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LAYING ASIDE BESETTING SINS (PART 2)



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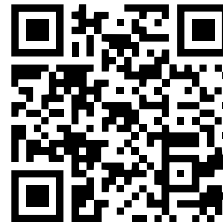
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On the Cover ▲

Gossiping is a deadly sin. According to Romans 1:28-32, gossip is as worthy of divine judgment as murder!



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GOSSIP: A TERRIBLE SPIRITUAL MALADY

“**W**hisperers” (Romans 1:29b) refer to people who engage in malicious gossips, and are grouped in the Bible together with those of “a reprobate mind” (Romans 1:28). In Romans 1:28–32, the apostle Paul paints a grim picture of such reprobates—those who have rejected the Lord and have embraced a lifestyle of sin.

“And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient; being filled

with all unrighteousness, fornication, wickedness, covetousness, ... murder, ... deceit, malignity; **whisperers**, backbiters, haters of God, ... 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.”

GOSSIPERS LISTED AS AMONG THE REPROBATES!

In this list of abominable evils of reprobate men, we not only find what we normally regard as gross sins like greed, deceit, adultery, murder, but also what many sometimes view as “a small problem”, such as gossip (“whisperers”) and slander (“backbiters”). Does this come as a surprise? Paul said that gossipers and slanderers are in the same league as God haters, sexual perverts and murderers! The apostle also makes it clear “that they which commit such things (i.e. those who persist in any of such evil behaviour) are worthy of death” (Romans 1:32)!

Now, the commonly used term “gossip” is derived from a word with the idea of “whispering”. It means “to indulge in idle talk, or rumours about others, or spreading of sensational stories”. The word “backbiter” (or slanderer) is derived from the same word from which the word “devil” originates. A slanderer is one who defames, or maliciously talks, or spreads damaging information, or speaks ill. Slander is the work of our adversary the devil. In fact, the Bible calls Satan “the accuser of our brethren” (Revelation 12:10b). If you are a whisperer or accuser of the brethren, even though it may not be your intention, you are being used as the devil’s agent! Those who slander

are on Satan’s side! Gossip (behaviour of “whisperers”), being a close cousin to slander (action of “backbiters”), God’s Word places both in the same category as murder and other wickedness—sins worthy of death. According to the Scriptures, anyone whose mouth is out of control does not have a right relationship with God. “If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man’s religion is vain” (James 1:26).

According to
Romans 1:28–32,
gossip is as worthy
of divine judgment
as murder!

As a Christian, do you occasionally slip up and commit a murder here and there? Or do you occasionally burglarise a home, or steal things from a grocery store? You may think it is silly to ask such questions. Of course, a good Christian doesn't behave that way. Then just as we are not to commit *murder* or *theft*, we are also not to *gossip* or *slander*. According to Romans 1:28–32, gossip is as worthy of divine judgment as murder!

The condemnable nature of gossip is also affirmed by the apostle Peter, who brings to our attention a sin that often goes hand in hand with the sin of gossip—“But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a **busybody** in other men's matters” (1 Peter 4:15). Notice that a “busybody” is placed in the same category as a “murderer”, a “thief”, and an “evildoer”. A busybody is a meddler who seeks confidential information about others; he is a snoop, a nosy person. A busybody—a person who meddles in the affairs of others—is a close relative to gossip. He acts like a spy, and serves as an investigator for the gossipers and rumourmongers, seeking to uncover sensational details and to “whisper” the latest news. Often, busybodies are found among idle persons having too much time on their hands, and with nothing better to do than to talk too much. “And withal they learn to be idle, wandering about from house to house; and not only idle, but tattlers also and busybodies, speaking things which they ought not” (1 Timothy 5:13). It goes without saying that with the modern explosion of communication technology (such as telephone, e-mail and WhatsApp chat), this besetting evil has become even more prevalent and intense!

A SERIOUS AND SUBTLE SIN!

By now, the Christian reader should be aware that anything placed in the same category as murder and other gross sins must be a serious sin—something that should not be taken lightly. Unfortunately, many Christians do not usually consider gossip and its related activity as sin.

Be warned, “whisperers” and “backbiters” can cause irreparable damage to the body of Christ. “The words of a talebearer are as wounds, and they go down into the innermost parts of the belly” (Proverbs 26:22). Mean, vicious accusations and rumours have ripped out the heart and soul of many fellow Christians and leaders, draining them of their love, enthusiasm and desire to serve God and His people. They have split churches, created strife, and promoted division and turmoil! A church can only be free from wild and destructive strife when its members carefully avoid any conversation that can become gossiping or slandering, and also cease from being busybodies. “Where no wood is, there the fire goeth out: so where there is no talebearer, the strife ceaseth” (Proverbs 26:20).

This serious malady is a very subtle one. We must learn to recognise correctly what is gossip. It will be very unfortunate if we judge a constructive and good conversation as gossip, or vice versa. For instance, a discussion between two church leaders about a church member's misconduct should not be considered as a gossip when it is done for corrective purposes (cf. 2 Timothy 2:17–18; 4:14). But they must take special care not to

spread the “news” to others under the pretence of “concern”.

A gossip occurs when a negative piece of “information” is told about someone who is not engaged in that conversation. Whenever one speaks of another person in less than a favourable way or in a manner that is fault-finding, or finger-pointing, he is engaged in gossip. It is generally a negative conversation, which focuses on nothing good or constructive, but just bad feelings about the person in question. Many a time, gossip begins like this—“I hate to say anything about this to you, but I'm concerned about so and so.” At other times, the gossiper will seek you out as his “confidant” to unload his “heavy heart” about his concerns—“I'm very troubled about so and so, and I don't know who else to talk to about it.” In reality, the gossiper is not sincerely concerned about solving the problem, but only in talking about it, or stirring up a conversation about someone else's weakness. Beware: “A froward man soweth strife: and a whisperer separateth chief friends” (Proverbs 16:28).

Conversely, any person who is genuinely concerned about solving a problem, will go and confront the person privately and express his concern. Or else he should go privately to the pastor in order to seek his help to deal with and settle the problem. A sound conversation should always strive to solve a problem rather than aggravating it, though in certain circumstances a good solution may not be achieved quickly. In all these, we must keep a loving spirit which is willing to forgive one another, esteem one another, restore and renew the brotherly relationship.

WHAT TO NOTE ABOUT GOSSIP?

Dear conscientious Christian, remember that gossip thrives on the negative, the controversial, and the sensational. Going around and telling others about someone else's fault or problem, before or during efforts to solve the problem, is harmful and does not help resolve the problem. It will only cause us to gossip and sin further. Because of its subtle nature, we do well to remember the following aspects about gossip:

- Unrepentant and persistent habit of gossip is a clear sign of the unregenerate spirit of a man. He faces the same consequence as a murderer unless there is repentance (Romans 1:32). God holds you accountable to your words (Matthew 12:36–37).
- The person who gossips to you about others, also gossips to others about you.
- Gossip and slander disqualify a person from spiritual leadership (1 Timothy 3:11; cf. James 3:2).
- Gossip often masks itself as pretentious concern for others.
- Gossip always contributes to a problem and never to a solution.
- Gossip always distorts and exaggerates, and is never a reliable source of truth.
- Those who gossip and slander are not in right fellowship with God (Romans 1:28–30).

