

Chapter 9....

FACING LIFE

My brother, Carl, died in a car accident when he was 19 and I was 23, the mother of two preschoolers. It was the most difficult trial I had faced in my young life.

I remember the long drive from Kansas to Indiana. As we drove through one town and saw people going about their lives, talking and laughing, I thought, "How can they be so happy when I am so sad?" It seemed as if the world should have stopped moving.

There was a visitation night before the funeral. We got there early, and I vividly remember my mother's arms around me, leading me over to look at Carl's body. It was all so unreal.

After we returned to Kansas, I talked to my good friend, Dorene, about what I was going through. I would begin having an overwhelming feeling of the strength being sapped from me. It was as if a dark cloud would slowly descend upon me, and I had no alternative but to take a nap in the afternoon when my day care children were sleeping. It helped me to share with someone who cared about me, to have someone who would "weep with them that weep" (Rom 12:15).

I had read about the stages of grieving, and I think I went through most of them, except that I never felt anger at anyone. My brother fell asleep at the wheel, and the car hit a culvert. He died instantly. I was so thankful to have seen him a few days before he died. For a long time I could not eat a chef's salad, because that was what I ate that day after hearing the news.

Although this book is not intended to guide you through the various stages of grieving, I think it is beneficial to know what to expect, or to hear about the experiences of others so you can realize that you are not alone. Another reason to share my most personal thoughts with you is so when you (those of you who have never lost a child or close loved one) have a friend who experiences such a tragic loss, you will have a deeper understanding.

When my father died of cancer, I was nearly 40. We were very close; Mom always said I had him wrapped around my little finger, and she was right. His death was harder for me to accept than my brother's death, although it was not as much of a shock. David's words express a grief similar to what I felt:

Save me, O God; for the waters are come
in unto my soul. I sink in deep mire,
where there is no standing: I am come into
deep waters, where the floods overflow me.
I am weary of my crying: my throat is
dried: mine eyes fail while I wait for my
God (Psalm 69:1-3).

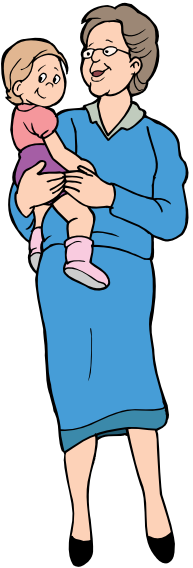
Neither of these experiences prepared me for the depth of sorrow I would undergo when Angie died. She was 33 and I was 54. The nightmare I described in the first chapter was truly a dark night. Everyone told me that losing a child was more difficult to cope with – the recovery taking longer than any other loss of life.

Never before had I cried as much in one week – or even in one month. Never before was I in such a “fog” as I walked through life the first few days and even weeks. When I returned to Kansas after being gone two weeks for the funeral and helping Eric pack, I tried to read a novel to get my mind on something other than my own grief. At first I could not even focus on the words.

When I did finally begin reading, it took me a month to read a book I normal would have digested in a week. It wasn't that I was busier, but just that I could not concentrate as well.

I was blessed with a preacher's wife who asked me if she could teach all of the children (a very wide age span) in one class, so I could take a few months off. I did not begin teaching Bible class again until January. The four months allowed time for partial recovery. I could readily say to this empathetic sister, "Ye have well done, that ye did communicate with my affliction" (Heb. 5:1,2).

Recovery



God blessed me with well-behaved day care children that year. I knew I was not ready to take on any new ones, so my group was smaller than most years. I worked at pampering myself, and trying to "be there" for Joe. As we talked and cried together, our love grew deeper and stronger than it had ever been.

I spoke often with my beloved friend, Dorene. She was always "there" for me! She told me once that Angie's death has been as hard for her as if one of her own grandchildren had died, and I know she was hurting for me. She had watched Angie grow up and we had worshiped together for many years. Having a friend like Dorene is like a life preserver being thrown to a drowning person. She helped keep me "afloat." Those who suffer need more than sympathy - they need companionship.

