this pitch darkness, I rely by faith on God's promises that are familiar to me and move toward the light, believing that the Lord is near.

But there is also a risk that in this darkness I will choose to enter the darkness of this world. Then it will be very difficult or impossible to find the way back.

During this crisis, many prefer to turn back and become teachers, theologians, preachers, and ministers for those who are still growing and have not yet reached the transitional stage of the crisis of faith.

But the Lord has designed a believer's transition into a closer relationship with Himself through such a spiritual crisis. Until I have experienced this darkness in my life, my heart will remain filled with many things that hinder my spiritual growth. Living

water must flow through my heart and bring it joy while cleansing it of every impurity. The fire of such trials burns away everything that can be burned, while leaving me alive and purified.

David described in detail in the psalms what was happening to him so that we could better understand what is happening to us. He was not ashamed to write about his disappointment, the emptiness around him, the betrayal of friends, and his indignation during this time. I believe that Jesus also experienced something similar, and in many psalms we can hear the very voice of Christ as He prays to His Heavenly Father about His experiences.

A crisis of faith is another new step toward spiritual growth. And all of us pass through this dark forest. But if I do not know the goal to which the Lord desires to lead me, I risk becoming lost in the dark forest and failing to grow any further.

Happiness, friendship, and agape love in close fellowship with Christ—these are the next steps of my spiritual growth. I do not pass through them together with my beloved brothers and sisters, but in complete solitude, holding the hand of Jesus by faith.

The attainment of love, happiness, friendship, and perfection in love takes place not amid noisy church fellowship, but in the depths of my heart, during hours of struggle and decisive choice, when everything around me is collapsing and I choose love, happiness, and friendliness.

The path to love is a path on which very few people understand and support you. It is when you are surrounded by those you love, but they cannot respond to you in the same way because they have not yet grown to that point and do not understand what you are experiencing.

But this is the path of an overcomer, and it is worth finding and walking upon it.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Please read Deuteronomy 8:2; Psalms 22:1; 42:5; 73:26; 88:18; Job 13:13; Habakkuk 3:17-18; Isaiah 40:31; 50:10; 1 Peter 1:6-7; Romans 5:3-5; 2 Corinthians 5:7.
2. What other Bible verses came to your mind?
3. What did you understand?
4. Why do some people turn away from God after their faith has been tested?
5. Are we able to follow Christ alone?
6. What do trials reveal about our hearts?
7. What keeps us close to God during a crisis?
8. Why are many people afraid of spiritual depth?
9. Why does the path of love pass through spiritual loneliness?
10. Why does God destroy our former ideas about faith?
11. Why do many people turn back and refuse to grow because they are frightened by the unknown?
12. Are we trying to run away from what the Lord desires to lead us through?
13. Can true love be born without suffering and trials?
14. Why do many people fail to understand those who are moving ahead of them in spiritual growth?
15. Was Jesus understood by His contemporaries?

## **My Crisis of Faith**

A crisis of faith is something every believer will inevitably encounter upon reaching a certain stage of growth. A crisis is inevitable, just as the trials of our faith are inevitable. We live in a world where a spiritual war is taking place—a war that does not stop for a single second and has no intention of ending. We cannot remain neutral in this war; through our choice or our unbelief, we take one side or the other.

I came to believe in God in 1993, and after walking with God for three months, I moved permanently from Russia to Germany. At that time, I was not a member of any church and did not belong to any denomination. I simply believed in Jesus and walked with Him, studied the Bible, and read whatever spiritual literature came into my hands.

A book titled *The Great Controversy* helped me greatly. It describes the spiritual war between good and evil and, with prophetic insight, tells of Christ's victory and what awaits all the saved at the end of history. Through this book, I understood that God has a special people and a special church called the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The appearance of this church on the world stage is a fulfillment of the prophecies in Revelation 12:14-17. What distinguishes this denomination from all other movements is that the Lord entrusted it with the fullness of truth and gave it the gift of the Spirit of Prophecy, which helps preserve worldwide unity in doctrine and in the understanding of the Bible.

I searched for this church in Germany, where I had moved with my wife. After finding local congregations, I began searching there for friends. I had an immense thirst for fellowship with believers who were of the same spirit, and the Lord gave me these people.

In 1995, I received water baptism in this church and became a full member. My spiritual growth moved from one stage to another. I searched for spiritual mentors, but because I did not find them among people, I found them in spiritual books, which

at that time began to be published actively and delighted my heart with an abundance of truth.

My church life in Germany did not have much variety. For years I attended church meetings, rendered unto God the things that are God's and unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and did not understand what I should do next. But the knowledge that I was in the right church kept me from making any radical changes.

I reached the stage of faith at which the entire church remained, and I was already able to be a teacher and mentor to other people who came to our church. If I had entered a theological seminary at that time, I could even have become the pastor of a congregation.

Because I was constantly searching for truth and was a very enterprising person, the Lord used this ability to carry out certain forms of ministry on the internet. But without understanding what I was growing toward or what awaited me ahead, I began to wonder what was happening in my spiritual life and why the church was not moving anywhere.

In 2003, I met people who were actively engaged in missionary work while also actively opposing the lawlessness they saw in God's church. I joined this movement and became an active member of the opposition who was constantly dissatisfied with something. Yet at the same time, I remained a member of my congregation and maintained a close relationship with Christ.

As I saw the sins of my fellow believers and received information from around the world about what was taking place in our worldwide church, I began to become disappointed in people. At the same time, however, I understood that the church's teaching was correct and that I should not leave it, although my new friends indirectly urged me to do so. But something restrained me from within, and I remained a nominal member who did nothing to support his church but only introduced confusion and disagreement.

Against the background of these events, I began to experience what is called a crisis of faith. Traditional Sabbath sermons no

longer satisfied me. The books I studied gave me no new revelations, and everything that had once brought me joy and inspired me in church life ceased to do so. Out of habit, I simply continued attending Sabbath meetings and did not understand where I was going amid this monotony that lasted for years.

When I openly spoke out against the sins of certain ministers in our church, there were always people who supported me in my boldness and others who considered me a very dangerous brother but could do nothing about me because I was telling the truth. But this way of life does not satisfy the soul. If I see only the sins of other people, it does not bring joy to the heart or draw me closer to God, because we are all sinful people.

My only comfort during this time was reading *The Desire of Ages* about the life of Jesus. In it, I saw an example to follow and learned to become like my Savior.

By 2008, my spiritual crisis had become so deep that I told all my friends that I was now walking through some kind of dark forest and did not know where I was going. Yet I continued attending church services and remained in close fellowship with the opposition movement, which had also ceased to satisfy my soul.

Throughout all this spiritual darkness through which I was passing, I was greatly helped by my habit of speaking with Jesus whenever I was alone. I did not hear His voice, receive any new revelations, or see any bright blessings in my life. But I held on to Him by faith with all my strength and told Him everything that was taking place in my heart, somehow understanding that He was near and listening to me, yet for some reason remained silent.

The Lord's silence did not trouble me. I understood that He had some plan for me that I did not know. During this time, many of my values and unnecessary spiritual things collapsed within my mind. I became disappointed in what had previously attracted and inspired me. The world never enticed me with its temptations, yet I lived in constant debt, which forced me to work hard with my hands.

Unfortunately, at that time there was no one who could tell me that I was passing through the most important stage of my faith. How much easier it would have been to struggle with myself if someone had told me that this was not the end, but a new stage in my spiritual growth. But I did not know this and wandered in darkness for years without knowing where I would arrive.

In 2009, the Lord sent light into my life concerning medical missionary work, which at that time was developing actively in Ukraine. I heard something new for myself and began studying this field, which was very close to my heart.

By the summer of that year, I had reached a condition in which my spiritual crisis came to its peak, and every kind of crisis that could possibly occur in a person's life entered mine. The only area in which I had no crisis was my relationship with Jesus, Whom I did not hear but with Whom I shared all my problems and experiences.

At that very moment, when the entire world had collapsed in my eyes, I somehow understood that I did not have love—the very agape love about which the Bible writes so much. I thirsted for it so deeply that it seemed I would die if I did not receive this blessing from Heaven. And the Lord heard my request and answered the cry of my soul. He revealed the new commandment to me and began teaching me to keep it.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Please read Deuteronomy 8:2-5; Job 23:10; Psalms 27:13-14; 42:5; 88:18; Isaiah 50:10; Jeremiah 29:11-13; Lamentations 3:25-26; Zechariah 13:9.
2. What other Bible verses came to your mind?
3. What did you understand?
4. What happens to faith when the Lord remains silent for a long time?
5. Do I continue seeking God when I no longer feel spiritual joy?

6. Have I begun noticing the sins of other people more than the condition of my own heart? How do I respond to the imperfections of the believers around me?
7. What happens to the soul when spiritual life becomes monotonous?
8. Am I trying to hide my inner emptiness behind active ministry?
9. Do I understand how deeply I need God's love?
10. What do I do when familiar spiritual things no longer give me spiritual satisfaction?
11. Am I trying to seek new revelations or sensations instead of seeking Christ Himself?
12. Have I lost the ability to rejoice in simple fellowship with God?
13. Do I believe that a spiritual crisis can become the beginning of a new stage of growth?
14. Can I honestly say that, more than anything else in the world, I thirst for the love of Christ?

## Life After the Crisis

It would not be entirely right to speak only about the problems experienced during a spiritual crisis. Although such a crisis takes place in the life of every believer and may last for years for some, it is not part of God's plan for us to remain in this condition for life. Unfortunately, someone's spiritual growth may become stuck precisely in this phase, from which the person has no intention of emerging because he finds certain advantages in this condition. Some people enjoy this kind of suffering and may regard it as a cross they must carry throughout their lives. But this is an illusion; it is not God's will.

The Lord desires to see us as overcomers, with the banner of love waving above our heads, a happy spirit within us, and friendly relationships among us.

When I lived through my spiritual crisis, I cannot say that I was especially depressed or crushed, because life around me continued: I fellowshiped with friends, raised my daughter, and fulfilled all kinds of family and church responsibilities. But amid all this, my spirit was passing through a dark forest and sifting through every kind of earthly and spiritual value, which was ceasing to be valuable in my eyes. The personal gold of my soul was being purified from impurities.

I do not know why I began asking God for love—that very eternal agape love—but at a certain point in my crisis, I understood that I did not possess it and that without it I would simply perish in this world. My knowledge had no meaning if it was not mixed with love.

As usual, I turned to God with this new thirst for His love, expecting Him to remain silent as He always had. But in this case, I understood that the Lord answered my prayer immediately. Interesting thoughts began entering my mind, directing my understanding toward the path of love and inspiring me to take certain specific actions. My entire life appeared before me in an unattractive light, and the Lord showed me how much work He would have to accomplish in my

heart, which did not know how to love but was desperately trying to do so.

I was overjoyed by this turn of events. I describe it this way: it was as though something switched within my mind, and a very bright light of heavenly origin began to shine. Together with this light, a special joy entered my life, and it has not left me to this day. I understood something very important for myself: now I would be able to love everyone truly because God had begun to endow me with this heavenly treasure.

From that time onward, all my prayers and conversations with God centered on the love I so desperately wanted to possess. I no longer merely asked for it; I thirsted for it and pleaded with my Savior for it with special persistence, asking for wisdom in applying this new quality of the soul.

I cannot say that I became a loving person in a single moment, because my carnal nature was accustomed to behaving in the usual way in certain situations. All of this caused me much disappointment in myself. But I understood that love must prevail in all these trials and have the final word and the final period, after which a new approach to a familiar situation begins.

My journey inward ended with a new phase of transition to the stage of moving outward. I greatly desired to share the new light and revelations that filled my heart. Every day, the Lord revealed to me the advantages of love and created situations in which it could be applied in practice. I learned to place love into everything I did, understanding that this approach is the most correct way of life for a loving person.

There were so many revelations from God that I began to forget them and could not retain in my memory all these blessings of a new understanding of agape love. I constantly shared my revelations with all my friends. They rejoiced for me, but they did not understand what was happening to me or what I wanted from them. I wanted to speak about love, share it, and bring it into our relationships. I longed to meet another person as strange as my brothers and sisters considered me to be.

I did not understand that someone might fail to understand me in my love. After all, I love, and it comes from my heart and from my whole soul. I am happy at all times.

I am friendly, and in this friendship I search for new friends so that I may learn to love them truly and make their lives more beautiful. All this filled me so completely that every conversation I had was about love and how wonderful it is.

It seemed to me that the sun shining in my soul also shone upon other people, and that they could freely share the joys of their lives with me and I would understand them. But something strange happened. The more love I showed and the more I spoke about it, the more hostility I encountered toward me. People began to consider me a hypocrite and a somewhat strange person, and I had to restrain myself when my heart was overflowing with joy and love.

I did not understand why the world hates loving people so much. I was called a liar, a fanatic, and an actor. I was assured that all this would pass and that I would reveal the true repulsive face of the carnal person who lives in each of us. But my love did not pass away, because each time I asked God for it and received it to resolve my difficult tasks and questions.

The Bible's stories and accounts of how people are persecuted, accused, pursued, and killed because of love helped me greatly. Through His life, Jesus showed me what those who carry love in their hearts experience and what awaits them at the end of life. I understood that the cross is the highest reward this world gives to a loving person. Understanding that I could not avoid such a culmination, I accepted this revelation and carry it in my heart as a cherished dream—to receive such a reward for my love.

I also understand that the life of a loving person is in God's hands, from which no one can snatch me away.

The path of love and friendship is the most beautiful path of a happy life that God has prepared for us. There is nothing more beautiful in this vain earthly life than to love, to thirst for this love, and to receive it from God in order to pass it on.

I cannot say that no more crises ever occurred in my life after this. They came and were resolved in one way or another, but my experiences were no longer as difficult as they had been when I wandered through the dark forest for years. Love resolves every crisis very easily, and it guards my heart from empty anxieties. In every new crisis, I ask myself the most important questions: "Do I possess love?" and "Has Christ left me?" And after receiving an affirmative answer from the Lord through His presence in my life and within me, I calmly endure every trial.

At the end of time, in one way or another, all those who believe in Christ must become overcomers whom the world will sentence to death and attempt to carry out this sentence against. When I step onto the path of faith in Jesus, I come under the death sentence of the world and Satan, who will desire to carry out this verdict. I do not know to what extent the Lord will permit all of this to be fulfilled in my life, but I am prepared for the fact that anything can be expected from the world.

The stages of spiritual growth in a personal relationship with Christ are filled with special meaning and a happy spirit, which can be experienced only by passing through this time with love.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Please read 1 Corinthians 13:1-3; John 13:34-35; 16:33; 1 Peter 1:6-7; Colossians 3:14; 1 John 3:14; 4:7-8, 16; Ephesians 4:15.
2. What other Bible verses came to your mind?
3. What did you understand?
4. Have you asked God for genuine agape love, or are you satisfied merely with knowledge about it?
5. Is the joy of salvation present in your heart, or has faith become a burdensome obligation?
6. What values lost their meaning for you during spiritual trials?
7. Do people try to hide their inner emptiness behind church activity?

8. How do you respond when your love is mistaken for hypocrisy?
9. Are you willing to continue loving even when you receive no love in return?
10. When was the last time you wept before God because of the lack of love in your heart?
11. Are you afraid of appearing to be a “strange person” because of love and kindness?
12. Do you harbor hidden resentment toward God because of the crises you have experienced?
13. What changed in your relationships with people after your encounter with God’s love?
14. Do you desire to make the lives of other people brighter and more joyful?

## A Journey Within Myself

Life with God brings me into a community of like-minded people who share my convictions, teach me, influence me, and come under my influence. Together, we are called the church of Christ. We are God's people, a movement founded by God, and He leads His people, preserves us, and blesses us.

If the Lord showed me my entire journey with Him from beginning to end, I would be greatly surprised to discover that the darkest periods of my life, designed by God, were the greatest blessings for me.

The church of Christ is at the third stage of faith, and it does not move beyond it. But God calls each person who has reached a certain point of growth to continue moving higher individually.

A person moves from experience and knowledge to relationships and the study of himself. God desires to have a closer personal connection with each of us. He dreams of each of us as a friend—as someone who will seek not only blessings from Him but will desire to have a close and deep relationship with Him, seeking to understand Who the Lord is, how near He is, and how I can know Him personally.

When I am occupied with ministry, I simply have no time for such a relationship. I must arrange everything, organize everything, and visit everyone. My planner is completely filled with plans and events. At the same time, I must also earn a living, make my home comfortable, and do many other things. But God immerses me in darkness and says, "Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10).

And I move to the next stage of faith.

### 4. A Journey Within Myself.

How painful it was to pass through the darkness. But after emerging from it, I understood that during this period I had to reevaluate many things, reconsider my life, and discover that I have a heart which I do not yet know. I am a distinct person; I

am a human being born for Eternal life with Christ. I am unique and unknown even to myself. The Lord gives me so many talents and abilities, but I become lost amid all of them and desire first to understand who I am.

I want to understand the people around me, how close they are to me, and whether I can have deeper relationships with them. I have many questions for God. I even have complaints about various situations, and I begin expressing them directly in my prayers and in simple fellowship with the Lord. Although I do not hear a literal answer, I receive instruction in another way. Sometimes I understand that I do not need an answer as much as I need the One Who answers. I thirst so deeply for this closeness with God, with my Savior. I feel so good when He is near. I consult Him about every little thing and can come to Him in prayer at any time.

At the same time, I do not turn my relationship with God into a general rule for everyone. It is personal, and at this stage each person's relationship is formed in its own way, not as mine is. But the principle is always the same: I thirst for a closer relationship.

The invisible God becomes even closer to me, and at the same time I seek human closeness. I would like to have a spiritual mentor on this path as well. I so greatly desire to find explanations and interpretations for all my questions of "why" and "how." What a joy it is to listen to and read the works of those who have traveled this path and share their experiences.

In the light of these new experiences, my view of ministry and fellowship with people begins to change. I see the depth and meaning of God's providence for His people. I see that we are a family—all different, with different positions and understandings—yet we have been brought together to influence, educate, support, and bless one another. Many of us like each other so much that we even start families and have children, thereby adding to our community.

Amid this diversity, I search for someone with whom I can have a very close friendship, so that I may freely share what I am

experiencing and also learn from my friend what he is going through. Not everyone opens up to this kind of fellowship, and sometimes I remain completely alone among friends who keep their hearts closed. Many people simply do not understand me. What do I need?

But in Jesus, I find that very close Friend Who will always understand and support me. And He conducts a dialogue with me very skillfully. I do not hear His voice, but my heart heeds His instruction and His Spirit. It is so interesting! I come to know the deep things of God and marvel at new discoveries.

I greatly enjoy being friendly, but in friendship I desire very close relationships. I am ready to trust another person so that I may hear wise instruction and correction from him. But everyone is occupied with himself—and so am I.

Sometimes my questions bewilder many people, and I see that not everyone is ready for the kind of interaction I offer. But this does not trouble me, because I was once the same way, and I know how difficult it is to open up to a friend who may suddenly betray or deceive you.

But I move forward by faith. And I have heard that the Bible says something about love. How good it would be to come to know this quality of the soul as well and bring it into our relationships. That would be wonderful! But for now, I am exploring my inner world, discovering new values, and establishing the right priorities. Life continues. And we grow.

I see many of my friends approach the trials through which I have passed, and they are afraid to enter this darkness. How can I help them? I have not yet understood myself. And all of this is painful. But if it is postponed until later, it will be even more painful—or it may never happen.

But no matter what stage my friends and those close to me may become stuck at, as long as they remain in God's family and in the body of Christ, they should not fear perishing. The Lord accepted them not in order to reject them, but to preserve them from evil and prepare them for Eternity.

I have friends whose child has a disability and has very limited intellectual development. But his parents love him deeply and care for him tenderly. They have no intention of killing this little person. Instead, they arrange their home life so that this child will feel safe and comfortable within his family. He remains their beloved son, with whom they plan to spend all Eternity despite the fact that he is not like other people. How much greater the Lord is in His love for us! And how often we distort His love by attributing our human ideas and ambitions to God.

But as I come to know God more closely, I understand that He is Love.

And the Lord cooperates with me in my self-discovery and my journey within myself. I discover so many new characteristics and come to understand how wonderfully I am made and how beautiful the Lord is within my heart. As I study myself, I see everywhere the hand of God creating a new person. My new heart is also very unique. It is not a heart of stone but a heart of flesh, and upon it are visible the traces of God's finger, which is writing a new story of my life and crossing out everything old and unclean.

Sometimes it is very painful to discover filth within myself, but I rejoice that when I find this impurity, I remove it with God's help, and it is no longer there.

How greatly I need friends! But if I do not have them, I will make them my friends by giving myself to them. I must begin with what is in my hands and within my power.

I have also heard that God has a certain special love for me, one that always exists and never ends. How wonderful it would be to possess it continually! How much good could be done in such a condition of the soul! I should study this subject too, but first I will understand myself.

Yes, there is no way forward without love.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What did you understand? Is what we are studying clear to you?

