

CHANGELESS GOD IN A CHANGING WORLD

1. WHERE IS YOUR SECURITY?

Horatio and his wife Anna Spafford lived in one of wealthier suburbs of northern Chicago. Horatio was a solicitor with his own practice and lucrative real estate on the shores of Lake Michigan. In the late 1860's, they moved through life with the effortless grace of the successful. They had five children, Annie, Maggie, Bessie, Tanetta and Horatio jr, and their home was always open to fellow-Christians; Dwight Moody, the famous Chicago evangelist, was a frequent visitor. Unlike so many upwardly mobile people, however, the Staffords' affluence did not immunize them to the injustices of their time. Horatio was involved in several reform movements including abolitionism and the house became the meeting place for social activists.

In the 1870's, the charmed life of the Spaffords took a downward turn. In 1870 their only son, Horatio jr died of scarlet fever, and a year later in October 1871, the great Chicago fire destroyed all their holdings by Lake Michigan. The fire left them almost destitute but they still managed to share what little they had left with the survivors. Traumatized by the loss of her son and wealth in quick succession, Anna's health deteriorated. Horatio decided that she and their daughters needed to recuperate from both disasters so arranged a family trip to England to assist Dwight Moody with his evangelistic missions. On the eve of their departure in November, 1873, Horatio was called away on urgent business. He instructed his family to embark on the voyage, promising to follow them as soon as he had concluded matters.

On the evening of the 22nd November, the ship sailed into a thick fog that cut visibility to a few metres. The SS Ville Du Havre churned through the Atlantic like a ghost ship. Sickly yellow light haemorrhaged from rows of portholes and vanished into the porous grey. Even the rhythmic rumble of the steamer's mighty pistons was dubbed by the dampening fog. On board, Anna, assisted by Emma, the children's governess, was preparing Annie, Maggie, Bessie and Tanetta for bed. All of them were in their night clothes; Tanetta, the baby of the family, snuggled in Anna's arms, lulled into a happy stupor by the rocking ship. Racing towards the steamer was SS Lockheam, an iron hulled cargo sailing ship from England. One moment, its sails scooped the moonlight and stars garlanded its masts, and in the next, the Lockheam plunged blind and deaf into the fog. The collision shook the SS Ville Du Havre from bow to stern and stopped it dead in the water. It was a fatal blow. With an ear splitting screech, the Lockheam's iron hull tore the steamer's belly wide open to the Atlantic. Anna and the girls were hurled from their berths by the violence of the impact. There was an instant of astounded silence and then the shouts and screams, a confused medley of noise that quickly spiralled into hysteria. The ship staggered and then began to list to starboard. Anna managed to retain her grip on Tanetta, and tried to quell her daughter's sobs with reassurances. Outside the Spafford's cabin there was utter mayhem; people fought each other to reach the deck and escape the pursuing sea.

The ocean erupted from ship's torn belly, rushed into the engine room, extinguished the furnaces in clouds of hissing steam, raced along corridors, leapt staircases, broke down cabin doors and burst through hatches. Anna, the children, and their governess, fled before it, propelled upwards in a thrashing mass of escapees. The roaring Atlantic snapped at their heels and pounced on any stragglers who fell behind.

Events were too confused and chaotic for logic and sequentiality. For Anna and many other survivors, reality exploded into myriads of disconnected but vivid fragments. Maggie, Bessie and Annie were ripped from her side soon after the collision. Later she learnt that Maggie and Annie had been tossed into the sea. A young man attempted to rescue them. "Grab my jacket pockets," he yelled, "and I'll keep you afloat. Hold on tight and don't let go." They gratefully complied and

clung to him. Gripping wooden wreckage for buoyancy, he kicked repeatedly to ward off hyperthermia and encouraged them to do the same.” “Hang on and try to keep moving. Kick. Keep kicking!” he pleaded through chattering teeth, but after forty minutes the spiteful Atlantic cold prized their fingers from his pockets and they floated away, their nightdresses billowing around them. The young man watched until their pale faces vanished into the fog, and then he kicked again and again in a desperate bid to deflect the biting cold and survive. He heard the splash of oars and saw the boat zigzagging through the water in search of survivors. “Here!” he shouted, “Over here.”

Wrapped in a blanket but still shivering, the young man told a distraught Anna his story and wished it had a different ending.

Anna had fought her way to the ship’s rail with Tanitta in her arms, constantly murmuring prayers to God: “Save my children. Save them, Lord! Have mercy!” Most of the lifeboats were gone and people were hurling themselves over the side of the crazily listing steamer. She was afraid, deeply afraid. The Atlantic was no longer the benign cradle that had carried the Ville Du Havre from the US, but a hungry, predatory force that encircled the ship in perpetual motion. She searched the bobbing heads below for her three daughters, but the fog had smudged all features into a dull sameness. Holding Tanitta tightly in her arms, she leapt into the Atlantic. The cold was so sudden and brutal that it took her breath away, but she refused to let go of her daughter. They would live or die together. A piece of wreckage from the sinking vessel struck her shoulder and arm and tore Tanitta violently from her grip. She ignored the numbing pain, and with a mother’s instinct, dived after her daughter, kicking hard to speed her descent. Flailing with her arms, she found her, gripped her nightgown, and tugged with all her strength to bring her to the surface. Anna was overwhelmed with relief but it was short lived. When the Lochhearn’s rescue boat found the unconscious Anna, she was holding a child’s nightdress; nothing more.

The survivors were picked up by the American cargo ship, the SS Trimountain, and taken to Cardiff, Wales. On arrival, Anna immediately telegraphed her husband with the legendary message: “Saved alone. What shall I do?” We know little of Horatio’s psychological state on hearing the news. Certainly he must have grieved and may even have suffered bouts of self recrimination: “If I’d travelled with my family I may have been able to save them.” What we do know, however, is that his faith in God stood firm during this severest of trials. On receiving Anna’s telegraph, he boarded a ship for Great Britain. The captain, aware of Horatio’s bereavement, summoned him to bridge as the ship approached the co-ordinates where the SS Ville du Havre floundered. “Sir,” he said, “we are sailing over the exact spot where the Ville du Havre sunk. Please accept my deepest sympathy for the loss of your girls.” Horatio studied the ocean for a few moments but there was no trace of wreckage or any other sign of the missing ship, only a vast expanse of featureless grey stretching towards the horizon. Involuntarily, he looked down. Three miles below him lay the wreck of the Ville du Havre and the bodies of his children.

Horatio Spafford withdrew to his cabin. He had known grief when Horatio jr had died; this grief was grief multiplied, a sort of mutilation by a thousand daggers. He was shaken by its brutal savagery. The ocean was all around him, the ocean that had drowned Annie, Bessie, Maggie and little Tanetta. He could hear it lapping on the hull, whispering to him in their voices from three miles down. Rejecting the sea’s mimicry, he spoke out loud: “My little lambs are in heaven. They’re in the arms of the Good Shepherd.¹” The lamp swayed with the motion of the vessel and sent his shadow staggering over the walls. The pain was still unbearable, but he knew that he was not alone. He carefully laid out a sheet of paper on the tiny cabin table, took his pen, composed himself and began to write:

¹ Horatio’s Spafford’s comment on learning of his family tragedy.

When peace like a river attendeth my way
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou has taught me to say,
It is well, it is well with my soul.

It is well, with my soul
It is well, with my soul,
It is well, it is well, with my soul.

Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come,
Let this blessed assurance control'
That Christ hath regarded my helpless estate,
And hath shed his own blood for my soul.

Refrain

My sin, O the bliss of this glorious thought!
My sin not in part but in whole,
Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more,
Praise the Lord, raise the Lord, O my soul!

And Lord, haste the day when my faith shall be sight
And the clouds be rolled back as a scroll
The trump shall resound, and the Lord shall descend,
Even so, it is well with my soul.

God has not given us immunity to the difficulties and tragedies of life. It is these dark times that test our faith and the reality of our love for God. All may change, but he is changeless in both his nature and loving regard for us. No wonder he is referred to as our 'Rock and salvation' (Psalm 61:2; 89:26). In the midst of the vagaries of life, he is the only certainty. Whatever happens, our feet are planted firmly on the Rock.

I am alarmed by the superficiality of much contemporary evangelicalism. Watch Christian TV and it is not long before a religious celebrity informs you that it is God's will that you should be wealthy, healthy, happy and trouble free. All that keeps you from a long and prosperous life is a lack of faith. The logic (syllogism) seems reasonable:

- God is our heavenly Father.
- Only a psychotic dad wants his children to wallow in poverty, tribulations, persecutions and sickness.
- God is love and therefore only wants his children to be happy, healthy and self-fulfilled and enjoy long, prosperous lives. All negative experience is from Satan and should be resisted. Martyrs and sick Christians die because they do not have enough faith to appropriate God's blessings and give Satan his marching orders.