When I could not be with Sophie, I hugged my day care baby, Alexis (who is three months younger than Sophie). Alexis's grandma Janet lived across the street and she was so caring and helpful. She would keep Alexis until I had time to do learning activities with the older children, and bring her in time for stories and songs.

Moving to Texas

Moving to Texas was the best thing for us, but it was also traumatic. We left behind close friends who had helped us cope with our loss. Joe moved from an ideal teaching situation to a difficult one. In spite of these roadblocks, we feel we made the right decision. (Now, two years later, Joe has found a teaching position more like the one he had in Eudora, and we are very thankful for this blessing!)

When Eric told us he would move to Shallowater if his parents could sell their house and move, or if Joe could find a job and move there, we began job hunting in earnest. Many were praying for us.

Here is how God blessed us:

1. We went to Texas over Memorial Weekend to look for a job.
2. Tuesday Joe went to two job interviews.
3. Wednesday he called the Plainview school to let them know he was here and in the process of getting a Texas teaching certificate. They asked him to come in for an interview that afternoon.
4. Thursday morning Plainview offered Joe a job.
5. Friday we bought our home and found a brand new apartment for Mom to rent (that had been empty for a year – just waiting for Mom).
6. Saturday we drove home.

7. Sunday we sold our home in Eudora!

What a whirlwind! I gave my two-weeks notice to the day care parents, and started packing. Joe let the Eudora school administration know he would not be back in the fall. In July we moved to Shallowater. That September Eric and Sophie also moved to Shallowater. I was able to do a lot to assist Eric with Sophie's care. At the time, Eric was not even dating, but by February he married Connie (as I mentioned in Chapter 3). She was a grade school teacher, and resigned when the school year was over. Now she stays home with Sophie.

We have never regretted moving here, even though it has been difficult at times to adjust to everything. It was especially hard for Joe to start teaching in such a large school system after being in a small to medium sized one (it grew) for 35 years. For months Joe said that when he went to bed at night he would dream of getting on the ramp to head out to the new high school at Eudora. He still misses Eudora High School and all of his friends.

The move was less stressful for me. Although I miss my friends, I have my computer and the work I do writing and selling books, which remains the same as when I lived in Kansas. After moving to Texas, I did not work as a home day care provider, but spent time caring for Sophie instead. Now that we don't see Sophie as much, I have even more time for writing.

The experts warn survivors not to move for a least a year after a loved one passes away. Eric was not in the position to remain where he was living. He needed immediate assistance with Sophie. He was blessed to have business partners who encouraged him to continue as a partner, even though he was not able to carry a full load for a while.

As I mentioned in the first chapter, Eric moved back to his hometown, Olton. Some close friends were a comfort to Eric. With his parents there, and a home large enough for Eric and Sophie, it was the best possible situation for them.

So how does a Christian go from the night of sorrow to the day of joy? As I cautioned in the last chapter, don't think it will happen overnight, because it won't. Some even need the assistance of medication to survive through the most difficult times. Please don't think less of yourself or anyone you know if medication is required. It does not mean you are any less of a Christian. Our bodies and emotional needs are all different. Joe took nothing, and I continued taking medication I started with for PMS several years ago. Since then I have read on the Internet that this medication is sometimes used to treat panic attacks, which brings me to my next point.

Panic Attacks

For almost year after Angie died, I don't believe I had any panic attacks. The first one that I recognized as being a panic attack (afterwards) was when Eric and I took Sophie to a birthday party not long after we moved to Texas. While we were there, mothers and fathers were helping the children in the gymnastic area. It was fun being with Sophie, and I didn't feel out of place because there were other grandparents present. In the back of my mind I kept thinking, "This should be Angie helping Sophie, not me."

I did fine until we got home. Eric went back to eat pizza with friends and I gave Sophie a bath so she could spend the night with Joe and me. Suddenly my heart started racing. I felt clammy and nauseated. I

told Joe I thought I was getting the flu or something I ate might have upset my stomach. I drank some Gatorade and rested. I improved after an hour or two and felt much better in the morning, except for feeling exhausted.