- Those who gossip will rarely get answers to prayer, and often face persistent, unexplainable problems (Psalm 66:18; Proverbs 6:12–15; cf. 21:23).

WHAT TO DO ABOUT GOSSIP?

Though the sin of gossip is subtle, it must be recognised, acknowledged and confessed as sin. If guilty of this besetting sin, you must seek the Lord’s forgiveness. Repent by surrendering your tongue to Christ. Do not gossip or bad-mouth again (cf. 1 John 1:9). If you can’t say something good or encouraging about others, then keep your mouth shut (Ephesians 4:29). If you find any error in a person, tell him in person with an intent to help. If he listens to your advice, let that matter be forgiven and forgotten.

Criticism can never be “constructive” if it is expressed to anyone else other than the one who is being criticised. If your “friends” start badmouthing others to you, stop them in their tracks. Refuse to be a partaker of their sins (cf. 1 Timothy 5:22). Avoid association with persons who gossip. “He that goeth about as a talebearer revealeth secrets: therefore meddle not with him that flattereth with his lips” (Proverbs 20:19). It is better that you suggest to the person who bring juicy or even provocative news to you that he needs to discuss the matter with the “accused” person before you take it seriously. That way, we can avoid separation of longstanding friendship and even unnecessary strife. Many long-term friends and coworkers have been separated by talebearers. Don’t trust a gossip, for he will also betray you later—“A talebearer revealeth

secrets: but he that is of a faithful spirit concealeth the matter” (Proverbs 11:13).

In fact, we should expose gossip (which is a work of darkness), by reporting it to the pastor or elder, that they may confront the offender and offer correction. Gossip should be treated as any other vile sin. “And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them” (Ephesians 5:11).

CONCLUSION

May we not let gossip thrive. Let us all resolve within our hearts like the psalmist: “I will take heed to my ways, that I sin not with my tongue: I will keep my mouth with a bridle, while the wicked is before me” (Psalm 39:1). ■



DISCONTENTMENT: A DISTRUSTING HEART

Was there ever a time when there was so much discontentment in the world as there is today? Despite our boasted progress, and vast increase in wealth, resulting in much time and money expended daily in pleasure-seeking, discontentment is prevalent in modern society. Many even among Christians are affected with this evil spirit of the age.

TRAGEDY OF DISCONTENTMENT

Many Christians in their pursuit of material accumulation readily sacrifice their spiritual convictions and disciplines. They justify their materialistic pursuit by asking, “If we don’t do these things, how can we survive in this world?” Their words and actions seem to declare that God cannot help His people to meet their

needs. Living by His standards and trusting in His providence seem to be a foolish choice to them.

Christians who compromise their spiritual integrity for the sake of material advancement often do so because they want to be among the wealthy and the affluent. It is not that God has not provided for their needs, but because their hearts lust for pleasure and glamour. Their words often betray their inclination to choose the materialistic path because they feel that God has not provided enough for their daily needs. But the real reason is that they are simply discontented with their God-given lot. Sadly, there is also another group of Christians who justify their unbiblical ways of gaining wealth by saying, “Look, if the Lord was not pleased with me, He wouldn’t have let me come thus far in this job or trade and acquire all these material blessings.” They measure divine approval by means of the material wealth and progress they have made. Based on this philosophy, they misguidedly think that the clear biblical guidelines are impractical in modern living. Not surprisingly, they even finally reject obvious teachings of the Bible for their own convenience. In the apostle Paul’s words, they are “destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness” (1 Timothy 6:5b).

Oh, beware of falling into the sin of King Saul, who justified his action of gathering the wealth of the Amalekites against divine prohibition (cf. 1 Samuel 15:2–3) by saying that “the people took of the spoil ... to sacrifice unto the Lord thy God in Gilgal” (1 Samuel 15:21). In the same evil spirit, many disobedient Christians say in their hearts, “Well, in these days, everyone accepts this sort of

means to gain wealth. It’s easier to go along with the crowd. Anyway, to prove that I am selfless, I will give my tithe or even more to the Lord.” Yet tragically, these people forget the caution of God’s Word—“Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice” (1 Samuel 15:22)!

At the root of discontentment is covetousness. It is like a canker worm eating up and destroying our satisfaction in God. That is why our Lord gave the solemn commandment to His followers—“Take heed, and beware of covetousness” (Luke 12:15), “which is idolatry” (Colossians 3:5). A covetous heart has its affection set upon material things rather than upon God. The language of a covetous heart is that of the horseleach’s daughters: “Give, give ... (signifying that they) are never satisfied” (Proverbs 30:15a). The covetous man is always desirous for more, whether he has little or much. How vastly different they are from the words of Christ’s apostle—“And having food and raiment let us be therewith content” (1 Timothy 6:8). Indeed, a much-needed word in this highly discontented society is that of Luke 3:14c: “be content with your wages”!

IS CONTENTMENT REALISABLE?

Is such a thing as contentment realisable, or is it nothing more than a beautiful ideal? Is it attainable on earth, or is it restricted to the inhabitants of heaven? Even if it’s practicable in the here and now, can it be sustained throughout one’s life? Such questions as these find answer in the words of the apostle Paul: “Not that I speak in respect of want: for I **have learned**, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content” (Philippians 4:11).

Now, that’s an amazing statement considering the apostle Paul’s circumstances at the time of his writing. The apostle was not writing those words while he was dwelling in a luxurious resort, or receiving the warm hospitality in the house of like-minded, kindly affectioned brethren. Instead, he was in “bonds” (cf. Philippians 1:13–14), being a prisoner in “Caesar’s household” (Philippians 4:22), that is, held in the palace prison in Rome! And yet, he declared he was content!

Now, there is a vast difference between precept and practice, between the ideal and the realisation. In the case of Paul, contentment was an actual experience, and one that must have been continuous, for he says, “in whatsoever state I am”. How was Paul able to have this disposition? The clue is to be found in the statement, “I have learned ... to be content”. The apostle did not say, “I have suddenly received an outpouring of unexplainable spiritual experience that make contentment my inheritance.” Nor did he attribute this to his natural disposition or temperament. It is something that he **had learned** in the school of Christian experience. It should be apparent that the contentment, which Paul enjoyed, was not the result of comfortable and favourable surroundings. This at once dispels the erroneous conception that contentment is impossible unless one can have the desires of the carnal heart gratified. A prison is the last place to which you would go to seek out a contented man. This much, then, is clear: contentment comes from God, not from material comforts.

