

The background of the cover is a dramatic, painterly landscape. The sky is filled with large, expressive brushstrokes in shades of blue, grey, and white, suggesting a storm or a dramatic sky. Below the sky, there are dark, silhouetted mountains or hills. At the bottom, a body of water is visible, reflecting the light from the sky. The overall style is reminiscent of a classical or romantic landscape painting.

Bible Witness

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LAYING ASIDE BESETTING SINS (PART 1)



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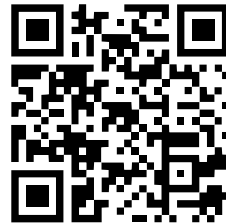
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On the Cover ▲

“Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses...”
—Hebrews 12:1



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WHY PEOPLE SIN?

How can people live in ways that are immoral and wicked, and yet seem completely insensitive about them but go on committing them, utterly oblivious to their own sins? How is that some people are not troubled at all by their sins? Why is their conscience not warning or pricking them?

Yes, it is possible that one can live with a conscience that is almost “dead”. This is a dangerous situation. It can be a sign that he has become totally oblivious to moral and spiritual sensibilities. This can lead to heinous sins and violent crimes.

BLINDING AND DECEITFUL NATURE OF SIN

The corrupt human mind has a spiritually blinding effect. Whoever entertains sin for a while can fall into this blindness. Even a whole congregation can allow spiritual blindness to befall them, if they disregard God’s Word.

The members of the church in Laodicea were materialistic and worldly. Yet they were not conscious of their sin. They continued to think of themselves as having been favoured of the Lord. But Jesus reserved these words of condemnation for the church in Laodicea: “Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked” (Revelation 3:17). Likewise, 1 John 2:11 also warns concerning those who harbour the sin of hatred against others, that they are spiritually blinded. “But he that hateth his brother is in darkness, and walketh in darkness, and

knoweth not whither he goeth, because that darkness hath blinded his eyes.”

The human heart is full of the corruption of sin. This corruption has a spiritually blinding effect. Sin always carries a degree of darkness with it. It darkens and deludes the mind. It blinds us to the reality of what is in our own hearts. “Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened” (Romans 1:21).

SUBTLETY OF SATAN

Satan is the prince of darkness (cf. Ephesians 2:2; 6:11b–12). Blinding and deceiving humankind have been his work ever since he began it with our first parents. No doubt, many who reject the Gospel that was preached unto them, do so because they are blinded by the devil. “In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them” (2 Corinthians 4:4). Even Christians are not spared. The apostle Paul expressed his sincere concern about what the devil can do to undiscerning Christians— “But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtilty, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ” (2 Corinthians 11:3).

Moreover, Satan’s subtlety is manifest in his working on our carnal minds to flatter us with the idea that we are better than we really are. He labours to blind us to our own faults, and thus dulls our conscience. Hence, Paul admonished conscientious

Christians: “For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith” (Romans 12:3).

BAD EXAMPLE OF OTHERS

If we permit the world and popular opinions to dictate our manner and standards of lifestyle, we will become desensitised to worldliness and sin. People tend to look at the behaviour of others to decide for themselves what is right and wrong. But society today is so tolerant of sinful living that many sins have become acceptable. A great number of modern practices and lifestyles are downright displeasing to God and are abominations in His sight!

Scripture warns us that “the whole world lieth in wickedness” (1 John 5:19), and that “all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world” (1 John 2:16). Therefore, we are to “Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (1 John 2:15). Do not follow sinners. If we allow our thoughts, mannerism and appearance to be influenced by unregenerate men, we will be blinded by the sinful habits and practices adopted by them. Instead, “have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them” (Ephesians 5:11).

POWER OF HABIT

Some people are oblivious to the sins they practise, for these have become

daily habits of their lives. Habitual sins often stupefy the mind, so that sins that once pricked the conscience begin to seem harmless.

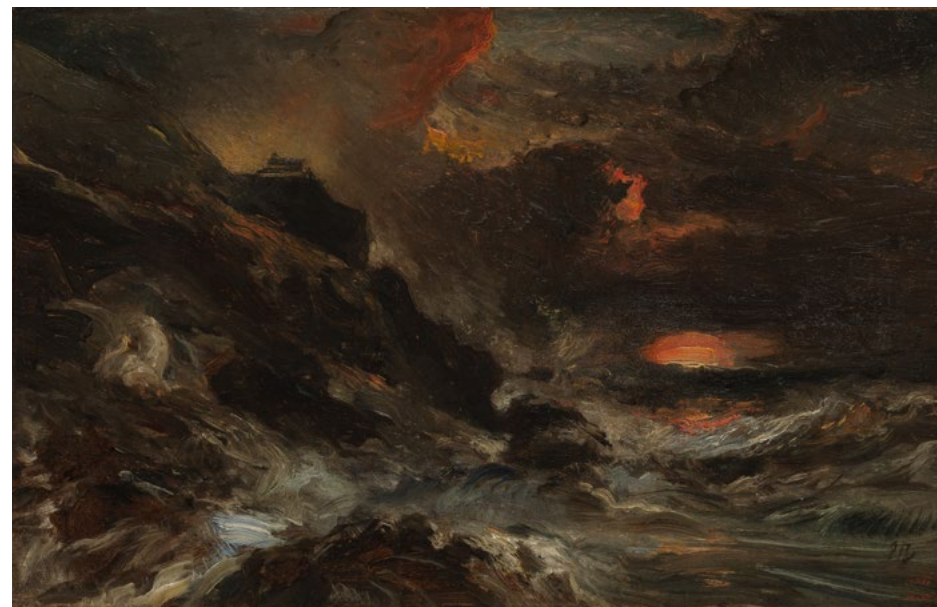
1 Corinthians 15:33 warns us, “Be not deceived: evil communications corrupt good manners.” Listening to unwholesome music or conversations can over time corrupt a man’s good manners and mannerisms. So Paul warns us to nip it in the bud: “But **shun** profane and vain babblings: for they will increase unto more ungodliness” (2 Timothy 2:16). The danger of a small sin leading to bigger (and more) and habitual sins is highlighted by Paul in Galatians 5:9—“A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump.”