It may seem logical enough but the only problem with this modern reworking of the Christian Faith is that it is not true. Read the Scriptures and it soon becomes apparent God is a fan of tough circuit training. He uses trials and tribulations to hone our characters, develop tenacity and stamina, and give us the capacity to empathise with others². The miscellaneous bunch of prophets, scribes, poets and apostles who penned Scriptures were not employed by God as spin doctors to put an optimistic

² John 15:18-25; 16:33; Romans 5:3-5; ! Corinthians 4:8-13; 2 Corinthians 1:3-11; 4:7-12; 6:3-10; 11:16-33; James 1:2-4, 12; 1 Peter 1:3-9; 2:21-23; 3:17-18; 4:12-19).

gloss on a raw deal. On the contrary, they told the truth about the cost of obeying God and representing him in a sin wrecked world. Paradoxically, we're offered peace in a storm, joy in suffering, triumph in rejection, power in weakness and life in death. This world is not a playground but a battlefield: a deadly war zone in which we engage in hand to hand combat with the Devil and his demon armies. Okay, so we're going to conquer: our commander-in chief, the Lord Jesus, has already won the decisive victory at the cross, but we've been enlisted in the clean up operation.

Arguably, the Second World War was won as soon as the allies established a bridgehead on the Normandy beaches, but it took eighteen months of fierce fighting before Hitler's evil empire was destroyed. Between the Normandy invasion and Hitler's suicide in a Berlin bunker, more allied troops were killed than at any other time during the war. Sadly, many Christians have imbibed the West's hedonistic philosophy of prosperity, health and individual happiness, and have re-jigged the gospel to accommodate it. Consequently, we've vacated the war zone for a retirement home and have forfeited the spiritual and psychological resources to cope with the tough times. With such superficiality and shallowness, even a toothache can lead to spiritual crisis and meltdown! Horatio and Anna's love for God was not based on a profit motive (serving him for his gifts and rewards) but on a sincere and selfless love. Anna suffered terribly after the loss of her daughters, but she was salvaged by the remark of a friend: **"It's easy to be grateful and good when you have so much, but take care that you are not a fair weather friend of God."**

My question for you this morning is this: "Where is your security? Is it in the blessings and rewards that accrue from serving God? Or is your security in God and God alone? Is he your Rock, the changeless One in a changing world?"

THE WORLD AT WARP SPEED.

Professor Michio Kaku³, one of the leading scientific commentators of our time, wrote:

'Clearly we are on the threshold of yet another revolution. Human knowledge is doubling every ten years. In the past decade, more scientific knowledge has been created than in all human history. Computer power is doubling every eighteen months. The internet is doubling every year. The number of DNA sequences we can analyse is doubling every two years. Almost daily, headlines herald new advances in computers, telecommunications, biotechnology, and space exploration. In the wake of this technological upheaval, entire industries and lifestyles are being overturned, only to give rise to new ones. But these rapid, bewildering changes are not just quantitative. They mark the birth pangs of a new era'.⁴

Computers have revolutionised the way that we receive information and communicate with each other. An ethereal cyberspace has become the electronic membrane that contains all human knowledge, the global meeting place and market for millions of people; a new breed of entrepreneurs run multi-million dollar businesses from home computers; students download research papers and exam questions; glam models strip for the digits on credit cards, terrorists plan atrocities in code, and predatory hackers spy and steal. This revolution has had a more significant and immediate impact on the world than the invention of the printing press. In thirty years, everyone from the Massai herdsmen of Kenya to the Inuit of Alaska are connected through the internet to an exploding global culture. **"We are moving at dizzying speed",** writes computer boffin Marc Dery, **'to wraithlike age of software, in which circuitry too small to see and code too complex to comprehend controls more and more of the world around us'.⁵**

³ Michio Kaku is the Henry Semat Professor of Theoretical Physics at the City College of New York.

⁴ Michio Kaku, *Visions (How Science will Revolutionise the Twenty First Century)*, Oxford University Press, 1998, p 4.

⁵ Mark Dery, *Escape Velocity*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1996, p 4.).

The world is accelerating to warp speed. Change is so rapid and kaleidoscopic that it becomes confusing. All the established solidarities are changing. These changes are comparable to earth during a huge geological upheaval that shifts continents, changes the course of oceans, throws up new mountain ranges, and makes conventional geography obsolete. Technological change is paralleled by tectonic shifts in human relationships. The old societal pillars of marriage and family are breaking down at such an alarming rate that governments are referring to a new era of serial monogamy and endorsing more exotic patterns of family life.⁶ Where once a person was employed by the same company for life and was rewarded with a gold watch and a pension, the new workforce only remain in the same job for a few years before moving on. The blurring speed of change has made life transitory and ephemeral. People often move too quickly to put down roots and find permanence and security. Alvin Toffler, the futurist and social chronicler, documents the outcome of life on fast forward: **‘the acceleration of change does not merely buffet industrial nations. It is a concrete force that reaches deep into our lives, compels us to act out new roles, and confronts us with a new and powerful disease. This new disease is called ‘future shock’.**⁷

A society at terminal velocity is in danger of disintegrating. People need secure landmarks in order to feel secure. Sadly, in their absence, we are in danger of becoming a generation of escapees, nostalgic for an idyllic past that only exists in TV period dramas. The world has become a dangerous place. With the collapse of the Soviet empire, we believed that we were entering an era of glasnost, but a new, elusive enemy emerged: the Taliban and al-Qa’ida and their legions of terror. Why this sudden hatred of all things American and Western? Antipathy to Israel is merely a symptom of a much deeper disorder: the techno revolution with its secular presuppositions has collided head on with a monolithic religion. This high tech blitzkrieg, with its panzer divisions of mass communication and secularist ideology, is sweeping through cultures that have remained unaltered for hundreds of years. No wonder people become ultra-fundamentalist and savagely resist the invader! Unfortunately, evangelicals cannot afford to be smug and complacent. Unlike our 18th and 19th Century predecessors, we seem strangely reluctant to engage with the world. Visit our book stores, read our literature, attend our churches and you cannot fail to notice that most of us are in hibernation. Islam waves a sword at the invader; we run away and hide in a warm, cosy sub-culture and sing pretty worship songs. What is the solution? There is no simple answer but there is one fixed certainty: our security must be in a God who is changeless but always contemporary. In a world of dizzying flux, he is our Rock.

2. WHAT IS MEANT BY A CHANGELESS GOD?

⁶ **‘The family has often been regarded as the cornerstone of society. In pre-modern and modern societies alike it has been seen as the most basic unit of social organisation and one which carries out vital tasks such as socialising children...From the 1960’s, an increasing number of critical thinkers began to question the assumption that the family was necessarily a beneficial institution. Feminists, Marxists and critical psychologists began to highlight what they saw as some of the negative effects and the ‘dark side’ of family life.**

In the following decades the family was not just under attack from academic writers - social changes seemed to be undermining traditional families. Rising divorce rates, cohabitation before marriage, and increasing numbers of single parent families and single person households, and other trends have all suggested that individuals may be basing their lives less and less around conventional family life’ (Haralambos and Holborn, *Sociology (Themes and Perspectives)*, p503).

⁷ Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock*, Pan, London, 1975, p 19

CHANGELESS, CHANGING GOD (Malachi 3:6). God is complete in Himself and therefore utterly self-sufficient. The old theologians, influenced by Greek philosophy⁸, referred to the 'impassibility of God' and argued that the Almighty transcended passion. This 'god', forged from both Scripture and Greek philosophy, did not resemble the dynamic, passionate and involved God of the Bible. He was a pale, aloof deity, transcendent in majesty, and utterly changeless and immutable. God, in this parody of the Bible's gutsy, colourful and vibrant Creator, is analogous to an antique Grandfather clock that keeps exact time because all its cogs and mechanical parts are perfectly aligned and synchronised. Quintessentially perfect, the clock is self contained requiring no external adjustment or alteration from a watchmaker. Its consistency is based entirely on immutable mechanical precision. The world may change but the clock continues to maintain perfect time, never deviating by a nanosecond from its purpose.

God is much, much more than a perfect machine. He is unchanging in his essential nature, but unlike the Grandfather clock, he adapts to changes in his universe. Scripture describes Him paradoxically:

- God is transcendent over the universe but immanent in his creation (Psalm 139:7-12; Isaiah 57:15; I Kings 8:27).
- God is One in three Persons (Matthew 28:19; 2 Corinthians 13:13).
- Christ is fully human and divine but remains a unified personality (John 1:14-18; Colossians 2:9).
- God is changeless but constantly changing (Genesis 6:6; 1 Samuel 15:11; 2 Samuel 24:16; Jonah 3:10; Joel 2:13).