Contentment then is the product of a heart rested in God. It is the soul’s

enjoyment of God’s peace which passeth all understanding. It is the outcome of our human will being brought into subjection to the Divine will. It is the blessed assurance that God doeth all things well, and is even now making all things work together for our ultimate good. This experience has to be “learned” by proving “what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God” (Romans 12:2b). Contentment is possible only as we cultivate and maintain that attitude of accepting everything which enters into our lives, as coming from the hand of Him who is too wise to err and too loving to cause any of His children a needless tear.

CONCLUSION

Real contentment is only possible by being much in the presence of the Lord Jesus. This comes out clearly in Philippians 4:12–13, “I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.” It is only by cultivating intimacy with the One who is all-sufficient, and who was never discontented while on earth, that we shall be delivered from the besetting sin of discontentment. It is only through the daily fellowship with Him who ever delights in the Father’s will, that we shall learn the secret of contentment. ■



ANGER: A SIN THAT EXALTS FOLLY

What do you do when anger gets the upper hand? It is a great danger, warns Proverbs, to leave anger uncontrolled, though it is a common emotional feeling that everyone experiences at some point in life. Along with its warnings, Proverbs offers a godly way for us to overcome anger.

KNOW WHAT ANGER IS ALL ABOUT

Several Hebrew words are used in Proverbs to express the varying degrees of anger. They are explained below in order that we may have a good understanding of the biblical perspective of our anger.

The first Hebrew word for “anger” is *‘aph*; it emphasises the emotional aspect of anger. This word literally means “nose”, and when it is used for anger, it has the figurative idea of an angry man’s nose having changed colour when blood rushes to it as he is aroused in anger. The word suggests a strong feeling of displeasure over a person or a situation. Man’s anger may be legitimate, but Scripture warns that anger can be outrageous. “Wrath is cruel, and anger is outrageous” (Proverbs 27:4). Anger will stir up strife. Proverbs 29:22 says, “An angry man stirreth up strife, and a furious man aboundeth in transgression.” In contrast, it is said that the man who is slow to anger appeases strife (cf. Proverbs 15:18), and a wise man turns from it (cf. Proverbs 29:8).

The second Hebrew word that depicts anger is *hamâ*. King James Bible translates this word as “fury” (67 times), “wrath” (34 times), “poison” (6 times), “displeasure” (3 times), “rage” (twice), “anger” (once). It is also interesting to note that this term is used a few times to indicate physical heat in the sense of a fever or of poison causing fever (cf. Deuteronomy 32:24, 33). Hence, this term is generally used to convey the concept of an inner, emotional heat which rises and is fanned to varying degrees. The context usually gives enough clue as to which translation should be preferred, whether it is anger, hot displeasure, indignation, wrath, rage or fury. Thus, in Psalm 37:8, in a progressive parallelism, the psalmist says, “Cease from anger (*‘aph*), and forsake wrath (*hamâ*—intense, hot anger)”.

The third Hebrew word is *‘shine’â*; it is used to express the opposition, ill will, and aversion men have for fellow men. Sometimes, it is translated as “hatred”. It expresses an emotional attitude towards people and things which are opposed, detested, despised, and ultimately shunned. It is, therefore, the opposite of love. Whereas love draws and unites, hatred separates and keeps at a distance. The hated persons are treated as foes, and are considered odious, utterly unappealing. Unquestionably, anger stored up in one’s heart will eventually manifest itself as hatred!

Thus, biblically speaking, anger appears in various degrees—from a mere emotional frustration to facial expressions, and even to violent hatred! They need to be properly managed.

KNOW THE DANGERS OF UNCONTROLLED ANGER

“Cruel and Outrageous”

Proverbs 27:4 warns us, “Wrath is cruel, and anger is outrageous; but who is able to stand before envy?”

Wrath is an ungoverned passion. When an unhappy thought towards someone is conceived in our hearts, it will heat up our emotions, eventually forcing an outburst. So, when we are angry and furious, we can become cruel towards others. Our words and actions may cause others to cower in fear. The word “cruel” indicates fierce and merciless behaviour. Anger in the heart causes a tremendous amount of energy to build up within us, which will later burst out in uncontrolled behaviour, violence and destruction.

The word “outrageous” is figuratively used here. Its common meaning is “overflowing of water” or “flood”. The warning in Proverbs 27:4 is that even if we manage to hide anger, yet if we entertain it within us, soon it will overflow. Anger kept within the heart will soon become uncontrollable, suddenly ventilating itself by yelling at others, shouting insults and vulgarities, hurting and injuring others, throwing things around and destroying them, etc.

“Stirreth Up Strife”

Proverbs 15:18 states, “A wrathful man stirreth up strife: but he that is slow to anger appeaseth strife.”

A hot-tempered man stirs up dissension and easily picks up a fight. He is set against the peacemaker, and is

therefore quarrelsome in disposition. Such contentious behaviour of an angry man is repeatedly highlighted in Proverbs. For instance, Proverbs 10:12a says, “Hatred stirreth up strifes”. Likewise, Proverbs 29:22a declares, “An angry man stirreth up strife”. A man given to this besetting sin, being stirred by his accumulated pressure of anger, can cause strife in the family, at the work place, or in the church.

The extent and intensity of trouble and strife that an angry person can cause in his or her family is illustrated in Proverbs 21:9—“It is better to dwell in a corner of the housetop, than with a brawling woman in a wide house” (cf. Proverbs 21:19; 25:24). This family situation is just the opposite of the expectation of a closely knit godly family, as extolled in the first section of Proverbs. Nonetheless, all is not lost. As the above-mentioned verses suggest, it would be better to keep clear from an angry spouse until the anger cools down! It may be wise to wait for a more opportune (though slightly later) time to “discuss” a matter with a furious person.

“Aboundeth in Transgression”

Proverbs 29:22b points out that “a furious man aboundeth in transgression.” The word “transgression” denotes revolt and rebellion. The fundamental idea of its root word is a breach of relationships (civil or religious) between two parties. Its verbal form designates a casting off of allegiance, or a rebellion against God, rulers, and those who are in authority. A furious man with uncontrolled emotions will soon step over the line and commit great follies. There is no

stopping of the abounding offences by an angry person. Mischief will flow from an angry, passionate, furious disposition. Such a man will provoke others to fall out with him, and even cause them to sin. Anger can also make men rebel against God.

Undue anger is the cause of many sins. It not only hinders men from calling upon God’s name, but it also gives occasion to their swearing, cursing, and profaning of God’s name. Charles Bridges says about anger that “it gives the impetus to every besetting propensity. It may be blasphemy. It stops at nothing. How many murders do we owe to this paroxysm of the moment! But for the divine restraints, the very foundations of the society would be torn up!”

“Dealeth Foolishly”

“He that is soon angry,” says Proverbs 14:17, “dealeth foolishly”. This fact is affirmed by Proverbs 14:29—“he that is hasty of spirit (to anger) exalteth folly.”

