

## THE SAVED

Is it easier to lose a close loved one who is saved than to lose a close loved one who is not saved? Knowing the deceased is saved eternally is a tremendous comfort. Yet the saved one may be missed more because of the Christian life he or she led.

When Angie died, I not only lost a daughter, but a very dear friend. She and I understood each other. Of course Angie went through the difficult growing up phases. When she went to college, we grew very close. She called me to talk over most of her problems, and always seemed to feel better when we hung up.

An even deeper bond developed during her pregnancy and the nearly eleven months she had with Sophie. It was a delight to have her ask my advice regarding mothering issues. I was needed and respected. She expressed a desire to be the kind of mother to Sophie that I was to her.

As this chapter is being written, it has been two years since Angie died. Yes, I still have her message on the answering machine. Yes, I am comforted in knowing that I will see her again some day if I lead a faithful Christian life. Even so, my heart aches for her. I miss her as much today as I did shortly after her death. Much healing has taken place, but there will always be the longing to see her – to talk to her.

Would the pain be worse if she were lost eternally? Of course. Do I miss her less because she is saved? No, never. I miss her more because of the spiritual bond we had developed. But I know I will see her again.

King David knew God's comfort. He wrote, "I will be glad and rejoice in thy mercy: for thou hast considered my trouble; thou hast known my soul in adversities" (Psalm 31:7). We are comforted as we seek God's will – trying to reach out to others – making serving God our number one purpose in life. As the song "Into the Heart of Jesus" states, "Joy in the place of sorrow, peace in the midst of pain" (© O. J. Smith, the author).

When a loved one dies, our minds turn to thoughts of where he or she is now, especially if we believe the person is saved eternally. Friends may try to comfort us with their views on the present state of our dearly departed one.

### **Prevailing Views**

When Angie died, well-meaning people declared, "She is in heaven with Jesus." Others told me, "She is an angel now." Although I appreciated their kindness, neither is accurate. The Bible does not teach that those who die go straight to heaven. Neither does God's Word teach that people **ever** become angels.

In fact, we know that people do not turn into angels because God created all of the angels, and they were not people first (Col. 1:16). Nor does the Bible teach that our departed loved ones can see everything we do.

For many years I wondered what happened to people when they died. The prevailing thought seems to be that when a person dies, he or she goes directly to heaven or hell. However, I reasoned, if that were the case, then how could these souls all go to their final destination **before** Jesus told them to either go with Him to heaven or depart to the fires of hell (2 Cor. 5:10; 2 Thes. 1:7-9)?

Certainly we can hope to some day be with God, Jesus and our loved ones in heaven. If we follow God's Word, we will spend an eternity in heaven (1 Thes. 4:17, Rev. 22:14). But a saved person does not go straight to heaven after dying. He or she goes to paradise.

We can affirm this fact by studying the Bible. One example, which verifies that saved souls go to paradise, was given by Jesus. "Today shalt thou be with me in paradise," Jesus promised the penitent thief on the cross (Luke 23:43).



The thief and Jesus both died. They went to a place of happiness called paradise. We know it is not the same thing as heaven, because after His resurrection, Jesus explained to Mary Magdalene, "Touch me not, for I am not yet ascended to my Father..." (John 20:17). When Jesus died He did **not** go directly to heaven to be with His Father. Rather, both Jesus and the thief were in paradise together. Jesus won't be in paradise when we arrive, because now He resides in heaven.

No, saved ones do not go directly to heaven when they die. They do not cease to exist – not even for a short time – nor do they "soul sleep" in an unconscious state until the judgment. Like the thief, the saved go to paradise when they die. After the judgment, the saved will go to heaven to be with God and Jesus.

Many have tried to use the account of the thief on the cross to "prove" that one does not have to be baptized to be saved. First, this argument is faulty because no one knows whether or not the thief was baptized with John's baptism (Mark 1:4). Baptism into Christ for the remission of sins in the name of the Father, Son and

Holy Spirit was not commanded until the Day of Pentecost (Matt. 28:18-20, Acts 2:38, Rom. 6:3-6, Gal. 3:27).

Furthermore, the thief lived under the old law, which was nailed to the cross when Jesus died (Col. 2:14). The Christian Age had not yet begun. We are living under the new law. Those living in the Christian Age must be immersed for the remission of sins in order to be saved.