I wasn't sure it was a panic attack until I had another one the day of Sophie's second birthday. It was very short in duration. By then I had done some research on panic attacks and decided that the first one probably was a panic attack. The second time I felt about the same, and both were occasions when I was thinking so strongly that Angie should have been here.

Twice when our son Mike came to visit us in Texas I had panic attacks because the thought kept sneaking into my mind: "Angie should be here, too. She will never come see me again. She will never call me again."

If you have undergone similar symptoms, please talk to your physician. First, you need to be sure it isn't a heart problem. If it is a panic attack, you may need medication and/or professional help. Ask your doctor whom to contact. I know some people have frequent panic attacks, and they can be so debilitating that work is missed and jobs can be lost as a result.

We all react to loss and trials differently. Some may benefit from grief counseling classes. Others benefit from reading books on the stages of grieving. The Internet may also be a source of information.

As you recover from whatever trial you experienced, you should spend less time crying and more time feeling a measure of happiness. After the death of a close loved one, you may still find the tears flowing occasionally after two years or even longer. Tears can be healing or they can be a warning sign that healing

is not taking place. If the tears continue day after day for an extended period, you need to see a professional.

Another word of caution for those who are taking medication: If you are so medicated that you are unable to cry, mention it to your doctor. The total avoidance of tears may be prolonging your recovery rather than assisting it.

Some of you are undoubtedly thinking, "I wonder if she still has panic attacks." Good news – I did not have a panic attack at all this past Christmas. Many Christian friends, and even some who don't know us, are still praying for our recovery. Knowing that Sophie has a Christian mother now has provided a great measure of peace. So if you are experiencing panic attacks, rest assured that a cure is not only possible, but within your grasp.

Whatever trial you have faced, accept the fact that life will never be the same. However, that in no way indicates a future of unhappiness. While the door to one facet of your life may have closed, other doors await to be opened!

New Traditions

Eric told us that in the grief counseling class he learned of the need to develop new traditions. We spend less time grieving over what has been taken from us if we find new events and traditions to take their place.

Every holiday and birthday our family always had (and we still have) a tradition of giving gifts and/or talking on the phone. For Sophie's first birthday, Angie and I had planned to celebrate by my coming to Arizona and helping with the party preparations. I told her we

would give her a carpet shampooer for an early Christmas gift so we could shampoo the family room area where Sophie had spit up (like many babies do). Angie had cleaned it each time, but still thought a more in-depth cleaning was in order. We were also going to shop together for party favors and gifts. What fun!

Angie's accident occurred about six weeks before my planned trip. Eventually my flight was changed to Texas, and I joined Eric's family in the birthday celebration. Words cannot express the longing in my heart. Yet being present and watching Sophie's delight in every gift comforted me.

Last year we went a few short blocks to Eric's and Sophie's new home in Shallowater. This little one had **three** great-grandmas present. Her happiness and love touched each of us.

This year Joe and I were once again invited to celebrate with the family. Long before her birthday, Sophie received the gift of a new mother. Joe and I are blessed with the assurance that we have been allowed to remain a "part of the family."

My mom would not have enjoyed a party at the park, so I asked her if she would like me to bring Sophie to her home the weekend before Sophie's birthday. It was very enjoyable for her to watch Sophie open the gifts "Grandma Ada" had for her. Two friends who play cards with Mom and me also came for the mini-celebration. Linda and Jean had already bought Sophie a gift, so I thought about how it would please them to watch her open the gift and share some cake.

On the day of Sophie's third birthday, Joe and I called her and left a message on the answering machine. When she called us later to tell us all about her new

bicycle (from her parents), our day was complete. Never will I be able to plan a celebration with Angie, but new ways of finding happiness are essential to my recovery, as they are to yours if you have undergone a very difficult trial in your life.