Changeless and yet constantly changing! That sounds like a proposition from Alice in Wonderland. Surely God is changeless and utterly consistent in all his actions? Certainly, but that does not imply that he is incapable of change and adapting to new contingencies and circumstances. He is not a deterministic machine, programmed to behave predictably, but a living Person who cries out to us in love, yearning, grief and even rage. He is a Person in an altogether different category from us. C.S Lewis, wrestling with this idea, described him as the 'supra-personality': a God who transcends all our narrow definitions of 'personality'. He is 'Person' par-excellence: more alive and vibrant, more real and durable, more colourful and beautiful than we can ever be. When I first encountered him, I felt like a tiny mote of sentient dust in a blaze of brilliant light.

In his essential being, God is utterly consistent and unchanging. James attempts to convey this idea when he describes God as the **'Father of heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows'** (James 1:17). God is reassuringly solid; that is why he is often referred to in Scripture as the 'Rock'⁹, but this designation does not denote that he is incapable of change. On the contrary, because he is always consistent and true to himself, he is always changing in his engagement with the world. These apparent 'changes' do not indicate capriciousness or dangerous instability for he always behaves according to his character. Jonah's reluctance to deliver God's word to Nineveh, the sworn enemy of Israel, is based on this assumption. God gives him a message of destruction, but Jonah knows too much about God to believe that this is his true intention. He knows him as loving and forgiving, and concludes that God will relent if the Ninevites turn from their cruelty and injustice. Why give them this chance? Jonah packs his suitcase and departs for Tarshish-on Sea, a trading port at the opposite end of the world from Nineveh. God stops him in his tracks by sending a storm. Admitting that the storm is the result of his disobedience to God, Jonah requests to be

⁸ Platonism, Neo-Platonism and Aristotelianism influenced the formation of Christian theology. Platonism and neo-Platonism influenced the formation of early Christian theology and the mystical theologies of the Medieval period. Aristotelianism influenced Thomas Aquinas and Medieval Scholasticism and also Calvin and the theological tradition he established called 'Calvinism'.

⁹ 2 Samuel 22:2, 47; 23:2; Psalm 18:2; 28:1; 31:2, 3; 42:9; 62:2, 7; 71:3; 78:25; 89:26; 92:15; 94:22; 95:1; Habakkuk 1:12).

thrown from the ship; he is swallowed by a 'great fish' and transported in its belly to the coastal area nearest to Nineveh. Stained by the fish's gastric juices, Jonah cuts a macabre figure as he tramps through Nineveh's suburbs proclaiming, "In three days you'll all be destroyed!"

On hearing the message, the king and his officials attempt to placate Israel's angry Deity: **"Everyone must fast in sackcloth and ashes and plead with God for forgiveness. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish."**

Scripture records God's response: **"When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he said that he would bring on them; and he did not do it' (Jonah 3: 10).**

Jonah is mad with God for his mercy: **"O, Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning: for I knew that you were a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better to me to die than to live."**

God replies, not with a reprimand or lecture, but with a question: **"Is it right for you to be angry?"**

Angry, sulking and resentful against God, Jonah leaves the city to await events. God provides Jonah with a bush as a sunshade. Next day as the sun scales Nineveh's walls and invades the city, God sends a parasite to attack the bush, thus depriving Jonah of his only shade. With no shelter, the sun fills the sky above him, beating down with such ferocity that the land shakes and quivers like a drum skin. God aggravates his torment by sending a desert wind, abrasive with superheated grains of sand, which lashes his skin leaving wheals of festering blisters. "This is my reward for obedience," he grumbles, "a grandstand seat to watch God's mercy on these..." He struggles to find language strong enough to express his loathing: "these filthy, murderous Assyrian swine. God forgives the Ninevites but roasts me alive. It's not fair! Better for me to die than live."

At this all time low in Jonah's experience, God repeats his earlier question but in a slightly different way: "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?"

This time Jonah replies without hesitation: **"Yes, angry enough to die!"**

God has set Jonah up; the trap snaps shut: **"You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labour and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And shouldn't I be concerned about Ninevah, that great city, in which there are more than a 120,000 children and many animals?"**

Can you relate to Jonah? He reminds me of the elder brother in the Prodigal Son. He was resentful of the partying that attended the return of his profligate sibling. Like our sulking prophet, he had no knowledge of his father's heart of grace and forgiveness. We too are often capricious and show considerably less grace and patience than our heavenly Father. Our treatment of people is generally determined by mood, temperament, preferences, perception and motives. God's engagement with people is based on completely different criteria: his perfection and consistency, his complete knowledge of us, and his unconditional regard and love for human beings. Unsolicited and unprompted, he changes his mind. In the case of the Ninevites, he feels pity for the boys and girls and domestic animals and postpones judgement.

Scripture not only teaches that God changes his mind but he also permits us to influence his decisions and change his mind. This is an extraordinary idea but it is clearly taught in the Bible.

Exodus 32:1-14

Moses has been with God on Mount Sinai for forty days. The people, believing that Moses is lost or dead, persuade Aaron to make a Golden Calf. God alerts Moses to their idolatry and tells him that he's about to annihilate them: "Get out of my way, Moses. I'll vaporise them and make you the founding father of a great nation."

Moses' reaction is heroic and selfless. Moses declines the 'founding father' honour', and then thrusts himself in the crossfire between an angry God and a stupid nation. Remember, God has already told Moses, "Get out of my way!" When the Almighty's in a rage and about to vaporise a nation, it's not a sensible idea to interfere. But Moses does just that. In an act of suicidal bravery, he argues with God and tells him genocide is a bad idea: "Lord, the Egyptians will say you recruited their workforce only to annihilate them in the desert. And how about your covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob? You made an oath to them by your own self that you'd multiply their descendents like the stars and give them Canaan forever. It's not right to go back on your word."

One thing is obvious from the exchange: Moses values the people more than his own life. He argues with God to save them. And God's response? **'And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people'**.

God changes his mind.

Numbers 14:1-25

Moses sends twelve spies to reconnoitre Canaan. When they return, the spies report that the land 'overflows with milk and honey' and produce a mouth watering selection of fruit. Opinion between the spies is divided. Joshua and Caleb recommend immediate invasion, and the others, totally demoralised by the Canaanite war machine, demand instant retreat: "We've seen their special forces: a regiment of giants called the Nephilim. Very scary indeed!" We're like grasshoppers compared to them. They also have the very latest high tech iron chariots with blades bristling from their wheels. We don't stand a chance against them. RETREAT!"

Unfortunately, the ten pessimists forget one important fact: if God is on your side your enemy doesn't stand a chance. Typically, Israel give their vote to the ten Mr. Negatives and decided on evacuation: better to return to slavery in Egypt than be slaughtered by the Nephilim and scythed to pieces by their war chariots! Once again, God is exasperated and insulted by their unbelief: **"How long will this people despise me? How long will they refuse to believe me, in spite of all the signs I've done among them? I will strike them with a plague and disinherit them, and I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they."**

Suicidal encounter with God was certainly not on Moses' job description, but once again he risks his life and hurls himself between God and the people: "Lord, the Egyptians have already scared the Canaanites to bits by giving them a full account of your exploits in Egypt. They're quaking with fear at the prospect of fighting you. What are you saying if you annihilate your people in the desert? The message is clear, Lord: their gods scared you off? You said recently that 'you were slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving sins and wrongdoing'. Genocide seems to contradict your compassionate side. Show your extravagant love and mercy by forgiving the people."

Then the Lord said, "I do forgive just as you have asked'.

Here we have a dilemma! How can a God who knows everything (omniscient) and governs history and human destiny according to his own will and purpose (omnipotent), change his mind at the request of a man? Were these two incidents set-ups contrived to dupe Moses into believing that he had actually changed God's mind? If so, God is guilty of a cruel act of duplicity. The argument that God rigged the vote by predetermining Moses' response makes both stories a sham. Think about it!

God creates the illusion that Moses has changed his mind, but in reality, he is merely reciting from a prearranged script. This sort of scam is unworthy of God. The obvious inference from both narratives is that God intended to annihilate Israel but Moses changed his mind. What does this tell us about God's government of the world? The Biblical evidence suggests that God has constructed the world in such a way that he permits people to share his sovereignty and influence his decisions. Certainly, he could rule without any co-operation from his human subjects, but he chooses to include us in his terrestrial operations¹⁰.

Motor manufacturers like Ford or Toyota design their vehicles for very specific markets and purposes. A sports car, for example, would not be marketed as a family saloon. Engine capacity and fuel type and consumption are also determined by the car's function. The designers restrict themselves to the parameters of their design: a diesel car will not run on petrol; a 1000 cc mini will not be able to haul heavy freight. Similarly, God, as our Creator, has deliberately restricted himself to his design. This is the only way to make sense of Moses' experience. God permits Moses to step between himself and Israel and change his mind. One fact, however, needs to be clearly established: **Moses is able to change God's mind but not his character.** God always acts in harmony with himself. On both occasions, Moses appeals to God's mercy, integrity and consistency. He may argue with God in an attempt to deter his judgment, but he does so, on the basis of his knowledge and experience of his character. God, in turn, shows that his friendship with Moses is not contrived but congruent: he listens to him, respects and reviews his arguments, and decides to rescind his judgement in favour of mercy. Moses has averted holocaust. What does this teach us? Through prayer, we have the capacity to change the mind of the changeless God. He transforms our simple requests into the edicts of his purpose.