2. Are you ready for changes in your life? Are you frightened by what awaits you in the future?
3. If I decide to remain at the stage where I am now, will this be a denial of Christ and an act of disobedience?
4. How can I determine where I am now among the stages of faith?
5. Why does God need such a long process for my spiritual formation?
6. Do you have a different understanding of God's path for personal development? Please share it if you do.
7. How does God respond to my cries, complaints, grievances, and accusations against Him? Do I come under a curse if I behave this way?
8. Does God continue to love me if I become stuck in my development or stubbornly refuse to move forward through darkness and fire?
9. What should I do to accelerate my spiritual growth?
10. Please read Psalm 46:10; Ephesians 4:13; 2 Peter 3:17-18; Job 38:25-27; Luke 1:80; 2:40; 2 Corinthians 10:15-18; Colossians 1:5-6; 2 Thessalonians 1-3.

## My Journey Inward

Every spiritual crisis provides a wonderful opportunity to examine one's heart. When I become disappointed in something, my values are reevaluated, and everything unnecessary that hinders my spiritual growth is cast aside. The heart may also become hardened, causing me to choose the path of darkness. As I walk along it, I will not see the pits and chasms of sin into which I will inevitably fall.

Whether I want it or not, at a certain point the monotony of spiritual life begins to grow tiresome. What once inspired me, amazed me, and drew me eventually becomes ordinary and natural, and the joyful experiences that had been an immense stimulus for my spiritual growth are no longer present.

Many things and rituals become ordinary practices that I perform out of habit without even thinking about their deeper meaning. Yet I greatly desire to see meaning in everything, and if I cannot see it, I have to invent it in order somehow to justify my rituals and traditional actions.

It would be incorrect to say that I produce this condition within myself. Every kind of growth follows a certain pattern and has a particular next stage of development. The Lord has provided for us to encounter various obstacles and trials along our path as we grow spiritually, so that through them we may rise higher.

My perception and understanding of what is happening help me analyze many things that I did not consider at first and simply accepted with simplicity of heart. But time passes, and I begin asking myself questions: Why is it this way? What is it for? Can it be done differently? And many others. I want clear and reasonable answers to all my questions of "why," because I am surrounded by people like me who may be asking similar questions but are afraid to speak them aloud. And I want to find within myself the answers to everything that comes crashing into my mind.

God does not desire us to serve Him out of fear, from a sense of duty, or because everyone else does so. He is open to being

known and to every question. The Lord knows what troubles me and what questions I desire to ask Him. He already knew and heard all my complaints against Him and against myself before I was born. But all these experiences are new to me, and they are necessary so that I may mature in a new understanding of truth and of myself.

Having passed through the dark night of my soul, I rejoice that the Lord does not abandon His children during this gloomy time in their lives, but preserves them from evil according to His Word. I understand that in order to follow Christ, I must understand myself, reveal my true motives and genuine desires, determine my next goal, and in all of this have a pure heart and a clear conscience before God.

During this time, the Lord reveals to me my particular sins, which I had not previously considered to be sins. God's Spirit helps me identify true values and give them first place. During this time, I greatly desire to fellowship with serious and wise people who can give me their answers to the questions that interest me. Although I have already been trained to discern good and evil, new trials help me see this evil within myself, and I do not want to live with such a neighbor.

Although many such thoughts and experiences can be painful, overall they bring me joy because during this time the right things are put in their proper places. With God's help, I search through my heart, discover many valuable things, and see a great deal of refuse from which the Lord gladly delivers me when I ask Him. And the Lord Himself sets His hand to the work in order to help me pass through this entire fascinating period of self-examination.

During this time, many people do not understand me. My conversations about the depths of self-examination bewilder many of my friends because they are not accustomed to discussing such subjects and do not understand what is happening if they have not experienced a similar crisis themselves. During this time, I want to be alone more often and spend time in reflection and prayer.

If you see people like this who withdraw into themselves, perhaps they are experiencing something similar so that afterward they may soar higher and draw closer to God—or enter the darkness and justify themselves by accusing everyone who previously surrounded them.

We see and notice the sins of other people very clearly, and these sins can become a stumbling block to those who have not become established in Christ but have sought God in friendship or in fellowship with believers like themselves.

Reflecting on myself helps expose such problems of the soul and put all these things in their proper place in my life—or discard the idea of Christianity as something incomprehensible.

In these reflections, I discover for myself the true beauty of Christ's character, become aware of His presence, and believe that He has not left me because He promised He would not. In some amazing way, the Lord helps me understand that He is near, that He holds me by my right hand, and that He walks this path together with me. Such faith and understanding greatly inspire me and keep me from making radical mistakes.

In my reflections about myself, I share with Jesus everything that is in my heart. I learn to entrust Him first with my small secrets and then with my great ones. It brings me great joy to understand and realize that the Lord listens to me and is deeply interested in what is happening to me. He has already traveled this path and knows what we feel during such a time.

As I speak with Him about myself, I cannot help realizing how close the Lord is to me during this time. In this closeness, I prepare myself to let my Savior into the most intimate secrets of my soul. I tell Him about my fears, disappointments, experiences, and the unknown that frightens me. The Lord listens and helps me understand that He knows me very well and will never abandon me in all these trials. He desires to assure me that I should not be afraid, but should hold firmly to His hand and move forward boldly.

In the Bible, in the book of Psalms, there are many verses written by people who journeyed within themselves and tried to

understand where they could find a way out. And they found it in the Lord. Something similar happened in my life. The Lord became my hope and the answer in which I received comfort, strength, and hope.

When I began asking God for agape love—that very eternal love of God which I did not possess—my journey within myself became especially interesting. The Lord revealed many things to me in the light of love, and I clearly understood what a corrupt egoist I was while still bearing the name of Christ. Although such revelations about myself caused me great discomfort, I rejoiced that through them a special cleansing of my heart and life was taking place.

Now, as I remember all of this, I understand how important every period is in spiritual growth. We should not be afraid of it. But when a person does not know that everything happening to him is under God's authority and within His will, he may stop and turn back, never again planning to grow further, remaining satisfied with the success already attained—or, even worse, leaving God's church or walking his own path alone.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Please read Psalms 139:23-24; Jeremiah 17:9-10; Lamentations 3:40; 2 Corinthians 13:5; Hebrews 4:12-13; Psalms 34:18; 51:10; 73:21-26; 119:59; Philippians 1:6.
2. What other Bible verses came to your mind?
3. What did you understand?
4. When was the last time you honestly examined your heart before God?
5. Are there questions in your life that you are afraid to ask yourself?
6. Has your faith turned into a habitual religious ritual?
7. What will happen to your faith if the believers around you disappoint you?
8. Are you escaping from self-examination through constant busyness?
9. Do you desire to change, or are you already satisfied with yourself?

10. Do you believe that the Lord is near even when you do not feel it?
11. Are you ready to accept the truth about yourself, no matter how painful it may be?
12. Do you think there is another path for spiritual growth?
13. Should you be afraid of this period if it has not yet begun in your life?
14. Does knowing about the trials ahead give me any advantage in overcoming them?

## The Risk of Turning Back

The growth of every plant follows a certain pattern. By studying it, we can understand how much time each species requires to reach its highest development and bear abundant fruit. By studying this subject, we can accelerate this growth or help our plants produce as much fruit as possible. Many different fertilizers have been invented and many processes discovered for this purpose. We do not know how fruit develops and ripens. But we can observe it and even identify a certain sequence. Yet it is not within our power to give plants growth.

Spiritual growth differs from the growth of plants in that any one of us can stop growing forever. We can also return to a previous stage and continue living a full life there. God cannot force us to grow, but He can create certain conditions for this growth and extend His invitation to continue onward and rise higher. He does not insist that I respond to this voice, but He always remains near, encouraging me through His inspiration and sending into my life people who have traveled this path and can explain what is happening to me.

Ignorance of all these spiritual processes can have disastrous consequences for me if I consider such a path abnormal and begin to become disappointed in what is happening to me. We do not become better as we grow spiritually. But we move to a special level of relationship with God, where He becomes closer to us than He was before.

The more I grow in Christ and in my faith, the more I understand how sinful I am and how greatly I need the Savior at every step of my life. Even when I attain righteousness in the eyes of Heaven, I will not consider myself righteous, because I see another law in my members that pulls me downward and compels me continually to make important decisions and resist every kind of temptation that crashes into my life.

But spiritual growth is not my invention; it is God's plan for each of us. At the right time, He leads us to the next steps and invites us to step higher so that, at this new height, I may leave

behind everything that pulls me downward and hinders my further growth. We do not invent stages of faith and stages of growth for ourselves. The Lord knows when and how to create the next crisis in our lives in order to destroy all the dangerous stereotypes that can become a trap for us and cast us into the abyss of lawlessness.

The Lord permits us, in one way or another, to experience difficult times—times of darkness and struggle. And He teaches us in advance to trust Him in simple things and in every little detail during this dark time. Blessed is the one who recognizes and understands the constancy of God's presence in his life.

If someone believes that the highest stage of love is only for specially chosen people who somehow rise above us in their growth, he does not understand the essence of spiritual growth. Spiritual growth places upon me a greater responsibility before God for the light I have received and for living in that light than rests upon those to whom something has not yet been revealed. And this responsibility remains with me until death.

I will give an account for every ray of light the Lord sent into my life. I will be shown when and at what moment I took hold of the helping hand extended to me, and when I turned my back on God and refused to continue into the darkness to which He gently invited me.

The Lord knows how disobedient and stubborn we can be, how much we love comfort, and how difficult it sometimes is to persuade us to take the next step. Therefore, He does not leave us alone, even when we prefer to turn back, live in familiar surroundings, and engage in our ordinary ministry.

Spiritual growth is not a matter of leaving sin or remaining in it, but rather of gaining a deeper understanding of God's character and allowing God to restore that very character within me—the likeness of Christ.

In this transformation, the Lord encounters many obstacles in my human nature: my sins, my will, my stereotypes, and my distorted understanding of truth.

All these things can slow my growth or kill me spiritually if I refuse to accept help and walk the path along which God plans to lead me.

If we look at the church as a whole and decide to evaluate the lives of those who have been in the church since childhood—especially for several generations—or who hold some high administrative position, we may gain the impression that the stages of faith are something invented by people who have nothing better to do. But this is not so.

Any position I hold in a spiritual organization, any ministry I perform, or any office I occupy in the church does not mean that, in order to do this work, I had to grow spiritually to the highest stage of faith. I may be an excellent evangelist, preacher, or some other kind of minister, yet at the same time hold on to the stage of success with all my strength and under no circumstances enter the darkness into which the Lord invites me.

I may memorize the entire Bible, but this will not add to my spiritual growth. I may have a special talent for bringing new people into the church, teaching Sabbath School lessons, or creating a special missionary project. But such things do not tell God that I have grown spiritually. I am simply using the opportunities available to me correctly and trying through all of this to carry out God's work.

I may become a popular Christian blogger and gather tens of thousands of followers who admire my ability to speak beautifully about spiritual matters and convince people that the teaching of our church is true. But this will not raise me even a millimeter higher in spiritual growth, because God has established His own criteria for growth by which He seeks to nurture each of us.

At the same time, I may be an ordinary church member with an insignificant ministry, yet experience one crisis after another, hold firmly to the hand of Jesus, and overcome the next obstacle together with Him. My relationship with God is sometimes invisible to other people, and the older I become in Christ, the

fewer people understand me. But this situation does not frighten me. I know in Whom I have believed and Who is leading me.

When hearing about the stages of faith, any uninformed person can invent his own criteria for evaluating the spiritual growth of other people, as well as his own. I may not fit his ideas of growth and, accordingly, may not be accepted by him in my statements and reflections about it.

My lack of understanding of where the Lord is leading me and where I must ultimately arrive may cause me to fear the trials ahead. And the enemy of the soul will certainly seek to use this vulnerability to stop my growth and persuade me to return to the place where everything is clear and wonderful.

We can clearly see similar stages of growth in the life of the patriarch Abraham. When God called him to go, Abraham believed that the Lord was calling him to follow this path and would never leave him. Yet the choice and consent always remain within a person's power.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Please read Genesis 12:1; Deuteronomy 8:2; Psalm 73:23-24; Proverbs 3:5-6; Ecclesiastes 7:8; Isaiah 30:21; 42:16; Jeremiah 6:16; Zechariah 4:6; Romans 8:14; 12:2; 1 Corinthians 3:6-7.
2. What other Bible verses came to your mind?
3. What did you understand?
4. Do you realize that spiritual growth may be accompanied by inner crises and struggles?
5. Are you ready, like Abraham, to follow God even when you do not understand His ways?
6. What is more important to you: spiritual comfort or spiritual growth?
7. How do you respond to spiritual crises—with trust or with murmuring?
8. What is hindering your spiritual growth the most today?
9. Is it possible for a believer to hide from God in ministry?
10. Are you able to hear God's voice amid the busyness of life?

11. Are you ready to acknowledge your spiritual weakness before God?
12. What happens to you when God destroys your familiar ideas?
13. Are you trying to appear more spiritually mature than you truly are?
14. Do you allow God to lead you where you do not want to go?

## A Longing for a Close Friend

Emerging from the dark night of the soul partially resolves my inner crisis, but it does not answer all my questions. The journey within myself leads me to a special longing for friendship. Simple greetings and handshakes no longer satisfy me. I need someone with whom I can calmly discuss spiritual matters, share my new revelations, and speak about the questions that concern me. Although I do all this with Jesus, and He strengthens me wonderfully and gives me His blessing, I understand that I also need a living person with whom I can have close spiritual fellowship.

My longing for friendship is so great that I see a potential friend in every brother or sister and try to build bridges of communication. But not everyone understands or accepts me. To some, my sincere interest seems strange, and they distance themselves from me just in case. I understand that there is something unusual about my behavior, but I cannot help it, because my soul longs for a close friend. My close friend is someone to whom I can reveal my innermost secrets, who is ready to listen without condemning me, and who will be glad to see and hear me. In Jesus I have found such a Friend. He is ready to listen to me around the clock and to remain near me. Such an attitude moves me to abide in constant prayer and fellowship with Christ when I am alone or when questions arise that I urgently need to discuss with Him. He is very attentive and tactful, and such fellowship is pleasing to Him.

But I cannot speak to God about my love for Him if I do not have a beloved friend like myself. And it seems to me that this longing for friendship is given by God so that I may properly develop within myself those Divine qualities of the soul with which the Lord endows me in my spiritual growth. I cannot escape from my neighbors. The Lord does not call me to lead an ascetic life and live completely alone in the wilderness. He places me in society and teaches me, in precisely such surroundings, to develop and reveal all the good qualities of His character with which He endows me.

The longing to have a friend is a special experience that nothing in this world can satisfy except a true friend. Naturally, my search is directed first of all toward those close to me who are members of my congregation or whom I have known for a long time. But because many of them already know me well and do not believe in my spiritual changes, they remember the experience of past mistakes and awkward incidents in our relationships and, just in case, do not let me come too close. This distance may also be caused by personal selfishness and dislike for me, which I likewise cannot change.

As a result, I decide to make new friends who will know me from the moment I offer them my friendship. I take uncertain steps, pray, worry, and remember the sayings of the wise of this world that the older one becomes, the harder it is to make new friends. Yet I still take the risk and, breaking all the rules, find new friends with whom I begin to build relationships.

I very much want to learn the story of friendship not from someone else's experience but from my own. Together with Jesus, I plan and develop ways of making friends that are new to me. If the Bible teaches that "a man that hath friends must shew himself friendly," I believe that this is possible in my life as well. I ask Jesus to teach me friendliness. Knowing that friendship is not love, but understanding that love without friendship is impossible, I learn to be a friend. I am deeply interested in understanding the laws and principles of friendship and in being the kind of true friend who will not be crossed out of someone's life or treated with neglect. Oh, if only someone had given me suitable literature during those days of searching and fervent prayer! Why did the Lord not send a mentor into my life who could have told me about the laws of friendliness and taught me this science? Instead, I have to be a pioneer for myself and gain my own experience through trial and error.

The Lord is a great Teacher.

Along this path, He teaches me to sense the needs of other people, enter into their problems, hear the voice of their hearts, and value what He gives me. I take timid steps toward a new

friend, while Jesus inspires me to move forward and not be afraid. Amazing miracles take place: I receive what my soul longs for. A new friend appears in my life—first one, then another, and then more and more. The newness of these relationships delights us with its unusual blessings, and because we are united, we have things to talk about and things to share.

I would like to point out that I do not go into the world or visit restaurants in search of new friends. I avoid every kind of disco and dating club. I need believers—friends who believe in God—because although a worldly person may share some common interests with me and feel friendly affection for me, my spiritual values will always remain foreign to him, and he will not be able to satisfy my longing for spiritual friendship.

Having gained experience in making new friends, I prepare new places in my heart for those whom I do not yet know but who will surely appear in my life in response to my friendliness. I rejoice at every opportunity to make a new friend and gladly pray about it, passing through great and unusual experiences as I meet new people.

Through all kinds of groups on social media, I can also very quickly find friends from around the world with whom I am of one spirit and share common spiritual interests. The Lord teaches me to understand people and not to give that which is holy to those who are unable to value it. My heart wants to be open to every person, but it does not want to fight with friends; it longs for someone who will be like Jesus.

In my process of coming to know myself, the Lord awakens a longing for friendship and helps me move into the stage of the journey outward. I decide to become an open person, because I understand that a person who has withdrawn into himself will interest very few people apart from a psychologist who decides to make money from him.

In my friendliness, I want to be genuine—the kind of person from whom others do not want to walk away when he appears on the horizon. Therefore, I try not only to find people I like for

future friendship, but also to examine my own heart so that I myself may be a pleasant person to others.

My prayers to God become purposeful, and I ask Him to remove from my heart every form of selfishness that could destroy any relationship. The Lord begins to cleanse my heart, and this is not always the most pleasant time in life. But I already understand that such a fire is necessary and that friendship with wonderful people is worth becoming a wonderful person myself.

As I make new friends, I understand that I greatly need unconditional love in order to be friends with them, because friends are different, and not every friend is a true friend. It is very unpleasant to realize that someone is using your friendliness for personal gain. But what concerns me most is that I myself must not become a self-seeking friend.

The Lord reveals to me that every proper friendship must involve sacrifice, and I am ready for this.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Please read Proverbs 17:17; 18:24; John 15:13-15; Amos 3:3; Romans 12:10; 1 Thessalonians 5:11; Colossians 3:13; Ephesians 4:2; 1 Peter 4:8; 1 John 4:7.
2. What other Bible verses came to your mind?
3. What did you understand?
4. Is there someone in your life whom you can call a true friend?
5. Is there sincere friendliness within me, or only a desire to be accepted?
6. What is friendship?
7. Must we respect other people's boundaries in friendship?
8. Are you ready to sacrifice your time for new friends?
9. What qualities of the soul are necessary for close friendship?
10. Why do some people use friendship for selfish purposes?
11. Should the presence of unworthy people in the world cause us to give up the search for new friends?
12. What makes it very difficult to make new friends?

13. Have you ever had a longing in your heart to make new friends?

14. What do you think: is the longing for friendship a longing from God, or is it a human need?

## The Journey Outward

The journey within myself brings no particular joy in life either to me or to those around me. Nor do I find anything within myself that I could display and thereby amaze the world. Yet in this unusual state I found the One Who loves me very, very much and gladly accepts me, the One Who reveals to me the depth and essence of very interesting things and facts. But I understand that I should not remain within myself for too long and that this journey must come to an end.

My relationship with Jesus has brought into my life a deeper understanding of God's will concerning me, the church, and ministry.

I suddenly began to realize clearly that the ministry I performed at the third stage of faith was more like service to myself. As ashamed as I am to admit it, I greatly enjoyed other people's appraisal of my work. Their enthusiasm and praise for my successes in God's work were a powerful engine that stirred up my zeal, while applause gave me such a strong incentive that I was ready to labor tirelessly day and night. But it was this excessive enthusiasm that led me to inner burnout. I misjudged my strength and realized that I was very weak. It was extremely difficult for me to admit this.

Having spent time within myself, I came to understand a great deal, and I believe I set my priorities in the right order. The Lord draws me onward; my spiritual growth is not finished. He brings me to the fifth stage of faith and invites me to enter it.

### 5. The journey outward.

I understand that I must return to my ordinary tasks—those I never stopped doing during this time, or those I set aside for the period of reflection—but now I should take them up with a clearer understanding of what is happening.

I am in God's service, and He evaluates everything I do differently from the way people do. It is very important for me to know what He thinks of me and how He sees what I am

doing. The opinions of those close to me are very valuable when they help me see my mistakes and failures, but praise, admiration, and applause do not interest me, although I do not prevent my brothers and sisters from expressing their joy in this way.

I am in God's service, and everything I do, I do for Him.

My approach to things becomes more conscious and balanced. I understand that not every undertaking called God's work is right for me or produces the expected result. I have learned to weigh and analyze. What draws me more is the depth of the relationships among brothers and sisters in all these activities. If our work together does not lead us to friendship and understanding, we should find the cause and remove it.