CONCLUSION

Let us therefore be cautious of the spiritual snares around and within us. Be resolved to “fight a good fight” against them, by the grace of God. May your prayer and attitude in your daily life be that of the circumspect psalmist, as manifest in the following verses:

- Psalm 139:23, 24—“Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”
- Psalm 19:13, 14—“Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me: then shall I be upright, and I shall be innocent from the great transgression. Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer.” ■

WHY SIN EASILY BESETS US?



“**W**herefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us **lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us**, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us” (Hebrews 12:1).

Since the fall of man in the garden of Eden, it has been the nature of man to be easily entangled in sin. Even a Christian can be easily caught in sin. Because of our sinful flesh, we know we are still prone to sin in general. But we also know that there are some sins that capture us more easily than others. (Each of us has certain propensities for specific kinds of sins.) Some of these habits of sin which plague Christians had been cultivated before their conversion. Then in their spiritual weakness even after becoming Christians, they continue indulging in certain sinful habits. These sins can entangle Christians very easily.

Oh, it's so scandalising to think of our personal habitual sins which we commit and subsequently confess, but again commit and confess again, and then commit again, and then confess ... and haplessly allowing them to go on that way in our lives! It's so shameful to be under the sway of such besetting sins. It is therefore incumbent on us to look into why sin besets us even though we are saved by faith in Christ.

SIN'S POWER AND PREVALENCE

Sin has a powerful influence on us.

Galatians 5:17 tells us, "For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would." Sin continually pushes us against the will of the Spirit of God. It exerts a strong influence on our will, emotions and affections. It rarely suggests things to us; it almost always compels us to have them. It seldom calls us; it mostly pushes us into wrongdoing. In our unguarded moments, sin readily finds in us a very receptive "host environment"; and we become its "willing ally". That is why the apostle Paul beseeched Christians "as strangers and pilgrims, [to] abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against (denoting a powerful adverse influence on) the soul" (1 Peter 2:11).

Sin's influence is ceaselessly exerted on us.

More than just forcing its way from the outside on our flesh, sin imposes its tyrannical grip on our flesh, as it were, from within us. It is very close to us; in fact, it is within us! "For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no

good thing ... For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do. Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me" (Romans 7:18a, 19–20).

No wonder Jeremiah 13:23 says, "Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil." We can no more change the sinfulness of our depraved flesh than the leopard can change its spots or the Ethiopian can change the colour of his skin. It is a part of what we are in this mortal, corruptible body of ours. Sin is very near us, with its powerful influence ceaselessly exerting itself on us.

Sin is so deeply entrenched in our daily life that it seldom appears to be hostile.

So, sin is powerful, and sin is near—even within us. Sin does not separate itself from the various facets of our daily life, but is mingled into and interwoven with everything in our lives. Even the noblest of tasks that we are engaged in is somehow corrupted in some way (to a large or small extent) by a taint of self-will, or self-pleasure, or self-aggrandisement, or self-righteousness, or self-gain, etc. That way, sin can so easily rear its ugly head in our lives. Undeniably, sin is so intertwined with our modern culture and lifestyles, so much so that if not careful, our purposes and plans can become enmeshed in sin!

But if we are going to be the kind of Christians God would want us to be, then Hebrews 12:1 says, "let us lay aside ... the sin which doth so easily beset us". Put it aside; put it away. It is not the first time we have been commanded to do that. We have been admonished in

2 Corinthians 7:1 to "cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit"; and in Ephesians 4:22 to "put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts"; as well as in Romans 6:12 to "let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof" (cf. 1 Peter 2:1, 11).

The question now comes: "How do we do that?" From a practical standpoint, we know it is the work of the Holy Spirit—that if you walk in the Spirit, you shall not fulfil the lusts of the flesh (cf. Galatians 5:16). Yet, there is a responsibility that is ours as we yield to the Spirit. How can we lay this or that sin aside?

HOW TO LAY ASIDE SIN THAT EASILY BESETS US?

Never underestimate the seriousness of your sin.

One major reason we don't deal with sin firmly is because we underestimate its seriousness to God, to those with whom we fellowship, to the church, to the unbelievers, and even to our own selves. Our sin steals away our rightful joy; our sin ruins fellowship with God; our sin diminishes fruitfulness; our sin robs us of peace; our sin renders our service useless; our sin undermines our effectiveness in evangelism; our sin hinders our prayers; our sin brings about the chastisement of God. We need to understand the seriousness of our sin. It violates first and foremost our relationship with the Lord.

Many of us become troubled and upset about the difficulties and problems in our life, but are not so

distressed—in fact, perhaps even tolerant—about our sins. Oh, how we need to understand that there is more evil in the least sin from within than the greatest calamity from without! A calamity or a certain misery may not necessarily be sinful. Sin, however you look at it, is exceedingly sinful! Treat your sin seriously—it dishonours God; it abuses mercy; it despises grace; it presumes on forgiveness; it defiles worship, service and fellowship. It stains, taints, poisons, and destroys everything good and holy.

Purpose in your heart not to sin.

Unless you have a strong resolution in your life to live unto God's righteousness, you will find it easy to be entangled by sin. In fact, it is that kind of heart purpose that is at the root of all holy living. Until you make that kind of conscious commitment to the Lord, you are going to battle the same things over and over and be defeated. Make a solemn vow and say, "God, I do not want to sin. I don't want to break Your law, I don't want to grieve Your Spirit, I don't want to dishonour the Name of Your Son which I bear."

The psalmist did just that in Psalm 119:106, "I have sworn, and I will perform it, that I will keep thy righteous judgments." That's not all. He also said in the same psalm, "I will run the way of thy commandments, when thou shalt enlarge my heart" (v. 32). It is like a great long-distance runner or a marathon runner who has an enlarged heart muscle. The tremendous development of his running ability and the strengthening of his heart enable the heart to keep pumping all that is needed to that body, as it pushes itself

beyond normal limits. The psalmist is saying, “I will run in the way of Your commandments because You have given me a heart for obedience.” That’s the kind of heart purpose that is absolutely essential.

Question your own spirituality.

Paul put it this way in 1 Corinthians 10:12, “Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.” Proverbs 4:23 says, “Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life.” There must be watchfulness on your part; you have to be watching out for sin’s subtle movements within your own supposed spirituality. Your heart is “deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked” (Jeremiah

17:9), and Satan is also desperately wicked and very deceitful.