3. HOW DO WE DISCOVER OUR SECURITY IN GOD?

Having attempted to define what is meant by the 'changelessness' of God, we must now reflect on the practical consequences. Does God's changelessness make any difference to our lives? It certainly did to Horatio and Anna Spafford. Without the certainty of the Rock beneath their feet, they would never have been able to cope with the sorrow and loss of all their children. Faith in a changeless God gave them the strength to go on.

Returning to Chicago, Anna gave birth to three more children. Their second son, christened Horatio after his brother, also died of scarlet fever. After his death in 1880, Horatio and Anna decided to leave American and found a Christian utopian community in Jerusalem. In an old part of the city which became known as the 'American colony', they cared for the poor, sick and orphans. Swedish novelist, Selma Ottiliana Lovisa Lagerlof, described this colony in her two volume Nobel Prize winner, 'Jerusalem'.

God's kingdom is not an underground fallout shelter that protects us from all the difficulties and tribulations of life. On the contrary, God trains his crack SAS regiments on the battlefield. It is here that he develops our faith, tenacity, courage and character. What resources do we have in God to cope with the blurring, nauseous speed of change? When we're pummelled by blows and knocked down, where do we find the strength to clamber from the canvass and continue the fight? Sorry, there are no formulaic answers to these questions. Empathy is often more important to the sufferer than religious clichés. What I will attempt to do, however, is to describe some of our securities in God. These give us the resilience to cope with the vicissitudes of life without caving in.

¹⁰ Isaiah 38; Amos 7:1-6.

OUR SEVEN SECURITIES OF LIFE IN GOD

1. PATERNITY: A SECURITY BASED ON RELATIONSHIP

In my experience, the most common form of insecurity among Christians relates to the question of paternity. Am I truly a child of God? Does he really love me? Our security in God will be determined by our answers to these questions. Nobody will ever be able to relax completely with a Father if he or she has doubt about the legitimacy of the relationship or the genuineness of his love. Security demands the utter certainty of belonging and the knowledge that we are loved unconditionally. To be secure with God, we need the assurance of forgiveness and the certainty that we are the adopted children of God (Ephesians 1:3-7). Without the reassurance that our Father loves us and has accepted us in Christ, there will always be hesitancy in the relationship: Does he love me or is he shaming? God knew that we would have difficulty accepting our adoption as sons, and therefore gave us the Holy Spirit to witness with our spirits that we are his children (Romans 8:14-17, 31-39).

Grace is not easy for us to accept. It is the antithesis of all our social and psychological programming, as improbably as breathing under water. We live in a world where merit and labour equal reward. This principle is illustrated in the entire spectrum of human activity. An actor wins an Oscar because of merit: his interpretation of a character was performed with such intuitive flair and empathy that he deserves recognition and reward. A footballer becomes the 'man of the match' or the 'footballer of the year' because of exceptional talent and performance. Similarly, in the workplace we receive a salary as a reward for work and a bonus for exceptional effort; diligent study earns the student a degree or doctorate, and no one is ever celebrated as a conqueror of Everest merely by flying over it in an aircraft: a climber must make the perilous ascent and provide proof of the achievement.

The idea that our value and reward are determined by achievement is etched so deeply into us that we react against the concept of grace. Only God could display such an outrageous attribute: forgiveness, adoption and co-inheritance with his Son bestowed as gifts on the very people who crucified him and persist in rebellion. Logically, grace makes about as much sense as rewarding the firing squad for shooting you: "Lads, before you pull those triggers, give me a few moments to consult with my solicitor. I'd like to reward you all by making you the sole beneficiaries of my will." After such insane generosity, the firing squad would probably be very eager to do their duty!

Accepting grace only becomes possible when we recognise that all our moral and spiritual achievements fall far short of God's requirements. In moral terms, the high jump bar is set at an impossible 100 metres when we can scarcely jump a metre. Grace only makes sense when, after repeated efforts to jump the bar, we recognise our utter helplessness. In this terrifying moment, we become vulnerable to grace. We will never enjoy the full benefits of our adoption as God's children until grace has seized us. Indeed, it is impossible to relax with God until grace has assuaged our guilt and assured us of his love and unconditional acceptance. I can think of no better way to illustrate God's grace than in the following allegory:

HOUSE

Lightening cuts through the bruised sky and lights a wrecked landscape. How have I come to this decaying world? No sound breaks the monotonous silence except the wind's rasp as it racks gutted buildings and snarls in shattered trees. This is a blighted land; even the air is dusty with disuse; every breath fills me with melancholy. Futility weighs down on me like gravity; my limbs feel as if they are encased in concrete, making each step an effort of brutal determination. Then the Song begins. O, what a Song! At first it is so faint I think I imagine it, but it tugs me, growing louder until there is nothing but the music. The Song is strangely familiar. Where have I heard it before? I rummage through my memory but I cannot find it, but the Song finds me.

I follow the Song to a house encircled by a high hedge. Wild roses, honeysuckle, and multitudinous climbing plants spin an impenetrable lattice separating the house from the surrounding desolation. The boundary is not fixed. As I watch, the hedge expands, conquering more and more of the dead land. The Song draws me to a small ornamental gate hinged by the tendrils of hawthorn, privet and ivy. Words appear on the gate:

“I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and out and find pasture.”¹¹

As I approach, it swings open and I step into a garden. The contrast between the dead land and this living paradise is so dramatic I reel and fall to my knees. There are plants of every description and size: towering Cottonwoods, surreal Banyans, and ethereal cyclamens and gentians peeping shyly from tiny fissures in rocks. A breeze strums the trees accompanying a blissful chorus of birdsong.

I don't know how long I wander through the garden. Minutes? Hours? Time back flips and summersaults in this place. I hardly notice the transition from day to night. Indeed, there is such an abundance of life in the garden that darkness does not extinguish the colours. Each plant shines with its own special luminescence.

The house is an extension of the garden. I find it difficult to ascertain where the garden ends and the house begins. This, you must understand, is not a house as we understand houses: an inanimate building that conforms to a strict architectural design. It is alive, sentient and the tree of life grows from its centre and fills the universe; the stars are its leaves and its fruit are planets hanging in clusters from its branches. The four walls of the house are Truth, Peace, Righteousness and Holiness and its gabled roof is Mercy.

The house is called 'Grace' and God lives in it.

I am afraid and fascinated simultaneously: fascinated by the Majesty hidden in the house; afraid of his perfection, vitality and power. This God is not static and aloof but tangled in the expanding web of life. I know with certainty that he watches me from the house, but still I recoil. What will he say to me? Will he accept me? Will he terrify me with his holiness?

The nearer I come to the house the further it seems away. I weep involuntarily, fighting back the tears. I know with utter certainty that I can never reach the house, only look at it from afar. There are rags on my body and chains on my limbs that I have never noticed before, and I carry within me the blight that has wrecked the world. “Help me!” I plead, and cast myself on the Majesty in the house.

¹¹ John 10:9.

As I struggle against all hope to reach the house, the doors are flung open and God races towards me. “Peace,” he says, and joyfully hugs me. “I give you amnesty, signed with the blood of my cross; ¹² “your sins are forgiven.”¹³ There is a formality and ringing authority to his words but he smiles at me with unbearable tenderness. The chains that manacle me corrode and fall away; my rags vanish and I am clothed in iridescence. I laugh in spite of my fear and the clothes seem to laugh with me, the colours changing with the tiniest variation in my thoughts and feelings.

“Who are you?” I ask.

“I am Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

His face alters imperceptibly, a sudden shift of perception, and the Father gazes at me through his eyes: “We’ve been expecting you for a long time,” he says and points at the tree with its foliage of stars and planets. “I chose you as my adopted child before I created all these.”¹⁴

At first I look at God timidly, but the Song rises in me, banishes my reticence and fills me with joy and recognition. “Father! Dear Father! Christ, my Saviour and Elder Brother!” I cry and begin to leap and dance and God leaps and dances with me. The Song fills all my senses.

How can I describe Him to you? The Father and Son are like converging rivers, flowing into each other yet retaining their distinctiveness; the Song, the third of the trinity, pours from them, breaches my defences and fills me with wild, uninhibited joy. Praise explodes from me. My tongue finds its true purpose and composes words of love, admiration, praise and yearning. I leap out of myself, leap so high I touch the face of God, shouting and singing his praise with all my strength.