God's approval is the chief motive that moves me. Whether the work is great or small is not so important, for I am not the one who blesses it and grants it success; that is done by the One Who moved me to perform this work faithfully and with a pure heart. At the same time, I am not deprived of the right to choose, and I recognize my responsibility before God.

I reconsider many forms of ministry and decide which one is closer to my heart and in which I could use my talents to do something good.

I become strange in the eyes of many of my friends, although I understand everyone who has remained at or is growing through the preceding stages. I also realize that my stage of faith is no better than the others; it is simply a continuation of my growth. Yet we are all in the one Body of Christ and cannot exalt ourselves above one another. We are called to help and serve one another more effectively.

What I do sometimes causes those close to me great bewilderment and many questions. They begin to regard me as strange and mysterious, and I cannot explain to them that I have become different because of the invisible trials I had to endure. God has done something within me that I cannot simply take and return to its former level. After knowing and possessing depth in revelation and in my relationship with

Jesus, it is very difficult to swim on the surface and be satisfied with little. I always long to be near Him and to have Him with me. Our friendship has brought us so close that I cannot imagine life without this relationship. All my future ministry and my entire life are dedicated to Him.

The family problems and difficulties that often used to disable me and throw me off balance are now perceived as ordinary trials over which I should not worry excessively or stubbornly defend my position. We do not live together in order to wage war over spheres of authority and influence. But if one's life partner cannot live without conflict, I ask for strength and wisdom to endure and bear it all.

But I continue onward and see very clearly that I greatly need love—that very agape love without which all my labor and ministry lose their meaning. I do not merely wish to understand that I am doing something correctly; I also want to have the right motive in every undertaking. I see that love must be present in my heart. Much is said about it, and I continue to ask Heaven for this gift as well.

I believe that God hears me and that He answers, but not in the way I expect.

He plunges me into darkness. Once again I find myself in a dark forest and do not understand why I am being treated this way. It hurts to be tormented like this, cast into the fire and into anguish of soul. But I have learned to trust Jesus, and this darkness does not frighten me. I can turn back; I can remain where I came from; but I decide to go forward. Once again, my values are reassessed, and I ask God what will happen next and what end I should expect. In His love, God shows me a beautiful future. I see a cross; I see a man crucified upon it and recognize myself. Such a reward surprises me, but I immediately begin to understand that the world is capable of nothing more, and this is what awaits me in response to my love—in response to that agape which never faileth. In the crowd around the cross, I see familiar faces gladly pronouncing sentence upon me. Then I look at the cross and now see the Savior there, taking this blow upon Himself. I realize that I am no better than Christ and that

the world has not become kinder toward His disciples, but I must choose this in order to continue onward. And I do. I cannot imagine a way back. I am not afraid of the fire if Jesus is in it; I am not afraid of the cross if it is necessary. In a sense, I die to this world, although I continue to breathe.

I give my life to Christ and express my consent to everything God has planned for me. I have the choice to go forward, and I take this step of faith, for my soul longs for something greater—something eternal and real. I open the door of my heart, and the Lord enters. But He does not bring a hammer and nails; instead, He gives me Heavenly bread such as I have never tasted before. We sit down at the table and begin the meal. He speaks and I listen; then I ask and He answers. I ask what will happen next, and Jesus assures me that in the future He will not leave me, but will show me great and inaccessible things that I do not know, though I have heard so much about them.

Together we enter a new stage of our relationship and experiences.

I understand that my discoveries at this stage have not ended; they are only beginning. Before me stretches the boundless ocean of God's love, which I will have to receive and come to know. I boldly enter its dark waters, and beside me is the One Who will never leave me, but will show and explain everything to me.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Please read 2 Corinthians 4:17-18; 5:4-5, 7; Philippians 1:9; 3:17; 2:12-14; 3:8-14; Ephesians 3:16-21; Hebrews 12:2-3; Isaiah 30:15; 2 Corinthians 10:17-18; Revelation 3:8.
2. Do you understand what is being discussed? What exactly did you understand?
3. Are you familiar with this subject of the stages of faith?
4. Why did the Lord establish these stages of spiritual growth in this particular sequence?
5. Do you know anyone who has reached the fifth stage? Can such people be identified by sight?
6. Do you believe that this stage is accessible to you as well?

7. Do pastors, elders, and church board members automatically enter the highest stage of faith because of the positions they hold?
8. Why is the entire church unable to move beyond the third stage of faith?

## Not of This World

Although spiritual growth follows a certain pattern and can be divided into several stages, in each individual case this growth remains something special and unique. A growing person may be at several stages of growth at the same time and understand very well what is taking place around him and within his heart.

Knowledge about spiritual growth helps me properly examine my heart and understand where I am now and what kind of relationship I have with Christ. Becoming stuck at an early stage brings no special blessings, although it may bring a measure of success and popularity in ministry.

People in the early stages of faith and spiritual growth very often orient themselves toward the expectations of the church and of other people. For them, praise, likes on social media, and applause are very important indicators of their significance in the spiritual world. New subscribers to their channels give them confidence that they are doing everything correctly and are on the right path. And the more people there are who evaluate your work, the more you want to serve those people.

But the Lord has His own program for my spiritual growth. What matters to Him is not my popularity, but my personal relationship with Him and the cleansing of my heart from all selfishness.

The journey within myself—the “dark forest” through which I must pass—gives God authority to cleanse my heart of every kind of rubbish in my understanding of spiritual values. Self-examination helps uncover and remove every root of selfishness from the heart. Disappointment in myself and freedom from the pressure of other people’s opinions and expectations lead me into a closer relationship with Christ. He cleanses my soul of the debris whose presence caused me to burn out emotionally.

When I have come to terms with myself, I greatly desire to take up my ministry in the church again, but now with a new understanding of what is happening. I am no longer concerned about how people or the church evaluate my ministry. I perform

it for God and with God in my heart. Christ's evaluation is very important to me, for He shows me what to do and how to do it better.

Applause, praise, other people's assessments, and the number of likes or new subscribers become unimportant to me. Outwardly, however, I do not demonstrate my indifference, because I understand that many people do these things sincerely as a way of expressing their appreciation. Yet all this appreciation is not an incentive for me in my ministry. I serve for God, and it gives me great joy to help other people for Jesus' sake.

At this stage of growth, I choose the ministry that corresponds to my understanding and my spiritual longing. Even if I hold a leadership position, I can relinquish it with simplicity of heart and choose some small ministry, thereby surprising my friends and fellow believers.

During the journey outward, I greatly desire to share my new experiences and discoveries with everyone. I willingly tell others about my new spiritual experience and about the inner trials I have endured. I am more interested in depth than merely in some event or experience. I begin to notice new revelations in the Bible that I did not see before. Christ's Sermon on the Mount suddenly opens before me in a new light. I marvel at the depth of what was said and see this depth at work in my heart because of the crises through which the Lord has led me.

Do you think anything could have frightened the three young men in the third chapter of the book of Daniel after they emerged from the fiery furnace? I believe that no threats or intimidation could have troubled them any longer. Something similar is experienced by those who pass through a crisis of faith and reach the level of spiritual growth at which God's agape love becomes a desired possession and a natural fruit of the Holy Spirit.

All the later crises and "dark nights" that continue to occur in the life of a growing Christian are no longer so dark and

incomprehensible. I understand that all this must be endured for my benefit. Therefore, I take Jesus with me into the next trial and allow Him to cleanse me in this new fire.

Even what you are reading now will not be understandable to you if you are at an early stage of spiritual growth.

To every thing there is a season. Yet such information is useful so that the coming crises of faith will not frighten you inwardly when they begin and while you pass through them.

Christ's approval and His plan for my life are the chief criteria by which I evaluate my ministry and my choice of one path or another.

I begin to understand more clearly that I greatly need God's love, in which all my motives and actions will have the right nature. I do not want to serve God merely from duty or play at love without having it in my heart. I do not want to reflect on a love that I do not possess within myself. But I am deeply interested in seeing how God's love works through me and what success it has in my heart when I ask for it and choose it.

As I move into the new stage of spiritual growth called love, I experience another darkness in my life. It is no longer so dangerous, but it saddens me because I become incomprehensible to other people, while they interpret my true motives as their exact opposite.

I am honest before God and rejoice that I hear His revelations, that I have a relationship with Him, and that I am led by His Holy Spirit.

As I study the life of Jesus at this stage, I begin to understand His experiences more fully and the loneliness He endured while among His disciples and among those who considered themselves teachers of Israel. The book of Psalms describes in detail the feelings experienced by the Savior. When I pass through something similar, I rejoice that the Lord has already walked this path and understands perfectly what is happening within me.

The stage of love is no better than the other stages, but it differs in that I must remain in it. While becoming stuck at any of the other stages of faith may prove fatal to me, abiding in the stage of love helps me grow in this love and receive new knowledge and experience of God working through it.

I become much more serious about spiritual matters and greatly value all the new revelations the Lord gives me. God does not leave me ignorant of where I am or what is happening to me. He shows me the power of His love and the importance of this Heavenly blessing. I understand that without this love all my works lose their meaning and every ministry is permeated by an entirely different spirit.

I have many questions about this, but few people can give me a definite answer. Therefore, I take all my questions to Christ, Who understands perfectly what is happening to me and why I am asking. And He answers.

Such discoveries lead my mind into another darkness, where once again I reassess what is happening and realize that very few people understand me. Therefore, I have to discuss all my discoveries and attainments more with God than with other people.

I can now communicate with people at any stage of growth in language they understand, while discussing all my deep revelations with Jesus. This world does not attract me, but I understand that I must still live in it for a while and do something more for God's glory.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Please read John 15:19; Galatians 2:20; Philippians 1:21; 3:8; 1 John 2:15-16; Colossians 3:2-3; 2 Corinthians 4:17; 13:5; Hebrews 13:14.
2. What other Bible verses came to your mind?
3. What did you understand?
4. What does the expression "not of this world" mean?
5. Whom am I truly living for: God or the opinions of people?
6. Has my ministry become an attempt to prove my significance to others?

7. Am I ready to serve God without applause or gratitude?
8. Why did God permit the fiery furnace in Daniel 3? Does something similar await His children?
9. Why are those who have grown in Christ not always fully understood by those who do not wish to grow?
10. Have I become too attached to my own understanding of truth?
11. Am I ready to acknowledge my mistakes and spiritual immaturity?
12. Why are spiritual darkness and personal crisis necessary for growth?
13. How can the love of Christ be seen in a person's life?
14. Does the fact that the Lord desires to make you not of this world trouble you?

## The Stage of Love

Every fruit tree has a value determined by the presence of fruit. Each plant has a particular period of growth, its own characteristics, and its own seasons. By the taste and quality of the fruit, one can understand how useful the tree is and whether it is worth continuing to care for it.

The Lord often uses this image in His parables to reveal His expectations to His children. It is good to be a tree planted by the rivers of water, but the requirements for such a plant are also very high. Anything may grow in a forest, but only that which bears good fruit is found in God's garden.

Much as we might wish to give everyone the hope that the main thing is to enter God's garden and that somehow we will adapt once we are there, the Bible teaches otherwise: only good, fruit-bearing plants remain in the Lord's garden, although the Lord cares very diligently for everyone planted there.

And what fruit does the Lord expect from His plantings? The very fruit that greatly benefits the soul and glorifies God. We read in Galatians 5:22-23: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law."

But if a tree is called a pear tree, I do not expect apples from it. In my life, I am able to diversify my fruit if I study the science of salvation and try to practice what is relevant for the present time.

Service to God is the most beautiful state of the soul. It brings joy and satisfaction to the heart, although it sometimes takes place under very difficult conditions. At a certain point I begin to understand very clearly that I need love, that this quality is missing from my life for fullness and harmony, and that although my motives are good, they sometimes remain tasteless. I labor with all my heart, do God's work responsibly and joyfully, yet my heart does not love those for whom I labor. At times I recognize the terrible truth that I need no one and that, by and large, no one is interested in me either. My speech

reveals this very quickly, and I look like a hypocrite. Although I understand that everything in my life is right—that I have a close relationship with Christ, a ministry, and results—I do not have love. I cannot say that I have none at all: it makes itself known here and there, and I see how it sometimes works and brings joy to my heart. But I also understand that it must always be present.

The good news for me is that God leads me from glory to glory, not so that at some moment of despair or disappointment in myself He may cast me away, but so that He may endow me with everything He has planned and make me what He desires me to be. As I passed from stage to stage, I simply found myself face to face with an ocean that I must enter. Behind me are the wilderness, darkness, struggles, and the pursuit intended to return me to slavery; ahead is a boundless sea that will drown me. But Jesus draws me into these waters, and I understand what they mean. I long to have them within me and to dwell in them. Love is not merely another stage of my growth; it is the open heart of God, which desires to become my heart and teach me to relate to people as the Lord does. The special feature of receiving the gift of agape is that God desires to give it to me but cannot do so without me. He often showed me that love exists. He took me in His arms and lowered me into these waters, then set me back down, desiring me to thirst for it with all my soul. When I understand with my mind that I need it and strive with my heart to obtain love, a more excellent way opens before me, and I enter a new stage of faith.

## 6. Agape love.

I knew that it existed and that it was available, but theory is one thing and personal experience another. How I longed to taste this blessing and discover its flavor! I tried to find it in other people's stories and desired to receive it from their experiences, but I could only guess what it was.

When I was a child, I saw people start families, live together, and then have children. So I decided to have a family too. In every girl I saw my wife, but I was too shy to offer my hand and heart. At thirteen, I firmly decided to marry and even chose a

classmate who seemed very well suited to the role, but I never proposed to her. The laws of the country kept me from taking this step, but I learned that somewhere in India it was possible to marry at that age, and I deeply regretted that I was not in India. I was not concerned about where we would live, how we would support a family, or where children came from. I simply wanted family relationships because that was how adults lived. I had a visible example, but no knowledge or understanding of what it meant. Time passed, and at twenty-two my dream came true. By then, however, I had understanding, responsibility, and permission for such an undertaking. I did not know what family life looked like from the inside, but I moved toward it confidently. Once I entered that stage, I began to understand everything more fully. During our life together, I came to realize three important things: 1. What a family should not be. 2. What it can become if love is brought into it. 3. Family happiness is built by both spouses. Otherwise, it either does not exist or is one-sided. Of course, there are other discoveries, but a relationship requires the participation of both parties.

Look at how God relates to us, to the world, and to me: with absolute love. And what does He receive in return?

But if I desire to respond in the same way, something very beautiful will grow between us. When I was a babe in Christ, I saw my relationship with God in a childish way, although I dreamed of great things and considered myself an adult. But children are not permitted to live an adult life; they must learn, and this takes time. Yet if that time has come and I still drink from a bottle and greatly enjoy wearing diapers, people already look at me with pity. God has established times for growth, and He does not shorten them, although there may be exceptions for prodigies. But when the moment arrives, He draws me onward.

The stage of love is not a matter of whether I want it or not; it is the place in my faith that I must reach. This stage was created not for “favorites” or the especially gifted, but for everyone—including you, reader! This science is not a theory for those who

are bored and have nothing to do; it is the narrow way that will lead you to the goal.

If you choose another path, you will miss the goal. In its literal meaning, sin means missing the mark. Is that what you want? What do you expect from your Christianity, dear friend? To drift quietly with the current? If you want to take flight, remember that an airplane takes off against the wind.

If God has prepared love for you, desires to endow you with it, and accepts nothing else, perhaps it is better to go out to meet Him and choose what is mine both by right and in fact. Is that logical? Yet with all God's strictness and longsuffering, He allows me to make this choice myself, without outside pressure, after weighing everything and deciding. And what do I choose?

Eternal life is worth giving everything to obtain it.

In this life, one may choose not to start a family so that nothing deficient results. But in a relationship with Christ, we must build what He offers, and nothing defective is acceptable in it. What is hindering you, friend? Love exists; it is available and worth attaining. It is waiting for you. "And the Spirit and the bride say, Come."

Questions for Reflection:

1. Please read Psalm 1:3; Isaiah 58:11; Jeremiah 17:8; Matthew 3:12; 25:29-46; Mark 11:13; John 15:5-9, 13, 16-17, 21, 27; Galatians 5:22-23; James 3:12-18; John 12:24-26; Isaiah 66:19-20; 2 Corinthians 3:3-4, 6; Mark 9:49.
2. What new things did you learn?
3. How does God speak to His children? Can He do so through our lessons?
4. Why does the apostle Paul call the stage of love "a more excellent way"? See 1 Corinthians 12:31.
5. Is life good for those who love and make this love the joy and meaning of life?
6. Although love is available, why is it neither popular nor sought after, even among the children of God?
7. Is there really no love at the preceding stages of faith? Explain how you understand its presence in a person's life.

8. Why do those who reach the higher stages of faith become less understandable to those who do not seek further growth?
9. Can a person at the second or third stage serve as an adviser or mentor to those who have surpassed him in faith and reached the later stages, but are younger in physical age?

## The Beginning of Love

Spiritual growth in Christ is beautiful because through it the heart of a growing person is cleansed and refined. No matter how difficult the trials and spiritual darkness that enter a believer's life may seem, in the end all these things work together for good.

The Lord knows perfectly what kind of vessel He desires to shape from pliable clay. If the clay does not resist, the Great Master will create something beautiful that will bring joy to His heart.

The narrow way the Lord has chosen for His children is so narrow that everyone who longs to walk it must walk alone. The joyful thing is that Jesus has already traveled this path and knows everything that awaits me.

Love is the goal of my journey and spiritual growth—a goal I must certainly reach and in which I must remain.

Life in love is an enormous responsibility before Heaven, which has entrusted you with such a great blessing so that, through this condition of mind and soul, you may reveal to the entire world around you the beauty of God's character in your life—the life of a sinful human being. This is how the Lord has chosen to glorify His name and overcome this world. It is His plan that we love one another and abide in His love.

Knowledge of all the stages of spiritual growth helps me understand the events taking place in my life, but it does not remove trials of faith from it. The fire of God's trials is very hot, and it refines all the inner foundations of my thinking. After passing through this fire, I leave behind many things that slowed or stopped my spiritual growth. Yet in the memory of those close to me, I may remain the same person they knew from the beginning. Such stereotypes are very difficult to remove from the minds of those who do not wish to grow and who evaluate everyone according to old memories. Through their recollections and subjective judgments, these people can

undermine the reputation of anyone they have known for a very long time.

Love changes my attitude toward people, but those people remain the same and begin to watch me, especially when I tell them about my love. At first, I am very afraid to speak of love to those whom God calls me to love. But I take this step and immediately run to Jesus to receive this love, because I understand that my human nature is incapable of such a constant relationship.

Strange as it may seem, I see the victory of this very love within me. It does not allow my inborn selfishness to become the chief motive of my behavior. I notice that I do many things out of love for people, which at first greatly surprises me. In this I see a special victory over myself. All my feelings and thoughts begin to submit to the new law of love and adapt themselves to it. This is not my human effort, but something that comes from outside me and changes my mind.

I do not suddenly become a loving person immediately or in a single day. But the very first conscious victory of love in my life reveals to me a new meaning in the great conflict with sin. I clearly see God's power in this work. There are no suitable words to describe all these new processes in my mind, but they radically change me from within. I begin to understand that this is precisely what the Lord desires to see in each of His children.

My friendliness acquires an entirely different power when I begin to invest in it all the love I receive from the Savior. I long so deeply to be accepted in this love—to be appreciated and to have others rejoice with me that I love from a pure heart, freely and without cause. But I notice that very few people understand me, and I run with my questions to Christ. He shows me His wounded hands and comforts me with the assurance that He knows perfectly what love encounters.

As I grow in love, the Lord reveals a great mystery to me and shows me the cross of Calvary, making me understand that the empty place upon this cross is the throne of the overcomer.

At first I do not greatly desire to accept such a victory and such a reward. But when I continually meet the hostility of the world and a completely different spirit in response to my love, I understand that the world has devised nothing better for loving people. Since the time of Christ, nothing has changed in the base human nature that remains beyond God's influence. The enemy of the soul has advanced in his deceptions during these two thousand years and knows how to approach each of us.

It is sometimes very painful for me to see the waves of God's love break against the unyielding cliffs of human selfishness. Yet I can no longer relate differently to those around me, and I continue to love them from a pure heart, choosing this very attitude.

Love leaves no special outward mark upon me that the world can recognize as the sign of a loving person. It cannot be seen with the naked eye, yet its influence remains constant. Anyone who has a relationship with a loving friend will certainly experience the influence of this love, and something must be done with it. God draws the friend's soul toward love in return, while the enemy of the soul seeks to destroy this attraction through inborn selfishness, instilling unbelief and recalling every betrayal and disappointment from earlier relationships.

I continue to love and become very bold in this approach to people. Their objections and unbelief no longer trouble me. I am prepared for indifference in response to my convincing actions. As I perform deeds of love and act from love, I expect neither praise nor gratitude, because what interests me most is the opinion of God, Who moves me to relate to people in precisely this way.