A hasty temper is bound to bring about foolish actions. Think of the damage that an angry word or act can bring about. Men who are peevish and touchy, and who are soon angry at the slightest provocation, will tend to deal (with people and situations) foolishly. They say and do that which is ridiculous, and so expose themselves to contempt. They will feel ashamed of what they have said or done when the heat is over.

CONTROL YOUR ANGER

Some may say, “I have tried so hard to control my anger; but I just can’t have victory in this matter. I can’t control my

temper.” Well, you may have convinced yourself that you can’t, but that doesn’t change the facts. God’s Word says that anger can be controlled. If you seek God’s help and follow His counsel, you can also control your temper. Let us examine the counsel from the Book of Proverbs.

For a start, acknowledge the dangers of anger and remind yourself frequently of what you have learned in the preceding section. Next, apply the following biblical counsels from Proverbs in your life.

Apply Discretion

Proverbs 19:11 admonishes us, “The discretion of a man deferreth his anger; and it is his glory to pass over a transgression.”

Anger often causes us to act rashly, without considering our words or actions wisely. Therefore, be deliberate from now onwards to think before you act. If you know that you have a problem in controlling anger, then you can’t afford to act impulsively. You need to make it a habit to deliberately consider the wisdom of your feelings and the responses they are evoking. It is very unwise to give in to our emotions without carefully analysing the folly they can lead us into.

Do not let your sudden surge of emotions determine your words and actions. Let your rational mind start to take charge of your responses with regard to troubling or upsetting situations. Apply godly wisdom. Teach yourself to choose a God-honouring course of action.

Exercise Self-Control

Consider the following two exhortations from Proverbs:

- Proverbs 14:29—“He that is slow to wrath is of great understanding; but he that is hasty of spirit exalteth folly.”
- Proverbs 16:32—“He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city.”

In both these verses, we are exhorted to be “slow” to wrath or anger. It may be very natural for you to be hasty with your response to others’ provocative words and actions. But you need to “slow” down. When you feel agitated or frustrated, you must tell yourself not to hurriedly express your feelings, because acting hastily will lead you to great folly—“but he that is hasty of spirit exalteth folly.” Do realise that a swift response does not expose the other person’s folly, but your own.

As Proverbs 16:32 instructs, we must learn to rule our passions, instead of they ruling us and making us look like fools. We must have the control over our own spirits, our appetites, our affections, and all our inclinations. In particular, we must keep our anger in check. Only then can we manifest godly behaviour. Indeed, it is a greater victory to have conquered our restless, volatile passions than to capture a city. Scripture also reminds us in Proverbs 25:28, “He that hath no rule over his own spirit is like a city that is broken down, and without walls.” Dear brethren, “Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:21).

Yield to the Holy Spirit

Galatians 5:15–16 advises us, “But if ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another. This I say then, Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh.”

After warning the Galatians against mutual destruction, and the dire consequences of uncontrolled anger, Paul told them to walk in the Spirit that they may not fulfil the destructive passions of the flesh. Walking in the Spirit means conducting ourselves according to the guidance and direction of the Holy Spirit, who speaks to us through His Word.

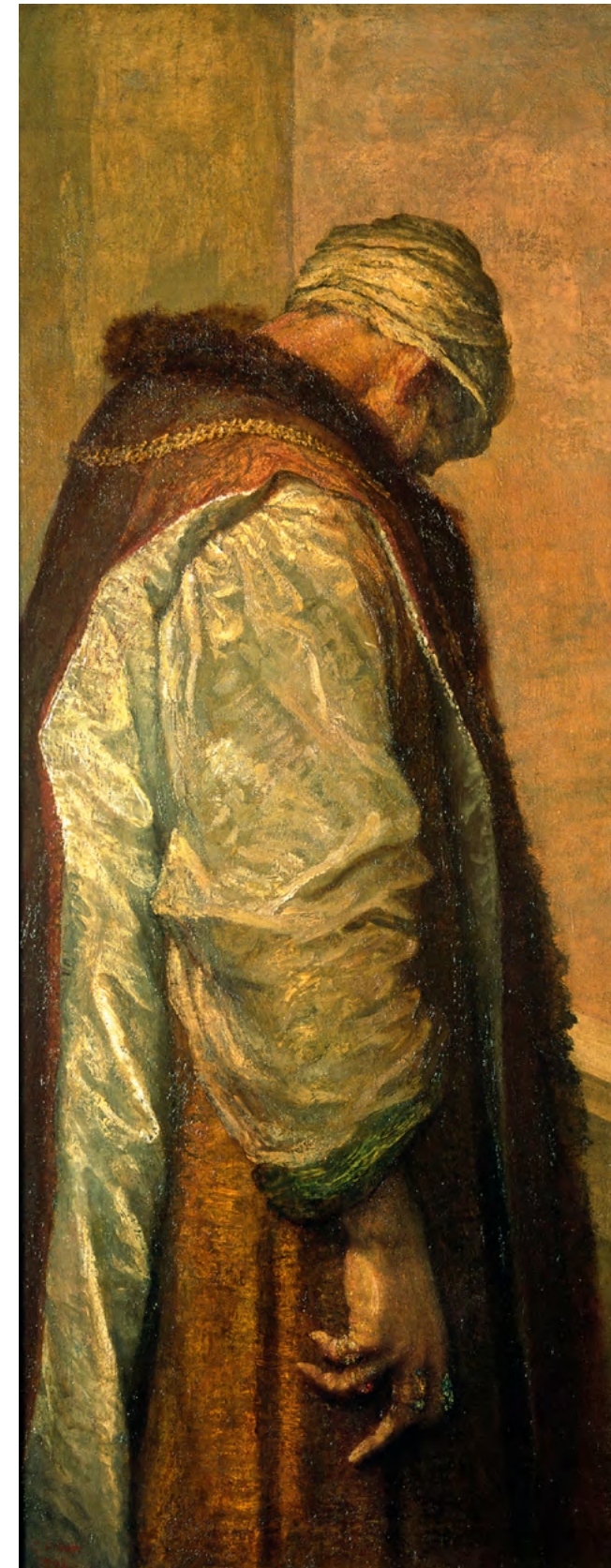
Yielding to the Spirit of God in your hearts will help you to check your sinful passions, even the outrage you feel within. When you are upset and frustrated, pray immediately that the Spirit of God would help you to manage the situation in a godly and loving manner. Then deliberately make every effort to ignore your unwholesome passion, and yield to His will. Remember, you are not called to walk according to your feelings, but according to the will of the Spirit. ■

PURSUIT OF WEALTH: AN ENSNARING TEMPTATION

We in Singapore live in one of the wealthiest nations on earth. To sustain our continued prosperity, our nation and people continue to work even harder to attain greater economic gains. There is a spiritual downside to this: there is so much social pressure and temptation from within us to pursue an affluent lifestyle. This has caused many people to be preoccupied with affluence and luxury, and to put the pursuit of wealth very high on their priority list in life. As a result, they rather leave their spiritual life unattended, and in the process, precipitating the ruin of their relationship with God.