Joe's Experience

Although Joe has never needed to take medication, I know he misses Angie as much as I do. He did not want to go to a grief counseling class. He talked to Eric often about how he was feeling, and it was helpful to know that others felt as he did. One thing I remember in particular is that Joe said he would often "see Angie" somewhere in the house. He knew it was not a vision. He didn't think Angie was really there. He just thought about what she looked like and pictured her in our home. Eric assured Joe that his reaction was quite normal. Grieving individuals might even see a person walking down the street and feel compelled to look at the face to be certain it is not the deceased (even though they know deep inside that it could not possibly be the one they are missing).

Part of the reason Joe had a harder time moving to Texas than I did was not only starting a new job, but he also had to take the Texas test to be a math teacher, even though he had taught in Kansas for 35 years. It was very stressful. Joe had a close bond to many teachers and students in Eudora. It is difficult to establish those ties in a new location. The parents here don't know what a great teacher Joe is. When we were living in Kansas, many of his former students would tell him how much better they were prepared for college math than were their peers who graduated from other high schools. It has been difficult for Joe to leave his "comfort zone," as he calls his Eudora teaching job.

In spite of these hurdles, Joe is constantly fortified by knowing that we are doing what Angie would have wanted. He is uplifted by the love he receives from Sophie. Truly, “Children’s children are the crown of old men” (Prov. 17:6a). He finds peace in watching my happiness in being close to Sophie, too.

We are both making new friends here, and that further prepares us to face new challenges in our lives. The church in Shallowater is sound and true to the Word. All of these things contribute to our healing. But it is not enough to look at modern examples of people who are overcoming trials. We will grow spiritually as we examine the pages of God’s Word to study the manner in which God’s people learned how to face life.

Elijah’s Tribulations

Elijah was bold and strong when he faced the prophets of Baal. He challenged the people of Israel, “How long halt ye between two opinions? If the Lord be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him” (1 Kings 18:21). He thought he was the only prophet of the Lord standing up against 450 prophets of Baal (v. 22). Even so, Elijah stood firm, waited all day for the failure of Baal’s prophets, and then called on God. The fire from heaven consumed even the stones and dust! Elijah then prayed for rain, and God sent a downpour.

When Jezebel heard what had transpired, she sent a messenger to Elijah to threaten him: “So let the gods do to me, and more also, if I make not thy life as the life of one of them [slain prophets of Baal] by tomorrow about this time” (1 Kings 19:2).

Elijah fled into the wilderness. He was so discouraged that he “sat down under a juniper tree: and he

requested for himself that he might die” (v. 4). God sent special food for Elijah to strengthen him for a long journey. Elijah traveled 40 days to Horeb (called the “mount of God”). He hid in a cave until God challenged him, “What doest thou here, Elijah?” (v. 9).

Elijah tried to justify himself, saying, “I have been very jealous for the Lord God of hosts: for the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life to take it away” (v. 10).

God came to Elijah, not in the strong wind that broke rocks to pieces, not in the earthquake, not in the fire, but in “a still small voice” (v. 12). Again God asked Elijah what he was doing there, and again Elijah answered that he was the only prophet of God remaining.

God did not leave Elijah to wallow in pity for his condition. God put Elijah to work in His service! God told Elijah to:

1. Anoint Hazael to be king over Syria.
2. Anoint Jehu to be king over Israel.
3. Anoint Elisha to be the prophet who would take Elijah’s place eventually.

God promised that He would take care of the enemies of Elijah using these three men. Then He put Elijah in his place by proclaiming:

Yet I have left me **seven thousand** in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which hath not kissed him (v. 18).

When we are faced with difficult trials, we may feel all alone like Elijah did. God won't speak to us verbally, but we can be uplifted through God's Word as we study and learn (1 Cor. 10:11).

Modern Application

What can we learn from Elijah's experience? First, when we have done all we can to serve God, we need to turn the outcome over to Him!