The way of love is the most beautiful way, yet at the same time this spiritual joy is mingled with sorrow over what is happening around you when you are neither understood nor accepted.

In my personal experience, I have noticed this characteristic: when love overflows the heart, it is very difficult for me not to speak or write about it or somehow hide it within myself. It seeks a way out and does not rest until it declares itself in some

way or makes known that it exists and is genuine. This causes me serious problems, making me appear in the eyes of others as some strange person whose intentions no one can understand.

But we are dealing with a good Lord, Who knows how to gladden the heart of a loving person by sending him those who can love in return and answer love with love. It is so beautiful to have friends like these, with whom we can openly exchange God's blessings without fearing that we will have to keep some of the abundance of God's love within ourselves. We gladly enrich one another and value such relationships above pearls and pure earthly gold.

Previously, at every stage of my faith, it seemed to me that I possessed love and could abide in it whenever I wished. To some extent, I received this blessing for fleeting victories, but my mind was not permeated with love, and inner selfishness very quickly destroyed all my victories. When the Lord had brought me to a certain level of growth, He decided to reveal to me from within the full power and beauty of His love. I now understand that it was impossible for me to love in the past as I do now with a renewed mind, because my heart was overflowing with every kind of rubbish that I carried with me through all the stages of faith.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Please read Romans 8:28; 12:9-10; 13:10; 1 Corinthians 2:9; Galatians 5:6; Ephesians 3:19; 4:2; Colossians 3:14; 1 Thessalonians 3:12; 1 Peter 1:7; 4:8.
2. What other Bible verses came to your mind?
3. What did you understand?
4. Do I believe that even the most difficult trials work together for my good?
5. Do you allow the Lord to shape your character as He desires?
6. Am I ready to walk the narrow way even if I must walk it alone?
7. To what extent does your love depend on the way other people treat you?

8. How can I understand what moves me more often: love or personal gain?
9. Can the Lord destroy every root of selfishness within me?
10. How do I respond to indifference toward my love?
11. How strongly do the opinions of others influence my actions?
12. Am I able to see the inner pain and need behind people's actions?
13. How do you understand the idea that the cross of Calvary is the reward for my love?
14. If those around me judged Christ only by my life, would they see His love within me?

## The Narrow Way of Love

Sooner or later, every person who believes in God begins to ask God for love. Some do so consciously, but most of those who pray for love expect loving people to surround them in answer to this prayer. Yet something entirely opposite happens. Strange trials and attacks that never existed before begin to occur in your life. And the people from whom you expect personal attention suddenly become unbearable. Everyone who asks for love experiences something similar.

I believe that the prayer for the gift of love is the most interesting prayer, and the Lord answers it in a most interesting way. It is as though He asks, "Do you truly want what you are asking for? Do you understand what it will cost you and how high the price will be?"

For a time, the Lord allows a person to experience the state of God's agape, extending its influence to those around him. Strange as it may seem, the appearance and presence of love in secular society or among friends unaccustomed to such a neighbor is felt by everyone, and the carnal nature of these people begins to resist every such manifestation.

I have noticed an interesting feature: when I begin to speak plainly or preach about God's love, which is given to me through faith in Jesus and in answer to my prayer, instead of joy over my success and spiritual growth, I see gloomy faces that regard me as some kind of charlatan who does not understand what he is talking about. And when I dare to say that I love, I hear every possible response except delight over such a beautiful decision.

As we know, Jesus was the living embodiment of God's love in reality. He did everything with love and from love. His heart overflowed with love. Yet He did not openly announce it; He conducted Himself as a loving person. Nowhere do we find Jesus making a declaration of His love for His disciples or for anyone else. But His deeds directly testify that His love was sacrificial and unconditional.

He harmed no one, yet His presence drew some people to Him and turned others against Him. Christ never even entertained the thought of harming or humiliating anyone. He was ready to descend into any depth of human sin in order to reach and save a perishing soul. But He could not do this without the consent of the will of the person who was perishing.

Strange as it may seem, the scribes, priests, and Pharisees hated Christ for His purity and because He destroyed their false ideas about God and offered the people simplicity in understanding sacred truths.

The same spirit that opposed Christ is still at work in the children of disobedience. God's love continues to arouse anger in people who possess a different spirit.

When you decide to enter the way of love and, receiving God's love, begin to love everyone around you, do not expect easy victories or pleasant leisure. The human heart will long for fairness and for its love to be returned. But do not dream of such an outcome. The world does not need God's love; it needs "pink hearts." And the enemy of the soul will oppose in every possible way any manifestation of true agape through your life.

But the essence of this struggle and victory is to love to the end—when there is no strength and when you see no meaning, but faith and the example of Jesus remain.

The presence of love from God is not something frightening to a loving person. It is Heavenly gold that enriches and brings no sorrow with it. To love is beautiful. To love unconditionally is the highest art.

At the same time, love influences not only those around you, but also you yourself from within. It is not some precious metal for your heart, but a molten liquid with a very high spiritual temperature that burns all selfishness, sin, and lawlessness from the depths of the soul. It demolishes every kind of stereotype and does not dwell beside any impurity.

When you tell someone about your love and say that you possess it because you ask God for it, receive it, and continue

onward, do not be afraid to hear sarcasm, irony, words of unbelief and doubt, as well as every kind of name-calling, abuse, and accusation in response. This is a common reaction that, unfortunately, makes the believer's path quite difficult and narrow.

In loving other people, I may be able to rely solely on my faith and expect supernatural help from God. But in mutual love for one another, I encounter an imperfect human being who is attempting to love me while dealing with an equally imperfect being in the person of me.

We truly pass through very interesting experiences in this love for one another. My human selfishness is unaccustomed to anyone loving me unconditionally, and I involuntarily resist such a blessing from my friend. At the same time, however, I understand that relationships like these should be ideal and should bring joy not only to us, but also to our Lord, Who endows us with this love.

The narrow way of love is also narrow because it is impossible to walk along it in a broad rank together with one's friends. Sometimes the human selfishness of those close to me blocks the way like cliffs so completely that I have to squeeze somehow among these stony hearts. It becomes impossible to pass through and endure such a trial together with any human being.

The only One Who is always present in all this is Jesus, living in my heart and dwelling in my mind. In every trial, He silently asks me what spirit I will choose in order to overcome and pass through this adventure that is so strange to me.

By nature, I do not always want to choose love, because I know other ways of resolving every kind of spiritual problem. But in spiritual battles, victory comes only through the weapon God has appointed for victory—the weapon with which Jesus overcame the enemy and this world.

When I choose love as the ultimate goal of my spiritual growth, I do not become a loving person in a single moment. But in His

mercy, the Lord gives me the opportunity to experience the victories of love and endows me with it to resolve many tasks.

I cannot contain this fire within myself, nor is it intended for me alone. Love is given only so that I may share it with other people and place it as the true motive within every deed I perform for those around me.

As I grow spiritually in faith and reach the moment when my heart is ready to receive God's love and live by it, the Lord opens a new page in my mind, writes upon it a new revelation of God's love, and begins to endow me with it.

Then a very interesting realization arises: I understand that there is simply no way back from this stage of faith. After allowing the fullness of God's presence into myself and permitting Him to work through me and live within me, returning to my lukewarm Laodicean condition would be equivalent to betraying a sacred trust.

This does not mean that I have become some special holy person who must now live in an unusual way and present himself to the world. No, that is not what this means. It means, however, that I am entrusted with the responsibility of being God's representative and overcoming every evil by God's method.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Please read Matthew 7:13-14; 10:16, 22; Luke 17:33; John 15:18-20, 25; Galatians 2:20; Philippians 3:3-5; James 1:2-4.
2. What other Bible verses came to your mind?
3. What did you understand?
4. Have I ever asked God to endow me with His love, and did I understand what I was asking for?
5. Why should I not expect kind treatment in answer to a prayer for love?
6. Am I able to continue loving when I see no love in return?
7. Am I seeking chiefly my own benefit and comfort in love?
8. Why was Christ crucified?
9. Have I noticed resistance from those around me when I try to live by the principles of God's love?

10. Am I resisting the love that God sends me through other people?
11. Why do many people consider a loving person a charlatan?
12. Is there a friend in my life with whom I am united by the love of Christ?
13. How ready am I to walk the narrow way of love if I must travel it almost alone?
14. Have I become a more loving person than I was several years ago?

## The Best Life

Life in love, no matter how lonely and incomprehensible it may seem, is the culmination of spiritual growth. It is the embodiment of God's plan in my life, the fullness of Heavenly life in a human body and mind, and the life of an overcomer.

The most beautiful thing one could desire for any believer is that he reach the stage of love. Although it is no calmer than the other stages in terms of trials and spiritual struggles, it is in the state of love that my mind comes into harmony with God and trusts Him at all times.

Although fewer of my fellow believers now understand me, this does not deprive me of love for these kindred souls. We cannot all fathom the depths of God's love at an even pace in one friendly crowd or walk side by side in spiritual growth. We all have different trials, different crises, and entirely different inner struggles with ourselves and with attacks from without. But if we have a common goal, spiritual fellowship, and a spirit of heartfelt affection and friendship, we can share our attainments and experiences with one another and inspire one another to victory in Jesus.

How good it would be to have teachers who had already traveled this path and, having reached perfect love, could share with us the features of this way that they had already experienced and that we have yet to enter in our spiritual growth. It would be wonderful if someone described to us in detail the advantages and beauty of every stage of spiritual growth. With this knowledge, we would have clear signposts by which we could move confidently toward the cherished goal of love and enter it as God's overcomers.

When an army launches a counteroffensive, the greatest losses occur in the assault battalions, because they bear the full blow of the defending side. The soldiers who follow them reap the fruits of the victory of their fallen predecessors and do not repeat the fatal mistakes that cost their comrades their lives.

Spiritual struggle and spiritual growth have their own pioneers who dare to go against the current and reach their intended goals by new paths. But we have the One Who traveled this entire path of struggle and victory, Who took the full blow of the enemy of the soul upon Himself, and Who, at the cost of His life, opened for us the way to complete victory over sin. His assault was successful, and He made not a single mistake. We merely follow in His steps and reap the fruits of His victory. Although Jesus has won this war, His enemy is still alive, desperately resisting, and still has power to ruin, entice, and destroy the careless soldiers of Christ.

When I reach a certain stage of faith, I greatly desire others to reach it as well, and I begin earnestly drawing them upward toward me, sharing with them every detail of my trials of faith. In each new crisis, the Lord cleanses my heart of selfishness if I permit Him to do so. With my permission, God fills this cleansed place with Himself and His Spirit.

All these spiritual changes of spiritual growth are something new to me and greatly gladden my heart with the Heavenly purity that was previously incomprehensible and unknown to me.

I see the Bible verses about happiness, love, and friendship in a new way. I marvel at how much the Bible says about our need for one another and about unconditional love for those close to me. Understanding this call and feeling an inner need to relate to people in precisely this way, I see that it is absent from me but abundant in God. I begin to ask in faith, and amazing things happen: I begin to love those whom I once could not stand, or whom I endured only through superhuman effort while wishing to be far away from them. Now I look at them with new eyes and rejoice that I love them. I try to express my love in words and share my new experiences and victories, but people do not believe me. They regard me as an actor who wants to obtain something but does not say so directly. Yet I love, and I rejoice greatly in it.

The most beautiful experience in this new stage of spiritual growth is conscious love that does not go away. I try to love,

and I succeed. But when I decide that enough is enough and that I have already given my neighbor what was needed, love still remains and does not disappear. I understand that it does not come from me. I do not know how to love this way, nor do I need such a thing, yet it exists and declares itself in precisely this manner. I test it again and again and see how constant this love of God is within me. This brings me great joy. I desire to share my new experiences and victories, but no one understands me. Some assure me that only God can love this way and that I am inventing strange things that convince no one of their power.

Because this unconditional love is something new within me, I do not know how to explain my condition to others, so I take it to Jesus. He gladly receives me and gives me a new revelation of what is happening in my heart and how I should live with it from now on.

With His own hand, He writes the law of love upon my mind, and I can no longer live in any other way.

But the most interesting thing is that those close to me whom I love do not see this love within me or recognize its expression. They have their own understanding of love, expect certain special deeds for their benefit, and do not believe my words, while my deeds of love do not impress them. Yet I place all my love into every deed I do for them. In response to all my words of love, I hear the same thing: "Those are only words. Show it by your deeds."

I do not understand what deeds are expected of me, for I truly love and cannot live otherwise. I receive this from God, and if He gives me precisely this attitude, what more can I add to it?

A new commandment opens in my life: love one another. I begin to look for a friend who can return my love, because I understand that our unconditional love for one another must be mutual. How wonderful it is when friends like these appear in my life! At last there is someone with whom I can share the fullness of God's love and discuss the processes taking place within me.

How I wish someone had explained to me at that time everything you are reading now. But I had to be a pioneer in this matter, because very few people speak or write about it.

Life in love is the finest way to spend one's time. It is the best life, because love is the banner of victory—a banner under which any regiment will become very formidable to the enemy of the soul. We read in Psalm 60:3-4: "Thou hast shewed thy people hard things: thou hast made us to drink the wine of astonishment. Thou hast given a banner to them that fear thee, that it may be displayed because of the truth."

If all these words seem like a distant dream or something fantastic to you, do not lose heart. God is a very wise Potter, able to shape us into what He desires and fulfill His plan in each of us. He has sufficient power to bring us into His unconditional love and, in this very love, make us overcomers.

Understanding what I am to grow toward and what I may become can accelerate the process of my spiritual growth and give me additional strength to pass through difficult times.

Reaching love is not a privilege for especially gifted people, but God's plan.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Please read 1 Timothy 1:5; John 17:23; Romans 12:9; 1 Peter 1:22; 4:8; 1 Corinthians 2:9; Ephesians 3:19; 4:15; Philippians 2:2; Colossians 2:2; 3:14; 1 John 4:12.
2. What other Bible verses came to your mind?
3. What did you understand?
4. What main thoughts from this lesson did you identify for yourself?
5. Why must we grow into love?
6. Do I notice the changes that the Holy Spirit is producing within me?
7. Do I ask God to teach me to love those whom I find unpleasant?
8. Do I rejoice in the very opportunity to love?
9. Am I expecting from other people an understanding of love that they do not yet possess?

10. Am I seeking spiritual friendship founded upon God's love?
11. Do I regard love as the portion of only exceptionally spiritual people?
12. What is hindering my growth in love today?
13. Can I honestly say before God that love has become the chief substance of my life?
14. Why is love itself the goal of my spiritual growth?

## Is That All?

Friends, in the preceding lessons we examined six stages of faith and saw what happens to a believer on the way to God and in life with Him. Looking back on my past with Christ and remembering it, I can say that those very unpleasant moments in my spiritual growth and the difficult experiences through which I had to pass and which I had to endure were the greatest blessing to my soul. During that time, the Lord removed from me all uncleanness and every carnal trait of character without injuring my individuality. Now, when I sense or see another trial approaching, I am not afraid to enter it, although from a human perspective I do not always desire it. Each time I look to Jesus and quietly ask Him, "You will not leave me today, will You?" I immediately answer myself, "No, He will not," because I remember His promises that He will allow no one to pluck me out of His hand.

At school I was taught that if something is limited by a certain number, then when I reach the final digit I have the whole, and that is the end. But what comes next? Does this rule apply to a stage of faith? As I strive toward love and apply all my effort and desire to reach, know, receive, and discover it, where do I arrive? Do I enter a dead end where everything has been attained and there is nothing more toward which to strive? Will there be another stage of development? After all, even "Peter's ladder" ends with love. Is that truly all?

Such thoughts may arise when I am at an early stage and try to apply human ideas to spiritual things. My mind is accustomed to living within a framework and defining everything by artificial boundaries. Once it has established them, it calms down and feels secure in its complete understanding of what is happening. But agape love is the exception to every rule. It is not the end of a stage of faith, but the beginning of a new and perfect life in Christ Jesus. Only now do I begin to comprehend the meaning of life. It is in love that the potential of unlimited possibilities opens before me—possibilities that I can continually discover and realize. I begin to understand many of

God's actions in the past that I viewed in the poor light of my perception. I am continually overtaken by discoveries of the beauty and depth of God's character, and I cannot stop in this knowledge, for nothing is more fascinating than discovering the heart of God. Love presents this knowledge in its proper light.

My education did not end at the final stage of faith; it only began. An entire ocean of new possibilities and wonderful prospects opened before me. I am studying the science of love, and I understand that this ocean can never be fully comprehended or brought to a point where I can say that I have reached the limit and there is no path beyond it.

There is also a seventh stage, but it is no longer a stage of faith. It is a personal meeting with the One Who will come for us to take us with Him forever and for all eternity. Then my faith in the invisible God will receive its absolute reward for all time. Eternity, with all its riches and glory, will be given to me, and love will be its enduring meaning of endless life—a life that will dissolve every fear and apprehension within itself and make unceasing development possible.

My eyes will see God. The One Whom I came to know by faith will be revealed to my sight, and without fear I will behold the faces of the Father and the Son, being changed into the same image from glory to glory.

But for now, faith is still in force. I have eyes of faith that see God in His word, in His promises, in my life, and in the lives of those close to me. I see this image upon the faces of my believing friends and admire Christ as I watch those who are led by Him. In their words I very often hear the voice of God, Who encourages, comforts, strengthens, points out mistakes, reproves, gladdens, and does what is beneficial and works together for good.

I live by faith, and it carries me through severe trials.

Love is not the end of the war, but the beginning of its fiercest battles. The enemy of the soul has not died; instead, he has entered an indescribable rage, knowing that he has lost me forever and understanding that I will draw many others with me

into Eternity and, with God's help, tear them from the chains of delusion, unbelief, despair, and distorted stereotypes. But such a war does not frighten me; I have long been in the ranks. It is not frightening to be wounded or to fall beneath the weight of a burden. What is frightening is to fall and not rise again, to lose the hand of God, to imagine something great about myself, and to become exalted in my own eyes.

Love is given for this very purpose: to carry me through every trial and grant victory in all things.

To be an overcomer is the most beautiful advantage of love. When you have several million in your pocket and need to buy a small roll, you do not worry about whether you have enough money. It is the same with Love. It gives me enormous potential and wealth, yet at the same time makes me poor in spirit. I know that I possess it, but I continually need it. I fear being left without it, although I am immersed in it over my head. It fills me within and without. Yet my heart is a weak and leaky vessel that God must continually fill with His oil, for if it ceases, I will simply be emptied and will be unable to satisfy this need anywhere. I place my new heart beneath the waterfall of God's love and allow these waters to pass through me and pour into the lives of my friends, blessing them with little streams of endless love.

The special nature of Eternal love is that it places me in eternal dependence upon God and cannot exist apart from Him. It simply is not present where God is absent. If God stops this river, where will I go? Who will give me this water of life? I know no one, and I simply do not possess it within myself. I am "wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked." Where shall I go without Christ? What am I capable of without His love? Here is true fear and horror! Yet for some reason many people choose precisely this path. Where is the logic?

An intoxicated person is unable to value eternal things. He has no need of Heavenly treasures. But I can give hope to such people, and God inspires the necessary words for this purpose, while each person must decide for himself.

The stage of love is the beginning of the longest course of study—one that cannot be comprehended in this life. This is why God gives me Eternal life: so that during it I may understand at least a little of the depth of this quality of the soul and experience in practice its influence in the lives of my friends. Only there, after billions of trillions of years, will I suddenly realize that love is something very good and beneficial to my soul and that it is simply impossible to live without it. With shame I will admit to my friends that at last I truly love them, while all this time I had only been striving toward it. Then, after trillions of decillions of years, I will suddenly understand how far I was from true love when I declared it to my friends. Now I will have begun to understand something more fully and will have a beautiful opportunity to go deeper into this science and come to know great and inaccessible things that I do not know.

It does not trouble me that I still know so little about love. It has been given to me so that I may come to know, study, test, and apply it. My Teacher is not a human being but the Lord Himself, Who will teach me everything I need to know, reveal everything I did not understand, and bring to my remembrance what I forgot or failed to consider.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Please read 1 Thessalonians 4:3; Colossians 2:8, 10; Philippians 3:14–15; 2:13–15; Ephesians 4:13, 15; 3:16–21; 1 Corinthians 13:11–13; Hebrews 5:8; 1 John 3:2–3; 3:18–20; John 17:26; Jeremiah 1:9, 11–12.
2. Did you find something useful for yourself? What did you understand?
3. What do you think: is love the end of the journey or the beginning of new discoveries?
4. Will our education and spiritual growth continue after the Second Coming?
5. How do people at the sixth stage of faith differ from everyone else?
6. What does the Lord expect from those who receive God's love?
7. Are special obligations placed upon a loving person?