Why is the thief on the cross a topic of concern to those who have lost loved ones? As time begins to heal our wounds, we must focus on those who are still alive. What can we do to help them live so they can spend an eternity in heaven after the judgment? It is only when we have a correct knowledge of what God's Word teaches about salvation that we can assist those who are still alive. Because of our personal loss, we may develop a deeper compassion for the souls of our family and friends, as well as those we come in contact with through work or social events.

### A Comfort

Although it will never bring Angie back to me, it was a comfort when the preacher of the congregation where she worshiped told us that for many years there would be times when he would use her life and death as an illustration to urge others not to wait, but to obey the gospel immediately. When Angie got up that morning and left home to go to garage sales, little did she know that she would never again have the opportunity to change her eternal destiny. When she told Eric good-bye, she had no inkling that she would never talk to him again on this earth. When she hugged Sophie and left her with Eric, there was no indication that it would be the last hug she gave her beloved child in this life.

The pain of our own suffering is initially so sharp that it is next to impossible to think of anything else. As time goes by, we gradually ponder how our experience impacts others. Eventually we reach a point where we are able to consider what we can do to teach the lost. Once we begin looking outwardly, new skin begins to grow on our healing wound.

There are few joys in this life that can compare with leading a soul to Christ. But we must remember that it takes a lot of patience, prayer, teaching and faithful living to reach that goal. It may be the soul of one of our children, a spouse, a student in Bible class, a friend we invited to worship services, and the list could go on and on.

I think what we need to remember is that we don't just jump from extreme sorrow all the time to extreme joy all the time. Our lives are always a mixture of both. Occasionally one feeling or the other may overwhelm our thoughts. When sorrow overtakes us, we must be patient and continue living a faithful life until the time can arrive when our lives again fill with so much joy that the pain is minimized. The call of duty to the fundamentals of a bedrock faith in God through Christ will carry us through the valley of deep emotional pain.

### **When a Young Child Dies**

How do parents recover from a loss when a baby or little one dies? One of the first steps of recovery is to realize that the child's soul was in a safe condition. This baby or small child was not guilty of sin. How can we know this of a certainty?

Jesus loves the little children. His love was evident when He told His disciples, "Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the

kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 19:14). He took time to touch them and show His love.

On another occasion, Jesus called a child to Him as an illustration when His apostles were arguing over who would be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven:

And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them, And said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me. But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea (Matthew 18:2-6).

God teaches that we are each accountable for ourselves, which means a child is not born with anyone else’s sins. Under both the old law and the new law, God has always taught His people that each person is responsible for his or her own actions. In Ezekiel 18:20 we learn, “The soul that sinneth, it shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son: the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him.”

If Jesus and the Father love children so much, then why does God allow them to die? Some of the answers to this question were covered in Chapter 3. However, let us delve more deeply into the question regarding babies and very young children.

Many times when a child dies, it is through a momentary lapse on the part of the one(s) overseeing the child's well being. It may be a parent, older sibling, grandparent, other relative, caregiver, or friend of the family. How sad we are when a child drowns, is poisoned (due to cleaners or medication left within reach), or runs into the street in front of a car. Yes, we wish that just for that moment God would change the laws of nature. Why couldn't the water rotate the child onto his or her back? Why didn't God make the caregiver realize the child was in danger?

On this earth we all have freedom of choice. Sometimes people are careless. It breaks our hearts to see the carelessness result in the loss of life. Yet it is wrong to blame God for man's mistakes.

Chapter 7, "Beyond 'If Only,'" will cover what our response should be if we are the one who caused the death of another. For now, let me provide one example of how a grandfather was able to survive. I don't know what this man went through in the healing process, but I do know that rather than wasting his life by wallowing in blame and self-hate, this Christian man was able to begin reaching out to others who have lost loved ones. As he dealt with his personal pain and threw out the life preserver, his life had new meaning.

Often times, no one is really to blame. A preacher's wife related this incident to me. Dear friends of hers lost a baby soon after the mother went back to work. The baby died while at a home day care. The provider was not at fault, and it was ruled that the baby died of SIDS. The baby's mother was a Christian, but her husband was not.

When the preacher struggled to prepare the funeral sermon, he asked the advice of a wise older preacher, who told him to speak on 2 Samuel 12:23. After David

sinned with Bathsheba, and the son born to this union died, David said, "I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me." The preacher used this illustration to encourage obedience to the gospel.