The seducing motions of your own heart can sometimes arise out of some vulnerable moments in your supposedly spiritual endeavours. Be biblically critical of your own spirituality - don’t trust in it. In Job 31:1, Job says, “I made a covenant with mine eyes; why then should I think upon a maid?” Job was, in effect, saying: “I have got to be careful where I look, because I don’t trust in my own spirituality.” The lust of the eyes was very real to that godly patriarch. Job did not presume his spirituality, but soberly examined his life, that he might eschew evil (cf. Job 1:1b, 8b). One thing we must understand is: except for the grace of God, we would fall into any sin!

Resist the first stirrings of the flesh and its pleasures.

Don’t try to stop the process of your sinful endeavour near the end; stop it at the beginning! The apostle James notes for us a certain process: people are tempted when they are “drawn away (i.e. carried away) ... and enticed” by their own lusts (James 1:14). “Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death” (James 1:15)!

In other words, fleshly lusts must be stopped at the point of “conception”, not at the point of “birth”. You need to stop sin at its conception, not after it has gone through a certain period of being “nurtured” in your mind. Before you realise it, it will manifest itself in a full-blown blatant act! You don’t try to stop it at that point. You resist and oppose the first stirrings of the flesh and its pleasures.

Meditate on the Word.

When the heart of a man is controlled by the Word, the steps of that man don’t slip. “The law of his God is in his heart; none of his steps shall slide” (Psalm 37:31). Indeed, “Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? by taking heed thereto according to thy word” (Psalm 119:9). So, how can you lay aside sin? How can you win this battle? By taking heed according to God’s Word.

Constant input of the Word of God will fill the mind with proper spiritual principles, which will then start to control the thinking process. That alone becomes the strength and resource in him that can resist the initial impulses of the flesh. Hence, in Psalm 119:10, we read, “With my whole heart have I sought thee: O let me not wander from thy commandments.” It is the Scriptures that must be meditated on, in order to guard ourselves from sin.

Continually pray for divine help.

Don’t fight the enemy on your own. When you engage the enemy, plead for help from above. Didn’t Jesus said to His disciples, “Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matthew 26:41)? In Ephesians 6:18, the apostle Paul highlights prayer after mentioning all the armour that a Christian should put on, in order to battle against Satan and demons: “Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance ...”

Such anticipatory prayer is a most effective way to fight sin. You need to start your day in a circumspect,

prayerful mood. “Lord, this is the way you taught us to pray: ‘Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.’ Please, Lord, today lead me away from temptation; today deliver me from evil.” You need to pray before the tempter arrives, before the flesh begins to rise up and entice!

Establish relationships with other believers that hold you accountable.

“Bear ye one another’s burdens,” says Paul in Galatians 6:2, “and so fulfil the law of Christ.” We all struggle the same way and we need one another as members of the body of Christ. “Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted” (Galatians 6:1).

This time, it could be fellow saint A who has been “overtaken in a fault”; the next time, it might be fellow saint B who has fallen into sin. Each needs other saints in the church who “are spiritual” (i.e. those walking in the Spirit) to help restore him or her. Who knows, on another occasion, it might be you who has fallen down and stand in need of restoration. Whoever it be, we “who are of the household of faith” (Galatians 6:10), do well to commit ourselves to hold one another accountable for holy living.

May the Lord keep us from falling, and enable us to “lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us”. Amen. ■

Sin does not separate itself from the various facets of our daily life, but is mingled into and interwoven with everything in our lives.

OVERCOMING BAD HABITS



How should a Christian view a bad habit in his life? Is it just an embarrassing weakness in our behaviour? But think of the nature of many of our bad habits. Is it not true that many of them are attitudes or behaviours that are dishonouring to God's glory, and are hindrances to God's purposes in a Christian's life?

BAD HABITS: WHAT ARE THEY?

If we are truly honest with ourselves, many of our bad habits are sins, though viewed lightly by most people. Do not hesitate to call them sins. It is time that we start thinking of them as a spiritual problem. They are sins that so easily beset us. When sins are not dealt with quickly, they will cling on to us as habits. Tolerance of sin is habit-forming and will lead to habitual sins in our lives. The Christian must see

that bad habits are ultimately spiritual issues. They signal the presence of some wrong beliefs and thinking. Haven't we heard, "Sow a thought, reap an action; sow an action, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a destiny"?

The consequences of sinful habits are more far-reaching than a lot of us think. If we have noticed a bad habit in us, it is time to think about its origin and deal with it decisively. It is dangerous if we accommodate it. We are responsible for our own sin—including those sins which we have been calling "bad habits". The fact that we do something wrong habitually does not relieve us of accountability. On the contrary, it may make the sin all the worse and all the more entrenched. So, we must take personal responsibility for our own habits and not shrink from calling them sin!

CAN WE OVERCOME THEM?

Yes, we can—by God's enabling! Sinful habits are not insurmountable problems for the Christian, who has the Holy Spirit in him. After all, as Christians, we can say that "we are more than conquerors through him that loved us" (Romans 8:37). Moreover, the Holy Spirit indwells us and is working to conform us to the image of Christ. Galatians 5:16 says that if we "walk in the Spirit, ... [we] shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh". If we make use of the resources provided by God through His Spirit and His Word, we can resist and overcome any bad habit.

To be able to have victory over bad habits, we need to renew our understanding and thus deal with the underlying wrong beliefs that weaken

our resistance to the bad habits. Crucially, we need to realise that the means of sanctification described in Scripture (chiefly the Word of God and prayer) are most essential for overcoming such habits.

HOW TO OVERCOME THEM?

Allow this writer to make some practical suggestions for overcoming bad habits which you should find helpful in your efforts in laying aside besetting sins.

Examine your life with the help of the Spirit and the Word.

Discovering our bad habits on our own is often impossible, because habits tend to become "invisible" to our observation. Normally we are oblivious to sinful attitudes and behaviours that have become habits. They are so deeply ingrained in us that our minds are no longer consciously detecting them. So we need to seek the help of the Spirit in times of our personal devotions and the hearing of the preaching of the Word, that God may expose them to our notice.