8. Is it difficult to love?

## Leaving the Laodicean Stage

When we bring children into this world, no sensible parent assumes that his child will spend his entire life in kindergarten or attend the primary grades of school until old age. Every period of growth has particular levels of education and development. When we hear that someone has turned eleven, we have an approximate understanding of that person's level of development and relate to him according to the age of the child. But when I see a young man who has turned twenty, I would be surprised to learn that he still attends first-grade classes and understands the curriculum for that age very well. At this stage of life, I expect to see an independent person who has completed secondary school and is already able to support himself.

Likewise, if I see an adult who continues to study in the tenth grade and master everything intended for that age, but does not become independent and goes on studying the same things year after year, I have many questions about that person. Why has he become stuck at this stage? How much longer will he continue studying this familiar curriculum?

With children and adolescents, we become concerned when their growth stops, and we understand that certain problems must be identified and resolved. Yet when it comes to the fellowship of the church, for some reason our minds switch off, and we do not respond at all to delays in spiritual growth, even when they concern us personally.

I would very much like every reader to stop now, look into his heart, and determine the stage of growth at which he presently stands or the stage at which he has become stuck.

Children do not write their own school curriculum and should not invent for themselves the tasks they are to understand and solve. This is done by adults and gifted people who understand which curriculum is best suited to each child at each stage of growth. God has likewise provided particular tasks and particular light for every stage of faith. He placed them in one

common textbook called the Bible. At the proper time, He reveals to each of us precisely what will help us grow spiritually.

The message of the Faithful Witness to the Laodicean church passes through every level and stage of faith and reveals the serious problem of arrested spiritual growth, calling it a lukewarm condition. What is taking place?

Verse 14 begins our acquaintance with the Faithful Witness. This develops into discipleship and grows into the stage of success, which becomes spiritual wealth for God's church. We become rich in knowledge, experience, every kind of project, and revelations. Our study of truth is so deep that our opponents have no weighty arguments with which to persuade us otherwise. Yet strange as it may seem, the Lord calls this condition lukewarm and offers us passage to a higher stage of faith.

Revelation 3:18 is, for all of us, the dark night of the soul in which we must understand that we are poor, wretched, naked, blind, and miserable and greatly need that which will enrich and clothe us and give us wisdom. When I enter this territory, I experience many things that cleanse my heart of spiritual pride and selfishness. I no longer want to simmer in the common pot and study the same things repeatedly when they no longer nourish me or add anything to my growth. I understand that the problems delaying my spiritual growth are not the church's fault; they are my personal problems, which Jesus calls me to resolve at a personal level as He addresses me personally.

When I accept God's plan and His program for my spiritual growth, the dark night of the soul in verse 18 passes smoothly into the journey within myself. There the Lord declares His love for me and calls me to be zealous in self-examination and to repent of the carelessness I have displayed until now. At this stage of growth, He lovingly reproves and chastens me. The fire of His reproof is very hot and burns out of me all the rubbish that is displeasing to Christ. I understand that I am in the hands of the Great Master and rejoice in the cleansing taking place within me.

But the Lord does not want me to become stuck at this stage. He invites me to leave verse 19 and move to the place where He modestly stands at my door and knocks, desiring that I come outward from my inner self-examination, enter into a close personal relationship with Him, and learn directly from Him to receive the important revelations with which He will endow me in personal fellowship with Himself.

As I commune with Christ every evening, I understand that I am also surrounded by the visible world of people who may become my potential friends. I gladly share with them all my revelations and my new experience of spiritual growth. Yet for some reason very few people understand me, and very few share my joy in these new discoveries.

Seeing my desire and longing for fellowship with Him, Christ invites me to enter the stage of the overcomer. There He begins to teach me His unconditional love and reveal the depth and meaning of this blessing. My friendship with new friends grows into unselfish love. In this love, I begin to discover a new beauty in Holy Scripture and to explore passages I had previously raced past without even suspecting what riches lay beneath my feet.

The Lord does not want me to become stuck in verse 20 and enjoy fellowship with Him alone. Although without Him I can do nothing, when I have a close connection with Him, He calls me to love those around me who have stopped in their spiritual growth. I discover a new phase of my life and spiritual growth. I understand that I love and that this comes from the Lord. I discover a new world of possibilities and blessings and grow confidently in God's love, which pours through me upon everyone around me.

I love. I love from a pure heart. I begin boldly to declare this to those whom God calls me to love and whom I have chosen for unconditional love. At this point, I become completely incomprehensible to everyone. Yet it is at this very stage of growth that the Lord declares me an overcomer. But what kind of overcomer am I when people laugh at me, strike me, refuse to take me seriously or listen to me, and accuse me of having

nothing to give people except love? I understand that I cannot live any other way, yet I do not know how to respond properly.

When I understand the characteristics of every stage of faith, it is not difficult for me to continue growing and accept all the accusations and mockery directed at me, which Christ also experienced in His life.

Spiritual growth does not imply withdrawing from membership in the spiritual fellowship or leaving my church. It means that while remaining in the church, I enter into a closer relationship with Christ, and He Himself teaches me and endows me with everything necessary for spiritual victories.

It is good for me if I understand that, as I grow, very few of those who have become stuck at an earlier stage of faith will understand me. This understanding helps me continue growing and follow Christ whithersoever He goeth.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Please read Revelation 3:14-22; Hebrews 5:12-14; 1 Corinthians 3:1-3; Ephesians 4:13-15; Philippians 1:6; 3:12-14; John 15:4-5; 16:33; 1 Peter 4:8; 2 Timothy 3:12.
2. What other Bible verses came to your mind?
3. What did you understand?
4. Did you see the stages of spiritual growth in the message to Laodicea?
5. What signs of spiritual maturity do you see in your life?
6. Is it possible that your knowledge is growing faster than your character?
7. What in your life may point to a Laodicean condition?
8. Do you thank God for the trials that help you grow?
9. Are you blaming the church or those around you for problems for which you yourself are responsible?
10. Are you striving toward new spiritual discoveries, or are you content with past experience?
11. Are you afraid to appear strange for the sake of fulfilling God's will?
12. Are you able in your own strength to love those who criticize, reject, or ridicule you?

13. Are you ready to follow Christ even when no one understands you? See Revelation 14:4.

14. If the Lord evaluated your spiritual growth today, what would He say about your present condition?

## Fermentation

The problem of Laodicea is described very clearly in Christ's address to this church—or, more precisely, to the Christian era of the last days. The condition of the church is so lamentable that the Lord gives the sternest warning: if nothing is corrected, He will have to spue these people out of His mouth. This is very serious—serious enough to make me ask whether this warning concerns me personally and what I must do to avoid this judgment.

Whether we want it or not, at some moment in cosmic history the time will come when Jesus carries out His sentence and spues out of His mouth those who did not accept God's plan for leaving the lukewarm condition. It is difficult to say what this will look like, but most likely the lukewarm church will continue doing what it does now. Meetings will be held, prayers offered, services conducted, many missionary projects planned, tithes collected, and some cosmic miracle awaited that is supposed somehow to change everything radically.

Meanwhile, Christ will be occupied with preparing a special group of those who responded to His counsel and accepted the invitation to pass through every stage of growth.

When reapers go to gather the harvest, they are not interested in empty blossoms. They intend to gather only whole ears filled with grain.

What makes the lukewarm Laodicean condition of God's people in the last days dangerous to the soul? It contains many good and proper things and deeds and a fullness of light, but it lacks an understanding of the importance of unconditional love for one another and a recognition of this love as the moving force in every motive.

What happens to any living organism when it stops growing but continues to live? This is called a pathology, and something must be done about it. With a plant the matter is simpler: it can be removed and another planted. But a human being is not a plant and must be saved, with everything possible being done

for him. Yet how can one save a person who considers himself healthy and rich and in need of nothing—not even in need of what Jesus considers important for leaving the lukewarm condition and necessary for victory?

When Christ invites someone to rise higher, He also arranges the way for this spiritual growth and the next victory. Every mistake along the way teaches and adds a sorrowful experience that later helps prevent its repetition. But when I reject God's invitation, I remain where I was before. I know what to occupy myself with and from which sources to renew my strength. I am surrounded by fellow believers just like me, and together we do what we consider necessary, watching one another and inventing new ways to serve and please God. But a problem arises: there is no agape among us—the very love that makes us overcomers over every temptation at all times. Yet even this is not a problem to us. We organize psychological training, coaching, and consulting to resolve our inner problems. We conduct every kind of seminar and marathon and invent many projects through which we can show the world that we are capable of something and that God is with us.

Jesus holds precious gold, white raiment, and eyesalve in His hands and marvels at how we dishonor Him through our ignorance.

Among us are also those who leave our ranks and establish their own society, through which they begin to fight against the official organization. These people receive tangible support from those who decided to remain in the common pot but are dissatisfied with everything simmering in it. Those who left the ranks of Laodicea and created something of their own in opposition to the church suddenly begin to consider themselves the holy remnant that must somehow win the victory and receive the cherished reward of the overcomer.

Everything would be well if not for the constant inner conflicts among our members. Dissatisfaction, deception, and fraud continually arise, while gossip has already taken the form of internal news and disputes. We no longer have the strength even to fight them without becoming victims of the same gossip

and disputes. To preserve their dignity somehow, many have to create their own clans and close themselves off from the needs of others. And because iniquity abounds, the love of many has grown cold.

The Lord looks upon all this happening on a worldwide scale and never ceases to invite us to Himself and to a new transaction that can take place only on an individual level. He condescends to address each of His sons and daughters personally and seeks to plunge them into darkness so that, in this darkness, He may open a little window of light and draw our attention to Himself.

For many of us, the most frightening undertaking is to be alone, one on one with our Savior. A mind unaccustomed to hearing God's voice and God's calls fears the unknown into which the Lord invites the weary soul.

Another danger of the Laodicean condition is that Laodicea has developed its own plan for leaving the lukewarm condition and approved it at its general meeting.

But Christ has established one common goal that all of us must reach. It is found in 1 Timothy 1:5: "Now the end of the commandment is charity out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned." What do we see in the definition of this goal? Gold tried in the fire, eyesalve, and white raiment, without which we cannot reach what God has appointed.

The purpose of this lesson is not to accuse God's church of terrible sins, but to invite us to consider the way out that the Faithful Witness offers to us all. He invites us first to enter into a relationship with Himself, which will certainly lead us to love one another.

The stages of spiritual growth are sequential. I cannot leap from an early stage to a later one without passing through everything as God has appointed it. I will not become an overcomer if I do not obtain what the Faithful Witness offers. The Lord will not come to sup with me in pleasant fellowship if I do not show zeal in my repentance. What would be the point of

endowing me with the whole armour of God if I have my own plan for victory and for leaving my lukewarm condition?

Among those whom Jesus calls overcomers, there will be no accidental people who were saved without understanding the full essence of the spiritual warfare of the last days and who somehow bypassed the counsel of the Faithful Witness in Revelation 3:18.

If the Lord has established particular laws for our spiritual growth, what will we grow into if we offer Him our own laws?

God's mercy is very great, and for now it extends to every stage of faith. If I die without reaching the ultimate goal, perhaps I will be saved. But one day Jesus will pronounce the final verdict.

Jesus loves His Laodicea and sees within it the potential for victory. He is not in haste to carry out His terrible verdict. Day after day, He pours streams of His light upon those who consciously choose spiritual darkness and return to the place where spiritual growth is impossible. Again and again, the Lord sends His warriors into His church to awaken those who have fallen into a deathly sleep but still consider themselves awake because they have so many different ministries and responsibilities.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Please read Matthew 7:21-23; 24:12-13; 25:12; 1 Corinthians 13:1-3; Hebrews 5:12-14; 12:14; James 1:22; Proverbs 16:18; Revelation 3:18-21.
2. What other Bible verses came to your mind?
3. What did you understand?
4. Is it important to evaluate yourself and your relationship with Christ, or should this process begin with the church?
5. Does Jesus love Laodicea?
6. Do you think Jesus will one day carry out His promise to Laodicea in Revelation 3:16?
7. Why is God not satisfied with our personal plan for victory?
8. Do you see your own spiritual blindness, or do you notice only the faults of others?

9. What in your life testifies that you are truly obtaining gold tried in the fire?
10. Is there room in your life for deep personal fellowship with the Savior?
11. Are you drowning out God's voice through constant busyness and commotion?
12. Has your ministry become a substitute for genuine love toward people?
13. What is more important to you: preserving your reputation or preserving love?
14. Do you think Jesus will knock at the doors of those who ignore His counsel in Revelation 3:18?

## Victory Through Laodicea

In studying the message to Laodicea, one may gain the impression that this church has been rejected by the Lord and that it is extremely dangerous to be part of this people, because the Faithful Witness expresses no praise whatsoever for His followers. But we should not rush to such conclusions.

The second and third chapters of the book of Revelation describe the entire Christian era, from the end of the first century A.D. to our own day. In this prophecy, Jesus briefly set forth what God's people would face and how the Lord views it all.

Knowing what temptations we would experience at the end of earth's history and how they would affect us, Christ established the path to victory and symbolically described it in the message to Laodicea. Living in this time, we can understand that the reality and power of this message are highly relevant in our day. It very clearly identifies the general condition of the church and of each one of us individually, and we are given a way out that works. Everyone who responds to God's call will receive precisely what the Faithful Witness offers us to buy.

Salvation and victory outside Laodicea are excluded. We would not dare to claim that Laodicea symbolizes only one denomination, because we understand that God's children are scattered throughout the world and are found in every church. This message is also addressed to them. The Lord desires to have a personal relationship with each of His sons and daughters, wherever they may presently be.

But the book of Revelation also contains a call to God's children who are in Babylon: they are to come out of her and become part of God's people, who possess distinctive truths and the fullness of light.

A person who believes in Christ as his Savior but at the same time unknowingly breaks God's commandments and instructions will never become the overcomer of whom Jesus speaks in the message to Laodicea. The Lord will reveal to each

person his duty and his sin before God's seal is placed upon the foreheads of the overcomers.

The Lord has also provided for the spiritual growth described in the message to Laodicea, which cannot be changed or bypassed. Every overcomer will pass through acquaintance with Christ, through discipleship, through the stage of success, and through the dark night of the soul. Each of us will be lukewarm and, in some respect, will feel quite rich, increased with goods, and in need of nothing. Although this will happen differently for each person, every one of us will experience the necessary disappointment in our lukewarm condition. This disappointment will come from the Lord through the crises of faith that He permits in the lives of His disciples.

The Lord permits all kinds of problems to arise in our lives, problems that will uncover those secret depths of our hearts of which, in peaceful times, we were not even aware.

It is very unpleasant to discover that you are lukewarm and at the same time wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked. Yet this very realization helps me ask the question: What should I do in this situation? Jesus has counsel for me that I should not only hear but also put into practice in my life.

As I pass through all the stages of faith, I travel this path specifically through Laodicea, experiencing together with everyone else the delights of the lukewarm condition that satisfy us but do not please the Lord.

The Faithful Witness directs His message to me personally, calling me in particular to reconsider my Christian life and enter into a close personal relationship with the Deity.

I did not devise this plan, and it is not for me to change it, but I am able to understand the meaning of all its symbols and how to apply them in practice. Symbols that have not been explained or understood do not obligate me to anything or place upon me responsibility for disobedience to God's expectations. Therefore, many readers of this message calmly set it aside as unnecessary and continue to luxuriate in their lukewarm condition. But this lack of understanding will not make me an

overcomer, and in the end I will be spued out of God's mouth and perish with the rest of the world.

The essence of the message to Laodicea comes down to this: if I do not become an overcomer, I will be a loser and will forfeit the right to Eternal life.

When God offers me all the fullness of Himself, all His time, and everything necessary for victory, I will have no excuse for my lack of knowledge or my ignorance.

If I do not allow God to write His law of love in my heart and to love through me all my neighbors and enemies, then of what victory should I dream?

But the path to this victory lies through every stage of faith, through the darkness of disappointment in myself, in my desires and values, and even in God's silence.

Faith manifests itself and comes alive not where God speaks, but where the Lord tests me through my trust in His words and promises written in the Bible. My faithfulness is also tested through obedience to the light I have received. I am not the one who turns it on, but I live in it.

I know many Christians who understand victory as a test of faithfulness in keeping the commandments. This too is part of the plan of victory, but it is important to remember that such obedience is acceptable only in the right spirit of love. If God's agape is not in my heart, my obedience will be formal.

This picture was very clearly manifested in the lives of the Pharisees in Christ's day. They considered themselves guardians of the law and zealous keepers of all the commandments. They developed their system of worship and obedience so meticulously that they missed what mattered most in the law: faith and love. They did not recognize the Savior and, accordingly, accepted nothing that He offered them for their salvation.

They did not need the righteousness of Christ; their own righteousness suited them very well. In such a state of mind, there can be no question of wisdom. Yet in the eyes of the

people, they were regarded as righteous and as examples to follow. If someone said that he was a Pharisee, in the eyes of the people it sounded like 'an overcomer.'

But God has His own view of victory. He accepts only the righteousness of Christ, which is symbolized by white raiment.

What has changed in our day and age? Only the form of self-righteousness. It is customary among us to regard the Pharisees as apostates and the very word as a term of reproach. Yet for some reason we do not want to see the Pharisaical spirit within ourselves, much less condemn it. This is why the Lord offers us eyesalve to buy from Him.

We have invented beautiful names for modern Pharisees and are proud when we are called by those names, but the essence remains the same—unbelief and self-satisfaction.

And how can I be rich without Heavenly gold? I invent various kinds of ministry and missionary activity for myself and then amaze everyone with my successes and God's blessings in that sphere. But the Lord calls me into a relationship with Him and waits for me to understand this and, while continuing to do God's works, to accept God's plan of transformation and victory for myself.

The conduct of Joseph of Arimathaea and Nicodemus showed that leaving the lukewarm condition was possible even in those days. Their subsequent lives were filled with Heavenly riches, and they ended them as overcomers.

God's plan for Laodicea is fundamental, faithful, correct, unchangeable, and irreplaceable. It invites Laodiceans themselves to take the next steps and continue their spiritual growth toward victory. In this message, the Lord offers us a relationship with the Deity at every level of our spiritual growth.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Please read Jeremiah 17:9; Proverbs 28:13; Job 23:10; Malachi 3:3; 1 Peter 1:7; John 14:23; Romans 13:14; Philippians 1:6; Colossians 3:14; James 1:12.

2. What other Bible verses came to your mind?
3. What did you understand?
4. Why is victory impossible outside Laodicea?
5. Are you ready to accept God's evaluation of your heart, even if it proves unpleasant to you?
6. Why does the Faithful Witness address His people so strictly and uncompromisingly?
7. Are you trying to hide from yourself the problems of the heart that the Lord desires to reveal to you?
8. Why does God permit crises of faith in the lives of His children?
9. How can you repeat the mistakes of the Pharisees in your religious life?
10. Can outward obedience conceal an inward absence of love?
11. In what matters do you especially need Heavenly eyesalve?
12. Is it possible to replace a living relationship with Christ with religious activity?
13. Do you believe that the Lord is able to bring the work He began in you to a victorious end?
14. How seriously do you take the warning about being spued out of the Lord's mouth?

## The Pharisaic Error

In Christ's day, Israel, which was under Roman jurisdiction, had a special religious authority called the Sanhedrin. It exercised great influence over the Jewish people and assumed the right to consider disputes concerning the interpretation of Holy Scripture and cases in which it had been violated, to establish order in the temple service, to judge violations of religious ordinances, and to decide various matters connected with the spiritual life of society. Its political and legal authority was limited by Rome, but in religious matters the Sanhedrin had freedom, except for the right to pronounce death sentences.

As a rule, the Sanhedrin consisted of the elders of the people, respected and wealthy men, teachers of the Law, and priests. It was headed by the high priest. Many members of the Sanhedrin belonged to the religious groups of the Pharisees or Sadducees, which gave them the right to be teachers of the people and interpreters of Scripture.

The word 'Pharisee' comes from the Hebrew word meaning 'separated,' which in itself indicated the special status of this group and inspired deep respect among the people. The Pharisees possessed spiritual authority in Israel, and their interpretation of the Law and Holy Scripture was considered correct and indisputable, although they had many disagreements with the Sadducees. Along with Scripture, the Pharisees studied various traditions of their fathers and introduced these ordinances as mandatory. Such requirements greatly burdened the common people and placed many among the transgressors, creating a number of spiritual problems that were difficult to resolve. And because the Pharisees visibly demonstrated their ritual purity, their separation from the 'unclean' people was evident to everyone, making them an exclusive and privileged group of spiritual people.

As they studied Scripture and read the description of Christ's Second Coming, they reached certain conclusions about these events and began to interpret them in their own way, as they wished.

They developed an entire system of ideas about how the Messiah should reveal Himself, what He would do and teach, what miracles and signs He would perform, and what supernatural phenomena would accompany His ministry and appearance. This interpretation became firmly rooted both in the minds of the Pharisees and in the understanding of the common people.