After hearing the sermon, the father began to ponder how David had something in his life that he wanted, too. The following morning the father called the preacher and was baptized for the remission of sins. Now he has the comfort of knowing he will see his daughter again, just as David knew he would see his son.

Realizing that children sometimes die, parents face a special dilemma. When a child wants to be baptized, parents must decide if the child is old enough to properly understand. Should they tell the child to go ahead and be baptized or urge the child to wait until he or she is a little older?

### **Age of Accountability**

When a person reaches the age of accountability, he or she is able to grasp the meaning of sin and the need of a Savior. This involves knowing the eternal import of one's actions and thus goes beyond mere disapproval by one's parents. The person must be able to "believe" before being able to "repent and be baptized" (Acts 2:37,38; Mark 16:16). The people on the Day of Pentecost understood what Peter taught them. They knew they were guilty of sin. Babies and little ones cannot understand enough to believe and repent. Therefore, they are not candidates for baptism.

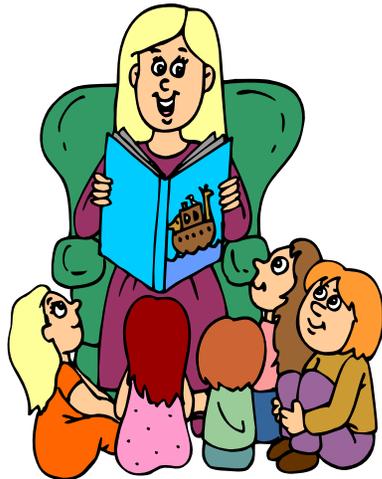
Often parents will study with the child who desires baptism to be sure the child comprehends what is about to take place. In an attempt to be more impartial, sometimes parents will ask an elder,

preacher, or other Christian to study with the child before a decision is made.

Angie was younger than most. She was baptized when she was only eight years of age. She was more mature than most eight-year-olds. She had been taught the Bible at a very early age.

When a young child requests baptism, in addition to studying with the child, I advise a parent to write down the reasons for the baptism – what the child understands. When the child is older, if he or she has doubts about what was and was not understood, the list can be an assurance. If there is any doubt, and a person desires to be baptized at an older age, it is his or her decision.

Parents and Bible teachers, we have a huge responsibility to properly ground our children in the Truth so they will be ready to accept Christ in baptism when they are old enough to make a commitment to become a Christian. Too often the passage in James 3:1 is used to avoid teaching. James warns, “My brethren, be not many masters [teachers], knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation.”



Yes, we are accountable for what we teach. But, we are also accountable for refusing to use our abilities to serve God. In the parable of the talents, the man who was given one talent told the master when he returned, “I knew thee that thou art an hard man,

reaping where thou hast not sown, and gathering where thou hast not strawed: and I was afraid, and went and hid thy talent in the earth: lo, there thou hast that is thine” (Matthew 25:24,25).

Was the master pleased? No! He chastised the servant, saying:

Thou wicked and slothful servant, thou knewest that I reap where I sowed not, and gather where I have not strawed: Thou oughtest therefore to have put my money to the exchangers, and then at my coming I should have received mine own with usury. Take therefore the talent from him, and give it unto him which hath ten talents. For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath. And cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 25:26-30).

As we learn to deal with losing loved ones, may we determine to teach the living, so they may be saved when they depart from this world. “Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men” (2 Cor. 5:11).

God does not overwhelm us with His presence to the point where we absolutely **must accept** Him, nor does He withhold sufficient evidence from us to where we **cannot** truly know Him. Similarly, when a loved one dies – young or old – we all have the opportunity to grow closer to God or to turn away from Him.

Those who turn away from God will never find true peace. They won't spend eternity with God and their

saved loved ones. Those who draw closer to God will find peace and *Joy in the Morning*. “Draw nigh unto God, and he will draw nigh to you” (James 4:8).

## Circle of Love

How can we respond when we see a Christian falling away after a traumatic experience? Here are a few suggestions, but you are encouraged to think of additional ways to reach out to the suffering Christian.