No wonder David prayed, "Who can understand his errors? cleanse thou me from secret faults" (Psalm 19:12). He also prayed, "Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Psalm 139:23–24). Whether we recognise a "bad habit" or not, knowing that we are naturally predisposed to sin and are often blind to them, let us humbly pray that the Lord will search us and deliver us from sins that are even unknown to us. Always incorporate self-reflection into the reading of God's Word. When you

read the Bible or hear sermons, reflect on yourself, comparing your own ways with what you have read or heard. Ask yourself when you read the Scriptures: “Do I live according to this rule?”, or “Do I live in any way contrary to it?”

When you read the historical portions of Scripture concerning the sins others were guilty of, ask yourself whether you are guilty of similar sins. When you read the examples of Christ and the saints, ask yourself whether you are living in ways contrary to their example. Make use of the Word as a “mirror” in which you can carefully inspect yourself, and thereby be a doer of the Word (cf. James 1:23–25).

Check whether you do things that are generally avoided by mature Christians.

You might have found a way to justify your thought or practice as lawful; you don’t see any evil in it. But if the thing is

Sins that ensnare us begin in the mind. That’s why Scripture commands us to renew our minds.

generally condemned by godly people, it certainly looks suspicious. You will be wise to consider conscientiously whether it is actually displeasing to God. Be mindful of godly Christians’ advice and example. “For yourselves know how ye ought to follow us: for we behaved not ourselves disorderly among you” (2 Thessalonians 3:7). “Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation” (Hebrews 13:7).

Consider what others may say of you.

We should especially listen to what our parents, spouse and friends say about us. It is foolhardy, as well as unchristian, to take offence and resent others when we are told of our faults. We should rejoice when we are corrected and made aware of our faults. This biblical mindset is upheld by the psalmist: “Let the righteous smite me; it shall be a kindness: and let him reprove me; it shall be an excellent oil, which shall not break my head: for yet my prayer also shall be in their calamities” (Psalm 141:5; cf. Proverbs 27:5–6).

Guard your thoughts and desires.

James 1:14–15 teaches us that “every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death.” Sins that ensnare us begin in the mind. The person who steals first thinks about the thing he wants. He then thinks of a plan for getting it. After he has schemed in his mind, he carries out his planned move. He ought to have

stopped the sin in his mind before it is translated into action! That’s why Scripture commands us to renew our minds (Romans 12:2), to think about good things (Philippians 4:8), and to meditate on God’s Word (Psalm 1:2).

Make necessary changes in lifestyle.

Discarding a habit also requires changes in lifestyle. We are to “make not provision for the flesh” (Romans 13:14b). The person who wants to stop smoking should throw away all his cigarettes and not buy any more; the person struggling with sexual sin should get rid of any suggestive material in his possession. Avoid the company of those who have the same problem (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:33). Similarly, avoid the places and circumstances which tempt you.

Seek help from mature Christians.

It is not easy to fight a bad habit alone. Develop relationships with more mature Christians who will encourage and support you (cf. Galatians 6:2). Spend time in prayer with them. Ask them to correct you and show you the proper path.

Stop a bad habit immediately.

Recognise what triggers that bad habit, or in whose company it usually occurs. If you do it alone, recognise how you fall into that habit. Knowing how those bad habits are practised gives you a chance to break the pattern by purposely doing something else. Then put a stop to that habit immediately. Completely stopping a negative behaviour immediately is by far the most effective method of breaking bad habits.

Don’t make excuses. Habits actually programme you to resist change. Once a habit is ingrained, it can become unnoticeable, innocuous to the conscious mind, and you may find it easy to ignore it. Or you may try making excuses, such as “I can’t change”, or “Nobody is perfect”. Thoughts like these will only strengthen the hold that the habit has on you. So, give no excuse for bad habits, but be determined to stop them. “Abstain from all appearance of evil” (1 Thessalonians 5:22)!

Replace bad habits with good habits.

Biblical change is not just turning away from sin; it is turning towards righteousness. The person who lies must speak the truth (Ephesians 4:25). One who steals must not only stop stealing, he must also work and give to others (Ephesians 4:28); and one whose language is unwholesome must learn to edify others (Ephesians 4:29). Do not just stop sinning, but also start doing what is right.

CONCLUSION

The good habits you cultivate will replace the sinful ones. Remember, nature abhors a vacuum. In the fight against sin, there is something negative and something positive to take note of. We need to “put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts” (Ephesians 4:22), and “put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness” (Ephesians 4:24). And that’s how we decisively “lay aside ... the sin which doth so easily beset us” (Hebrews 12:1b). May God have mercy on us. ■



LIVING MORALLY IN AN IMMORAL SOCIETY

Many think that to describe someone as being immoral, is to pass judgment on another's actions and thereby be considered as judgmental. Increasingly, in this world, there seems to be no definite standard of right behaviour. We often hear in these days that "what appears right for one would appear evil to another." As different countries and societies have varying and sometimes conflicting standards, it becomes almost impossible to establish a common benchmark to make measurements of "morality" acceptable to all and sundry. Therefore, the immediate challenge we face today is: who determines what is right behaviour?

THE CONSTANT MORAL STANDARD

This difficulty is removed when we keep in perspective man-made laws and conventions. We ought then to focus our attention on and regard with utmost importance the standard that the Creator of this universe has set. When we do so, there is a clear and unchanging standard for man to live by. God's standard is consistent throughout His Word, from the Old Testament to the New. His own holiness is the standard. In Leviticus 20:7–8, we read, "Sanctify yourselves therefore, and be ye holy: for I am the LORD your God. And ye shall keep my statutes, and do them: I am the LORD

which sanctify you." The children of Israel were to be like their Creator.

The New Testament Christians also have the same standard. The apostle Peter restates this principle in 1 Peter 1:15–16, "But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation (behaviour or conduct); because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy." To be sanctified or holy is to be set apart for a specific divine purpose. This means that those who would be pleasing to their Creator, must separate themselves from the standards of the world they live in, and be conformed to the principles which God has set forth in His Word.

Jesus has said, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). This goal of perfection should be our heart's ambition. The Lord Jesus is the only example of a perfect life. When we consider the abject wickedness that surrounds us, we must never become smug and hypocritical. By realising that we can only be acceptable in the sight of our Creator by God's forgiveness of our sins, we shall then be enabled to govern our life according to God's constant moral standard.