Second, let us remember that Elijah was not alone! We are not alone, either. We have God and Christian friends to see us through the rough times in our lives.

Third, God gave Elijah meaningful work to do in His service. Filling one's day with "busy work" and avoiding proper rest will not accomplish the same thing: "It is vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late, to eat the bread of sorrows: for so he giveth his beloved sleep" (Psalm 127:2). We can all find ways to serve God if we are willing workers. The word "easy" appears only once in the New Testament relating to work, and then in connection with Christ's yoke (Matt. 11:30). Someone well said, "Pray to God, but row for shore."

Following a divorce from an obsessive-compulsive husband, a friend of mine asked what she could do to stop focusing on what she had been through. One of the things I suggested was that she should write down at least one thing each week that she would plan to do to encourage someone else. It could be writing an encouraging note, calling someone, offering assistance or anything she could think of to uplift someone else.

We cannot be happy when we are wallowing in self-pity! It is essential to look outside ourselves. This is

not always easy to do. I know I was probably more self-absorbed after Angie died than I had ever been during my Christian life. It is too difficult to reach out when we first experience the death of a close loved one. We need to accept the love and comfort of others. But the deep down healing won't occur until we grow stronger and find occasions to reach out to others. "A man that hath friends must shew himself friendly" (Prov. 18:24a; cf. Rom 16:1,2; 2 Tim 1:15-18). Comfort is a two-way street!



STUDY AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Discuss situations where prayer is needed for more than just a few days or even a few weeks (cf. Psalm 55:17). Write down names of those who need your prayers now (either other class members or anyone you know).
2. What are some of the comforting things people have done for you, in addition to praying for you, when you were undergoing a trial. (These should not be the immediate responses to the death of a loved one, but you may list things that happened months later, or things that took place after other trials.)
3. What have you done for others in similar situations (to question two)?

4. Describe the bravery of Elijah in facing the prophets of Baal.
5. How did God respond to Elijah's prayers?
6. Who threatened Elijah and what was threatened?
7. How does Elijah's despondency compare to ours when we are facing trials? Consider Christ's words in John 16:32. During times of crisis, do you think similarly?

8. Was there a time in your life when you felt very alone, or thought there were not many who cared about the trial you were undergoing? How can you gain strength by studying Paul's attitude in a similar situation in 2 Tim. 4:16-18?

9. God did not come to Elijah in the strong wind, earthquake or fire. Rather, He came in a small, still voice. Are there times in your life when you were looking for a mighty, powerful answer, but found it in a quieter, calmer manner?

10. How many knees had not bowed to Baal? What can we learn from this in our modern lives when we sometimes feel there are so few who truly love God?

11. What did God command Elijah to do, and how would this have comforted Elijah?
12. List some things you can do to reach out to others. Make it your goal to do at least one of these each week. They do not need to be “big” things. An encouraging note, a phone call, a visit to a shut-in or an inexpensive gift for someone who needs comfort or encouragement could be some of the services for God that you might consider.

Chapter 10....

PRECIOUS MEMORIES

Before we are ready to concentrate primarily on the precious memories of loved ones who have passed away, we must begin dealing with the trauma surrounding their death.

In some cases the deceased may be very old, and the death may have been expected. There will still be some sad memories of the departure, but the survivors are generally able to focus more on the good memories soon after the death.

Even in a case like mine, where the death was a total shock, there will be sorrow and joy intermingled for months and maybe even years. As I've explained before, the sorrow is overwhelming at first, and it is difficult to focus on joy.

As time goes by, joy grows and sorrow recedes. One dear sister in Christ described to me how she would "play it over and over" in her mind, reliving the death of her parents in a tornado, being notified, going to the funeral, etc.

A Tragic Movie

Her experience and mine are somewhat similar in that the deaths were completely unexpected. Although her parents died in April, by December she was still playing the experience over and over in her mind. She thought there was something wrong with her.

Her awakening arrived in December, when she offered some tomatoes to a neighbor. Although the lady was

not a close friend, my sister had a discussion with her neighbor that would alter her outlook on the grieving she was unable to overcome.

