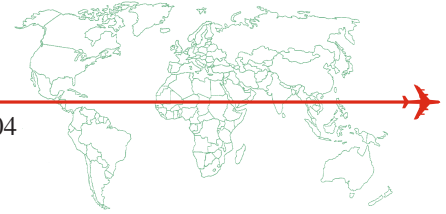




Lifeline

...a prayer letter from John and Jackie

August 3, 2004



Dear friends,

We greet you again in the Wonderful Name of Jesus!

There are principles or ways by which God operates in our lives. For example, His way is always a way of faith. *"The just shall live by faith."* This is the way of the Lord. It is impossible to please God without faith. And whatever He does in our lives will require faith. It is the basic way of the Lord.

To this could be added hope. God is the God of all hope. His way is always to hope. Hopelessness is not the way of God. Hopelessness never comes from Him, nor does it lead to Him. Hope is the way of the Lord.

The greatest of His ways is love. God is love. Love is His way. Love is His way of thinking, His way of feeling, and His way of doing. It is to be our way of thinking, feeling, and doing as well. *"Let all things be done in love."*

The ways of the Lord are not so mysterious. They are the clearly revealed ways shown in His word, and they do not change, for He is the Lord, and He does not change.

Here is another great principle, or way of the Lord. "My strength is made perfect in weakness." (2 Corinthians 12:9) 2 Corinthians 12 is the discussion of the story of Paul's "thorn in the flesh". Many sermons have been constructed from this thorn. Some are preached to prove from this passage that God does not always heal, interpreting the thorn as sickness. This is usually put together with Galatians 4:13-15 which indicates that Paul had some problem with his eyes when he was with the Galatian church. Some preachers try to say it was a permanent incurable "thorn" of sickness given by God. **There is no evidence that the sickness continued, nor that God gave it; and there is no evidence that it was the thorn of 2 Cor. 12.**

Scripture interprets itself in the important matters, and it is so in the case of the thorn: Just look at what Paul says before and after he mentions the thorn in the flesh (which was given to keep him from getting proud). *"Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, I am strong."* 2 Corinthians 12:10

Though "infirmities" can sometimes mean sickness, it can also mean weakness. Here Paul reports the list of infirmities in His life: **reproaches, needs, persecutions, distresses. This is not a list of sicknesses, but a list of troubles.** All we have to do is follow the story of Paul's life and ministry to see the "thorn". He was plagued with *continuous opposition*. This was the "messenger of Satan sent to "buffet" him.

He had been given great revelations, taken up into heaven and shown things that could not be uttered. So that he could not get big headed about it, trouble was allowed to continually bite at his heels. Some of that trouble consisted of the "Judaizers", who would try to tear down the gospel message Paul preached and to put people back into legalistic bondage.

Here is Paul's further report of His "thorn in the flesh:

"From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness-- besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I do not burn with indignation? If I must boast, I will boast in the things which concern my infirmity." (2 Cor. 11:24-30) His infirmity, his weakness, his thorn was this list of troubles!

Paul's thorn was not so different from what you and I may face in serving the Lord. Perhaps we may not get shipwrecked, or beaten with rods. But Satan's opposition will come, and we will probably feel very weak in the face of his opposition.

Much of Satan's opposition comes internally -- in our thoughts. That is where we can get "beaten" or "shipwrecked". It is in our thinking that Satan does his best (or worst) work. That is where he opposes us with the greatest force -- in our own minds.

Like Paul, if we ask God to take it all away, He may respond to us just like he did to Paul: *"My grace is sufficient for you..."*

The truth is this: God's grace will enable us to meet and resist the opposition. Though we feel weak and helpless in the face of Satan's intimidation and discouragement, God's strength comes into us (if we will simply receive it). It is to be said of us just like Hebrews 11 reports concerning the saints of old: *"out of weakness (they) were made strong"*. These are the ones *"of whom the world was not worthy."*

How often God's victory comes in our darkest hour, when all seems lost, and we seem out of strength and resources.

We have sung a song from childhood that starts with these words: *"He giveth more grace when the burdens grow greater..."* One line says this: *"When we have exhausted our hoard of resources, our Father's full giving has only begun..."*

I had thought that I would one day become a strong and smart Christian. Both have illuded me somehow. Now, at age 62, I feel weaker and less wise than ever.

Our experience in ministry during the last few years with the revival and harvest among the Churches of Praise has only increased these perceptions. Instead of feeling more confident, we feel less so. Instead of feeling more wise, we feel less so. Instead of feeling stronger, we feel weaker. At times, we wonder if we have run out of strength for the race.

We especially feel that way this summer.