THE COLLAPSING MORAL STANDARD

Unfortunately, in our modern society, many gross sins no longer appear shocking or vile to many people. Indeed, we see an increasing number of people "who knowing the judgment of God, that they which commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them" (Romans 1:32).

Undeniably, the enormity of modern society's immorality has become diminished by virtue of people being constantly surrounded by it. They are often like a frog that is in a pot of water which is being gradually heated up. The creature is unable to feel the slow rising of the water's temperature until it becomes dangerously hot, but then it will be too late! Likewise, when we live in an increasingly sinful world, we also seem to lose our sensitivity and awareness of sin in our lives. The subtle indoctrination we are fed (on a daily basis) through the various forms of media, not to mention the blatant flaunting of gross immorality (which gradually becomes the norm), all have the effect of numbing our senses till our souls get entrapped.

Ponder for a precious moment the process by which Lot got entrapped in Sodom. Lot, by such a gradual process, found himself entrenched in a society which was so abhorrent in God's sight that it had to be eradicated. His choice of Sodom was a tragic mistake, for it was within a wicked environment. He first looked from a distance (Genesis 13:10), and chose that area and journeyed towards it (v. 11); he then lived close to Sodom (v. 12). We next find him living in the city itself (Genesis 14:12), and eventually becoming a part of the establishment of Sodom (Genesis 19:1). Oh, may we beware of making little compromises in our lives, by justifying our thoughts or actions—for before we know it, we are not set apart for our God, but have become entangled in the things of the world!

The apostle Peter commented that it is only by the mercy of God that Lot was delivered: "And turning the cities

of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes condemned them with an overthrow, making them an ensample unto those that after should live ungodly; and delivered just Lot, vexed with the filthy conversation of the wicked: (For that righteous man dwelling among them, in seeing and hearing, vexed his righteous soul from day to day with their unlawful deeds)" (2 Peter 2:6–8). Lot had made the mistake of taking his family into this immoral environment. As a result, his conscience bothered him daily, but still he did not change his situation. What a frightening picture for us and our families in this ever degenerating age!

Incidentally, the root word of Sodom has found its way into the English language to portray actions and people who engage in deviant sexual behaviour. The laws of most countries contain penalties for people who commit such acts. Unfortunately, societies now do not condemn these actions as they once did. They now look at a homosexual relationship as a matter of sexual orientation and preference, and if we discriminate in any way against people with such a lifestyle, we are in danger of having the weight of the law brought to bear on us. It is not something that is done in secret any more, but openly flaunted, encouraged and advocated. In many countries, there are openly gay and lesbian politicians, clergy, radio broadcasters, entertainers and many other people in prominent positions in their societies. However, the Word of God leaves no doubt as to how our Creator views these actions, which are manifestations of the world's collapsing moral standard.

CAUSE OF COLLAPSING MORAL STANDARD

There are two aspects of life that human beings have a hard time accepting, namely taking responsibility and accepting consequences. We do not like to take responsibility for our actions, but do our best to place the blame on any other party. This principle is portrayed by our first parents in the garden of Eden (cf. Genesis 3:11–13). Even when we finally accept responsibility for our actions, we do not like to suffer the consequences. These two facts of life come into play in the immorality of the age we live in.

In Galatians 5:19–21 Paul gives a list of actions that are abhorrent in the sight of God. All the things listed will prohibit our entrance into the kingdom of God. This means that the accepted lifestyles of the societies we live in are a death sentence to those practising them. This also applies to those who vicariously engage in sex and violence through books, videos and television in the privacy of their own homes and minds. God has created man with sexual desires, and in His Word, He has laid out the way we are to satisfy them. They are only to be satisfied within a marriage relationship between a man and woman. This godly principle has been abrogated by our modern world, where virginity and chastity are conditions that are the exception and not the rule. People now live together and have partners, not husbands or wives. Pre-marital sex and extra-marital relations involving married couples are worryingly prevalent in our societies. God's Word tells us these things are wrong, and that "consensual agreement" does not make them

right. In fact, our Lord takes it beyond actions to the thought processes that are behind them. "Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: but I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart" (Matthew 5:27–28).

There were consequences for these sinful actions in times past—venereal disease and unmarried mothers (with illegitimate children). With modern medicine and the advent of the pill, the possibility of suffering the consequences of such actions has been greatly reduced. The practice of abortion as a means of ending unwanted pregnancies among unmarried women, sadly, has the complete backing of the societies we live in. The social stigma that went with these things has also almost vanished.

CORRECTION OF COLLAPSING MORAL STANDARD

Where does this leave God's people, who are swimming against the tide and trying to do those things which are right in the sight of God? They appear as peculiar and abnormal to the world around them as each day passes, not helped by the subtle indoctrination of entire societies or systems, which makes it harder to follow the right way. Things will not get better—in fact they will get worse—till the Son of God returns to this earth. Until that day, we must keep to the unchanging standard as delineated in God's Word for men to live by. We must keep the Scriptural principles clear in our minds and do our best to follow them.



Admittedly, some of God's people may have walked blatantly in the past according to the world's corrupt moral standard. Be that as it may, God is willing to correct you if you truly repent of your sins. Paul makes this very clear to the believers in Corinth—"Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Corinthians 6:9–11).

We pray to our God that we all would avail ourselves of this cleansing of being "washed" and being "sanctified"—and thus laying aside besetting sins, walk worthy of the love our God has shown to us till His Son returns. "Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness" (2 Peter 3:11). Dearly beloved, keep yourselves unspotted from the collapsing moral standard of the world. ■

DISCERNMENT: KEY TO VICTORIOUS LIVING

WHAT IS DISCERNMENT?

Discernment, to Christians, is the ability to decide that which is God's will from all else. It is also the ability to differentiate truth from error, and right from wrong. It is the process of making careful distinctions in our thinking and choices according to God's Word. In other words, the ability to think with discernment is synonymous with the ability to think biblically.

WHY IS DISCERNMENT IMPORTANT?

Discernment—the ability to think biblically about all areas of life—is indispensable to our living a thoroughly godly and spiritually victorious life. It is incumbent upon the Christian to seize hold of the discernment that God has provided through His precious truths!