God is tireless. He romps through his garden, shakes the tree of stars with gusts of laughter and throws me high only to catch me in his arms. Why? I am one among billions of people in a world that has rejected him. Why does he love me? He sees the question in my eyes and leads me to his house. He pushes the door open and beckons me to follow. There are living pictures of me everywhere: a crinkled baby, an untidy boy with mischievous eyes, a defiant adolescent with a quirky grin, and a cynical adult resigned to broken dreams, so many pictures but each exposes an essence of my life. Their honesty is so raw and uncompromising I have to force myself to look.

As I came to terms with each picture, God stoops down and removes my shoes. I protest at the sheer incongruity of his action. Earlier he’d thrown me to the stars and caught me effortlessly in his hands; now he deftly unties my laces with gentle fingers! His power is not diminished in any way by this menial task, but he seems vulnerable and exposed as he leans over me and places a very ordinary slipper on each foot. “This is your home,” he says, “a place of rest for your soul.”¹⁵

We study the pictures together and I remember all my joys, struggles and disappointments. Somewhere on the journey I’ve misread the signs and missed my road. I am crushed by my anonymity. Futility is killing me. Something inside me rebels against the regimented predictability of life: marching in step with a billion other people resigned to the same inevitabilities and hopelessness. But what can I do? I have the objectivity to stand outside my life and see it for what it is, a sham of wasted moments, but I am impotent to do anything about it. I have been lost and never admitted it to myself.

¹² Colossians 1: 19-20

¹³ Hebrews 8:12

¹⁴ Ephesians 1:3-5; Romans 8:14-17

¹⁵ Matthew 11:28-30

“You’ve come home,” God says. I am becoming accustomed to him reading my thoughts. “You’ve entered my rest and will find your purpose in me. Yes, you were lost and I’ve found you.”¹⁶

In the garden, God was jubilant: power erupted from him in starbursts, geysers, fountains and lightning bolts that ripped the sky apart like an artillery of lasers. Throughout this display of pyrotechnics, God shielded me and kept me safe. His breath was fire but I was not burnt; hands that moulded giant stars, ignited supernovas, juggled galaxies, and spun super-massive black holes, held me without harm. I romped with God and lived. Here in his house God is tranquil and reposed, glimmering with all the yellows, indigos, violets, crimsons and purples of a desert sunset. The stillness does not signify inertia but a God of unimaginable power and wisdom at peace with himself and his purpose. He looks steadily at me for a very long time without speaking; I am amazed by his transparency and the expression of simple love and pleasure on his face. The deep humour and joy in his eyes disturbs me.

The Song that drew me out of myself in the garden delves into me, each note a spark that stings.

I try to interrupt God’s stillness and silence the Song: “Lord, I am unworthy of your regard. Why are you looking at me?” Angels, solid as mountains, attend him and vanish through the walls obeying his commands, yet nothing disturbs his terrible, tender scrutiny. He wants something from me and is prepared to wait, but I can’t respond. He knows I can work it out for myself and so he waits!

I have always lived with impossible expectations. As a man I want to morph into superman; only then, I believe, will I be worthy and accepted. Pride and perfectionism drive me to compete, excel and even exaggerate as I confuse aspirations with reality. I struggle against impossible odds. ‘Superman’ is a comic book myth; the real world is populated by vulnerable, imperfect human beings. I want to be better than I am. Grace and forgiveness I can accept as the logical solution to my dilemma: he alone can leap the chasm between us and bring me home. I can even accept God as my Father. What then is my problem? I think that to be God’s friend I need to achieve some sort of moral equality with him. By attaining this worthiness, I can earn the right to talk to him and gain his friendship.

He is right to be silent. I work it out for myself and look at him ruefully, my pride a little hurt. I am a joke. No wonder there’s such humour in his eyes. What sane person would ever try to compete with him? The grace that humbles me lifts me to his eye level. I begin to laugh and God laughs with me. “We’re both crazy,” I say, startled by my audacity, “You with your absurd grace, and me with my ridiculous self-deceit.” His laughter shakes the house.

“You understand,” he says. “A last you understand,” and he seems so happy, almost relieved. “Now we can be friends.”

Suddenly I am relaxed and comfortable with him. He is not a disapproving God, ready to pounce on the tiniest infringement and discrepancy. I don’t fear reprisals, censure, or his anger because I don’t measure up to impossible standards. He is my Lord yet he never patronises me. He draws me into his confidence, shares himself with me, and allows me to influence his decisions. We talk through the night and the next day, and through the weeks and years. I grow old talking to him and still we chatter on, old friends happy in each others company.

I live in this house and garden permanently and will never leave it. God is always with me. Sometimes I’m his ambassador, a supplicant, a penitent, a chastened son, a petulant child, an angry interrogator, but always a friend¹⁷.

¹⁶ Hebrews 4:9-10

2. PROPINQUITY: A SECURITY BASED ON GOD'S PERMANENT PRESENCE (Psalm 91:1, 4).

Christian theologians, grappling with the idea of God's immanence in creation, defined his universal presence as 'omnipresence'. The word is certainly useful in categorising an important attribute of God, but it has inherent limitations. Western theology has a tendency to dissect God, label and categorise his component parts, and file him away in systematic theologies. These help us to understand the Biblical revelation of God, but they do not always do justice to the immediate and colourful Deity portrayed in the Scriptures. Our Western theologies often remind me of waxworks: we attempt to reproduce God in exact Biblical formulas but we seem incapable of imbuing him with life and dynamism. The Hebrew writers, on the other hand, brought God to life with daring anthropomorphisms and metaphors. He is not merely the omniscient God who knows everything, but the One whose 'eye is upon mankind, he takes their measure in a glance'.¹⁸ God's omnipotence is often implied by his actions, but these leave us in no doubt about his almighty power: astride an angelic war horse, God rides out of heaven in a hurricane to rescue his servant. Smoke pours from his nostrils and molten fire gushes from his mouth; he hurls showers of blazing meteorites and lightning bolts, bends his war bow and shoots flights of arrows at his foes. Nature itself is shaken by this fearsome epiphany: the planet reels, mountains shake, earth's tectonic plates shift in cataclysmic earthquakes and tsunamis, and fire and hail rain from the sky.¹⁹ This is much more the dramatic poetry of Homer's 'Iliad, than the precise legal language of Calvin's 'Institutes of the Christian Religion'.

The Scriptures also describe God's universal presence in pictorial language. 'Face' is one of the most common descriptions of God's abiding presence.²⁰ The Hebrew writers also refer to 'living in the shadow of the Almighty' (Psalm 91:1), an idea which brilliantly conveys God's propinquity and is usually associated with wings. God is often described metaphorically as a bird; his outstretched wings overshadow and protect his fledglings.²¹

Brother Lawrence (1605-91), the simple Carmelite monk who wrote the classic, 'Practice of the Presence of God', learnt to live habitually in God's presence. He was not a scholar or a high ranking religious leader. On the contrary, he worked in the monastery kitchen cleaning pots and pans and influenced those around him by his warmth and joy. God's presence was so overwhelming that he often 'cried aloud, singing and dancing as vigorously as a madman'. When people asked him his secret, he confided, "All we have to do is love and be happy in God."

Brother Lawrence had a self deprecatory sense of humour. He stated that his reason for joining the Carmelite Order was as penance for his clumsiness. He was a big, uncoordinated man and prone to accident. Entering the monastery to serve his self imposed penance, Brother Lawrence protested that God had cheated him. Instead of chastising him for his clumsiness, God rewarded him with delirious joy and a moment by moment experience of his presence. The daily encounter with God is not unique to Brother Lawrence, but should be our common heritage. This deep, intuitive knowledge of his abiding presence is important to our security. Why should we fear adversity and opposition if God is with us?²² Who needs to call for back-up if the Almighty is at our shoulder? A young single mother writes:

¹⁷ John 15:12-15; Isaiah 41:8; 2 Chronicles 20:7; James 2:23

¹⁸ Psalm 11:4 (New English Bible)

¹⁹ Psalm 18:1-19

²⁰ Psalm 5:8; 16: 11; 31:6, 20; 51:9, 11; 67:1; 95:2; 119:135; 139:7; 140:12.

²¹ Psalm 17:8; 36:7; 57:1; 63:7; 121:5; Hosea 14:7; Matthew 23:37; Luke 14:34.

²² Psalm 46:7

Over the past year the Lord has been training me to look beyond the constraints of time (Lord, how can I pray if she keeps putting the books on my lap every two minutes?) towards a continual, moment by moment relationship with him that transcends time: the practice of the presence, as it is sometimes called. Of course, I am still learning, but I am sure that this is the way ahead. The inner dialogue with God, the continual reassurances and admonitions of the Spirit that can, in fact, co exist with bed bouncing, playing and even tears’.

3. PROMISES: A SECURITY BASED ON GOD’S INFALLIBLE WORD

God’s word is absolutely reliable. That is why Scripture is so important in the Christian life. By reading, studying, meditating and memorising the Scriptures we become acquainted with God’s promises.²³ Prophecies and words of knowledge need to be tested to determine their authenticity, but God’s word is infallible and can be trusted in every circumstance. More and more I am discovering that the most accurate and authoritative prophecies are those which are under girded by Scripture.