When Christ came, all the passages of Scripture pointing to Him and to the First Coming were literally fulfilled. Jesus was born as the King of Israel. He was of the royal line, but His Kingdom was spiritual in nature and did not correspond to the expectations of this world. Such differences were strikingly clear and so obvious that many people had questions for the Pharisees to which they could give no intelligible answer.

Jesus was not afraid to reprove the hypocrisy, pride, self-righteousness, ambition, and lawlessness of the Pharisees. He boldly quoted passages of Holy Scripture and gave them their correct interpretation, which differed substantially from that of the Pharisees. But the Pharisees were waiting for their own Messiah and could not accept the prophetic testimony concerning Christ.

In their way of thinking, they symbolized the governing body of the Laodicean period of that time. The limitations of Pharisaical thinking and the mandatory observance of numerous laws and traditions hindered the spiritual growth of the people and seriously obstructed Christ's teaching about the true Heavenly Kingdom. Commandments and human prescriptions distorted God's character so greatly that people worshipped God not from love, but from fear of condemnation and punishment. Yet the Pharisees considered themselves righteous and worthy of God's approval. It never entered their minds that they were sinful in God's sight.

Jesus demolished all traditions and Pharisaical prescriptions. He did not even try to appear as though He were attempting to observe human ordinances. He Himself was the living Interpreter and Fulfiller of the Law, and He acted as One

having authority. Such conduct was unacceptable in the eyes of the Pharisees, and they hated Christ.

All these images and examples were not given by accident. There is a danger that we will repeat the Pharisaic error, interpret prophecies in our own way, and expect Christ's Second Coming to occur as we think it should. We will need a special anointing of the Holy Spirit to discern such errors and to prepare precisely for what the Lord has determined to be necessary and right.

It is not by accident that the Lord counsels us to obtain eyesalve from Him so that we may see the fulfillment of prophecy in its true light.

If I understand that the final events and trials will be connected with one of God's commandments as a test of my faithfulness to God, I may comfort myself with the thought that I am faithful to God in this matter and that this commandment is written in my heart. But obedience to a commandment includes not only the literal keeping of the law; it also implies my personal relationship with the Lawgiver. I will be greatly surprised when I come for the reward of my obedience to the law and hear, 'I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity' (Matthew 7:23).

It will be bitter for me to learn that, with all my understanding of keeping the Sabbath according to the commandment, I neglected a personal relationship with the Lord of the Sabbath.

We have been given prophecies stating that this commandment will form the basis of the test of our faithfulness to God. But in addition to the fourth commandment, the same God also gave us the commandment to love one another, which is likewise God's commandment.

My spiritual growth implies both visible obedience to God's law and an inward belonging to this God.

Is it possible never to kill anyone and yet be a murderer in God's sight? Yes, it is possible if I have an angry spirit (Matthew 5:22). Is it possible to be an adulterer while living

with only one woman? Yes, it is, if my lustful thoughts wander among other women (Matthew 5:28).

Is it possible to violate the Sabbath while scrupulously keeping this commandment? Yes, if there is no love in my heart and no personal relationship with Christ. It is not the form of obedience, but its spirit and motive that make me either a keeper or a transgressor of God's law.

At the Laodicean stage, there are certain traditions and rules that it is customary to observe because they make us a special and separate people. Holiness implies separation from the world and dedication to God. And there is a danger that, having separated from the world without cleaving to God, we may become a particularly separated people possessing special truths inaccessible to ordinary sinners. Our generally accepted understanding of end-time prophecies may become the very obstacle that prevents God from conveying to us the simplicity of the Gospel for the present time, because we will be waiting for our own Messiah and planning victory in the battle of Armageddon in whatever way suits us best.

But the Lord makes it clear that those who have spiritual ears will be able to hear His voice and follow Him, admitting Him into their lives and putting all His counsels into practice.

The greatest danger for a believer is not that he will cease to believe in God, but that he will replace a living relationship with Christ with correct knowledge and confidence in his own rightness.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Please read Matthew 15:8-9; 23:23; John 5:39-40; Mark 7:6-8, 13; Isaiah 29:13; Proverbs 3:5-7; Daniel 12:3, 10; 2 Peter 3:16; 1 Corinthians 8:1-3; Ephesians 4:14-15.
2. What other Bible verses came to your mind?
3. What did you understand?
4. Are we repeating the error of the Pharisees today by considering our understanding of Scripture to be the only correct one? And should we accept someone else's understanding without examining it?

5. Are you ready to accept God's truth if it destroys your customary ideas about prophecy?
6. Have you replaced a living relationship with Christ with correct knowledge about Him?
7. Are there religious habits in the lives of God's people that have become more important than obedience to God?
8. What will you do if the Lord reveals to you a truth that contradicts your previous understanding?
9. Are you proud of the light you have received from God?
10. Has keeping the commandments become a goal for you instead of a means of fellowship with God?
11. Are you certain that Christ knows you personally?
12. What is more important to you: being right or being taught by God?
13. Do you expect prophecy to be fulfilled only in the form that seems right to you?
14. What are you ready to change now so that your relationship with Christ may become deeper, more living, and closer?

## Spued Out

Jesus said, 'So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth' (Revelation 3:16). His promises have the power to fulfill everything He has said, both that which is good and that which is sorrowful.

God's Word is powerful enough to save each one of us and make us new, righteous people who are perfect in love. It is also powerful enough to destroy everything unclean.

The Lord delights more in showing mercy than in destroying, and He is the longsuffering and merciful Lord God. From morning until evening, He stretches out His loving hands to every person, desiring to save him. He does everything possible to ensure that this salvation takes place and is complete. But if a person chooses his own path of salvation and ignores all of God's counsels, what can the Savior do for such people?

Addressing His church in its lukewarm condition, the Lord pronounces a terrible sentence upon those who will not accept God's plan. These people will be spued out of God's mouth. This will not be some momentous event at which God solemnly announces that a negligent disciple has been cast out. He will simply and quietly depart from that person's life forever, allowing him to follow his own way and do what he is accustomed to doing.

All those who did not follow the counsel of the Faithful Witness and did not enter into a trading relationship with Him will be unable to develop spiritually and grow according to God's plan. Yet they will actively perform their ministry according to their own plans, build new projects, establish new missionary societies, and do everything by which, in their view, they can glorify their Lord. Meanwhile, with special sorrow, He will leave these people forever, never again to extend a helping hand to them and forever to close His ears to their prayers.

Our Lord is not only abundant in mercy, but also just. When His mercy comes to an end and His patience is exhausted, justice then comes into operation.

When a bridegroom calls to his bride again and again and desires to have a close relationship with her, but she does not respond in any way to these calls and invitations, the bridegroom finally understands that his chosen one does not need him. He quietly leaves, giving her the opportunity to arrange her personal life as she wishes, without his participation.

To be spued out of God's mouth is the saddest event in the entire history of humanity. This is not because God is so angry and exacting, but because ignorance, inattentiveness, and indifference have become part of the lukewarm Christian's character, and he did nothing to correct this condition or to understand what the Lord offers and what He counsels us to obtain.

God has appointed the last days as a time of fiery trial—a trial involving the fear of physical death for one's faith. In the example of the three young men in Daniel 3, we can see the entire picture of what we too will soon face. These young men followed God despite all the dangers coming from the king. They were faithful to God in little things, and when the great trial came, they proved faithful in it as well. They did not know that God would save them from the fiery furnace, but they resolved to remain faithful unto death.

What were the rest of God's children doing during this time of trial? They were worshipping the image created by the Babylonian system. Something similar awaits us at the end of the history of this sinful world. The culmination will end in universal worship of the antichrist, and only those who responded to God's call, studied God's plan for the last days, and followed Christ wherever He invited His people will be able to endure this trial.

The Lord loves His children and will not allow any of us to perish because of our ignorance. He knows our weaknesses and knows how trusting and naive we are. He knows that we are blinded by this world and by all kinds of deceptions. Therefore, He will not make a harsh separation, but in His mercy will lay many of us to rest before these tragic events begin.

But woe to those who harden themselves against Christ and carry the seeds of rebellion within them. Their church membership will not save them, nor will the name of Christ by which they called themselves help them. Every sin must be confessed when the Holy Spirit points it out. Jesus is satisfied not by my agreement with His reproofs, but by my following the counsels He gives me after His reproofs.

The Lord sees with perfect accuracy whether I have heard Him or have not understood what is being said. Therefore, there is no reason to be afraid if some messenger has explained and presented the message incorrectly. But when the Lord clearly sees that the message was heard, understood, accepted by the heart, and then rejected through ignorance or unwillingness to do what He counsels, perhaps the Lord will try in some other special way to bring it to the person's awareness.

But rejecting Christ once opens the door to subsequent refusals to accept what He counsels. Therefore, there is a danger that the human heart will harden until nothing can soften it. It is like clay which, while soft, can take any shape, but after drying in the sun becomes hard and resistant to further working. When it passes through fire, it becomes fixed in its condition and is no longer capable of taking any other shape.

It is better for us to become established in good decisions and in God's plan as He presents it than to become established in our apostasy and hardness of heart.

As I tell you about God's plan in the message to Laodicea, I do not know whether you have heard it or understood nothing. I cannot see whether the Holy Spirit touches your hearts as you read these solemn truths, and therefore I cannot say how the Lord evaluates your subsequent choices and actions. My task is to continue speaking about this everywhere an opportunity exists.

But the Lord is not a man, and He makes no mistake when He sees what is taking place in the heart. He cannot be deceived. He watches your decision very seriously and records with Himself all your arguments 'for' and 'against.'

To be spued out of God's mouth is to be blotted out of the Book of Life. And what can be done after that? No one will solemnly announce to you that you have been rejected. No one will send you a letter stating that your name is no longer recorded in the Book of Life.

Your spiritual life will undergo no noticeable changes, and you will continue doing what you have always done. As usual, you will read the Bible and pray, attend spiritual meetings, and explain the emptiness in your heart by saying that it is a temporary phenomenon and that everything will certainly change soon.

Meanwhile, your destiny will already have been decided finally, and the Lord will never again pronounce your name as the name of one for whom He shed His precious blood. You will see chance coincidences in your life and attribute them to miraculous answers to your prayers, amaze others with your dedication, and perhaps, even while dying for Christ, consider yourself a great martyr for the truth.

In reality, however, you will become a victim of satanic activity against those who are no longer under God's protection. The world will continue to live and develop, planning its beautiful future and carrying you along in its current, while you do everything possible to resist the evil influence that, in streams exceeding your strength, will carry you downward toward the abyss of your final destruction.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Please read Hebrews 3:15; 4:11; Revelation 14:1; 20:15; Isaiah 55:6; Ezekiel 9:4-6; 33:11; John 10:27; 2 Peter 3:14; 2 Corinthians 13:5; Daniel 3:17-18; Romans 2:4-5.
2. What other Bible verses came to your mind?
3. What did you understand?
4. How seriously do you take Christ's warning about being spued out of His mouth?
5. Are there areas in your life where you knowingly ignore God's counsels? And do you have a habit of postponing obedience to God until a more convenient time?

6. Why is it easier for many people to replace obedience to Christ with active religious work?
7. Is there a danger that you call something spiritual growth when it is actually only an accumulation of knowledge?
8. How carefully do you study God's plan for the last days?
9. Do you notice occasions when the Holy Spirit prompts you to act, but you postpone your response?
10. What signs of hardening do you see in modern Christianity?
11. What does it mean to you to be recorded in the Book of Life?
12. How seriously do you regard the possibility of being rejected by Christ?
13. Why is religious activity not a guarantee of salvation?
14. Are you certain that you are following Christ where He leads, rather than where it is convenient for you to go?

## The Army of Overcomers

The book of Revelation describes a very interesting group known as the 144,000. These are special people who have a special relationship with Christ and a special character. They follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth, and in their mouth is found no guile. It is not without reason that the Lord set these people apart as a special group. It is commonly believed among us that these are people whose character will be so pure that they will meet Christ while still alive and pass through the time of trouble without a Heavenly Mediator.

This group is quite mysterious and enigmatic to people today. And if it is mysterious, you do not know what qualities of soul you must possess even to be a candidate for this number.

We can say with confidence that these people came out of Laodicea, that they were once lukewarm and sleeping Christians, but Jesus' invitation to a personal relationship awakened them. Having set out to obtain the blessings of God described in Revelation 3:18, they became possessors of everything the Faithful Witness counseled them to obtain. We may safely assume that these people are filled with faith which worketh by love, that they are clothed in the righteousness of Christ, and that Heavenly wisdom tells them what to do, how to do it, and in what time they are living. They learned to hear God's voice even when He is silent and to distinguish it among the many voices of this world. They know the voice of their Heavenly Shepherd and do not follow another.

These people passed through every stage of spiritual growth. Having learned that the goal of growth is charity out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned, they reached this condition of soul and received special blessings in their love for one another.

Like the wise virgins in the parable of Matthew 25:1-12, they obtained Heavenly oil and knew the One Who sells this blessing.

These people were taken out of the world so that the Lord might be glorified through them and in them. They lived amid a sinful society and among brethren who had fallen away, but they chose the better path and responded to the invitation of the Faithful Witness to enter into an eternal trading relationship with Him. In this relationship, they became so closely acquainted with Christ that they walked with Him, ate with Him, fell asleep and awoke with Him, and shared these discoveries with others, inviting everyone who desired to taste personally and see that the Lord is good.

When God created man, He did not simply create some intelligent being that would merely occupy a place in the Universe, eat and drink, and live for itself. No. The Lord created man with a definite purpose: through these people, He would show the entire Universe the beauty of His Heavenly character. The first people possessed the potential to reflect God's glory and to develop in this respect. No sin prevented them from visibly displaying the image and likeness of their Creator. But humanity fell, and the image of the Eternal God was buried beneath carnal attractions and desires. Yet God's dream and plan remained unchanged—to restore His image and likeness in fallen people and reveal this image to the fallen world and the observing Universe.

When the Savior was born into our world, through His sinless life He showed the entire Universe what God is truly like. He revealed to the world the image of a loving God and overcame every sin in the same way that we can.

Christ had access to the same power of the Holy Spirit that is available to us. God will work in us and through us and accomplish what He accomplished through Jesus if we accept God's plan and rely by faith upon the fulfillment of this plan in our lives, and if we follow everything He has provided for our salvation.

The group of 144,000 consists of those very overcomers who heard the message to Laodicea, followed Jesus' counsel, were zealous and repented of their lukewarm condition, opened the doors of their hearts to Christ, and had a close daily

relationship with Him. They did not consider themselves overcomers, but they advanced toward this victory by carrying out God's plan in their choices and in their relationship with Christ. They allowed God to fulfill in them all the purposes He had for them. Being humble people, they held a humble opinion of themselves and did not display their good works for everyone to see. But because of God's love, they had the most proper motive in everything they did.

They learned so thoroughly to seek God's counsel, to trust Him, and to believe that He would certainly protect them and fulfill in their lives everything for which they asked and toward which they strove. God led these people through the fire of trials, through ridicule, and through the cleansing of their hearts from love for this world. For a time, they lived and grew with others in a lukewarm condition, but when they heard God's counsel, they responded to it and put into practice everything to which the Faithful Witness called them. Although they knew how to overcome every temptation alone, they always strove for unity with their fellow believers and rejoiced over everyone they found for spiritual growth together.

Dwelling within these overcomers, Jesus revealed and showed them at the proper time where to take the next step, what to believe, and where to go. He was their constant Teacher and warned them of every danger that could slow their spiritual growth or lead them in another direction.

These people showed the whole world God's perfection and how God can transform any sinful person when that sinner begins sincerely to trust and follow his Shepherd. These people allowed God to be love within them and to teach them to love their enemies, their neighbors, the members of their households, their brothers and sisters, and one another. Love became the breath of their lives and the chief motive of their relationships with one another. They spoke with love, thought with love, and acted with love, placing it into everything they touched.

They overcame this world just as Christ overcame. When mortal danger threatened them, they chose death and remained

faithful to God. But death did not gain dominion over them, because God had another plan for their lives. They were to become living witnesses of God's power and God's perfection, showing the entire Universe and the whole world what complete obedience and the presence of God's grace in a person's life can produce. They endured every temptation and emerged from it as overcomers, just as Christ overcame while living in this world. They understand that none of the merit for this victory belongs to them, but that all of it is the privilege of the presence of God's grace in their minds and hearts.

And the most interesting thing is that you, dear reader, can become one of these 144,000 right now by responding to God's call and doing what He counsels you to do in Revelation 3:18. The Lord does not want you to be a spectator who applauds while watching others obtain these Heavenly blessings and grow in knowledge and in a personal relationship with Christ. The Lord desires you to become a direct participant in all these events and to overcome this world and all its temptations, to overcome all of Satan's temptations, and to cleave so firmly to Christ that it would be easier for you to die than to sin. This plan can be fulfilled in your life because it was written specifically for you. The Lord is calling and drawing you in particular to Himself, but you decide what to do with this call.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Please read Revelation 7:14; 14:1-5; John 10:10, 27; 15:5; 16:33; 17:23-25; Romans 8:29; 12:2; 13:14; Galatians 2:20; 5:6; Ephesians 4:15.
2. What other Bible verses came to your mind?
3. What did you understand?
4. Who are the 144,000?
5. Is there a connection between this group and the message to Laodicea?
6. How seriously do I take the counsel of the Faithful Witness to Laodicea?
7. How can I learn to distinguish God's voice daily among the many voices of this world?

8. Can I say that I have a close personal relationship with Christ?
9. Do the 144,000 understand what the Lord expects of them?
10. Will there be any accidental people among this number?
11. Why does the Bible give special prominence to this number?
12. Can the beauty of God's character be seen in my life?
13. Should the beauty of God's character be revealed in my love for friends and enemies?
14. Is love the chief motive of my actions?

## The Non-Overcomers

What comes to mind when you hear the name Igal? I do not think any Bible story comes to your memory. But if I tell you that he was the son of Joseph, we may begin carefully searching our memories for all the familiar heroes of faith bearing similar names and, since none of them had a son named Igal, ask for more information. And when I tell you that this man was from the tribe of Issachar, some of you will remember that these were men who had understanding of the times and knew what Israel ought to do. We read about this in 1 Chronicles 12:32. But the name Igal is not mentioned among these wise men. Then, with the help of a concordance, we quickly find the fascinating story of this man.

And if I mention the name Gaddiel, the son of Sodi, from the tribe of Zebulun, you are unlikely to guess where the Bible speaks about this man.

But I can add other names to this list: Shammua, Shaphat, Palti, Gaddiel, Gaddi, Ammiel, Sethur, Nahbi, and Geuel. I do not think you have encountered such names in ordinary life, with people giving them to their children. Nor have these men occupied any place in our memory, and after reading this chapter you may forget them forever. Why? Because these are the names of non-overcomers, upon whom God's curse is fulfilled—that the names of such people will be blotted out from under heaven (Deuteronomy 29:20; Psalm 9:5).

But this group also included two other men: Caleb the son of Jephunneh and Oshea the son of Nun, to whom Moses gave the name Joshua.

I think that now, upon hearing these two names, you immediately remembered Israel's story of the twelve spies who were sent to explore Canaan.

'Non-overcomers' is not a designation you will find in the Bible, but we can place in this category those to whom a sacred trust was given but who failed to justify that trust and entered Bible history as people whose example should not be followed and

who are not worth remembering. Yet many of them were God's children, belonged to God's people, did God's work, and performed good deeds. But having chosen the path of non-victory, they passed into oblivion. Some of them, like Judas Iscariot, are still associated with something proverbial.

I know many people named Daniel, Peter, Esther, and Mary, but I have never heard of anyone naming their children Judas, Saul, or Herodias. As a rule, believers do not give their children such names. And what do the names have to do with it? Essentially, nothing. But the conduct and non-victory of people who bore beautiful names disgraced those names forever.

The name Adolf is not so bad in its history, but in Germany and Europe it is not customary to give it to newborn children because one man bearing that name once committed a very great deal of evil.

The Lord desires to see us as overcomers. Through faith in Him and by virtue of our spiritual birth, our names are written in the Book of Life, where special records are kept of our spiritual growth and our sins. The Lord gives us everything necessary for victory, teaches us how to use it, and sends mentors and teachers who explain to us the paths of salvation and teach us where and in Whom to obtain strength and wisdom for victory. Our faith overcomes this world, and love establishes us in this victory.

The enemy of souls has prepared interesting and very severe trials for us. Whether we want to or not, we will have to pass through this fire and come out of it as overcomers. Just as the three young men in the third chapter of the book of Daniel did not wish to enter the fiery furnace but found themselves there by God's providence, so we too will find ourselves in difficult circumstances in which we will need power from above so that no evil and no fire may harm us. We know that this trial will certainly occur, but we do not know when it will happen, exactly what it will be, or in what way we will be tested. But the plans of the wicked one are not unknown to God. He knows what this world is capable of and how to withstand its evil influence.