NO MAN CAN SERVE GOD AND MAMMON

The temptation to pursue wealth is, of course, nothing new. It was a problem that the early Christians also faced in the first century. Jesus Himself taught us that we cannot serve both God and money. Jesus warned, “No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise



the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon” (Matthew 6:24). Human beings must choose one or the other. Of course, He advised us to choose God. Pursuing wealth at the expense of a close relationship with the Lord is a depraved attitude. Rather, we should invest our lives, our time, our energy, our resources to gain riches in Heaven. It is also equally wrong to think that it is alright to give equal preference for the pursuit of God and the pursuit of money.

It is no exaggeration to say that the two most heinous sins of our times are exalting wealth as a real sign of one’s spirituality, and using religion as a means to get rich. Increasingly, people think—incorrectly—that godliness (i.e. being pure, genuinely religious, and holy) is a means of financial gain. So, they use God’s Word, and combine it with religion, and make it into a religious money-making scheme. Nothing can be more abominable!

When the Son of God left His incomparable glories in Heaven, and came to Earth, was it His purpose to make lots of money? And to live a nice, comfortable life in Nazareth? And to wear the most elegant clothes, have the best quality sandals, live in the biggest house, drive the grandest chariot? If it were so, then He could have been born into the family of Caesar, or some wealthy merchant or king. But He chose to be born into a poor Jewish family, who was part of a people under the political dominion of Rome. Later, when He assumed an occupation, He chose to be a carpenter, but soon even left that occupation to become an itinerant preacher, a wandering Rabbi, telling people the truth, preaching

the Good News of salvation. So, from the Son of God, we ought to learn what His priorities were, and embrace them. He is our supreme Model and Example to follow.

GODLINESS WITH CONTENTMENT IS GREAT GAIN

Notwithstanding the foregoing, the apostle Paul tells us in 1 Timothy 6:6 that godliness actually is a means of great gain—when it is accompanied by contentment. Godliness—being like the Messiah, being truly religious, and striving for purity and holiness in your life—does bring great advantages, but not necessarily material or monetary advantages. That is why Scripture says that contentment must accompany godliness. Being godly does result in great gain, but you must be contented with whatever you have, however little it may be.

Pursuing wealth at the expense of a close relationship with the Lord is a depraved attitude.

What are some of those gains that come from godliness? Some of the gains are:

1. Godliness helps our relationship with God. God looks favourably on the godly.
2. Godliness is evidence of our salvation. If you truly accept Jesus as the Lord, and that reality manifests itself in your life by your becoming more and more godly, it shows that your confession is genuine and that your salvation is sure.
3. Godliness helps our relationships with people. The more godly we are, the better we treat those around us, and the better help we are able to bring them.
4. Godliness brings peace that passes all understanding.
5. Godliness adds meaning and significance to life.
6. Godliness also brings hope for the future.

It makes sense to pursue God, and not money, for we have brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of it either. We bring no material possessions into this world, and we can leave with none. You cannot take your assets, wealth, property or money with you when you leave this world. However, there are things that we can take with us; therefore, those are the things worth pursuing. What can you take with you? Salvation, your good name, your good works which will be rewarded by God, your sacrifices for others that will be rewarded by the

Creator, your service for Him, your love and knowledge of God. These are what you take with you into eternity. So, if these are what you can take with you, it only makes sense that your earthly life should centre around such things. Why strive for a life that is based on the acquisition of more and more material possessions, which you cannot take with you? Rather, focus on what are enduring, and direct your time, energies, thoughts, efforts, resources towards them.

BEWARE OF TREASURES OF WICKEDNESS

Pursuit of wealth will bring disillusionment. In fact, Scripture tells us that “riches certainly make themselves wings; they fly away as an eagle toward heaven” (Proverbs 23:5b). Riches are so unreliable that they can “disappear” (or become worthless) in a moment. This can occur when the value of money plunge because of inflation, or speculation, or interest rate fluctuations. Worse still, if gotten through greedy means, riches can ensnare. That’s why Proverbs 10:2a cautions us: “Treasures of wickedness profit nothing”.

To be sure, the Bible promises “treasures” to those who will love God and live by His Word. For instance, Proverbs 15:6a says, “In the house of the righteous is much treasure”. Likewise, Proverbs 21:20 affirms, “There is treasure to be desired and oil in the dwelling of the wise”. Therefore, treasure (or wealth) is in itself not evil. However, if wealth is regarded above all other matters of life, especially spiritual and moral principles and duties, it becomes an evil thing. So Scripture says: “Labour not to be rich” (Proverbs

23:4). It is a great evil to give pre-eminence to affluence and prosperity. Scripture also warns, “He that hasteth to be rich hath an evil eye, and considereth not that poverty shall come upon him” (Proverbs 28:22). So, let our conviction be thus: “Better is the poor that walketh in his uprightness, than he that is perverse in his ways, though he be rich” (Proverbs 28:6).

Dear brethren, settle this spiritual fact once and for all in your life. “Treasures of wickedness” may dazzle and furnish a greedy heart with gratification, but they will profit neither the soul nor the body. They will not secure any true comfort or happiness. Instead, such treasures, gained through wicked means, will bring much trouble and sorrow!

CONCLUSION

Dear Christian readers, keep yourselves away from every ungodly means of procuring wealth. Do not forget the warnings of God’s Word. Indulging in amassing wealth can destroy you, your family, and certainly your spiritual prosperity. It is better to be poor and pure than wealthy and filthy. Apart from what we do for God’s glory, all else that we do will be in vain, useless, meaningless, empty, and without eternal significance. Our lives will be lightweight, insubstantial, like chaff blown away by the wind. Apart from Him, we can accomplish nothing significant, nothing lasting, nothing rewarding. Only those things wrought in God, accomplished with God and for God, will last. May those instead be the truly satisfying things that we pursue. Pursuit of wealth is certainly not one of those things. ■



LIVING IN DEBT: A SIN THAT DELUDES

Living in debt has caused not a few lives and families to be cast into horrible pits of disarray and troubles. Have you not read heart-breaking news headlines, like: “Debt-ridden farmers end life”; “Debt-ridden students opting for ‘sugar daddies’ to pay rent, tuition, etc.”? Let no reader casually respond by saying, “Well, those reports do not truly show that loans and debts really affect people at large.” From anecdotal evidence and this writer’s pastoral counselling encounters, it must be asserted that living in debt is indeed a widespread problem, affecting even Christians.