There are promises in Scripture that relate to all of us,²⁴ and others which are given to individuals and have no universal application.²⁵

After the feeding five thousand men plus women and children, Jesus instructs his disciples to meet him at Bethsaida. While Jesus prays on a mountain, the disciples battle a ferocious headwind on Lake Galilee. In the early hours of the morning, Jesus approaches them walking on the water. Predictably, the disciples are terrified believing Jesus to be a ghost. “It’s me. Don’t be afraid!” he cries, his voice piercing the shrieking wind and roaring waves. Peter, high on adrenalin, reacts: “Lord, if it’s you, command me to walk to you on the water.” This request is often cited as an example of Peter’s impetuosity. I beg to differ. In situations of extreme stress, the human nervous system responds in three ways: flight, attack or catatonic shut down.²⁶

Let’s watch this story again and search for missing clues. Press replay: the disciples fighting for their lives in a storm; the moon, swamped in broiling cloud, trickles eerie light on the lake and distant hills; the ear splitting cacophony of wailing sea, crashing waves, and creaking timbers. Press pause! Is that a figure walking on the water? Press play to examine more carefully. The figure, indistinct at first, is soon clearly visible as he approaches the boat. He walks on the water; the waves, subdued beneath his feet, form a pathway of calm through the storm’s chaos.²⁷

I’m not the sort of man who’s frightened of graveyards at night, but if I was in that boat I’d be scared witless. Men only walk on water in Chinese martial arts films, courtesy of the film company’s special effects division.

Peter, like the rest of the disciples, was on the verge of hysteria. The storm was bad enough, now he had to contend with a ghost who defied the rules of nature. When Jesus utters his words of reassurance, Peter reacts in attack mode. He doesn’t say, “Jesus, I’m so glad to see you. Let me come to you on the water.” Peter believes, as do all the cowering disciples, that he is caught between the ‘devil and the deep blue sea’. His request is made to verify the identity of the wave

²³ (2 Corinthians 1:20; Isaiah 40:6; Psalm 119:89, 152; Psalm 33:11; 1 Samuel 6:6).

²⁴ These are promises specific to our salvation and inheritance in Christ (Galatians 3:15-18; 2 Peter 1:4).

²⁵ These promises are specific to the individual: the promise of a Son to Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 11:1-17); the promise of a throne and kingdom to David (2 Samuel 7:1-17).

²⁶ Catatonic shock is a state of terror induced immobility.

²⁷ This is not stated specifically in the four accounts of the miracle, but it is an obvious conclusion. It would be impossible to remain upright on the choppy, unpredictable waves characteristic of a storm on a large lake. If indeed Christ walked on the waves we would be looking at a second miracle: the defiance of gravity.

walker. Jesus replies, “Come!” Peter risks his life to test the word of Jesus. He climbs out of the boat and commits himself to the most improbable and absurd walk in history: a walk on water at the invitation of a ghost claiming to be Rabbi Jesus. This is not impetuosity or the gung-ho lunacy of a hysteric, but an act of audacious bravery. He risks his life on the assumption that if Jesus is indeed the wave walker, he too will be able to walk on water. Peter has nothing left to lose. If the figure is a malevolent spirit, Peter dies; they all die. If he is Jesus, Peter lives; they all live.

Does Peter actually walk on water? The answer is ‘yes’ and ‘no’. Certainly his feet are in contact with Lake Galilee, but in reality, he is walking on solid, immovable rock: **the living word of Jesus**. As the distance between the boat and Peter grows, the chilling reality of his predicament slams into him: each step he takes is impossible, a miracle. Only the word of Jesus keeps him from calamity. Suddenly the boat seems too far away, the waves too high, the wind too ferocious, and the word of Jesus too flimsy. Once again Peter’s nervous system is on overload and this time it triggers flight, but there’s no escape from the predatory, howling waves. He gives one despairing cry before Galilee gives way beneath him and the waves rush in to kill, “LORD, SAVE ME?” Jesus is there instantly; his strong hands reach down and lift Peter from the water; together they wave walk to the boat.

Peter’s faith, like ours, grows through first hand experience of Jesus’ character and power. If he knew, truly knew, the power of Jesus, he would laugh at the waves. He stands on something far more solid: **‘the word of our God which stands forever’ (Isaiah 40:8). The promises of God are utterly trustworthy.**

Christians throughout history have discovered for themselves the reliability of God’s promises. Hudson Taylor, founder of the China Inland Mission, supported hundreds of missionaries in that country. Facing a serious shortfall in mission finances, he wrote these words to his wife, “Darling, I have £5.00 in the bank and all the promises of God.”

Hudson may have triumphed in his test of faith, but we often fail. One of the most illuminating aspects of Peter wave walk is Jesus’ reaction to his failure. Jesus invites Peter to come to him on the water, knowing full well that he will fail the ‘faith test’. What is so significant about this? The answer is self evident from the text: “Come,” not only guarantees Peter’s wave walk, but includes Jesus’ swift intervention when faith fails.

Learning to rely on God’s promises and live by faith is never easy. Like Peter, all of us frequently fail the faith test and sink. God’s promises must never be regarded as formulaic or static; they are living words from his lips, guaranteed by his power and faithfulness, and prompted by his love. Promises must never be confused with the inert stepping stones over a river: safe if a person stands on them; fatal if he slips. Promises are God’s active word, demonstrating his grace activity and commitment to his people. We may fail but Father never fails! When we slip from the security of his promises, he reaches down and lifts us up.

4. PROTECTION: A SECURITY BASED ON GOD'S POWER AND CHRIST'S TRIUMPH OVER SATAN.

God is the secure defence of his people. The Scripture describe the security we have in God in a numbers of different ways:

Refuge (Mashseh) Psalm 91:2, 9.

Fortress (Metsudah) (Psalm 18:2; 31:3; 71:31)

Tower (Misgab) (Psalms 18:2; 59:9; 16:17; 62:2, 6; 94:22; 61:3; 144: 2; Proverbs 18:10; 2 Samuel 22:3).

Arms (Deuteronomy 33:27).

Weapons (Psalm 91:4).

Psalm 91: 11-12 states that God **'will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways'**. In his book, *Angels: God's Secret Agents*, Billy Graham tells the story of the Rev. John Patton, a missionary in the New Hebrides Islands, who was protected by angels. The local chief and his men had surrounded his house to burn it down and kill him. Their intention was plain but they suddenly showed signs of fear and extreme agitation and fled into the jungle. A year later the chief was converted and requested baptism; many of his subjects followed his example. During the ceremony, the chief interrogated John. "A year ago," he said, "I came with my warriors to kill you and burn down your house."

"I remember clearly," John replied, reliving the incident and shivering with a sudden chill of fear. He grinned ruefully at the chief: "What stopped you?"

"The gigantic men in white robes who surrounded your house. They had eyes like lightening and swords of fire. Who were they? The chief looked at John respectfully waiting for his reply. The tribe's noisy chatter subsided and every face turned expectantly to him. John replayed the events of that day again. He had registered the expressions of terror on the warriors' faces and realized something extraordinary had happened. Initially he had been terrified, but the icy fear gave way to a wild, exhilarating joy. He felt as if the Almighty was standing next to him. If he was martyred, and it seemed more than likely, he would fly straight to the arms of God. "So that's why they ran away," he thought. "Angels! And I didn't see a thing." For a second time he grinned ruefully: "Lord, I thought I was going to be dispatched to you on a spit of spears. Why didn't you let me see them too? It would have helped."

"Who were they?" persisted the chief, and snapped John from his reverie.

"Angels! A regiment of angels! Angels are God's warriors and they were sent to protect me."

News travels fast in an island culture. From that day on, nobody messed with the man with a bodyguard of angels.

God is almighty and has the power to protect and shelter us in every circumstance. In the 16th Century, a movement known as the Reformation erupted in Europe. The catalyst of this gigantic religious upheaval was an Augustinian monk and professor of theology called Martin Luther. He argued that the Bible was above the Church and Tradition, the only definitive authority in matters of life and doctrine. His desperate attempts to conform to God's righteousness, left him beaten and almost suicidal. Later he would write: 'I looked for God and saw only the devil.' In his distress, he began to search the Scriptures and the writings of the Church Fathers.²⁸ His studies led him to

²⁸ The Church Fathers are the early theologians of the Church who defined orthodox doctrine. Their theology is referred to as 'Patristic Theology', from the Latin for 'father'.

conclude that God's righteousness could only be received as a free gift of grace, the doctrine we call 'justification by faith'. These two ideas seem strange sparks to ignite the tinder of a Reformation that set Europe aflame, but that is exactly what they did. The Catholic Church had controlled the religious life of Europe through priestly mediation, penance and the sacraments for almost a thousand years. It was the monopoly share holder in salvation and conferred on its traditions equal authority to Scripture. Luther's protest ended a millennium of Catholic hegemony and threw wide the gates to freedom of religion and conscience.²⁹ It is not surprising that he was the most hated and hunted man in Europe. The Catholics anathematized him, destroyed his writings and wanted to burn him at the stake for heresy. His survival against all odds was a miracle that Luther attributed to God. We still sing the anthem he wrote celebrating God's protection and the triumph of his truth. His words were forged in fire and even today they resonate with reality:

A mighty fortress is our God,
A bulwark never failing;
Our helper he, amid the flood
Of mortal ills prevailing;
For still our ancient foe
Doth seek to work his woe'
His craft and power are great,
And armed with cruel hate -
On earth is not his equal.
Did we in our own strength confide,
Our striving would be losing;
Were not the right man on our side,
The man of God's own choosing.