1. First and foremost, pray for this person daily. Not just for a day or two. Not for only one year. If a Christian has lost a child (or other very close relative) he or she may need our prayers for several years!
2. Then consider what you would like others to do for you if you were in this same circumstance.
3. Years ago I had a book with a poem that told how a person tried to shut people out, to draw a circle to keep people at a distance. The portion I remember is, “But love and I had wit to win. We drew a larger circle that took him in.”
4. Be ready to let this person speak of the loved one who has died (or whatever serious problem he or she faces). Don’t force it, but just “be there.”
5. Continue inviting the hurting one to church services and social events. If a sister has lost a child, or her husband has died or they have divorced, be sure to make a special effort to call and ask if she needs a ride. Let her know you care.
6. Call the suffering Christian occasionally, merely to chat and see how things are going. Remember that

people often say they are “fine” when they really aren’t.

7. Make a special effort to invite this Christian into your home. Fix a meal. If it is a couple, ask if they would like to play cards or some other game with you and your spouse. They need to be able to laugh with you – now more than ever.
8. If you notice the hurting one missing worship services, don’t ignore it! Mention that you miss them. Ask them to go out to eat with your family after Sunday morning services, or to your home for lunch. Have two or three couples meet you and this person (or couple) for a meal or snack after evening services.
9. Ask other Christians to help you draw the falling away one back into the church family.

This life is short. How will we spend our time here? Will grief overcome us and prevent us from serving God? Or will we overcome the grief and save not only our souls, but also the souls of loved ones we can still influence.

Remembering David’s example, heed his words:

As for man, his days are as grass: as a flower of the field, so he flourisheth. For the wind passeth over it, and it is gone; and the place thereof shall know it no more. But the mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear him, and his righteousness unto children’s children; To such as keep his covenant, and to those that remember his commandments to do them (Psalm 103:15-18).

## STUDY AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In Chapter 4 we studied the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). What was Lazarus' condition on earth and after his death?
2. Where did the thief on the cross go when he died? (Luke 23:43)
3. Where was Jesus between His death and resurrection? (Luke 23:43)
4. What we can do to "Draw nigh unto God" (James 4:8).
5. Besides the things listed, what can we do to help a Christian remain faithful after losing a loved one or while facing other traumatic situations? What has helped you or others through such times?

6. Explain why a baby cannot be scripturally baptized.

7. How can we know when a child is ready to be baptized?

8. How can we balance James 3:1 and Matthew 25:24-30? Should we be afraid to teach Bible class because we will be judged regarding what we teach?

9. What does Matthew 25:20-23 teach us about the person who is willing to work at being a good Bible teacher?



## Chapter 6....

# ROOT OUT BITTERNESS

Harboring resentment and anger can only slow, or even stop, the healing process. These bitter feelings may have been caused by:

- A drunk driver who killed a loved one.
- A loved one who committed suicide.
- Death caused by smoking or drinking.
- An unfaithful spouse.
- Neglect of a caregiver resulting in death.
- A hateful boss firing a good employee.

When death, divorce, job loss or other trials come our way, it is only human to feel resentment, anger and even hatred toward the guilty party. If we are unable to replace these feelings with love, bitterness develops and engulfs us. Paul warned in Ephesians 4:31,32:

Let all **bitterness**, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice: And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.

A wounded person cannot heal if infection is festering under the surface. The injury may seem to have healed when we only look skin deep. Inside, the infection may be growing and spreading. If it is not dealt with, an infection can kill a person. Likewise, the negative feelings we hold inside can kill our Christian influence and result in eternal death. How shall we deal with the bitterness, anger and hatred? We must open the wound and apply a healing solution.

At the JANSSEN-CILAG web site, under questions dealing with diabetes, a person asked, "Why does a doctor or a nurse cut open the wound when it seems to be healing?" The reply states:

In medical terms, the removal of dead skin cells is known as wound excision or debridement. It constitutes an important step in the healing process. Although it may seem as if the wound is healing properly, the layer of skin covering the wound may be hiding an infection. This 'dead' skin may look strong but it's not. It damages easily and can result in a festering wound. By cutting open the wound, the new skin is able to grow better. **Always** have your doctor or nurse do this for you.

### The Great Physician

Jesus is the Great Physician. When Jesus was criticized for eating with sinners, he rebuked the scribes and Pharisees, saying:

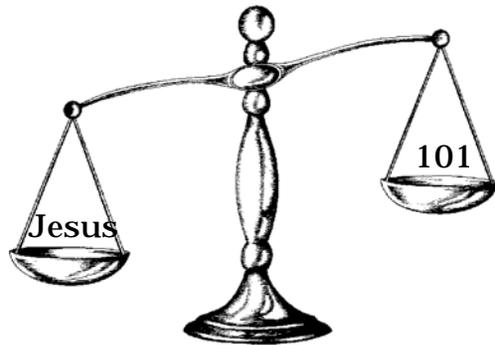
They that are whole have no need of the physician, but they that are sick: I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance (Mark 2:17).