The excitement of the congress which we reported in our letter in June included the dramatic recovery of a woman brought into the meeting at death's door. That report was adjusted this month by the news that she died several weeks later. Before the Congress, some of our team had gone to her home and knew her condition. The church knew her condition. The fact that she walked out on stage after prayer and testified of healing was medically impossible. Everyone knew God had touched her. After the congress she walked in health for a time. She then had a great battle (with several breakthroughs), and yet finally succumbed to the sickness. Much more prayer took place during that time, and even after she died the church gathered to pray for her resurrection. But she is gone. Did she not know how to keep her healing, and stand against the symptoms? We don't know.

Meanwhile, we received many reports from the village workers who had attended the same Congress that after arriving home they discovered that they were healed of various diseases. It had happened without them even being aware of it!

This reminded me of the fact that God's supernatural working isn't always in the dramatic experience. We all saw the drama of the woman carried in to the meeting, and raised up. It was very dramatic. That healing later turned to a sad report. Meanwhile, in the same meetings, God was working healing in many people without any drama at all! Only afterwards was it evident that God had done great things.

At the same time we heard of the death of a church planter, Roma, whose mother Clava is one of the senior pastors. (She was formerly a Communist boss!). Roma took his own life in June. He had been saved from a life of drugs, but had recently gone back to that life. He left a wife and small child. A great sadness, for sure.

His wife is going on in the ministry, however, assisting her mother-in-law Clava in church planting. Clava had taken over her son's ministry the months before his death, to restore stability when Roma was beginning to neglect everything.

The good news is that a move of God has begun in that work since Roma's death. Many in that region are turning to Christ and coming into the new churches.

Just before his death, Roma's sister was released from prison. She was in prison for drug related crimes, and Clava had been raising her children. She came to Christ in prison, and became the pastor of the new church begun in that women's prison. Even through her brother Roma's death, she is going on strong in the Lord, going from prison church right into church planting.

Pastor Gregory recently reported to me that they think there are more than 500 Churches of Praise now. I did not respond to this with excitement inside, but felt weak and apprehensive. Having spent some time with the class of new village ministers being trained in the 3 month mission college, I found myself crying "Oh God! If the village ministers are all like these raw recruits, what will happen to all these young churches?"

Of course, none of the new churches are solely in the hands of the "raw recruits", but overseen by the church planting team

under the care of senior leaders. Nevertheless, the task of seeing this harvest of young believers grow up in Christ seems daunting. Thank God for the Holy Spirit, and for Jesus, who said, "*I will build My church.*" If left only to human assistance, the churches would be in a sad condition. Nevertheless, we feel a responsibility to all of them, as parents and grandparents. It has left us feeling weaker, not stronger.

This morning I woke with words from Psalms 102: "*He has weakened my strength in the way....*" I was reminded of the teaching of Jesse Penn-Lewis out of the great Welsh revival. She taught about the problem of our natural soul strength. She taught that God has to weaken our soul, so that we can become strong in spirit. In other words, the strength of our own thinking, our own feelings, and our own will, need to become weaker or less controlling -- so that we will instead be led and controlled by God through the quiet voice of our spirit. Out of such God-made weakness we can be made strong, like the great saints mentioned in Hebrews 11!

We need to remember that the Word says to "Be strong IN THE LORD, and in the strength of HIS MIGHT." (Eph. 6:10) It is not OUR strength but HIS. Such strength comes from a weak soul clinging to, completely relying on, and totally depending on God. That means weak souls such as us can be strong in the Lord!

Most of the work in the Churches of Praise is being done by others, not by us. Our task is to help release others into their ministry and equip them to do the work. Sometimes we think, how can we help them more? They seem way beyond us -- even many of the new Christians! When we think this way, we remember our own children. Our own children may be smarter and excel more than us the parents (and our children and spouses are that -- they are great people!), but that doesn't mean we abandon them! They are still our kids! We help them in whatever way we can.

So the ministers in the Churches of Praise seem like our "kids". Many of them seem "bigger and better" than us. All we know is that we don't abandon them; we continue to help them in whatever way we can -- and get others to help them as well!

Thanks Again!!

Once again, we want to thank you for your assistance in this ministry, through your prayer, your giving, or your going. It is a great privilege to work with others in the harvest. Your part is as important as ours. As you know, we could not do our part without your part. Thank you.

Receive the Lord's blessing for your home and family, and be encouraged to keep serving the Lord with all your heart, and not shrink back because of your own feelings of weakness or inadequacy.

"Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God, who made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant..."

Keep your eyes on Lord and on His abundant mercy and grace. The best is yet to come!

With love,

John and Jackie