1 Thessalonians 5:21–22 teaches that it is the responsibility of every Christian to be discerning: "Prove all things; hold fast that which is good. Abstain from all appearance of evil." In the epistle to the Romans, the same command (though phrased somewhat differently) is given: "And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the

renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God" (Romans 12:2). That way, we will be able to "Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good" (Romans 12:9). The apostle John issues a similar admonition when he says, "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1).

The importance of discernment is further driven home when Paul prayed that this duty is to be practised by believers—"And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment; that ye may approve (Greek: *dokimazō*) things that are excellent; that ye may be sincere and without offence till the day of Christ" (Philippians 1:9–10). The Greek word *dokimazō* means "to discern or distinguish after putting to the test". The clear exhortation here

is that believers are to discern, choose and embrace the spiritually "excellent" path in all issues of life, that we may be "sincere" (pure and without blame) and "without offence" (i.e. not be a stumbling block to others). That way, we will be able to have a clear conscience. And having a clear conscience in our Christian walk will be key to our laying aside of besetting sins. To be able to do so requires loads of discernment.

HOW TO PRACTISE DISCERNMENT?

The following probing questions are crucial in helping us practise biblical discernment:

Does it help your identity as a Christian?

When trying to decide if something is right or wrong, first ask yourself the above question. Ponder whether

your decision would undermine your identity as a Christian. Is it not better for you to be sure than to walk ignorantly into Satan's realm of sin, which would tarnish your testimony as a Christian? God has always required His people to maintain a separation from Satan's realm. We see this principle uncompromisingly taught in 2 Corinthians 6:17—"Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you" (cf. Romans 12:2).

Whenever a Christian becomes so much like the people of the world, it becomes hard to tell whether he is a Christian or not. Our lives ought to be living demonstrations of the will of God, rather than living demonstrations of the will of Satan. This principle would prove that many commonly accepted behaviours are activities we should not participate in, because it would prove that these activities are against the glory of Christ.

Does it lead others to offend or sin?

In 1 Corinthians 8:13, Paul wrote, "Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend." If you are a child of God and you care about what is right, then you cannot have the attitude: "I don't care what others would think of my ways!" Do take note that if we do anything which would cause another to violate their conscience, we sin, for we are told to "take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumblingblock to them that are weak" (1 Corinthians 8:9).

Does it harm your body?

Our bodies belong to the Lord. So we should use our bodies for God's glory rather than incurring His reproach. Paul said, "What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body" (1 Corinthians 6:19–20). Paul also said, "Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are" (1 Corinthians 3:16–17).

Thus, you should not engage in any activity which will prove dishonouring or destructive to your bodies or others'. By this principle, we can quickly see what is wrong with smoking cigarettes, drinking alcohol, using illegal drugs or engaging in sexual sins. They are dishonouring and destructive to our bodies and, therefore, things we should not participate in.

Does it cause conflict with your duties as a Christian?

We do not have the right to put ourselves under any circumstance, or form any kind of alliance, which can interfere with our duties to God, because our service to the Lord must come first. Jesus has said, "But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matthew 6:33). Nothing is to come before our service to the Lord. Therefore, any activity or situation which prevents us from fulfilling our responsibilities as a

Christian, is an activity or situation we cannot participate in.

Does it create an excessive appetite for things of this world?

We are not to live our lives after the flesh, seeking only to satisfy the appetites of the flesh. We are to live on a spiritual basis, focusing on things above. That's what Paul said in Colossians 3:1–2, "If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth." In Titus 2:12, Paul warned us to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts. Such "worldly lusts" would include not only lusts of a sensual nature, but also lusts for material things in general. If we want to please the Lord, we should avoid anything which will encourage in us an excessive desire for things of this world.

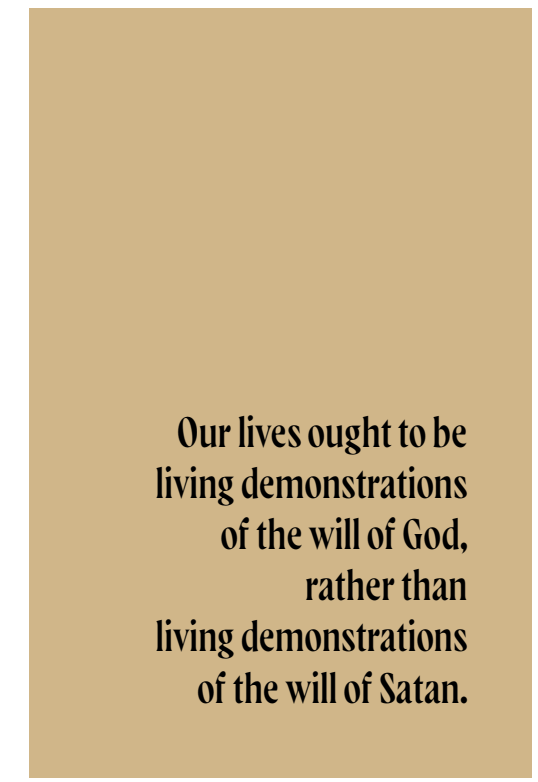
Does it place you under the evil influence of others?

The apostle Paul said, "Be not deceived: evil communications corrupt good manners" (1 Corinthians 15:33). We need to be careful about the influences which are being brought to bear upon our heart and life, that is, to be careful that we are not submitting ourselves to influences and associations which will destroy us and bring us under the captivating power of sin.

Our children are often under much pressure to do wrong because of their unwise choice of friends. We, as adults, are often in similarly vulnerable situations, when we commune with those we undiscerningly and

indiscriminately choose to associate with. In such situations, it is not a question of whether they will have a negative influence on us; it is only a matter of how quickly their evil influence will bear its evil fruit in our own lives! If the activity or relationship we are contemplating will put us under the influence of those who are evil, then we should choose not to participate.

Indeed, being discerning would mean that we "walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful" (Psalm 1:1). Such biblical discernment certainly would have a considerable bearing on our ability to lay aside besetting sins. Beloved, may we "be diligent ... (to) be found of him in peace, without spot, and blameless" (2 Peter 3:14). Amen. ■



Idelette de Bure

(d. 1549) – Part I

Retold by Jenny Lok

Illustrated by Andronicus Koshy

Life in the city of Liege, Belgium, was both happy and peaceful for Idelette de Bure – until the day her husband, Jean Storder (“Jean” being the French form of “John”), a cabinet-maker, made the sudden announcement:

My dear, it's about time we move from Liege!

