

THE ORACLE

HOW TO IDENTIFY AND ESCAPE DESTRUCTIVE
CYCLES IN YOUR CHRISTIAN WALK



Specially for Christian Youth

MODUPE KUMAPAYI

The Oracle

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DEDICATION

To everyone that desires to walk and
work with God.

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PREFACE

A NEW BEGINNING

GOD HAS a need, and you can meet it. To learn that God has a need has to get your attention because it got mine. Leaves you wondering, doesn't it, how a God who is Creator and who has all power to do His pleasures could have need of anything! And to think puny man is whom He is asking to meet His need.

It had me wondering, what could God be doing, and what would He have me do? I presume you're asking the same questions too.

You must know that God is at work. He is doing a new thing, and is about to usher in a new beginning in His Church and for the world. But isn't He always? Yes, He is always working, doing a new thing, and always bringing about new beginnings, and this time – just like in previous times – He seeks to involve you and me who are Believers in this work, and it's not just about what He would have us do, it's more about who He would have us become. It is our becoming His new design that God is very much interested in; for it will determine if our role in this work that He is doing will be possible and as effective as it ought to be.

A Sharp Knife

WHAT would God have us become? A sharp knife. He wants a collection of sharp knives – Believers that are completely submitted to His influence and directives in and out of season, that are distinct, i.e., recognizably different among

other professing Believers, and definitely from the world. These would be Believers who are clearly defined by their perception of the ways of God, comprehension of the word of God, and response to the will of God. Only when we finally become, God will then use us to revive the Church and evangelize the world.

Sharpening a knife can be a rough process; it is not enjoyable for the knife, but it is very essential for the knife if it is to be and remain useful and more effective. This is my way of informing you that this book is one way of God intimating you on what He is doing and of sharpening you. You might not find what you'd read enjoyable, but it will prove beneficial if you read it with an open heart and take the necessary steps to realignment.

INTRODUCTION

THE SEVEN CALLS

WHILE OBSERVING closely the letters John wrote to the seven churches as dictated by Jesus Christ Himself in the book of Revelation, a number of issues were brought to my attention. It wasn't my first time reading these letters, but I found myself alarmed as though it was my first time reading them; and the reason is because I realized the same issues back in John's day, persist today even among older generation Believers, and worse among the younger generation!

And the question on my heart is, until when does it all end, these issues? It's all looking like a vicious cycle! But then, it suddenly became clear to me that unless we begin to see the messages in these letters as direct messages from God to each and every one of us, and we pay attention to every issue brought up, and become careful to take all of Jesus' warnings and advice to heart, even putting them to practice, we'll never take a step forward out of this vicious cycle in order to become who God really wants us to be, much less doing the things He's got planned for us to do. So, we must take a step forward! We must break out of this vicious cycle and become who God wants us to be, doing all He wants us to do, and inspiring the next generation to do same!

So beloved, I implore you to see the words on the pages of this book as important, a personal call to you! The seven messages to the seven churches are also individual messages to you and me. Let us be determined in our hearts that it's time for change; time to unlearn certain ways, to learn new ways

and relearn these new ways as well! It's time to become better, even the best version of ourselves! And why? It's because a new you is an absolute prerequisite for the new beginnings that God is ushering in. The important refrain in the seven letters in Revelation is, "*He that hath an ear, let him ear what the Spirit saith....*" I hope each of us can see this statement of Jesus as a call to obedience to God!

1

THE FIRST CALL: *Love God over Works*

DOES GOD have likes and dislikes, and does God have preferences, i.e., things He has a greater liking for over another? Have you ever asked yourself these questions? You know we get this warm and fuzzy feeling over knowing that God knows us intimately not only because He created us but also because He stays mindful of us, that He is curious about us, so He pays attention to us. He even makes it obvious to us how mindful He is of us. And the greatest way He's proved this to us is by meeting our greatest spiritual need by presenting us with the gift of salvation through Jesus.

It must be said that the salvation package proves God's mindfulness; but it also reveals God's heart to us, and His love for us. But He doesn't stop there; once the salvation package is received, God wears the hat of Father among many other hats, and begins to undertake for us, meeting not only our other spiritual needs but also physical needs, emotional needs, financial needs etc. He stays interested and invested in us. But you already know all this, don't you?

I believe for most of us our relationship with God began with gratitude – we learn all of these things about God and we are ever thankful to be recipients of His generosity. We weigh our options and decide we are better off staying on His side than being free agents and open to the wiles of the enemy.

Then over time that gratitude we felt morphed into affection – it’s impossible to not like God, especially when you know what He’s done for you and what He continually does for you. He is very likable, so you move closer to Him. And then that affection for most begins to deepen; it deepens into love, this means we begin to have great interest in Him and derive great pleasure from fellowship with Him. That love morphs too into devotion; and in our devotion, there’s not just love, there’s loyalty, there’s enthusiasm, and there’s also activity; we begin to share His vision and do all we can for His righteous cause. But you already know all this too, don’t you? What you might not know is that for some, perhaps even you, the journey isn’t as lineal as I’ve described: Gratitude – affection – love – devotion.