As we face difficult trials (such as pain caused by another person) we need to turn to the Great Physician to be healed. Without a doubt, the old saying, "Love the sinner, but hate the sin," is a truism we should heed. Remember that God offered His Son as a sacrifice for our sins. God hates sin. Sin separates us from God (Isaiah 59:2).

God's love for us is defined in Christ's sacrifice:

For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:6-8).

We can think of 101 reasons to retain our bitter attitude. Yet, one reason why we should cast aside the hatred and bitterness far outweighs the 101 reasons why we think we should harbor ill will. **God allowed His Son to die for us while we were still sinners!** But, you know, I didn't really do anything as bad as cause someone's death.



Oh, didn't you?

Every person who ever lived caused the death of Jesus Christ, God's dear Son. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).

God watched His Son being tortured for hours. He did nothing to stop the pain and suffering. Why? Because God loves me. God loves you.

## Root of Bitterness

Holding on to bitterness can cause us to lose our salvation. In Hebrews 12:14,15 we read, “Follow **peace** with all men, and holiness, **without which no man shall see the Lord**. Look diligently lest any man fail [fall short] of the grace of God; lest any **root of bitterness** springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled...”

Generally, bitterness hurts the one who is bitter more than it hurts the one we are bitter toward. One of the most powerful examples of bitterness was the hatred expressed toward Jeffrey Dahmer.

Over a 13-year period, Dahmer molested and killed at least 17 people, and even cannibalized some of them. He was sentenced in 1992 to 15 consecutive life terms. In 1994 he was baptized for the remissions of sins. A member of the church of Christ taught and converted him. Arrangements were made for his baptism while in prison. Shortly after his baptism he was killed by a fellow inmate. I clearly remember reading in the newspaper how people said he should never have been given the opportunity to be baptized. They wanted his soul to burn in hell.

What Jeffrey Dahmer did was despicable. Nonetheless, God's grace is offered freely to all. Those who harbor bitterness toward Dahmer are only hurting themselves. He can no longer be affected by their feelings. If he was sincere and faithful to God for the short time he lived after his baptism, Jeffrey Dahmer is in paradise. Having an unforgiving attitude toward him would condemn us to eternal punishment. Those who are not willing to forgive the repentant sinner will not be forgiven of their sins. Jesus warned us, “For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father

will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses (Matthew 6:14,15).

## Root Out Bitterness

Even when people are not penitent, we are required to root out any bitterness we may feel toward them. Elizabeth and Frank Morris faced such a dilemma. Their 18-year-old son, Ted, was killed by a drunk driver who crossed the median and hit him head-on just two days before Christmas in 1982. The drunk, Tommy Pigage, only received probation.

How could parents ever feel anything but hatred and bitterness toward Tommy Pigage for his horrendous behavior? If you were in this situation, wouldn't you want revenge? Wouldn't you feel anger, bitterness and hatred for Tommy Pigage?

Elizabeth felt all of these things. She grew distant from her husband and could not enjoy life. The infection was raging. If she did not find a way to root out the bitterness, the infection would overtake her entire body and cause death – spiritual death, and perhaps even physical death.

Elizabeth began thinking about how God let His very own son die on the cross for our sins. She remembered the words of Christ, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34).

It was only through prayer that Elizabeth was able to cut open the festering wound and allow the poison to escape. She applied the healing ointment by reaching out to Tommy. Undoubtedly he was suffering greatly from having caused the death of another human being. A combination of his sorrow and Tom and Elizabeth

reaching out to him resulted in peace between the one who caused so much hurt and those who were suffering as a result. Through the love that was shown to him, Tommy began attending worship services.

How the angels in heaven must have rejoiced when Frank baptized Tommy. After telling the parable of the lost sheep, Jesus explained, “I say unto you, that likewise **joy** shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance” (Luke 15:7).

Frank was asked to perform the wedding ceremony when Tommy got married. Surely the Morrises experience great joy each time they ride to services with the Pigages and worship God with them. (Adapted from *God’s Outrageous Claims*, by Lee Strobel, pp. 13,14.)

It required a deep faith in God on the part of the Morrises to love the sinner while hating the sin. We can find this depth of love only when we place our lives completely in God’s hands.