Even now, the Lord offers us the opportunity to enter into a constant spiritual relationship with Him. He desires to endow us with those qualities of soul and those riches of Heaven which, when we possess them, will enable us to stand in every trial and be overcomers in every battle. However strange the weapons from God's arsenal may seem to us, they will be the most effective means of victory. What will happen to those who do not heed the counsel of the Faithful Witness in Revelation 3:18? Most likely, they will never become overcomers. What can Heaven do for those who hear God's voice, understand what is being discussed, take an interest in the details of the blessings offered, and do nothing to obtain them and learn to use them?

I believe that special records of every overcomer's victories are kept in Heaven so that all the inhabitants of Heaven may study the power of God's grace through the example of living and sinful people—how a fallen being can become a mighty overcomer through God's power and grace. It even seems to me that some streets in the Heavenly Jerusalem will be named after us. Perhaps this will not happen, but I am certain that the names of the overcomers will surely be immortalized in the Universe and will eternally bear a special meaning and power.

And what will happen to those who prove to be non-overcomers? Their names will be blotted out of every source of Heavenly information. They will be remembered once with regret and tears, and consideration will be given to how many opportunities these people received and how they chose their own path, upon which they suffered shipwreck. Even now it is very painful to speak and write about this, knowing that among these people may be my dear brothers and sisters who go with me to God's temple, worship our Savior, and do everything possible to save at least someone from this world. Perhaps I myself, because of hidden sins, spiritual laziness, or ignorance, will be found among the non-overcomers. I want least of all to believe or speak about this, but God is no respecter of persons: He will give victory only to those who do everything possible to be overcomers and who study everything God decides to reveal to them.

In the parable of the ten virgins (Matthew 25:1-12), Jesus made it clear that among believers there will be those who understand perfectly well what the Lord is calling them to obtain, how much it costs, and where it may be obtained, but who, for personal reasons, will not obtain it during the favorable time. Their vessels will prove empty, and when the time of darkness comes, their lamps will go out.

Jesus also taught that many will come and be surprised by the closed doors because they had good works, supernatural miracles, and many other things that they considered sufficient for salvation. But Jesus will declare that He does not know them, because they proved to be workers of iniquity.

And what does Jesus offer for victory? Faith and love, His righteousness, and wisdom from above. He does not separate these qualities as though suggesting that we may possess only one of them. He desires to present this Heavenly treasure in its fullness and, through personal fellowship, teach us how to use all of it, permitting various trials in our lives.

Be assured that the Savior will not leave a single thirsty person in ignorance, nor will He withhold His blessings. We will be given all the fullness of Heaven's treasures for complete victory over self, the world, sin, and Satan. Are you ready to become such an overcomer? Do you have ears?

Questions for Reflection:

1. Please read John 16:33; 1 John 5:4; Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21; 21:7; Ephesians 6:11-13; Zechariah 4:6; Matthew 25:10.
2. What other Bible verses came to your mind?
3. What did you understand?
4. Who is a non-overcomer? Which biblical non-overcomers do you know?
5. What is necessary in order to become an overcomer?
6. Do you have a habit of postponing important spiritual decisions 'until later'?
7. What is more important—convenience or faithfulness to God?

8. Are you ready to pay the price for spiritual victory?
9. Are you relying on someone else's faith, love, and righteousness?
10. Why am I unable to produce within myself the weapons needed for victory?
11. Are you determined to go all the way to the end? If so, where are you going, and whom are you following?
12. Why will an overcomer be unable to avoid the trial and the fiery furnace?
13. What is necessary in order to be an overcomer wearing the whole armour of God?
14. What name do you want to leave behind?

## The Breath of a Gentle Wind

The greatest and most significant works are accomplished not amid great noise or some supernatural manifestations of Divine power, but very quietly and steadily. Spiritual growth takes place unnoticed. If I am constant in my intention to know God and follow Him, He will reveal to me what will help me move forward.

In the Bible, we read about some striking moments when God's power was manifested. For example, the prophet Elijah said that there would be no rain, and there was no rain for three and a half years. Then he summoned the prophets of Baal to Mount Carmel, and we see how miraculously God answered His servant's prayer. This striking manifestation of Divine power frightened everyone present, and in fear they fell to the ground, glorifying God. But such manifestations do not change hearts. They reveal a problem very clearly, but they do not solve it. What happened afterward? The prophet became afraid of Queen Jezebel's threat and fled into the wilderness, wishing for death. The people returned to their homes, reflecting on what they had seen. Nowhere is it described what reforms took place in the country after such a miraculous manifestation of God's power.

But when the prophet Elijah began supporting the schools of the prophets and teaching other people to do the same, and then passed this work on to his successor Elisha, we see what an influence it had upon Israel.

We also read that when the Holy Spirit was poured out upon Christ's disciples on the Day of Pentecost, they began to speak with other tongues, and after Peter's sermon several thousand people repented and accepted Jesus as their Savior.

After that, we do not see God's power manifested in the same manner, but through the disciples' consistent and continual ministry, the Lord added to the Church those who were being saved.

My mistake may be to expect some significant miracles so that, through them, a transformation may somehow be accomplished in people's hearts. But miracles can amaze, yet they do not change a person's character. Constancy in my ministry and the calm explanation of biblical truths and criteria, however, are the sowing of spiritual seed which, when it springs up, bears much fruit.

Every plant grows very quietly, and it needs certain conditions and continual watering in order to grow successfully. If this takes place, I can expect much fruit at the proper time. In nature, there is no mixture that makes the bearing of fruit instantaneous. Time and constancy accomplish this work more successfully than any miracle fertilizer.

When I enter into a special trading relationship with the Faithful Witness of Revelation 3:18, obtaining the goods He offers and using them in my life is not some noisy event. It is more like the gentle breath of the wind, which very tenderly but continually reveals to me the importance of what I am obtaining and shows me how it can be used in practical daily life.

Faith and love are a very quiet manifestation of the Holy Spirit's power in my mind, where He persuades me to rely upon God's Word and act according to these principles in response to the hurricane of human passions raging around me.

The righteousness of Christ is a very quiet influence upon my heart through which the Holy Spirit calls me continually to behold the Savior, study the beauty of His character, and conduct myself in this world as Jesus did.

Heavenly wisdom is the quiet instruction of the Holy Spirit through which He teaches me how to apply the Heavenly goods I have obtained to myself, to my spiritual growth, and for the benefit of other people.

Establishing a close trading relationship with the Faithful Witness is not some noisy event. It quietly arises in the heart, awakening my interest in what the Savior offers. Then a special thirst arises, because of which I quietly but continually come to the Heavenly store and quietly obtain that which gives me

strength for spiritual growth and for further victories over the influence of the world and the powers of evil.

My constancy in ministry and in building personal relationships with people and with Jesus is far more important than spontaneous manifestations of God's supernatural miracles. God sometimes manifests Himself in an unusual and loud manner. Most likely, this occurs as a sign to draw attention to Himself, but not as the principle by which human hearts are changed. Amazement and delight are not the moving motive for changing my character. But the constancy of the gentle breath of the wind is acceptable for every kind of spiritual growth and forms within me the mindset of a righteous person.

It is difficult to change a person's life through a single sermon, but if that sermon contains the supernatural influence of the Holy Spirit, the forceful words that are spoken can show people a better path. But when seminars are conducted on a particular subject, they calmly persuade people to accept the truth and follow it. Under the influence of these persuasive and sustained discourses, a change takes place in the mind as the Holy Spirit convinces a person of the truth and prompts him to live in a new way.

There is a special power in silence through which I can hear the voice of the Holy Spirit addressing my heart. Instruction in the principles of love takes place not amid peals of thunder, but in a calmer atmosphere where my mind is attuned to receive what is being offered.

We all want miracles. We want the Holy Spirit to descend upon us in the form of fire in answer to our prayers and miraculously bless our listeners. But unfortunately, such an influence in a single occurrence will change little in a person's soul, although it may direct him onto the true path. Yet one must walk this narrow path continually, and in order to pass successfully along it, the quiet influence of a gentle wind is needed to show the way forward and inspire the next step. Instruction in love and in the righteousness of Christ is a very quiet event taking place in my mind and heart. Love teaches me to make quiet decisions and calmly put them into practice in my life, giving all of myself

to those around me without regret. The Lord instructs me without shouting, noise, or pressure, but confidently and continually. Every morning He renews His mercy and grace and remains faithful and unchanging in this approach to His chosen ones.

Jesus knows how and on what occasions to address me. A quiet and tender touch upon the strings of my soul is His method of working with His disciples. He displays neither haste nor impatience and knows how to convey the necessary information to me very calmly. He acts confidently and skillfully.

There is great persuasive power in a quiet and skillful approach, in which my mind analyzes the light it receives without pressure and agrees with God, opening my heart and persuading my will to accept the better path.

In every school, children are taught various sciences and subjects without noise or shouting. Every school curriculum is designed for a long period of setting tasks and explaining various rules and laws. This constancy attunes the minds of students to accept and assimilate the subjects being taught. And we see how many educated people enter the world after graduating from these schools. Their education took place through the quiet influence and instruction of various teachers. Spiritual instruction is built upon the same principles, and by observing these rules we quietly comprehend wise truths and make them part of our minds.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Please read 1 Kings 19:11-13; Zechariah 4:6; Isaiah 30:15; Hosea 6:3; Matthew 13:33; John 3:8; Acts 2:41-47; 2 Corinthians 3:18; Philippians 2:13; James 3:17-18.
2. What other Bible verses came to your mind?
3. What did you understand?
4. Why does God so often work quietly rather than through loud manifestations of power?
5. Am I seeking the unusual while neglecting what the Lord already reveals to me every day?

6. What will happen if constancy is replaced by rare moments of spiritual uplift?
7. What changes a person more powerfully: a miracle or prolonged instruction?
8. Does the Bible describe miracles that changed someone's life? Give several examples.
9. What prevents people from continually obtaining 'gold,' 'white raiment,' and 'eyesalve'?
10. Am I drowning out the voice of the Holy Spirit with busyness, ministry, entertainment, or constant activity?
11. Do you believe that calm instruction can change a person's life more powerfully than an emotional sermon?
12. Do those around me see in me the calmness produced by the Holy Spirit?
13. What areas of my character is the Lord now changing without my noticing?
14. What am I ready to change today in order to learn to live under the quiet, continual, and transforming influence of the Holy Spirit?

## Jesus Only

As I pass through every stage of faith, I grow not only in the knowledge of truth, but also in the knowledge of the One Who is the Truth. In this knowledge lie the secret of my victory and the strength to overcome every difficulty and trial.

Any spiritual knowledge without the knowledge of Christ, although it may be useful information that brings much light and changes many things in life, does not give the right to Eternity. Jesus defined eternal life in these words: 'And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent' (John 17:3).

When Jesus spoke in Matthew 7:23 about His rejection of those who bear His name, do good works, and perform many right actions, the key point was that all those who were rejected shared the absence of a personal relationship with Christ. They did not respond to God's counsel and did not open their hearts when the Savior knocked upon them. They chose their own path to eternal life and decided to obtain the right to it through their own merits and achievements.

At every stage of growth, the Lord gives me a certain amount of time to learn new and useful things, to make important decisions, to remove something from my life and add something else to it. He does not hurry me, but neither does He allow me to become stuck. When I am invited to rise higher, any delay can slow my growth, and I may become stuck for a time at some stage. Any subsequent refusal of the invitation to continue growing blocks my mind so completely that I cease responding to God's voice.

The stage of success is the longest and most interesting stage of my spiritual growth. Here I not only learn something new, but also put the knowledge I have received into practice and see the effect of my words and instruction. I succeed in everything and regard this as my personal victory in spiritual battles. Such victories confirm me in the belief that I am doing everything correctly, but I may fall into the danger of beginning

to regard my works as an important criterion in serving God and knowing Him.

I see how the Lord answers my prayers and how, in response to my prayers, He blesses me and my neighbors. I see miracles take place and demons leave their victims at my command in the name of Jesus. I greatly enjoy praying for the sick and seeing disease leave these suffering people as they revive and begin to live healthy and fulfilling lives. And if I manage at this stage to accept every reform into my life, I feel that I have reached a special spiritual height, because I receive blessings from these reforms and see their special significance for our time.

But the Lord does not want me to remain at this stage. The experience and knowledge I received while growing spiritually will not disappear, and I will not be left with nothing if I accept God's invitation to move forward. I do not know what the narrow path looks like, and therefore, when the Lord leads me out of the familiar comfort of spiritual victories and places me in the darkness of a forest unknown to me, my faith undergoes interesting trials. I begin to reevaluate all my values and my entire life, and in all of this I greatly need Jesus' help. This is precisely what He is waiting for. He desires a close personal relationship in which not my works and success, but my thirst to know Him will be the chief motive of our relationship.

Jesus is a Person. He is able to feel, He understands my feelings and needs, and He knows how and with what to satisfy me so that I may develop fully and win genuine victories, manifesting the spirit of an overcomer.

Because Christ's goal is the love that I must obtain, He desires to communicate this to me and give me a thirst for this quality of soul. He creates conditions in which, despite all my Christianity, I begin to understand that I do not possess the love that would win the victory in every battle. Through particular circumstances, Jesus reveals to me that without love I am no one and nothing, not only in His sight but also in my own.

Personal knowledge of Christ and a personal relationship with Him teach me that He not only wants to fellowship with me, but also desires to act in me and through me in love. In offering the knowledge of Himself, He also offers the knowledge of God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. It is difficult to describe in human language the full essence of these relationships within me, but as I grow, they become part of my spiritual development. I cannot say that growth requires only a relationship with Christ or only with the Heavenly Father. Indeed, these relationships themselves are impossible without the direct participation of the Holy Spirit.

The Lord allows me to immerse myself within so that there He may reveal the sources of a close relationship with Himself, which help sweep all the rubbish out of my life and endow me with that which, by my nature, I do not possess.

As I continue to grow and, having analyzed my heart, desire to journey outward and come to know the spiritual world of my friends, building upon this new relationships with my neighbors, I begin to understand that without love I can neither attain nor obtain this. Therefore, the Holy Spirit naturally begins to draw me into study in the school of God's love.

All of this takes place in a manner far more complex and interesting than I describe here, but there is one common element in it all: I understand that without the cross I can no longer do anything, and I need nothing except for Him always to be with me and direct all my inner processes and outward circumstances. My prayers at this time become so intimate that I may wonder: Am I trusting Christ too closely, and am I speaking with Him too tenderly in my prayer? After all, He is God, and I am an unworthy sinner. But my conscience does not reprove me, and I understand that God likes such fellowship. Understanding how close He is to me, I tell Him everything, ask Him for everything, ask questions about every little thing, do not hesitate to address Him at any time of the day or night, and know that He is always near and listening to me in order to answer and act.

His physical silence no longer surprises me. I have learned to hear that gentle voice within me which knows how to address me, how to comfort me, and how to suggest something important and necessary. Having such a relationship, I become calm and ask for more love.

At first it seemed to me that, having received love from God, I should return it specifically to Him through declarations of love, through prayers containing words of love, through setting my heart upon my future meeting with Him, and through showing special love toward Him. But the Lord makes me understand that His love, which He teaches me, is directed toward my neighbors. To them I must reveal our personal relationship and show how God's power within me knows how to love them and how it is able to respond to everything with love. I am learning this and discovering a new world for myself.

The School of Agape Love is the most beautiful endeavor that can be recommended to every one of us. At this stage of faith, I come to know God as He desires to present Himself to the entire world. But because I am one who has responded to His call, it gives Him special pleasure to act through me and through the imperfect love that I try to show toward my neighbors and friends. And my Lord rejoices with me over the victories He accomplishes within me.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Please read Matthew 6:33; 7:21-23; Revelation 3:20; John 13:35; 14:21; Jeremiah 29:13; 2 Corinthians 3:18; Philippians 1:21; 3:8; Romans 5:5; Colossians 2:9-10.
2. What other Bible verses came to your mind?
3. What did you understand?
4. What does the expression 'to know Christ' mean to you personally?
5. What is the difference between knowing about Christ and knowing Him personally?
6. Why is eternal life connected specifically with knowing God and Jesus Christ?
7. Why were the people in Matthew 7:21-23 rejected despite their good works?

8. What can prevent a believer from moving forward in spiritual development?
9. What kinds of spiritual success can imperceptibly replace Christ Himself in a person's life?
10. Why do trials or persecution often contribute to a deeper knowledge of the Lord?
11. Why does Christ desire to be not only a Teacher, but also a close Friend?
12. Why is it impossible to win genuine spiritual victories without love?
13. What role does the Holy Spirit play in a personal relationship with Christ?
14. Why does love for people become a natural result of love for God?

## The Victories of Others

As I learn to love, with every new trial and every opportunity for God's power to be manifested in my life, I gain experience in personal victories and defeats. From within, I know how God's love acts in me and how difficult—and sometimes simply impossible—it is to be an overcomer without it. The most difficult stage of spiritual victory is complete reliance upon God's power, when you have to release your opponent, humble yourself, and wait to see what will result. My human nature thirsts for justice, but God's love desires to teach me mercy and humility.

Choosing Love, I accept the consequences and take the position of a loving person, sometimes not knowing how the next trial will end. But a miracle takes place, and instead of disappointment I receive the blessing of an overcomer. People call me names, trample upon me, insult me, and walk away with their heads held high, considering themselves victorious, while I remain silent and choose love. After all this, I rejoice that instead of anger and revenge I manifested the Spirit of Christ and did not stoop to putting my opponent in his place. This is an interesting experience that brings many deep emotions, but everyone must pass through it.

But I have also noticed this particular feature: in my own life I am ready to endure every deprivation and insult, every injustice and every trial, entrusting all the consequences to God and understanding that God does not always intervene to make things pleasant for me and punish the guilty person. But when it concerns another person to whom I am explaining the characteristics of spiritual victory, I very often have to listen to the most unpleasant details of someone else's trials.

As a rule, a believer describes his struggle from the position of one upon whom satanic wrath and other attacks are unjustly falling. I hear how my friends are humiliated, knowingly deceived, slandered, and presented in an unfavorable light before other people. I very much want the Lord to intervene

and defend His children, showing wicked people how dangerous it is to mistreat God's children.

And saddest of all, I notice righteous indignation arising in my heart against every injustice done to my friends. Evaluating the situation as a third party, I see the evident actions of Satan in the opponents of truth and how ingenious he is in inflicting spiritual, emotional, and physical wounds. How can one help in such a case? I want to be useful.

My experience tells me that people's minds must be directed toward true victory and that love must be chosen instead of carnal solutions to immediate problems. This is precisely how I act in my own life. But when it concerns my friend, I want the Lord to intervene, perform a miracle, punish the guilty, and teach the wicked a lesson. At the same time, I understand that such an experience will teach nothing good, and the next time the person will expect the same intervention from God, which may not come.

Understanding all the arguments for and against, I offer my friends the same thing I choose in my own life: love, a happy and grateful spirit, friendliness, and joy. I invite them to find in this very love the joy of victory and the special beauty of God's plan for the overcomer.

Not every friend of mine agrees with such a turn of events. As a rule, everyone expects sympathy and participation in condemning the opponent's injustice. But I begin to propose unthinkable things: to love when you are being beaten; to choose happiness when you are being robbed and humiliated; to remain a friend when you are being betrayed. Yet this is exactly how the Lord overcame the enemy, and this is exactly how He won complete victory over sin, this world, and all demonic powers.

While suffering, Jesus did not murmur. He voluntarily surrendered Himself to humiliation in order to show how such things are overcome through love. When He was beaten unjustly, the only response of which love was capable was to ask: 'If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil: but if well,

why smitest thou me?’ But such words only provoked further mockery and an even greater desire to humiliate and trample Him.

The Lord endured all this injustice with a meek and silent spirit, allowing His enemies to manifest their satanic traits of character. When Christ was being crucified without cause, He could have appealed to God’s justice and asked the Father for protection so that the guilty might be punished. But He prayed for these people because they did not understand what they were doing.

When Jesus hung upon the cross, heard the mockery directed at Him, and saw the satisfaction of His enemies, He did not manifest the same spirit in response and did not give the enemy even the slightest reason to anticipate His revenge.

On the cross, Jesus manifested absolute love—in His thoughts, feelings, and silence. He cursed no one, but thought about the salvation of these wicked people and believed that through His death He would be able to redeem and free from Satan’s slavery many deceived souls. Christ’s victory was complete and absolute. His example is the most convincing and faithful proof that love overcomes every sin.

As I practice such love in my life, I notice how it overcomes and makes me an overcomer. Having tasted the joy of such victories, I no longer want to live in any other way, and I know how to conduct myself in the next trial. But my friends are a special trial for me. How I wish all their problems could be resolved very quickly and justly! Yet at the same time I understand that they would then learn nothing.

Only love, the manifestation of a humble spirit, sincere friendliness, and the desire to be happy—only these qualities of soul constitute the warrior spirit of an overcomer. Knowing this, I counsel my friends to choose love, happiness, and a friendly spirit. It is very difficult for me to surrender them to the crucifixion of self. But from personal experience I know that there is no other path to victory. And any human justice can become a trap for their souls and spiritual safety.