As they began talking, the neighbor revealed that she had cared for her husband at home until he died, and then she did the same thing for her mother. As they confided in each other, for the first and last time, my friend awakened to the fact that her feelings were quite normal, and they would even last quite a while longer. What a relief!

Soon after this incident, my friend read an article in the newspaper, which said the crying and grieving should stop in a certain period of time (she thinks it was six months). She stated to me, "Just think how I would have felt had I read that before someone who had been there assured me I was just fine." She called a grief counselor at a funeral home and told her how upset she was about the article. The counselor called the paper and contacted the author about how this misinformation could impact negatively on those who were still grieving.

Even now, nearly 18 years later, she can play every scene of the tragedy in her mind with precision. But, she points out, "I am now able to control the playing."

How did this dear sister recover from her monumental loss? She did not talk to a counselor, other than the short phone call mentioned above. She had two Christian friends that spent many long hours on the phone with her every day. Sometimes they talked about her parents, but other times they talked about nearly everything except her deceased parents.

Much later she discovered that one of the ladies had lost a very close relative and understood the depth of sorrow my sister – and her sister – was undergoing.

Now she is able to do the same for others who are suffering.

My Movie

As you read the first chapter you realized that my memories of losing Angie are crystal clear. There may be small things we forget, however.

When my dad died, I had been doing home day care and Angie answered the phone. I remember her taking me by the hand and leading me into the bedroom. Years later she told me that I hit her when she told me Dad had passed away. I have absolutely no memory of that reaction. Other events remain ingrained after 18 years. (Yes, my dad died the same year my friend's parents both died, and we are close to the same age.)

The movies of my dad's death and my brother's death are not often replayed. I think of them and miss them, but it is not the excruciating pain I still feel about losing Angie. Although I know this pain is lessening, it does not bother me that I will always miss her. That does not mean I have not recovered. It does not mean I dwell on my loss constantly.

Now I can control "my movie," too. And I can play portions of the movie without falling apart. Most of the time, though, I concentrate on my present life and ways I can serve God. Someone aptly stated, "In the clouds of affliction, the eye of faith can always find God's rainbow." When I do think of Angie (daily), I still think of how much I miss her, but primarily I am able to focus on the happy times we had.

Precious Memories

Precious memories can be a great comfort when a loved one dies. For many years I have kept folders in

my file cabinet. Each time the “Encouragement” folder started bulging, I carried it to a storage cabinet and placed a new folder in the up-to-date area.

After Angie died, I found some of her encouraging letters and cards in the current folder. I sobbed as I read them, but felt so comforted to remember the close bond we shared. Then I thought of the other folders hidden away and began searching through them, pulling out every letter and card I found from Angie. One of these letters is on the dedication page.

After a few days, I yearned for more “communication” from Angie. I searched and searched and found a few more. Then the well was dry – and so were my eyes – for a period of time.

Months later I providentially ran across a treasure – a poem book Angie had given me – with comments on many of the pages. She had marked special poems, which she said reflected her feelings toward me. Once again the tears flowed freely, sorrow over what I had lost mingled with joy for the close relationship we shared.

Now the special letters and cards are stored in a box at the foot of my bed. Evidently the tears are still needed, and the connection with Angie is eagerly sought. Although I don’t cry as often, I want you to understand that it is normal for you to continue crying for a close loved one, even several years after they are gone.

What is not normal, is crying daily for hours and being unable to go on with your life. If you find yourself in this situation after the first few weeks, you urgently need to seek professional help. Talk to your physician and ask him or her to suggest a psychiatrist or psychologist if you don’t know whom to contact.

Pictures are another source of comfort. Soon after I returned to Kansas I began finding recent pictures of Angie with Sophie – or Angie, Eric, and Sophie together – to make copies for our friends and loved ones. Unfortunately I had not saved the negatives, and did not have the pictures on a CD. But Wal-Mart and other stores have machines, which duplicate photos, and I spent a lot of money trying to preserve and share the recent pictures I had taken (or that Angie had sent to me).