### **Could You Overcome Bitterness?**

Take a few minutes to put yourself in the place of one who had been severely wronged. Ponder your reaction.

- Your siblings were very jealous.
- The jealousy grew to hatred.
- They caused you to be sent away from home when you were only seventeen.
- You had to do the work of a servant.
- You had no way to communicate with family.
- Your friends didn’t know where you had gone.
- Your only living parent thought you were dead.

- Someone lied about you, and you were thrown in jail.
- You helped a fellow inmate who forgot all about you after being released.

By now you have probably guessed the identity of this mystery person. Can you even imagine how alone Joseph must have felt?

Was Joseph bitter? Did he turn against God because of this chain of events? Did Joseph blame God? No, no, no!

Joseph constantly made the best of each situation. When a servant of Potiphar, Joseph served honorably. He did not grumble and complain. God blessed all that Joseph did because Joseph was a faithful servant of God. Potiphar could see how God was blessing Joseph.

As time passed, Potiphar gave Joseph even more responsibility. He put him over everything he had, and “the Lord blessed the Egyptian’s house for Joseph’s sake; and the blessing of the Lord was upon all that he had in the house and in the field” (Gen. 39:5).

Potiphar’s wife lied about Joseph because Joseph rejected her sexual advances. Joseph remained honorable to the point of being cast into prison.

Even then, Joseph did not become bitter and spiteful. He was honorable, and God blessed Joseph again, resulting in the prison keeper putting Joseph in charge of all of the prisoners.

Although Joseph told the butler the meaning of his dream, which came to pass, the butler did not remember Joseph to Pharaoh as he had promised.

Through all this hardship, there is no indication that Joseph ever had a spiteful attitude. Not once did Joseph turn against God for allowing him to be placed in such circumstances. Could we be as faithful?

## Joseph's Brothers

When Joseph was only 30 years of age, after interpreting Pharaoh's dream, Pharaoh gave him a position just under him, and over everyone else in the entire land of Egypt. All of this honor was bestowed upon Joseph because he was faithful to God for thirteen years, while he was a servant and when he spent time in jail.



Little did Joseph's brothers realize that when they went to the governor of the land of Egypt, it was the brother they had sold into slavery who held their fate in his hands. Joseph could easily have had them killed or cast into prison for the rest of their lives.

Yet when Joseph revealed himself to his brothers, it was he who comforted them, saying, "Now therefore, be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that ye sold me hither: for God did send me before you to preserve life. For these two years hath the famine been in the land: and yet there are five years, in the which there shall neither be earing nor harvest. And God sent me before you to preserve you a posterity in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance" (Gen. 45:5-7).

God did not make the brothers sell Joseph into slavery. But God **did** go with Joseph and help him every step of the way. God does not perform miracles as He did then, but God does help us through His

providence if we remain His faithful servants. Except for his ability to interpret dreams, we are just like Joseph!

What can we learn from Joseph's example? He is mentioned in the "Hall of Faith" in Hebrews 11. How can we develop this kind of faith?

### A Stronger Faith

Faith is **not** blind. Haven't you heard of people acting on "blind faith" – as if it were a virtue. Yet God does not teach that faith is blind. "Now faith is the substance [realization] of things hoped for, the **evidence** of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1).

Where do we find this evidence? It is available to all who will study the pages of the Word of God!

Faith is not merely a belief that what God says is true, either. James teaches us that there are two kinds of faith: living and dead. "Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone" (James 2:17).

No, we are not saved **because** of our works, but neither are we saved **without** works. "Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe and tremble. But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead? Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar? Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect? And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God. Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only" (James 2:19-24).

We must show our faith **by our works!** (James 2:18). Then as people observe our lives they will see Christ alive in our actions.

You need to remember that people are watching your actions to see how strong you remain when you are faced with difficult trials. It is similar to our responsibilities when we are teaching young children in a Bible class. We realize that we must set a good example of faithfulness or all our work will be in vain.

That doesn't mean we can't ever cry, or we can't express our sorrow in losing one we loved so dearly. But it **does** mean that we must remain constantly vigilant and faithful in our service to God. If we grow bitter at losing a loved one or suffering other difficulties in life, we will not be able to save our own souls, let alone the souls of loved ones who are still alive and are looking to our example.