Dost ask who that may be?
Christ Jesus, it is he!
Lord Saboath is his name,
And he must win the battle.
And though this world, with devils filled,
Should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear, for God hath willed
His truth to triumph through us.
Let goods and kindred go,
This mortal life also;
The body they may kill:
God's truth abideth still,
His kingdom is forever.

The hymn was translated from German and written in the archaic English of a different age, but the sentiment is contemporary. When I read or sing this hymn, I want to shout out, 'Hallelujah! A mighty fortress is our God'.

Please note that Luther was more concerned about the triumph of truth than his own survival.

The corollary of God's sovereign protection is that we too are enlisted as warriors in the holy war. This is dramatically described in Revelation 12. Satan is hurled from heaven to earth by a coalition of angels led by Archangel Michael. Furious over his defeat and subsequent exile, Satan declares

²⁹ 'Hegemony means 'sole leadership, domination'.

total war on the children of God and turns planet earth into a battlefield. Fearless in the face of this savage onslaught, the people of God overcome the devil by the 'blood of the Lamb'.³⁰

Psalm 91 not only promises God's angelic protection, but also the power and courage to trample 'the young lion and the serpent'.³¹ This idea was carried over into the New Testament. When the seventy evangelists returned to Jesus and announced euphorically, "Lord, in your name even demons submit to us," he replied:

"I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you."³²

God has given us the weapons³³ and the authority to defeat Satan and his demons. Where is the devil today? Brother and sister he is under your feet. Look up and see Jesus enthroned and victorious; look down and see the serpent defeated and his with head crushed by Christ's mortal blow. Christ bruised his heel³⁴ on the serpent's head so you can stamp on him.

Peter says that Satan is like a prowling lion hunting for prey. Meditate on his words. The devil is not the lion, but he merely imitates the behaviour of this predatory beast. There is only one Lion, and he is the conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the victorious Lord Jesus Christ.³⁵ Peter and James offer the same advice in dealing with this fake lion: 'Resist him firm in faith and he will run away.'³⁶ On battlefield earth, we are the victors. God has given us the authority and state-of-the-art weaponry to defeat Satan. If we fail, we only have ourselves to blame. Here are some tips from the Bible Battle Manual:

- When Satan takes you on a guided tour of your past sins and failures, show him the blood of Christ; tell him you're forgiven. If he persists, take him to the graveyard and show him your tombstone. Tell him that the "old you"³⁷ died with Christ and was buried with him: "Satan, you're addressing a corpse. I died with Christ to sin. You're speaking to the new man, the resurrection man. Quit rapping and start running."³⁸
- When Satan tells you that you're rubbish and will never amount to anything, laugh at him and show him your adoption papers: "Satan, I'm the adopted child of God and co-heir with the Lord Jesus. I will live and reign with Christ forever. I am God's masterwork, planned before all ages for a ministry of good works and worship. My Father doesn't make rubbish."³⁹
- When Satan oppresses you and attempts to steal your joy and passion in God, resist him. Use the all-powerful name of Jesus and stab him through the heart with the Spirit's sword, the word of God. Don't let him bully you into submission and depression. Stand up and fight. Resist him firm in faith.
- When Satan attempt to neutralize you by lies, suppression of your gifts, ferocious opposition, and all his other dirty tricks, march to war. Pray and fast and resist him with every weapon in God's arsenal. God has given you authority over the devil and all his works, so use it. Drive him from your life in riotous retreat.

³⁰ Revelation 12:7-11

³¹ Psalm 91:13

³² Luke 10: 17-20

³³ Ephesians 6: 10-20; 2 Corinthians 10:3-6

³⁴ Genesis 3:15

³⁵ Revelation 5:5

³⁶ James 4:7; I Peter 5:8-9

³⁷ The 'old you', referred to Romans 6:6 as the 'old self', is our old, sinful identity. This can best be described in terms of an autobiography in two volumes. The first volume is called 'Life in My Old Identity', and ends with crucifixion. The second volume is called 'New Identity in Christ' and describes the creation of new identity. The old identity was dominated by sin, selfishness and Satan; the new identity is ruled by Christ and the fruit of his Spirit'.

³⁸ Romans 6

³⁹ Ephesians 1:3-7; 2:10

- Satan can't kill you. He has no authority over you whatsoever, but he's very theatrical. He will try and scare you to death. Don't be intimidated. However big and ferocious he seems, he's a midget compared to the Almighty. If he tries to scare you, scare him: "Satan, you're a bragging bully but my Elder Brother beat you up. Hallelujah! Let me read your future. You've been judged and sentenced to the Lake of Fire. "
- If you want to make Satan hopping mad, constantly praise Christ for his triumphs. The devil can't stand it. It's like acid in his eyes. If you feel dejected, wounded in the war, and in need of a pick-me-up, sing, clap, rejoice, praise, shout, stamp, yell, leap and dance with joy (Habakkuk 3: 17-19). Go on the offensive! Don't let negative feelings get the better of you: **LET EVERYTHING WITH BREATH PRAISE THE LORD!**

5. PROVISION: A SECURITY BASED ON AN ALMIGHTY FATHER'S LOVE AND CARE FOR US.

(Matthew 6:25-34). We are fortunate enough to live in the wealthiest civilisation in history. Scientific breakthroughs in technology and medicine have given us unprecedented luxury, health and longevity. Guaranteed monthly salaries, the minimum wage, pensions, life assurance, the National Health Service, sickness benefits, generous redundancy payments and the Welfare State keep us from the deprivations that afflicted previous generations. Fridges and freezers allow us to stockpile food. In the event of a major emergency, the average family could survive for a least a month on this tinned and frozen largesse. For many of us, the petition in the Lord's Prayer, 'give us this day our daily bread', is almost irrelevant. Why petition 'our Father in heaven' for 'daily bread' when we can select a ready meal from the freezer, microwave it, and minute or two later eat dinner? Admittedly, I am grateful to live in this era and benefit from all the advantages of our civilisation. Who in their right mind would elect to go back in time and endure tooth extractions and surgical operations without anaesthetics? The problem that we must confront, however, is that it is possible to live as a Christian in our culture without exercising faith. Our world has been tamed and domesticated by technology and medicine. With morphine drips, even dying can be fun! It is now possible to make the journey from birth to death First Class, avoiding the extremes of poverty, hunger, destitution, sickness and agony that were once the human lot, and tragically still are in many parts of the world.

The danger for the Christian in this society is that we can easily incur Christ's savage indictment of the Laodiceans:

For you say, "I am rich, I have prospered and I need nothing." You do not realise that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked." (Revelation 3:17).

Christ's antidote to their spiritual poverty was to buy from him 'gold refined in fire,'⁴⁰ a vivid metaphor of a purified faith.⁴¹

If our security rests in our bank balance, job security, family, pension fund or Welfare State, we can be in serious trouble. The Recession has shown the impermanence of all these quasi securities; an economic downturn can sweep them all away. Sadly, if our security rests in these things, their abrupt removal will expose the utter poverty of our inner lives. We may have 'gained the world' but neglected to develop our spiritual resources.

Praying for an increase in faith can be a very dangerous business. Faith is rarely conferred as a sudden infusion but is learnt in the difficult circumstances of life. God often arranges

⁴⁰ Revelation 3:18

⁴¹ 1 Peter 1:7

circumstances in such a way that we have no alternative but to trust him for provision. After warning Ahab of an impending drought, Elijah is instructed by God to camp at the brook of Cherith. Breakfast and an evening meal will be provided by a flock of scavenging ravens: “I have commanded the ravens to feed you.”⁴² Elijah has been raised in the tough austerity of the desert. He knows that carnivorous ravens do not share their food with ravenous prophets. God is sending him into an impossible situation. He can only survive by a daily miracle. Elijah either lives each day by faith in God’s promise or dies of starvation.

Things get no easier for Elijah. Soon the brook dries up and God gives him his marching orders: “Go to Zarephath-on-Sea. I have commanded a widow there to feed you.”

