

## Good News

AS WE TRY TO FOLLOW GOD, WE OFTEN FIND TWO OPPOSING VIEWS fighting within us. The first view acknowledges the truth of Jesus' words, "You did not choose me, but I chose you" (John 15:16). "Wow," we think, "Jesus actually chose me—me!"

When I was a boy, we would form teams for baseball by choosing two players to be captains and having the rest of us line up and wait to be picked for one of the teams. The worst possible thing that could happen was to be chosen last. That meant nobody really wanted you on his team. You felt like a loser.

The greatest honor, however, was to be chosen first. This Scripture tells us that not only does Jesus want us on his team but also he picked us first, that is, before we picked him! He really wants us.

Now, even though I know this is the truth, I still hear the voice of the second view from time to time. You know the voice I mean. It's the one that says you don't deserve his love; you'll never measure up; everyone else can receive it but not you. It says, "Yeah, but if you only knew me..."

Sometimes I fall into this trap. I think that God could never choose me, let alone choose me first. The problem lies not in knowing the truth of God's love but in getting that truth from my head to my heart.

*A NEW PERSPECTIVE*

Let us consider this dilemma. Some have said that the distance of eighteen inches from the head to the heart is the longest journey in the universe. We cannot make that journey by sheer grit and determination. It takes God's grace along with our cooperation.

I remember quite vividly an incident in this journey that occurred when I was wrestling with a big issue in my life. I was in the midst of an especially difficult time, and I felt that I had failed the Lord miserably. I began to fear that Jesus was going to cut me loose. I was wondering how many times you can fail before he gives up on you.

My response to all of this was noble but futile: I determined not to make any more mistakes as I proceeded to dig out of my difficulties—as if that were possible. I didn't do this consciously, but in effect that is what I was doing. I was tense and worried about every decision as I tried to figure out God's will for me. I was more concerned about circumstances and actions than I was about loving God, and I slipped into regarding the Lord as an unreasonable taskmaster. The Christian life was becoming miserable.

Fortunately, God loved me enough to intervene. As I was praying one day, I was drawn to the Scripture passage Hosea 14:3–4: “We will say no more, ‘Our God,’ to the work of our hands. In you the orphan finds mercy.’ I will heal their faithlessness; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them.”

I had read passages like this before, but this time was different. In Hebrews 4:12 it says that the Word of God is living and active. That was my experience in reading these verses. It was as though the words leapt from the page into my heart. In an instant I knew that I was making circumstances more important than God himself. I already knew this intellectually, but now my

heart became involved, and I began to change.

Then the Lord spoke to me, not in an audible voice but in the quiet of my heart. He said, "David, you don't have to get it right this time either." As I considered this, all of the pressure I had been feeling began to disappear. I knew that God loved me whether I was right or wrong. His love for me was unconditional; it did not depend on my performance. I had learned all of this many times before, but now I *knew* it!

I think we often make the mistake of thinking that God is just like us. I'm sure glad he isn't. If we decided who received God's love and who didn't, the kingdom of God would be mighty small.

I don't presume to think that I know how much God loves me. His love is unfathomable and deeper than I will ever know, but there is a level of it that I do know, and it drives me to know more. His love is absolutely amazing!

We need to not expect God to act like us. We need a change of perspective. We need God's perspective, and we can only get it from him. I believe it was Abraham Lincoln who said that his greatest concern was not having God on his side but rather making sure that he was on God's side. What a great point of view!

When I think about a change in perspective, I remember a story about a monk who loved to smoke cigars. He was transferred to a new monastery, and when he arrived he asked the abbot if he could smoke while he prayed. The wise abbot said that he didn't think that was a good idea.

When the newly arrived monk went to the chapel to pray, he couldn't help but notice one of the other monks smoking a rather fine cigar. He went over to him and said that he had asked the abbot if he could smoke while he prayed, but the abbot had said no. The other monk replied, "You asked the wrong question. I

asked him if I could pray while I smoked.” Changing our point of view can make all the difference.

*JESUS WANTS YOU!*

I once heard someone say that Jesus didn't come to take sides; he came to take over. I think we need to let him do just that, especially in viewing things and living from his perspective. To refuse to live according to God's point of view is like waking up every morning, shooting yourself in the foot and then wondering why you walk with a limp.

The cornerstone of God's point of view is his love for us. Let us consider a little of what Scripture has to say about God's love.

First and foremost: God likes you. I mean, he really likes you! (I use the word *like* here because we have watered down the word *love* so much in our society that it has lost a lot of its meaning.)

Mark 3:13 says, “Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him” (*NIV*). I was meditating on this passage one day, and I got stuck on the fact that Jesus called “those he wanted.” I realized that I had always assumed that Jesus called me because he had to, not because he wanted to. After all, it was his job. He is the Savior, and that's what saviors do.

I was so struck by this realization that I looked up the Greek word for *wanted* to see if it really had that element of personal desire in it—and it did! I was overwhelmed by how much Jesus actually wanted me to be around him. The King, the Master, the Creator wants *me*. Wow!