Comforting Memories

When our loved ones can no longer be on this earth with us, we are comforted by memories of times we shared with them. This is true whether or not the deceased was a Christian.

When Angie was a little girl, she loved going with me to the nursing home. We had special people we visited every time, and she delighted in seeing their shining eyes when she made them a picture or took another gift for them.

One very lovable friend we nicknamed the No-No Lady as a term of endearment. She was unable to speak, due to a stroke she had suffered. When Angie showed her a new winter coat, this sweetheart would say, “No, no, NO, no,” being interpreted, “I love your new coat!”

As Angie grew a little older, she would stop at the nursing home after school. Following one such visit, Angie came home bawling, and ran to her room. About that time the phone rang, and an employee of the nursing home apologized for not letting me know that the No-No Lady had died the previous night. Angie asked what had happened to her, and was devastated when the attendant told her. It would have

been better if I could have cushioned the loss for her before she went to see her friend.

After I discovered what had happened, Angie and I talked about how much we loved the No-No Lady. I comforted Angie by reminding her of the joy she brought into this woman's life through the pictures she drew, the flowers she gave her, and the picture I took of Angie with the No-No Lady and framed one for Angie and one for her friend.

Not only was Angie comforted by remembering how she had brought happiness into the No-No Lady's life, but now I am comforted as I remember what a loving child and adult Angie was. I know her childhood experiences contributed to her desire to work with children who had learning disabilities.

My home day care was probably an even greater influence on Angie than the visits to the nursing home. One time Angie told me that she used many of my techniques for dealing with the day care children when she was coping with misbehavior in the school classroom.

Even More Precious

While it is pleasant to remember loved ones, both alive and those who are no longer with us, the most precious memory in our lives should be that Jesus loves us and gave His life for us. When this is the center of our lives, we are more able to cope with the trials of life.

If you can truthfully say with Paul, "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Phil. 1:21), then you can also possess "the peace of God, which passeth all

understanding, [which] shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:7).

Christians find in Jesus a friend who is true, faithful, loving, compassionate, and everything we need. He never leaves us. We may leave Him, but Jesus never turns from us as earthly friends may do. God is a loving Father who gave us the gift of His only begotten Son, so we may have eternal life if we but obey His Word.

My mother wrote a poem about her best friend – and mine – and I hope He is yours, too:

MY FRIEND

By Ada Bender

The dearest friend of all to me,
Is one I cannot touch, or feel, or see.
But I am sure you know Him, too,
I see Him in your face and what you do.

He left His home in heaven on high,
To come to earth and for me to die.
Yes, the dearest friend of all to me,
Is one whom now I do not see.

But some sweet day after I do die,
I'll go to be with Him in my home on high.
So until then, please, all pray for me –
That true to my Friend, Jesus, I'll always be.

Jesus described those who are His friends, saying, “Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you. Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends; for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you” (John 15:14,15).

Jesus said we are His friends **if** we obey him. He revealed Himself to the apostles, and we are able to read these words in the New Testament. Are we a friend if we don't care enough to read God's Word to learn what we must do to be saved and remain faithful? Remember how I said I wanted to read the letters from Angie over and over? How much more we should desire to receive communication from God through reading His Word!

Legalism or Love

It saddens me to hear people describe those who emphasize the need to obey the Bible as those who are "legalistic." As I read the pages of God's Word, I am convinced over and over that those who love God obey Him, and those who don't love God, don't care about obeying.

Jesus Himself clarified it for us, "He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me: and he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and will manifest myself to him" (John 14:21).

When we look at those who were truly legalistic in the Bible, they were the ones who made laws that God did not authorize. When the scribes and Pharisees came to Jesus to criticize him and his followers, they asked why the disciples did not follow the **tradition** of the elders (Matt. 15:2). They weren't chiding them for not obeying God, but rather their own man-made regulations!