BORROWING PRESSURISES ONE INTO HURTFUL OPTIONS

Just to highlight one example. A young lady, who was a university graduate, had been troubled by the burden of bank loans taken by her parents for her tertiary education purposes. She tearfully shared with this writer of her many struggles because of the student loan her parents had taken to send her to university. While she desired to be married and be a homemaker, which was also the desire of her husband-to-be, the parents insisted that she should not get married immediately, but that she should first focus on earning money to pay off the debt and then consider marriage and family life. Now, that would take years! Oh, the dreadful snare of debt that stops young women from fulfilling the divine injunction—“... that the younger women marry, bear children, guide the house, give none occasion to the adversary to speak reproachfully” (1 Timothy 5:14; cf. 1 Corinthians 7:9; Hebrews 13:4a)!

Debt is not only delaying some young people from getting married early in their adulthood, it also burdens those who enter married life. Many begin their marriage with loans and credit purchases, with the express intent to start off their marital life in fancifully-renovated houses filled with expensive furniture, appliances, etc. and driving luxury cars. This is a most imprudent way to establish a sound, solvent, godly family life! Lenders often require repayment of debts with their stipulated interests. Interests charged are often high, making it difficult to repay the loans quickly. Repayments of loans are even harder for those borrowers hailing from the lower income group, thereby

adding more trouble to the needy—hence the saying, “Need is a frying-pan, but debt is the fire!”

As if that is not bad enough, the resultant heavy financial burdens on such borrowers would drive them to a hectic, stressed-out work schedule that is obsessed with earning more money in order to service their loans. Without doubt, living in debt can compel one into foolish and hurtful actions, the result of which would negatively affect their spiritual pursuits and family unity. Desperation to liberate themselves from the shackles of debts may further push them to desire for huge financial rewards. This may in turn lead to neglect of family relationships and their children’s care, and bring about many sorrows in their lives. Needless to say, worry and fear, arguments and quarrels, materialism and spiritual deterioration, and suchlike would soon overwhelm them.

The general societal acceptance and advocacy of living in debt is a slippery slope to severe spiritual, financial, familial and social troubles that will wreck many young lives in the days to come. Under the intense pressure of debts, debt-ridden young people are increasingly becoming desensitised to and undiscerning of the perils of get-rich-quick offers from cunning men. Many of them fall victim to rich, filthy, perverse men who, having offered enormous financial rewards, take advantage of their vulnerability. Such exploiters would further abuse these obtuse young people for their own carnal pleasure, and compromise their reputation, chastity, and even lives in exchange for greater material gain. What’s more, some of those

desensitised youths do not anymore think that such a lifestyle of loose morals is hazardous, and have even adopted for themselves ungodly living for greater material gain!

BIBLICAL WARNINGS AGAINST BORROWING

Christians do well to heed biblical counsel to refrain from borrowing. The biblical wisdom is that we “Owe no man any thing, but to love one another” (Romans 13:8a). Nowadays, many financial pundits will tell you that “leverage”—the use of borrowed money to buy assets for appreciation—is the way to prosperity. But be warned that such advice is contrary to biblical wisdom. Absolutely nowhere in the Scriptures are we advised or commanded to use debt to accomplish God-given financial objectives.

Even if one is able to get interest-free loans from relatives or friends, the Bible forewarns of painful consequences. Borrowing money from someone is certain to change the relationship with that person. Proverbs 22:7b cautions that “the borrower is servant to the lender”. Even if one were to borrow money from parents, or siblings, or children, the relationship will soon sour.

So, the Bible warns us not to put ourselves in a surety situation. Proverbs 11:15 advises, “He that is surety for a stranger shall smart for it: and he that hateth suretyship is sure.” Likewise, Proverbs 22:26-27 admonishes, “Be not thou one of them that strike hands, or of them that are sureties for debts. If thou hast nothing to pay, why should he take away thy bed from under thee?” In

other words, if a person puts up security for another, he will suffer, but he who refuses to pledge is safe. The biblical advice is that we had better not be a guarantor for others’ debts. If you’re in a surety situation, like having taken a student loan for your child, the Bible’s advice is that you had better pay it off and get out of it. It is very unwise to take a huge loan for any enterprise, without having the means to pay back.

NO DIVINE PROMISE ATTACHED TO BORROWING

Be warned that there is no promise in the Bible that God will bail you out of the unwise debts you have accumulated. Some Christians who unwisely borrow seem to think that the promise of Philippians 4:19 is for them and applicable to all situations. This wonderful promise—“But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus”—assuring though it is, does not apply to all sorts of dire situations that disobedient Christians fall into, certainly not in solving their self-incurred debt predicament! It should not be taken out of context, and is certainly not a divine guarantee for cancelling the consequences of unwise borrowing.

Do not deceive your own selves. Those who think that their decision to borrow money is an “act of faith”, fail to realise that God has never said that He will provide for His people’s needs through moneylenders. How sad it is that many Christians look to moneylenders as their “provider”! They have made moneylenders their god, whom they presumptuously look to, for sanctioning them to achieve

all the carnal desires of their hearts. Sadly, many blindly believe that living on borrowed money is wise financial planning. However, according to biblical teachings, it is a fallacious notion. Though the Bible acknowledges that the poor may be compelled to borrow in their emergencies, it does not encourage borrowing. More often than not, the Bible warns strongly against borrowing.

Rather, the Bible teaches us that “godliness with contentment is great gain” (1 Timothy 6:6). God has already promised that He will provide for all our needs (cf. Psalm 23:1), but that should not be stretched to cover all our cravings and greedy wants. Living in debt by borrowing is self-deluding, no matter what the banks and investment gurus promise. The biblical solution is to live within your means. Indeed, the secret of contentment is knowing how to enjoy what you have, and be able to lose all desire for things beyond your reach. Such a spiritual attitude delivers us from worry, fretfulness and avarice. It also frees us to enjoy what God has given us.