And I say, 'Love, forgive, release, and give, as Jesus did.' Then I wait to be accused of fanaticism and for people no longer to want to share such problems with me because I solve them in a very strange way. But I cannot offer anything else, because I know that human justice is not the path of overcomers, but merely the standard solution to problems. Not everyone wants to overcome as Christ overcame. Not everyone agrees that such a victory is better. Not everyone wants to continue winning such victories. And some, after trying the power of love, leave this path and return to the works of the flesh.

But how joyful it is to hear that my friends have acted in love and then share their blessings, revealing the power and value of such victories. I want to declare in detail and with delight: 'I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth' (3 John 4).

And afterward, how interesting it is to discuss all the details and blessings of the victory! How joyful it is to hear someone else's testimony of victory in Christ! I think that all Heaven rejoices with me. The Heavenly witnesses of our battles know better than anyone what true victory looks like, and they are very glad to see it in the sons of men.

How joyful it is to hear about another person's experience of victory, understanding that he is expressing your own experience as an overcomer, but now in his own life.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Please read 1 Peter 2:21-23; 3:9; Isaiah 53:7; Matthew 5:39, 44; Luke 6:27-29; 23:34; Romans 12:17-21; Ephesians 4:31-32; Proverbs 20:22; 24:29; 1 John 4:14.
2. What other Bible verses came to your mind?
3. What did you understand?
4. Have you experienced the victory of love? If so, please share it.
5. What is true victory for us: proving that we are right or preserving love?
6. Why is it sometimes so difficult to renounce the desire to restore justice by our own efforts?

7. How often do I ask the Lord to change my opponent instead of changing me?
8. Why does the Lord sometimes not intervene in my trials as I would like Him to?
9. Why do we sometimes want the Lord to punish those who hurt our family and loved ones?
10. What happens within me when I choose love instead of conflict?
11. Why does love sometimes appear to be weakness in the eyes of those around us?
12. What does the expression 'overcome evil with good' mean to me in practice?
13. What do people see in me during a conflict: my character or the character of Christ?
14. Why does the Lord permit His children to suffer instead of immediately delivering them from suffering?

## Maintaining the Stage of Success

Success is popular in our world because everyone wants to have it in everything. If I undertake some enterprise, I expect it eventually to become successful and bring me spiritual or material benefit. If this does not happen, I close that enterprise and think about starting another one.

Let us take a blogger as an example. Today, being a blogger is fashionable, popular, and accessible. Enormous potential has been placed within each one of us, and with a positive evaluation from other people, it can manifest itself in very interesting ways. If I study market demand and offer people exactly what they want, my popularity increases. By studying how marketing and advertising work, I will be able to achieve a certain degree of success very quickly if I use these means to promote my ideas and products. How useful my product will be to the final consumer is no longer such an important question.

If you and I try to evaluate the products of some popular blogger in the light of Eternity, they will most likely fail to meet biblical criteria or give people hope of eternal life. The number of followers does not determine the value of his publications. And if this blogger is a Christian, then in addition to popularity, an enormous responsibility rests upon him to ensure that his materials are not only popular and pure, but also fully consistent with Heavenly standards and biblical truth. All of this must be taken into account before setting out upon such a path to success.

The stage of success in spiritual growth is unique in that every enterprise at this stage proves successful, and every work done with all one's heart brings a special blessing, especially when a good result is visible. This stage is the longest period of spiritual growth. During it, a believer acquires skills, forms his character, learns to distinguish and separate good from evil, brings new people into the church, and does a great deal of useful work for God's cause.

The stage of success is God's stage, which He appointed for our spiritual growth and at which His Spirit actively works for the good of us all. Because success is attractive, particular formulas for success are developed in our society, books are written on the subject, and many people conduct training programs on how to conquer the surrounding world successfully. Although the world resists, it still cannot withstand the successful activity of God's messengers and is compelled in some areas to surrender its positions and release the tormented into freedom.

A great many books and scientific studies of every kind have been written on this subject. We have become professionals in conducting successful evangelistic programs. And the truth moves forward, confidently making a way for itself.

The Internet has opened new opportunities for preaching the Gospel. Although we were late, we were nevertheless able to occupy this niche and plant the banner of truth there.

But however successful we may be, eventually we all arrive at a lukewarm condition in which some of our works remain hot, while in other respects we cool so greatly that no hot works can melt the icy parts of the heart. Jesus identifies this problem as He addresses our generation and calls us to enter into a close trading relationship with Him.

Some of us who decide to leave the stage of success and give the Lord the opportunity to immerse us within ourselves in order to discover what prevents us from getting rid of this condition begin to look at everything taking place through different eyes and receive a completely different evaluation of our success. The Lord permits us, as we respond to His call, to become disappointed in many good and successful things that previously inspired us so greatly and that, as we saw it, added to our spiritual growth.

But because it is not customary among us to speak about spiritual growth and point to its final goal—the stage of love, which we must necessarily reach—the only solution regarded as correct remains missionary work at the stage of success. When I decide to remain at this stage and do everything possible for it

to grow and expand, all my energy is directed toward maintaining everyone and everything at the stage of success.

All my labors and all my interests are directed toward winning as many people as possible for Christ and bringing them to my level. As it is written, 'The disciple is not above his master' (Matthew 10:24-25). And what is characteristic is that all my works are in demand and popular. People gladly read them, distribute them, share them, and also use them to replace the works of those who no longer maintain the stage of success.

In God's plan, this stage of growth is just as important as all the others. But God has a plan for the full development of my faith, and He invites me to set out upon this narrow path, where I will be accompanied by personal spiritual success attained after overcoming difficult spiritual crises.

When I am one stage ahead of my fellow believers, they still understand me and listen with interest. I become for them a spiritual psychologist who understands spiritual matters somewhat more deeply than others. But when I move forward and begin telling others what new things are taking place in my spiritual growth, I notice that I become completely incomprehensible to them.

And when I begin to speak about the love I receive from Christ, which produces a transformation of the entire inner person within me, I understand that I become even less comprehensible. Moreover, my testimony about the spiritual blessings of the stage of love begins to irritate my listeners because it seems to them that I am humiliating them by telling them what I have attained in Jesus. This is not something to fear, but it is something for which we must be prepared.

Unfortunately, the entire Laodicean system is structured to maintain the stage of success and bring everyone precisely to this level, and then to teach them to find other people in the world and bring them to this same stage of development.

But God has His own plan for my victory. He desires to teach me love and lead me through every trial and crisis, showing how His love in me and through me must overcome this world.

His task is not only to bring me to the stage of love, but also to help me remain at this level as long as I live and walk with Him.

But ignorance of God's plans and expectations exerts its influence upon me. I believe that my present position at the stage of success satisfies my Lord. After all, I am successful in advancing God's cause, which means that God must rejoice in it.

But Jesus invites me to rise higher because my continual success may make my head spin and make me proud, blind, and unfit for His Kingdom. I will begin to rely upon my own knowledge and strength and cease to trust in God.

My salvation consists not only in learning biblical truths, but also in preparing my heart for life among holy beings, where it is customary to pay one another with love and to live in love.

God's goal is not to lead me to success, but to lead me through success to love. If I stop at success, I risk becoming self-satisfied. But if I allow the Lord to lead me farther, success will cease to be my support, and love will become my nature.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Please read Philippians 3:13-14; Hebrews 5:14; 6:1; Romans 12:2, 9; Proverbs 16:18; Psalm 127:1; Zechariah 4:6; Hosea 4:6; Jeremiah 9:23-24; Luke 9:23; 17:10; 1 Corinthians 15:58.
2. What other Bible verses came to your mind?
3. What did you understand?
4. What is the chief goal of my spiritual life: success in ministry or growth in love?
5. Am I able to give up a successful work if the Lord calls me to move forward?
6. And how does the Lord call us to move forward?
7. Can you regard your success as proof of your spiritual maturity?
8. What will I lose if my entire audience disappears but Christ remains?
9. How often do I trust my own knowledge more than the Lord?

10. Why does the Lord sometimes permit disappointment even in good works?
11. What happens to my faith when my labors cease to be successful?
12. Why can the disciple not be above his master?
13. Why does speaking about God's love sometimes provoke resistance even among believers?
14. If Jesus were to evaluate today not my works, but the measure of His love within me, what evaluation would He give my life?

## Ministry Is a Responsibility

When I immerse myself in reflection on spiritual growth, many questions arise in me concerning the people I see in my church: among the leaders and among those who bear responsibility for various kinds of ministry. It naturally seems to me that these people have already grown spiritually, have reached the summit of their development, and that their faith rises above our world like an impregnable rock. But as I become better acquainted with them, I understand that they are people just like everyone else, who have simply been entrusted with more and who bear greater responsibility before God than ordinary church members.

Ministry is not a status that makes me a special person and opens the gates of the Kingdom of Heaven to me. Rather, it is a great responsibility for the light I have received and for the opportunity to share revealed blessings with other people.

In our church, it is not customary to appoint young and inexperienced people as church leaders or to entrust them with a ministry for which they have not yet matured. Although there are exceptions, we see that the church watches very carefully whom it puts forward for pastoral ministry. Who is a pastor? As a rule, he is an ordinary person with many years of experience living within the church community, who knows how to build relationships with people, understands the teachings of the church, and lives in accordance with them. He is a person in whom the church places its trust by appointing him as a leader and organizer of church life and various projects within the church.

Such terms as theologian, bachelor, master, doctor, professor, and teacher have entered our internal vocabulary. We understand that these titles are not given without reason, but testify that these people have received specialized training in theological educational institutions and possess greater knowledge than many other church members.

But all of us together, with all our leaders, pastors, presidents, and secretaries, are members of one beloved, warm church to which Jesus addresses His special message. To Him, we are all members of His body. He desires not only to give us knowledge and freedom from sin, but also to draw us nearer to Himself, making us overcomers in the coming struggle that all of us will have to endure.

Ministry entails an enormous responsibility before God for the salvation of those souls whom God entrusts to church leaders. Someone may understand this to mean that the status of a leader makes a person the unquestionable superior of others, giving him the right to command and make decisions single-handedly. But this is not so. According to the teaching of Christ, the great one is the person who makes himself a servant to those who are weaker in faith, who know less, and who need a wise mentor.

Spiritual growth does not depend upon a person's title or status in the church. A conference president may reach a certain stage of spiritual development and, without growing any further, continue to perform his ministry in the leadership of the church organization. Spiritual growth is a personal relationship with Christ in which the Faithful Witness invites me to rise above myself and my concerns and to receive the love that will make me hot in every sphere of church life.

I may be an ordinary church member who responded to Christ's call and entered into a trading relationship with Him, acquiring everything that Jesus counsels me to buy from Him. As I purchase these blessings, I grow spiritually without noticing it and begin to see what was previously incomprehensible to me. The Lord reveals to me great and inaccessible things that I did not know. He leads me from glory to glory, transforming my character in love, faith, meekness, and humility. If, at the same time, I am a church leader or hold some leadership position in a division, then my relationship with Christ makes me fit to perform fully the ministry entrusted to me, and I love with a pure heart those whom the Lord has committed to my care. Then all my instruction and deeds will be permeated with the

spirit of Christ's love, which I will no longer be able to conceal within myself.

At one camp meeting, I listened to a representative of the General Conference who spoke about the interesting ideas some ministers in exotic countries have regarding their leadership status. They believe that the more important a person is and the higher his position, the more slowly he should move and the smoother his movements should be. The leader of one of the divisions in that region moves so slowly that everyone else must wait a long time for him to take his place and pass among his fellow believers. When one sees something like this, one may get the impression that this is an especially holy person who understands something about life that you do not.

Every culture has its own distinctive features, which we have no right to condemn or hold up to ridicule. But if Heavenly love is absent from these features, then there is no benefit in anything we offer through our culture. Faith which worketh by love is the distinguishing characteristic of every overcomer who fights against himself and overcomes sin from within through the power of Jesus Christ.

If a minister in the church is also a well-known preacher whose testimonies touch hearts and stir people's minds, this still does not mean that he has grown spiritually and abides in love. It is very easy to determine whether love is present in a person: he always speaks about it, lives by it, and brings it into every relationship and every interaction with other people. For him, words about love are something desirable, something he speaks about with interest and wishes to hear from others. He will not miss a single lecture on this subject and will study everything that is said and written about the message to Laodicea. He is open to learning something new and accepting everything that will help him grow spiritually. As a rule, such people do not seek leadership positions or administrative work, because they understand that the main thing is to build close and strong relationships of love and friendship among people and fellow believers, while everything else consists merely of

organizational matters that may change according to circumstances.

But there are also leaders who, upon attaining a certain position, become unreachable and elusive to ordinary church members. They are constantly traveling on business and attending sessions, meetings, and councils. They have so much to do that almost no time remains for personal relationships. And, strangely enough, someone really must do this work. Yet I, not understanding what takes place in the upper echelons of church leadership, may decide that only a person who is especially close to God is capable of such activity. And my culture prompts me to honor especially those who have achieved much in this life. If administrative work compels me to travel constantly and makes me unreachable to my friends, that is only half the trouble. But if I begin to think that, having attained a certain position, I have become some kind of special person and therefore isolate myself from those whom I consider mere mortals, then perhaps I have missed something very important in spiritual growth, become stuck at one of its stages, and fallen into trouble.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Please read Mark 9:33-37; 10:42-45; Luke 12:42-48; 17:7-10; John 13:34-35; Philippians 2:3-8; 1 Thessalonians 2:7-8; Hebrews 13:17; 1 Peter 5:1-6.
2. What other Bible verses came to your mind?
3. What did you understand?
4. Do I understand that every leader remains, first and foremost, a human being in need of God's grace?
5. Do I idealize church leaders, expecting spiritual perfection from them? Do I judge a person's spirituality by his fame, education, or position?
6. Why does spiritual growth not depend upon a position in the church?
7. Why does a position in church leadership have no connection with spiritual growth, and how does spiritual authority differ from administrative power?

8. How do I relate to people who hold a higher and more responsible position than I do?
9. Why did Christ call the one who becomes a servant the greatest?
10. Am I able to serve people without expecting gratitude or recognition?
11. Do I use my knowledge or experience to feel superior to others?
12. Do I love people more than my position among them?
13. What qualities make a person a true spiritual leader?
14. Does my ministry draw people closer to Christ, or primarily to me?

## Christ's Beloved Church

However poorly we may think of the church of Laodicea and however poorly we may speak of this people, it is always worth remembering that the Lord loves His church and preserves it in this world. It has endured a great many trials and is now passing through the fire of the great controversy. Satan's attacks have not diminished, but have adopted a new strategy that successfully charms sincere souls and leads them away from the true paths.

Jesus stretches out His pierced hands to His people and draws everyone to Himself, as though saying that only in Him and only with Him will we be able to stand amid the abundance of temptations and sins. In rebuking His church in its lukewarm condition, the Lord does not leave us in this miserable state, but offers the very best way out, which will make us overcomers and after which He will grant us to sit with Him in His throne. What is this great love of God capable of! He raises a sinful person from the very bottom in order to make him great throughout the entire universe and give him the highest authority. No logic or justice can contain this mercy of God. He not only forgives my sins, but also desires to make me so rich that throughout eternity I will be able to enrich everyone around me who wishes to receive.

How can this love of God be understood? Where can its manifestations be seen? How can the union of infinite mercy and lawful justice be comprehended?

In the life of Jesus Christ, we can see one very bitter experience. As He approached Jerusalem and looked upon it from the height of the mountain, He began to weep, lamenting and exclaiming that if the hour of God's visitation had been understood and accepted, its devastation and destruction would not have taken place. How many times did the Lord stretch out His loving hands to His people in order to deliver them from the power of sin! How many of His messengers and prophets did He send to His people in order to warn them of destruction and save them for eternal life! How many prayers did He offer for

the apostate Jews who sought His life and wanted to destroy Him! And the Lord was ready to forgive all of this, reveal His mercy, and give cleansing power so that these people might come to their senses and turn from their iniquities to righteousness.

Jesus came to save His people from their sins, and He did so. Through His sacrifice, all sincere and seeking souls repented and accepted the new way of salvation.

When Jesus wept over Jerusalem, His heart did not burn with a desire to destroy that city and the wicked people living in it. He dreamed of their salvation, prayed for it, and did everything possible so that everyone might be saved. The Lord did not experience the slightest joy that these people would have to perish for their iniquity. He warned them about the consequences of sin and told them about the sorrow that would befall those who refused to accept God's plan for their salvation, but instead confidently continued along their own way, rejecting God's mercy and grace. And what could the Lord do for these hardened hearts? He could only offer them the better way, but He did not drag these people after Him by force. In opening the way of salvation, the Lord gently invited them to come to Him. He said: 'Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest' (Matthew 11:28).

The same thing is taking place in our day. The Lord sees how an abundance of information has engulfed us and led us away from the true path. Foreseeing this sorrowful condition, He prepared in advance the best plan for our salvation and our deliverance from the lukewarm condition. And now the time has come when this plan has begun to operate. The Lord likewise addresses us gently, inviting us to come to Him, establish a trading relationship with Him, be zealous in our repentance and conversion, and follow the path that the Lord has chosen for the overcomer.

Jesus knows the condition of His beloved church. And He permits all of us to pass through this stage of spiritual growth. He desires us to mature specifically in Laodicea so that

afterward we may move from this stage of faith into a closer relationship with Christ. Having been born again for God's Kingdom, I cannot leap straight into a personal relationship with Christ while bypassing the lukewarm church. This is not part of God's plan. But He desires that, while in the lukewarm condition, I recognize my need of Him and thirst for what He offers.

His hands are stretched out toward me to bless me and give me everything I truly need. He sends His messengers and prophets to draw my attention to His message. He opens my understanding so that I will not harden my heart because I fail to understand the importance of what is taking place. All His host stands ready to pour out God's blessings upon me in abundance at my request. The Holy Spirit is ready to guide me into the true way, teach me love, and place a joyful spirit within my heart. On God's side, everything is open and everything is ready to make both me and His entire church overcomers. His grace is more than sufficient for all of us. But He can do nothing without our permission and our interest in His message. He can find a person who, having understood the essence of the message to Laodicea, will be able to explain all its details in understandable language and show step by step how what is offered may be received. But ultimately, the last word remains with me. Will I desire to accept what God so greatly wishes to give me through His servants and through His message?

The Lord has done everything possible and has prepared my entire path as an overcomer so wonderfully that nothing needs to be added to it; I can only take what belongs to God and enjoy the victory. Through His prophet He asks, 'What could have been done more to my vineyard, that I have not done in it?' (Isaiah 5:4). And what will I say to Him in response to all His efforts and appeals? Must He really hear from me an answer such as this: 'Forgive me, Lord, but I have a better way for my salvation and victory. I am grateful to You for Your care, but forgive me, I do not want to change anything in my life. I am satisfied with my plan for becoming an overcomer'?

Do you think there is some other message for such people? Will the Lord devise something unique that is not yet in the Bible? I know your answer. As you read these lines, you agree that God is right, but simply agreeing that God is righteous and true does not solve the problem of the lukewarm condition. It is solved only when I accept everything that the Faithful Witness counsels me to buy from Him.

And what is the Lord to do when He sees our backs turned toward Him and sees His message being neglected? He can only weep in response to such disregard and continue seeking those who will value everything He offers. With what joy He opens His arms to those who respond to His message and take uncertain steps along the path of the overcomer. The Lord accepts everyone who, in one way or another, thirsts to receive the Heavenly blessings prepared by the Lord, and not by men.

He has not rejected His church, but continues to love it and gently calls each of us to come to Him and abide in Him, learning from Him to love one another. Can you imagine how the Lord will pour out His blessings upon those who respond and accept His message! All Heaven will be set in motion to minister to those who have decided to leave the lukewarm condition and are ready to know Christ and taste the fruits of His victory.

Jesus has already overcome, and His victory is ours.

Questions for Reflection:

1. In the light of this lesson, please read Isaiah 1:18; 5:4; 30:18; Jeremiah 31:3; Zechariah 1:3; Matthew 23:37; Luke 15:4; 19:41; Romans 8:38–39; Ephesians 5:25; Philippians 1:6.
2. What other Bible verses came to your mind?
3. What did you understand?
4. Why does the Lord continue to love the church despite its lukewarm condition?
5. Do I see in the rebuke to Laodicea a manifestation of God's love and a solution to the problem, rather than condemnation?

6. Do I believe that the Lord has already prepared everything necessary for my spiritual healing?
7. Why does the Lord continue to appeal to me patiently, again and again?
8. Am I causing the Lord to weep over me today as well?
9. Am I able to see future overcomers in my brothers and sisters, rather than only their shortcomings?
10. Why does the Lord do nothing against a person's will?
11. What does leaving the lukewarm condition mean to me personally?
12. Do I believe that the Lord is able to bring me to complete spiritual victory?
13. Am I repeating the mistake of the inhabitants of Jerusalem by rejecting God's visitation?
14. What should a person do if he suddenly learns that Jesus is weeping over him?