Ahab’s wife, Jezebel, was a Phoenician princess and a fanatical devotee of her country’s chief deity, Baal. Once she became Ahab’s wife and queen of Israel, she ruthlessly imposed Baal worship on the nation and attempted to exterminate God’s prophets. Elijah’s prophecy of drought was God’s judgement on this idolatrous and corrupt system. Zarephath was in Phoenicia, at the very heart of Jezebel’s country. God, in a very real sense, prepared a table for Elijah in the presence of his enemies.

Arriving at Zarephath’s gates, Elijah meets the widow as she collects sticks on which to cook a final meal for herself and her son. When Elijah asks for food, she informs him that she only has a handful of meal and a little oil in a jug. Elijah predicts the impossible: “Do not be afraid! For thus says the Lord the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day the Lord sends rain on the earth.”⁴³

Elijah lives in the Zarephath guest house with the widow and her son. At meal time each day, the jar of oil and jug of meal are supernaturally replenished. Once again, Elijah only survives by a daily miracle, but there is one significant difference: Elijah’s faith also guarantees the survival of the widow and her son.

Implicit in both Cherith and Zarephath is an impossibility overcome by faith in God’s promise. Providentially, God develops Elijah’s faith by kicking away his props and securities. To survive he must trust in God; there is no other alternative. God may be dealing with you like this. Don’t confuse difficult circumstances with demonic attack or even the Lord’s chastisement. The gold of faith is always refined in fire. God has promised to provide for his children, and however impossible our circumstances, we must take him at his word.⁴⁴

Faith, like a muscle, will only grow with regular exercise. The heavier the weight and resistance, the stronger and more developed the muscle. Give your faith plenty of exercise; increase the resistance to encourage growth; make sure your security is in God and he will never fail you. Praise his Name!

6. PRAYER: A SECURITY BASED ON GOD’S PROMISE TO ANSWER OUR PETITIONS.

The prayerless Christian reminds me of a person who goes to work in the morning and leaves his front door wide open. Before his departure, he glues a note to his bay window: ‘Thieves are Welcome’. On returning in the evening, he discovers that his invitation has been accepted and thieves have stripped his house bare; even the floorboards and light fittings are missing. Neglect

⁴² 1 Kings 17:4

⁴³ 1 Kings 17:14

⁴⁴ Matthew 6:25-34

prayer and you will lose everything except your salvation. Why live in a plundered house, when you can enjoy the bounty and security of God?

Prayer is God's priceless gift to us, the means by which we co-operate in his rule, dialogue with him and receive his gifts. Our security in God is not only determined by God's initiative in Christ, but our response. As our heavenly Father, he wants our obedience, love, friendship and empathy. Communicating with God is not a complicated, mystical process that requires years of ascetic training and exercise. On the contrary, it is as simple as recognising the Father's immediacy and dialoguing with Him. Notice I use the word 'dialoguing' and not 'talking'. 'Talking' denotes a monologue, a one way conversation with God in which he is the Sympathetic Listener and we are the voluble petitioners. Can you imagine anything more boring than a tirade of need, petition, self absorption, interspersed with a little insincere praise and thanksgiving? I regularly use the gift of tongues, but I am alarmed by the idea that this gift is somehow superior to other forms of prayer. We often lack intelligence and imagination in our approach to heavenly Father. He is a loving, intelligent and communicative Person; our intelligence, creativity and personhood are derived from him. He specifically designed us in his 'image and likeness' so that we could respond to him intelligently. Let's put this in context. Imagine your child requests 'daddy' time. You're delighted by the idea and sit her on your knee: "How was school today, Joanna?" you enquire, anticipating a pleasurable hour or two of chatter, laughter and camaraderie. The question is ignored, and for the next hour she is transformed into a tongues automaton. As her 'daddy, you want rapport and dialogue, but instead she bombards you with an alien language. The language is incomprehensible to her but she hurls it at you in cascades of meaningless syllables and vowels. Admittedly, daddy may understand the language and appreciate some of the fine sentiments that Joanna uncomprehendingly expresses, but he wants more, much more from the relationship than this.

Let me get to the point! Throw off all the traditional and superstitious ideas that you've inherited, and think Scripturally, logically and empathetically about God. He is a Person, your loving Father, with feelings, thoughts, desires, imagination and a fierce yearning to communicate. We may feel that by incessantly speaking in tongues or bombarding him with requests, we are somehow fulfilling our obligation to be relational. The notion is laughable. If we adopted the same approach in a human relationship, we'd be very unpopular. I can almost overhear the remarks:

"I said 'Good Morning, Femi! How are you today?' and she shouted at me in a foreign language for half an hour. I only wanted to have a conversation with her."

"I met Bill this morning! A very weird fellow! You can't get a word in edgeways when he starts talking. I tried but it's like diverting a charging bull with a tooth pick. All he did for forty five minutes was ask me for things. Okay, not all the time. He interrupted the 'give me, give, give me' routine with exaggerated flattery like, 'You're beautiful. You're the highest, greatest, and most magnificent. Hallelujah! I praise you! Thank you for your grace, mercy and generosity! I worship you for bending your ear to your humble servant! Bless your name!' and strangest of all, 'I am a beggar and you are my provider'. He must have mistaken me for somebody else. And all that beggar stuff is crazy. He wears an Italian suit, gold Rolex and drives a Bentley. Probably I was another one of his scam victims. It's a strategy. He bullies you into giving him money, cars, food and paying his credit car bills. The most extraordinary thing was this: at the end of this mugging, he said he wanted to be my friend. My friend!

I'd sooner befriend a crocodile!"

The simple process of thinking is often worth more than a few hours of hollering at God. Unfortunately, some of us have made the mistake of believing that the mind is an obstacle to relating to him. This is utter nonsense, dangerous nonsense. Thinking is a divine activity, distinguishing us from beasts. It is important to use our cognitive gifts and imaginations in the

service of our heavenly Father. Think! Imagine! Why should God's personhood relationally be any different from ours? Why should he tolerate a one way conversation when we regard such behaviour as rude, insensitive and intrusive? Are we so stupid that we believe we can please God and force his compliance by battering him with incessant demands or strafing him with tongues? The two human parallels are proof enough that this kind of prayer hardly constitutes communication. Friendship implies dialogue and a selfless interest in the other person. How do you think God feels when we treat him like a slot machine? No person ever wants to be relegated to a 'utility'. By all means petition God and use the gift of tongues for self edification,⁴⁵ but recognise that what he really wants from us is friendship: dialogue, obedience and the intuitive ability to empathise and share his outlook. None of us will ever outgrow the necessity to petition God, but our motive in prayer should not be 'need' or 'greed', but love and delight in Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Neglect prayer and your 'blessings in heavenly places in Christ' will be stolen from you. The shell of your house, your salvation, will remain, but everything else will be lost. I can think of nothing more tragic for a believer than a 'Godless Christianity': an empty house bereft of warmth, light, decoration, comfort and companionship. Ultimately, a prayerless life is an empty, wasted life. The prerequisite for enjoying God and his security is prayer, which leads naturally to my last security.

7. PEACE: A SECURITY BASED ON SHARING GOD'S UNRUFFLED, ETERNAL PEACE

Prayer and God's peace are partnered in the New Testament (Philippians 4:6-7: John 14:27). As we have seen in this study, God is passionate, colourful, dynamic and involved, but he is never stressed. Why? As the Almighty, he has everything under control; as the perfect, holy God, he is at peace in himself: a symphony of harmonious attributes. He is not a flustered, ineffectual MD, stressed out by his responsibilities and kaleidoscopic changes in his universe. The Almighty is more than adequate for every contingency and emergency in heaven and earth. Peace is the inevitable attribute of a God who is all-powerful, all knowing, and has no internal conflicts and complexes, 'the perfect Personality'.

The 'peace of God' must never be confused with isolation or detachment. Let me explain this with a couple of examples. A person married to a hostile and abusive partner may divorce her husband to gain 'peace'; a house owner with 'neighbours from hell' may decide to move in order to find more peaceful accommodation. In both scenarios, peace is obtained by separating from the source of conflict and discord. God's peace is not like this. He is utterly involved in his universe. In the midst of conflict and the dramatic convulsions of creation, he is totally at peace. God is all serenity, tranquillity, stillness and poise, yet with one word he can ignite the fiery conflagration that will end our universe.⁴⁶ This peace is God's gift to us and it is aligned to prayer. Through prayer, we offload our problems and needs to our Father, and in return, he downloads his peace to us. We will never enjoy complete security in God until we share his peace. Don't run away from problems but give them to our heavenly Father, exchange them for his peace. If you run away and bury your head in the sand, the tide will turn and drown you. Our security must never be in anything as fickle as circumstances. Our Rock is immovable and everlasting; our security is in him.

HIS PEACE BE WITH YOU!

⁴⁵ Study 1 Corinthians 12 in which Paul explains the purpose and limitations of the gift of tongues.

⁴⁶ 2 Peter 3:3-10