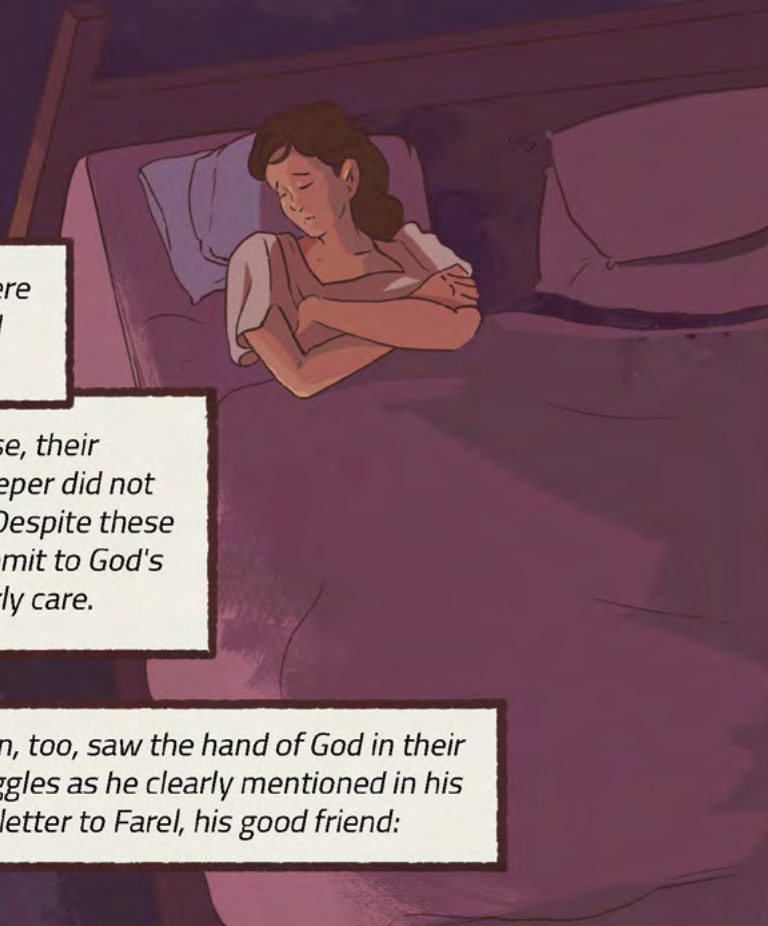
CONCLUSION

Dear saints of God, it is best to bear our troubles with much prayer, and overcome them through hard work and wise planning. Beware of entering into debt, especially borrowing beyond our means to pay back. It is not only unwise, but also a self-deluding practice that can lead to more severe troubles. As Scripture unequivocally counsels, do not live on borrowed money—be debt-free! ■

Idelette de Bure

(d. 1549) – Part II

Retold by Jenny Lok
Illustrated by Andronicus Koshy



At the outset, the newly-weds were constantly so sick that they had to remain at home.

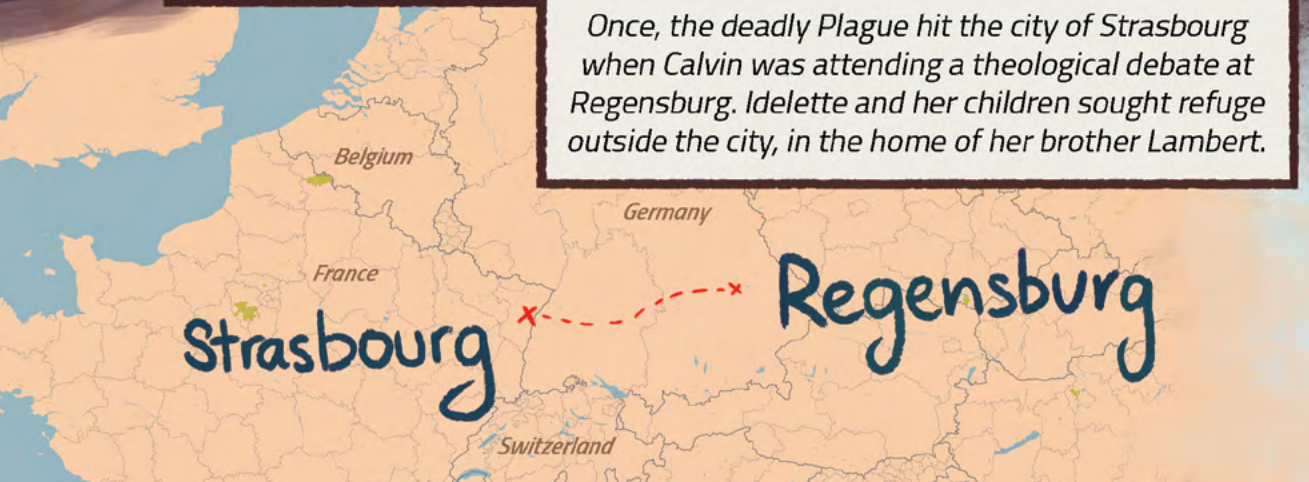
To make matters worse, their "sharp-tongued" housekeeper did not make life easy for Idelette. Despite these trials, Idelette learnt to submit to God's providence and fatherly care.

Calvin, too, saw the hand of God in their struggles as he clearly mentioned in his letter to Farel, his good friend:

As if it had been so ordered, that our wedlock might not be over joyous, the Lord thus thwarted our joy by moderating it.

Oftentimes, Idelette had to manage the home alone as Calvin was frequently away for preaching and other spiritual engagements.

Once, the deadly Plague hit the city of Strasbourg when Calvin was attending a theological debate at Regensburg. Idelette and her children sought refuge outside the city, in the home of her brother Lambert.



As soon as Calvin heard the news, he rushed back to attend to Idelette and the children. The Lord was good to them and kept them from being harmed by the Plague. Their hearts were overwhelmed with gratitude to the Lord.

As Idelette was settling into domestic life at Calvin's boarding house, she did not expect that another great change was about to take place. It happened about a year later in September 1541.



Idelette, my dear, I need to let you know that I have been invited to lead the church in Geneva once again!

The leader banished you and your friend Farel from the Geneva church in 1538. Now they want you back? Is this a trap?



I am also rather concerned about the invitation. But the Protestant minister and some of the citizens wrote to me and pleaded with me to return to Geneva to help bring order to the reformed system that was once established there.

I am compelled to go.

In fact, Calvin had written to his close friend Farel and stated:

I dread throwing myself into that whirlpool I found so dangerous.

Nevertheless, Calvin's conscience pricked him so much that he could not but say, "I offer my heart to the Lord in sacrifice." So Calvin went ahead to Geneva, leaving Idelette and the children behind until such a time when he deemed Geneva to be safe for them.

About a week or two later, a two-horse carriage with a herald (official messenger and protector) came to bring Idelette and her children to Geneva.

To Idelette's joy and comfort, their family furniture were carried along with them! However, leaving Strasbourg remained a struggle for Idelette as she had regarded the city as home (though her family had to share their house with a few others), after having lived in it for a number of years.



She wondered if she would ever long to be anywhere else.

Upon arrival in Geneva, Idelette was struck by the breathtaking sight before her!

At the top of the Rue des Chanoines (a short narrow street near St Peter's Church) was a beautiful house, which was to be the parsonage.

Behind the house was a little garden, which offered a spectacular view of the deep-blue Lake Geneva. What a change from their overcrowded boarding house in Strasbourg!



Idelette loved the vegetable garden behind the parsonage, and she thanked God for it. Every year, she would plant a variety of herbs and many pretty, colourful flowers that made the garden so amazingly bright, beautiful and fragrant!

Without fail, all their guests would be shown round the garden by Calvin, who also shared Idelette's delight in it. At last, here was a warm and cosy home that they could call their very own!

Life in Geneva might be full of ease and comfort for Idelette, but not once did she become indolent or lacking in charity. Instead, she laboured to minister to others who were ill and needy. Besides visiting the sick and the poor with Calvin, she was also very hospitable to visitors who sought inspiration from her husband Calvin, a renowned scholar in the Reformed doctrine.