Jesus answered them in Matthew 15:3-9:

Why do ye also transgress the commandments of God by your tradition? For God

commanded, saying, Honour thy father and mother: and He that curseth father or mother, let him die the death. But ye say, Whosoever shall say to his father or his mother, It is a gift, by whatsoever thou mightest be profited by me; And honour not his father or his mother, he shall be free. Thus have ye made the commandment of God of none effect by your tradition. Ye hypocrites, well did Esaias prophesy of you, saying, This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.

The Pharisees and scribes were the legalists. They made their own laws and expected people to follow them. They were not teaching people to obey God without adding to or taking from His Word!

Jesus warned them – and us – that we must not add the commandments of men or our worship to God will become null and void – meaningless – worthless.

The more things change, the more they stay the same. People today do the same thing. They add to God's worship and criticize those who want to stick to what the Bible says. They label the obedient as "legalists" for saying that obeying God is necessary. Rather, they desire to emphasize "love" as the answer. Yes, love is the answer. But true love leads to obedience! This is confirmed in 1 John 2:3-5:

And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments. He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the

truth is not in him. But whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him.

Perhaps part of the confusion is that we don't recognize the stages through which a Christian passes. When we first hear about the Truth of God's Word, we may be motivated to obey more from fear than from a deep love. Yes, we love God, but we may fear hell more than we desire to go to heaven. Fear can be a healthy thing if put in perspective. "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad. Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men" (2 Cor. 5:10,11).

As we grow in Christ, we learn more about how much He loves us, and our love grows. We may obey more as a result of this deep love than before. Not that we no longer fear hell (if we were to choose to turn from leading the Christian life), but that we are motivated to obey because we love God and Jesus so much that we desire to do everything we can to follow Christ's example.

The Mind of Christ

As we travel through this earthly life, let us strive to become more like Christ, and have the mind of Christ, as is expressed in Philippians 2:5-12:

Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of

a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became **obedient** unto death, even the death on the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always **obeyed**, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.

Jesus, our perfect example, obeyed the will of the Father and submitted even unto death. Let us follow His example and have the mind of Christ! While our Lord shed tears upon occasion (including the loss of a loved one), it is clear that He never allowed such to consume Him. He went on with His life of devotion and service to His Father and to mankind.

The Results

Paul continues in the book of Philippians to describe some principles and details resulting from having the mind of Christ. It would be beneficial to read the remainder of this book. Consider these key points:

- “Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord” (3:1).
- “But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ” (3:7).
- “I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus” (3:14).

- “Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice” (4:4).
- “Be careful [anxious] for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God” (4:6).
- “And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus” (4:7).
- Think about the true, honest, just, pure, lovely, things of good report, things of virtue and praise (4:8).
- **“I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me” (4:13).**

Here are some wonderful, inspired statements regarding the prerequisites and results of a life centered upon Christ and Him crucified! Surely the world is more impressed by a demonstration of our faith than by our mere profession or verbal description of it. Are you demonstrating, day-by-day, the mind of the Savior?

STUDY AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Discuss things you are doing now to leave precious memories for your loved ones, and things you would like to do in the future.
2. What precious memories have deceased loved ones left for you?
3. What is the most precious gift Christ has given to us?
4. How did Jesus describe His friends in John 15:14 and 15?

5. How were the Pharisees and scribes legalistic?
6. Explain why it is love and not legalism when we choose to obey God's Word.
7. If we teach for doctrine the commandments of men (Matt. 15:9), how does it affect our worship to God?
8. How does the "terror of the Lord" (2 Cor. 5:10,11) motivate us to save lost souls?
9. What must we do to have the mind of Christ as we learn in Phil. 2:5-12?

10. What do we gain through our love and obedience?

11. How can we “rejoice in the Lord” (Phil. 4:4) when we face difficult trials in life?

12. What have you learned from the book of Philippians that helps you feel confident that you can “do all things through Christ”?