Why? Has something happened?

You know that for quite some time, the Roman powers have been persecuting us, the Anabaptists.

Though we do not belong to the radical group of Anabaptists, they are now bent on getting rid of us. We must flee!

I have not expected this to come so soon!

A wave of sorrow came over her as she recalled how her father Lambert van Buren, a famous Anabaptist, was arrested in 1533 for heresy (or false teaching). Not only was his property confiscated, he was also forced to leave Liege!

Suddenly, it dawned on Idelette that the Roman authority would soon come for Jean, who was an Anabaptist leader. As Anabaptists, they were taught not to have any dealings with the government or be involved in any armed combat. They also believed that they should never take an oath, whether in or outside the court.

Though their teachings differ, in some ways, from those of the Reformed faith (which was widespread in the 16th century and greatly opposed by the Roman church), the Anabaptists were also persecuted without exception.

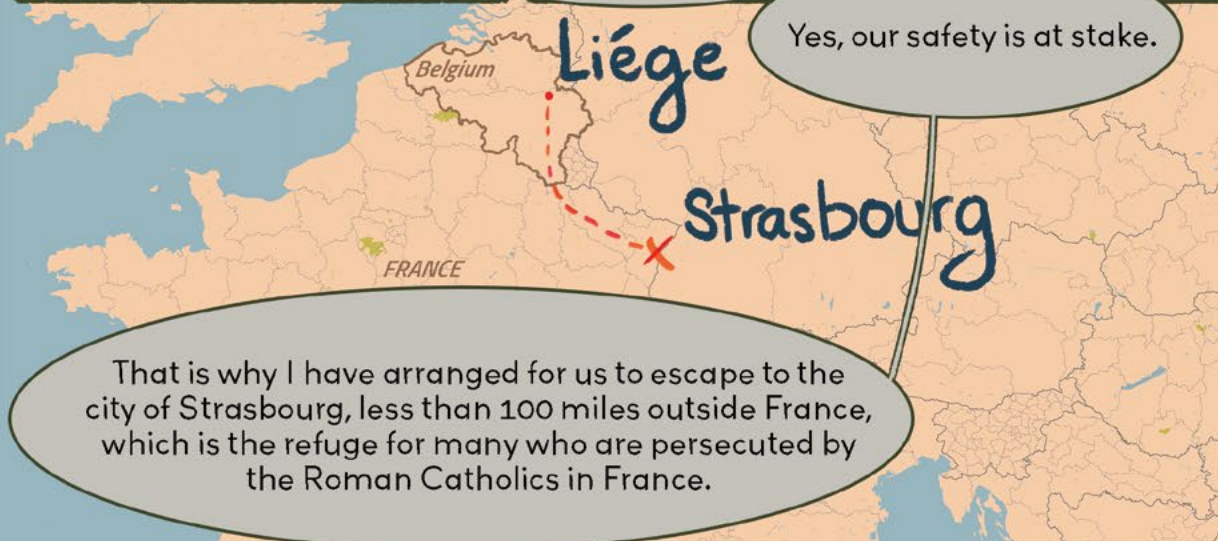
What would happen to their family?

Idelette, you seem to be deep in thought.

Jean, our lives are in danger! What is going to happen to our children?

Yes, our safety is at stake.

That is why I have arranged for us to escape to the city of Strasbourg, less than 100 miles outside France, which is the refuge for many who are persecuted by the Roman Catholics in France.



Thank God!



Yes, let's entrust ourselves to God's care and protection.

Jean knew that only God could help them.

By God's providence, Jean and Idelette, together with their children, safely reached the city of Strasbourg. The family was warmly welcomed by the French-speaking community, which was largely made up of French refugees. Soon they made many friends and started attending church.

How the couple rejoiced when they realised that the pastor of the church was none other than John Calvin, who was widely known for his book, "Institutes of the Christian Religion" (six chapters having been published at that time).

Sitting among the four to five hundred French refugees, Idelette and her family listened attentively to John Calvin, their pastor and great Reformer.



Calvin, they were told, was a native of France and had served in Geneva with his good friend, William Farel, for a while before they were expelled by the authorities because of their uncompromising Christian teachings. "The Institutes", which Calvin wrote, was actually an attempt to clear any confusion or wrong understanding of the Reformed doctrine in the minds of fellow Protestants and those of their persecutors, the Roman Catholics, as well.

Day after day, Idelette and her husband learnt wonderful truths from Calvin's lectures on the Scriptures. They regularly attended the four preaching sessions that he conducted every week. Idelette, in particular, loved to listen to Calvin's skilful exposition of the Scriptures.

Eventually, the day came when both husband and wife were moved to make a major decision on their Anabaptist beliefs.

Idelette, it's no secret that both of us have learnt to embrace the Reformed doctrine. God's Word is indeed the authority. I can see that Pastor Calvin loves God and His Word.

It shows on his face!

I totally agree with you! He believes firmly in the inspiration of the Scriptures, and so do we!



Then we must abandon our Anabaptist ways forever!

Absolutely!

Calvin appreciated their company and regarded them as his disciples. The Storders' hunger for God's Word and their knowledge of the truth brought tremendous joy to the heart of their beloved pastor, who cherished the "simplicity and sanctity of their lives".

Idelette and her husband Jean became faithful members of the church, and often they would extend their hospitality to Calvin by inviting him to their home for meals and fellowship.



The spring of 1540, however, saw an unexpected crisis in the Storders' family. Jean Storder was struck by the deadly Plague and succumbed to the disease in a matter of days. Idelette was devastated; she became a widow overnight! How was she going to bring up her two children on her own? Who would provide for the family? Her heart was laden with sorrow and burden for the future. Moreover, she missed Jean very much, and felt utterly lost and helpless. In her deepest gloom, she found her solace in God, who indeed is "[a] father of the fatherless, and a judge of the widows" (Psalm 68:5).

As Idelette mourned the loss of her beloved husband, Pastor Calvin continued to minister God's comfort and strength to the young widow and her children. At the same time, he found Idelette to be a very patient and attentive listener whenever he shared about the various challenges he faced in managing his own boarding house (which was converted from a rental house) and a growing congregation.