The suffering caused by a person who is still alive is often as difficult to endure as is the pain of death. When we are estranged from a parent or child due to abuse or a wicked life, or if a spouse has been unfaithful or abusive, the relationship has been severed. Although there was at one time a loving relationship, it has come to an end. In effect, this person has become our enemy.

Remember the words of Jesus:

Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, **Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you;** that ye may be the children of your Father which is in

heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? Do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? Do not even the publicans so? Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect (Matthew 5:43-48).

The enemies we must love include people who have done us harm. But loving them does not include allowing them to injure us further.

### Avoid Those Who Want to Harm You

When someone is still seeking to hurt us, we would do well to remember David's example. King Saul sought to take his life. Although David had opportunity to kill Saul, he would not do so. (For example, 1 Samuel 26.) However, even when we don't strike back, we are permitted to defend ourselves against physical and/or emotional harm. David constantly prayed for God's assistance, and fled from the vengeful King Saul. David grieved when Saul died (2 Samuel 1).

One of my favorite Bible passages, Psalm 27, was written by David and speaks of his trials. I read this often when I was the Kansas Pro-Family Forum State Coordinator and attending government sanctioned meetings in which the vast majority of the participants were opposed to my political views. I was the "token" pro-family person selected by the governor's office.

Each time I went to one of those meetings, I felt as if I were entering the "enemy camp." Although I knew they would not be taking my life, the attendees did

everything they could to prevent my views, and the views of pro-family individuals throughout the state, from being heard. God's Word strengthened me. I also memorized Proverbs 3:5,6 and thought about it throughout my ordeal.

## Steps to Rooting Out Bitterness

So how can we overcome bitter feelings toward those who have caused extreme sorrow in our lives? How can we be more like Joseph and David?

1. Recognize why you feel as you do.
2. Look to God's Word for peace and comfort.
3. Realize that Jesus suffered more than you have, and He did it because of **your sins**.
4. Ask God to help you find peace rather than harboring bitterness. Ask others to pray, too.
5. Focus on the blessings God has given you.
6. If the person is not saved, pray for his or her soul.
7. If it is a Christian who has repented, rejoice that a soul has been restored to God (2 Cor. 7:9).
8. Work to show love to all, even your enemies.
9. Find ways to reach out in love to other people, finding peace by doing good in God's service.

How do you know if you are still bitter or if you are merely protecting yourself from one who might harm you? If you hope the person suffers as much as he or she made you suffer, then you are still bitter. If you can sincerely pray for the individual's soul, you are on the way to rooting out the bitterness in your heart.

If you constantly think about how this person hurt you to the point that you are unable to serve God, it's time for an attitude adjustment! You can't change what the person did to you – you can only change what is in

your heart. When you can't help the one who has hurt you, because of his or her hardened heart, you can focus on reaching out to friends and loved ones who are receptive to you.

Regardless of whether you are trying to overcome bitterness or recover from the death of a loved one, you will greatly benefit from reaching out to improve the lives of loved ones.

Birthdays and holidays have been very difficult for me. One reason is that I know if Angie were here she would always remember to call, give a gift, or do something special. On her first and only Mother's Day as a mother herself, she made an inexpensive but meaningful gift for me. She used various types of stationery or decorative paper and cut out wide letters spelling GRANDMOTHER. On each letter she wrote one line to a poem she wrote for me, as if it were spoken by Sophie, and attached a cutout of a picture of Sophie. The gist of it was thanking me for all the things I did for her – Bible stories, playing games, fixing good meals, etc. Because, she said from Sophie, "Grandma, Mommy learned so much from you! That must be why she knows what to do!"

But never again will I receive a sentimental gift from Angie. So this year I tried to do something sentimental for **my** mother. I wrote letters to everyone I could think of who knew Mom during her 80 years in various states, and asked them to give her a "card shower" for her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. She received over 90 cards and several calls. Doing things for others helps us fill the empty void in our lives.

Whatever trial you are facing, remember these words of King David, "Wait on the Lord: be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart: wait, I say, on the Lord" (Psalm 27:14).

## STUDY AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How did God bless the Morrises because they reached out in love to Tommy?
2. What can we know about Joseph's faith when he was sold into slavery at the age of 17?
3. Who did God bless because of Joseph's faith? Did Joseph find himself in "the right place at the right time" without having to go through distress, trials and sorrow?
4. How did Joseph comfort his brothers when he revealed his identity? Can God ultimately bring about good from misfortune in our lives today? (Cf. Rom. 8:28.)