And it doesn't end there. In Micah 7:18 we read, “Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity / and passing over transgression / for the remnant of his inheritance? / He does not retain his anger for

ever / because he delights in mercy.” It is noteworthy that this passage not only says that God will forgive us but that he delights in doing so. This is good news!

I can remember trying to manipulate my parents into giving me something. Occasionally, but not often, it actually worked. They would grant my wish begrudgingly just to get me to stop pestering them. My own children have done this with me a few times with some success.

God, however, does not give us his grace grudgingly. He doesn't show it through gritted teeth. He delights to show us mercy; he actually enjoys doing that. Sometimes his mercy doesn't come wrapped in the package we desire, but it is his mercy nonetheless.

God's great love and generosity are clear in Ephesians 2:4–5: “But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved).” He gave us his grace while we were dead in sin, that is, while we were still sinning. Isn't that amazing?

Have you ever tried to clean yourself up so you would look good to God? What a colossal waste of time! We can't clean up our act without him. The good news is that God loves you and wants to work through you just the way you are. He wants you *as is*! You don't have to change a thing to get him to love you.

Don't get me wrong here. I'm not saying that you don't have to change. My point is that changing your life is not the basis for God's loving you and being able to change you. In fact, his love for you and his presence in your life are the only things that can help you to change.

*FAITH: HOW MUCH IS ENOUGH?*

There are a group of incidents recorded in the New Testament that I like to call the “O you of little faith” Scriptures. These stories show the disciples having a problem exercising their faith. In each of these situations, Jesus “yells” at them, using the phrase “O you of little faith.”

For example, in Matthew 8:26 we read, “He replied, ‘You of little faith, why are you so afraid?’ Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm” (*NIV*). And in Luke 12:28 Jesus says, “If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith!” (*NIV*).

In these two examples we find a thread that runs through all these stories. Jesus rebukes his followers for their small amount of faith, but he still delivers the goods: He gives them what they need. He doesn’t tell them to come back when they have more faith. He supplies the need in the given situation.

If you feel that your faith is very weak and small, you qualify as a Christian. A little faith is enough; in fact, it’s more than enough. All we have to do is use what faith we have.

The story of Peter’s walking on the water gives us a great picture of Jesus’ mercy in view of our lack of faith:

“Lord, if it’s you,” Peter replied, “tell me to come to you on the water.”

“Come,” he said.

Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, “Lord, save me!”

Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. “You of little faith,” he said, “why did you doubt?” (Matthew 14:28–31, NIV)

You would think that if you were able to walk on water, even for a little while, you wouldn’t doubt Jesus’ word at all. But Peter did, and we probably do, too. When Peter cries for help, does Jesus say, “Sorry, Pete, not enough faith here. Come back when you have more”? Of course not! Jesus saves Peter in the very midst of his doubting. It is only after he has Peter securely in his grasp that he corrects him.

This is a great picture of how Jesus cares for us as well. Even in the midst of our doubts, he will come to us and help us.

I often have thought of what things were like in that boat after Peter climbed back in. He must have been wet, and he probably looked a bit haggard. Perhaps one of the other disciples teased him: “Hey, Pete, looking a bit wet there, aren’t you?” But then Peter could have looked that disciple straight in the eye and said, “I may be wet, and I may have failed, but I also walked on water. Where were you?”

Even our half-finished attempts to serve God are great sources of grace. Reaching out to Jesus on any level is never a failure. He always reaches back.

In spite of knowing this, it continues to amaze me how easy it is to slip back into a mentality that says, “You need to pay your own freight; nothing in this life is free.” I need to remember that the love I am offered in the shed blood of Jesus Christ is wider than I can ever imagine. Is it wide enough for you? You bet your life it is! And that is a bet you’re going to win.

ANSWERING THE CHALLENGE

When I was beginning to try to live out my faith in a more radical way, I heard a story about the great evangelist D.L. Moody. The story goes that Moody was in a meeting where he heard someone say that the world had not yet seen what one person totally dedicated to Jesus Christ can do. Moody decided to accept the challenge to be that person. He went on to have a very powerful ministry of preaching and teaching.

When I heard this story, I knew that a long line of saints, stretching through the ages, had also demonstrated that kind of dedication. I decided that I wanted to be another one of those people.

As I look back on my Christian walk since then, I see an interesting mix of success and failure. I was hoping to go “from one degree of glory to another,” as Saint Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3:18. The road turned out to be not as smooth as I had expected; sometimes it seemed downright impassable. I had imagined myself going from mountaintop to mountaintop, but I forgot to take the valleys into account.

Yet God carried me through it all. In fact, many of the times when I was most effective in serving God were when I was in the midst of a valley crying out for his mercy.

Now as I look back, I ask the D.L. Moody question a little differently. Has the world yet seen what one man can do for the kingdom of God—one man who is fully dedicated to Jesus Christ but who also is weak, prone to repeating dumb mistakes, losing his hair, gaining weight around the middle, not always hearing God very well and tempted to give up sometimes? I sense that God is asking me to be *that* man, because the result will be no different than it was for the earlier challenge I mentioned. The success of our attempts flows not from our efforts or grand notions but rather from the inexhaustible mercy of God.

O Lord, may I be that man!