With an increasing workload, Calvin had been suffering from constant poor health. This led to his friends advising him to look for a wife "to relieve some of the burden of domestic life". Calvin welcomed the advice, but stated very clearly that his future helpmeet must meet the following criteria:

This only is the beauty that allures me, if she is chaste, if not too fancy or fastidious, if economical, if patient, if there is hope that she will be interested about my health.

In other words, all that Calvin wanted was a godly woman who would live a simple and frugal life; one who was willing to endure hardships and take care of his health. Subsequently, after three failed attempts to find a wife, Calvin told his good friend William Farel

I have not found a wife and frequently hesitate as to whether I ought any more to seek one.

At this moment, his pastor-friend, Martin Bucer, came to him, saying,

Calvin, what about the gentle Idelette?



That question remained in his mind for quite some time as he continued his work on the "Institutes", aiming to expand it from six to seventeen chapters.

As far as Calvin was concerned, Idelette had always been a dear sister in the church. He observed that she had been such a loving wife to her husband till his last days.

Idelette was also "godly, kind and intelligent", as well as attractive (although this was the least important factor for Calvin). Her gentleness and quiet spirit left a lasting impression on him.

There was no doubt in Calvin's mind that she was "a serious-minded woman of good character", one who submitted to God's will in her life with much humility and patience - indeed, his ideal choice of a wife!



In the course of time, according to God's will, Idelette's marriage to Calvin took place on 10 August 1540. Calvin's good friend, William Farel, was only too happy to officiate the holy matrimony. Idelette's heart was full of gratitude to God who not only provided a godly husband for her, but also a wonderful father to care for her children.

The couple began their married life living in Calvin's home, which was more of a boarding house.

Unknown to Calvin and Idelette, many trials awaited them in their new life together...

(To be continued)

BIBLE TRIVIA

DEUTERONOMY 8:1-10

SARAH YONG

In this passage, Moses reminded the children of Israel of how the LORD had provided them with manna throughout their wilderness journey. He then revealed the goodness of the Promised Land, in which they shall be fed with an abundance of food.

A. From verses 7 to 9, identify nine such essential items, and circle them in the word search below. (Hint: There are four words "across", and five words "down".)

A	X	Y	W	A	T	E	R	M	Y	F	B
N	C	Z	H	X	N	D	A	O	C	I	E
H	O	N	E	Y	F	P	T	B	X	G	Q
G	I	B	A	R	H	G	C	R	I	T	H
W	L	S	T	J	D	B	I	E	K	R	L
P	O	M	E	G	R	A	N	A	T	E	S
E	L	T	K	O	F	R	N	D	U	E	P
M	I	Q	G	V	U	L	R	N	H	S	W
S	V	I	N	E	S	E	B	T	A	I	D
J	E	X	U	H	K	Y	K	O	V	M	L

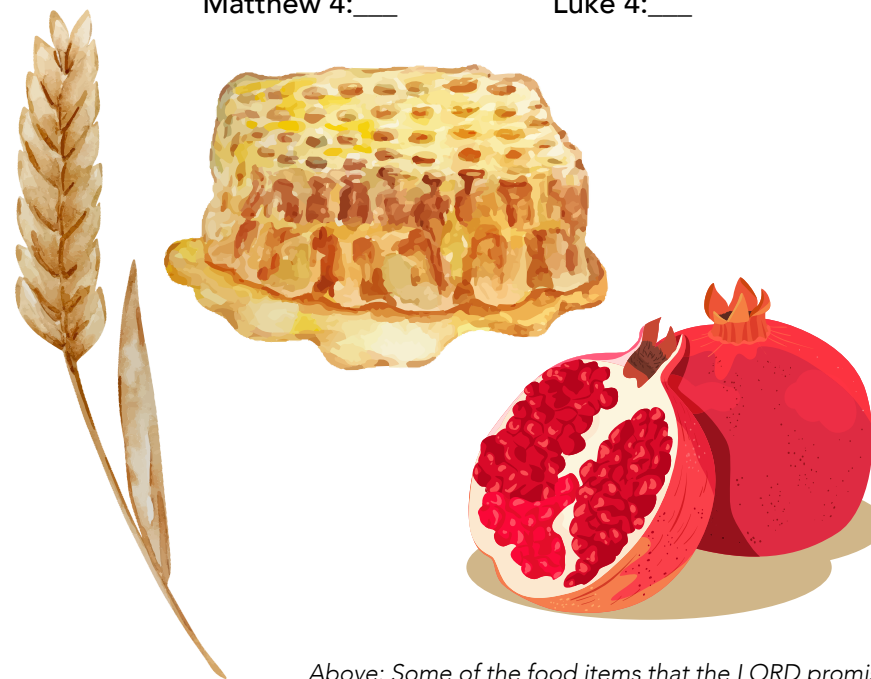
B. In the midst of abundance of food, Moses urged the Israelites to remember that spiritual feeding is more important than being fed with food. This teaching can be summarised by Deuteronomy 8:3b. Complete the verse by filling in the missing words.

Man doth not _____ by _____ only, but by every _____ that _____ out of the _____ of the _____ doth man _____.

C. Do you know that Jesus quoted these words when tempted by the devil? Verses similar to Deuteronomy 8:3b appear 2 times in the New Testament. Their Bible references (indicating only the books and chapters) are given below. Find out and complete them by filling in the respective verse.

Matthew 4:___

Luke 4:___



Above: Some of the food items that the LORD promised the Israelites in the Promised Land.

Answers to Bible Trivia —Deuteronomy 7
(Vol. 23, Iss. 1, p. 25)

Part A: A, B, C, E, I, L, N, O, P, R, S, T
Part B: BIBLICAL SEPARATION

22nd Bible Witness Retreat

Held at Vivanta Meghalaya, Shillong, India



From top to bottom:

- Participants at Soli Deo Gloria Reformed Bible Academy, the Bible academy set up by Pastor Jied.
- Participants at the piece of land where a small church is currently being built.
- Participants inside Thomas Jones Chapel.
- Participants at Thomas Jones School of Mission.
- (Above) Entrance to Thomas Jones Chapel.