Indeed, Calvin had been greatly honoured in Geneva, for he was presented with "a new robe of black velvet, trimmed with fur" upon arrival, as well as a modest salary of 500 Genevese florins (about 200 pounds or close to \$200 in those days) and a good, regular supply of food and beverage.



With all these God-given blessings, Idelette strived to fulfil Christ's calling to care for the down and out in the community (cf. Matthew 25:35-40).

In the summer of 1542, a baby boy was born to Calvin and Idelette before the expected delivery date. They named him Jacques.

However, their firstborn died after a few weeks, much to the parents' grief and disappointment. Calvin recognised God's sovereignty in their bereavement, and penned the following words to his friend, Pierre Viret:

The Lord has certainly inflicted a severe and bitter wound by the death of our infant son. But He is Himself a Father and knows what is necessary for His children.

Two years later, their little daughter arrived, but was soon taken from them after a persistent fever. This was followed by the birth of their third child, who also died in infancy! Idelette was overwhelmed with deep sorrow, as much as Calvin was. It was at this moment that the Roman Catholics took aim at their "childless condition", and interpreted it to be God's judgment upon them. Despite the lie and insult, Calvin's response was

I have myriads of sons throughout the Christian world.

Idelette never fully recovered from her weakened state, and continued to suffer from prolonged illness. Calvin, likewise, was not spared from various ailments too. In the midst of their physical infirmities, Idelette was always at Calvin's side, supporting him, especially in taking care of the persecuted Waldensians (who had fled to Geneva in 1545) and praying for his safety as he dealt with the unruly Libertines in the "church-state" of Geneva in 1547. Truly, theirs was a godly marriage that exhibited much "kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; forbearing one another, and forgiving one another" (Colossians 3:12-13).

As time passed, Idelette's health continued to deteriorate to the point that she was unable to stand without any support. By 1549, she became bedridden. Sitting by her bed, Calvin would talk to her of the nine happy years they had enjoyed as husband and wife. Most of all, he comforted her with the joyful hope of "exchanging an abode on earth for her father's house above". When the time of death was fast approaching, Calvin noted that she looked calm and peaceful until at one point, she cried out:

*O glorious resurrection.
O God of Abraham and of all of our fathers, the believers of all the ages have trusted in Thee and none of them have hoped in vain. And now I fix my hope on Thee.*

Such was Idelette's deep trust in God's promise of salvation to those who believe and hope in Christ.

As Idelette's life was slowly ebbing from her, and with Calvin and her loved ones around her, she made her final request in a voice that was slowly disappearing:

Let us pray,

let us pray.

All pray for me.

Thereafter, slowly but quietly, Idelette left the world of trouble and tears for heaven, the place of everlasting peace and joy, forever enjoying eternal rest in the presence of her precious Saviour!

Two days after the homegoing of his dear wife Idelette on 5 April 1549, Calvin wrote to his friend Viret, speaking of his grievous loss:

I have been bereaved of the best companion of my life, who, if our lot had been harsher, would have been not only the willing sharer of exile and poverty, but even of death. While she lived she was the faithful helper of my ministry. From her I never experienced the slightest hindrance.

Beyond doubt, in Idelette de Bure was "the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price" (1 Peter 3:4). To Calvin, the great theologian and Reformer, she was a "virtuous woman" who had been "a crown to her husband" (cf. Proverbs 12:4). Notably, Idelette had given of herself wholeheartedly in support of John Calvin's preaching and teaching ministry, and therefore had played no small part in the 16th century Reformation. There is clearly no greater commendation for Idelette de Bure than that in Proverbs 31:29 – "Many daughters have done virtuously, but thou excellest them all."

BIBLE TRIVIA

DEUTERONOMY 9 & 10

SARAH YONG

Even while the people of Israel were preparing themselves to pass over Jordan into the Promised Land, the LORD continued to admonish His people through Moses.

Read each given statement below and its corresponding verses indicated in the brackets carefully. Then select the option from the box in the facing page that best completes the sentence.

1. The LORD would go before the people of Israel as a consuming fire, and would destroy their enemies because of the wickedness of those nations, _____ [Deuteronomy 9:3-5]
2. The children of Israel were described as a stiffnecked people who were rebellious against the LORD, _____ [Deuteronomy 9:6-8]
3. While Moses was gone up into the mount for forty days and forty nights to receive the two tables of stone written with the finger of God, _____ [Deuteronomy 9: 9-12]
4. When Moses saw the people's sin, he fasted and fell before the LORD, in order to pray on their behalf, _____ [Deuteronomy 9:16-20]
5. The LORD wrote the ten commandments the second time upon two hewn tables of stone, and commanded Moses _____ [Deuteronomy 10:1-5]
6. The tribe of Levi was separated from the other tribes, for the appointed purpose of bearing the ark of the covenant of the LORD, that they may stand before the LORD to minister unto Him, _____ [Deuteronomy 10:8-9]
7. Israel was reminded to fear the LORD their God, to walk in all His ways, to love and serve Him with all their heart and soul, _____ [Deuteronomy 10:12-13]
8. They were to remember the great and terrible works of the LORD, noting that from the initial 70 persons that went to Egypt, _____ [Deuteronomy 10:20-22]

- A. for the way they had provoked the LORD to wrath in the wilderness.
- B. resulting in the LORD hearkening unto him and not destroying them.
- C. with the promised assurance that the LORD would be their inheritance.
- D. and not because of the Israelites' righteousness or uprightness of heart.
- E. God had made them as the stars of heaven for multitude.
- F. the people sinned by turning aside to make a molten image for worship.
- G. to place them in the ark made of shittim wood.
- H. and to keep His commandments and statutes.

Answers to Bible Trivia—Deuteronomy 8:1–10
(Vol. 23, Iss. 2, pp. 30–31)

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

Part B: live, bread, word, proceedeth, mouth, LORD, live
Part C: Matthew 4:4; Luke 4:4



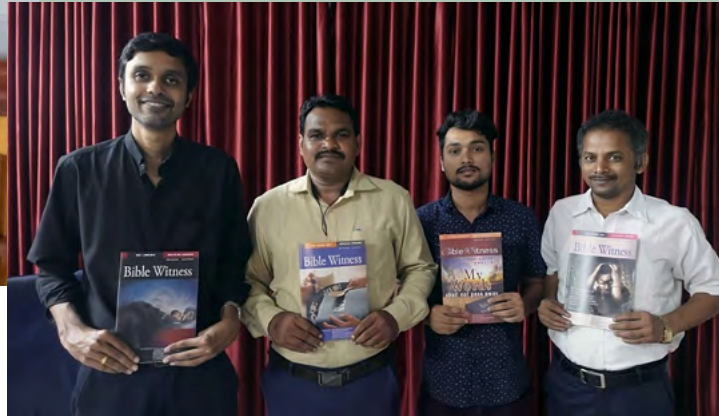
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◀ Bible Witness Magazines arriving in Cherrapunji, Meghalaya, India

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