But for all Believers, these feelings ought to morph lineally and not go away. All four are supposed to stay intact throughout the course of the rest of our lifetime, which also should be the duration of our earthly relations with God. Among the Believers whose journey isn’t lineal are those who while yet at the stage of the feeling of gratitude jump straight into activities. The activity part is supposed to be rooted in, and motivated by, devotion. As you can see, jumping from gratitude into activities skips the affection and love stages. Such haste, as you can imagine, has fall-outs; deficiencies in maturity, drawbacks in understanding and even backsliding.

Then, still among that group of Believers whose journey isn’t lineal are those who feel gratitude, and even a wisp of affection, but it ends there for them. They stay grounded there because they won’t spare any time exploring those emotions, basking in it and letting it lead them on to the next stage: love,

and further still to the next stage: devotion. The result? They begin to lose interest in God and godly things, and begin to neglect fellowship with God daily. These ones too are at risk of backsliding. In fact, many of them eventually wander away from the fold of God.

There is also a very common group that deserves a mention. This group of Believers are among others whose journey isn't lineal; not because it can't be, but because they won't let it be. They are lackadaisical. These ones claim to be grateful to God. They claim to like God, even love Him, but they never get to the devotion stage. Their professed love for God doesn't deepen into devotion! They are at risk of easy compromise when things get tough and rough. They are characterized by their lack of eagerness about any godly works or Christian service. Even when they show some interest; they are not committed.

But there's yet a special group of Believers I must mention. This group Jesus directly mentions when addressing the Church of Ephesus. They're not of the category we've mentioned and discussed so far. These ones are Believers who have gone through all four emotional stages – yes, their journey was lineal but unfortunately they get carried away in the activities of the devotion stage, thereby causing a noticeable decline in the love stage. But so far, which of the aforementioned groups do you fall into?

Before we address the group Jesus directly mentions, I'd like us to pay close attention as we explore the groups He didn't directly mention. Because this is where we miss it. If we fail to read between the lines, we will keep making mistakes we ought not to, and then we wonder why the Church, i.e., Believers are the way we are.

GROUP 1: Gratitude and Activities

HERE'S the first group, made up of Believers who feel gratitude but jump straight into activity, i.e, serving – Christian service. To this group, I'd repeat the very words of Jesus to busy-bee Martha in Luke 10:42, "*one thing is needful,*" and it is not the activity or myriads of activities you're involved in, at least not yet; for now, those are distractions. You need to choose the good part, and that good part is what is needful for you right now – it is necessary, and a prerequisite for even good, acceptable and lasting Christian service.

The good part I speak of is to spend quality time being a student of Jesus daily. Learning about Him, learning from Him, meditating (contemplating, reflecting) on all you're learning and practice modelling Jesus' character, even obeying His other instructions in your daily life and interactions with others before your Christian service officially begins. All these too you must continue in, even during your service when that time eventually comes. This is the part that must not be taken from you. It is a good part, something you must guard perpetually. Writing from experience, I know majority that find themselves in this group are victims of the distorted teachings in the Church lately, where there's so much emphasis on serving and not enough on starting, building and maintaining a personal relationship with God, with daily fellowship with God.

The leaders in these churches tell you that serving first and foremost is the way to go; and trusting them, you go that way. But alas! You get to discover it is the way of destruction, for too many people claiming to be Believers have backslidden in this manner. They jumped into the pool of activities too soon

and drown in it. Today, they are nowhere to be found. Observing the life of at least one of those who have fallen, I discovered this individual didn't even have enough knowledge of God or a deep bond with Him, just a lot of zeal coupled with talent and support from the Church and Christians worldwide. In the end, this person's empty zeal – even zeal with talent – proved not to be enough.

Am I saying that those who have known the Lord long and those who have a close bond with Him don't backslide? The answer is no. But you'd agree the chances of them completely falling away from the faith, in fact, the percentage from those from amongst them who fall from the faith, is not a large percentage. The chances are slim. Again I repeat, one thing is needful, choose the good part. Don't allow yourself to be rushed. Take your time – invest it in getting close to God. Start a relationship with Him, get to know Him so you can start having a positive regard for Him, and become deeply interested in Him.

Keep maintaining that relationship with God, and that positive regard will morph into a strong affection for Him, and a close bond with Him. Your roots then can go deep. Your love can burn bright. Your faith can endure; and then when it's time, God Himself will tell you what He would have you do, and even how you must go about it. That's His way. Please submit to it.

GROUP 2: Gratitude and Light Affection

THOSE in this group feel gratitude, then a wisp of affection; but it ends there. See, I use the word *wisp* to describe their affection because it's like a stray thought. It occurs to them at

least every now and then that God seems likable. They have admiration for Him but don't dwell long enough on these emotions. They don't explore them and allow their light affection to morph into genuine affection and then into love, not to talk of even devotion, let alone the activities that are associated with devotion.

Sadly, the pews of our churches are filled with such Christians! They show up on Sundays and sometimes Wednesdays for Church programmes. These Christians are trapped in spiritual infancy and end up being spectators all of their Christian life. We can't even advise them not to put works before loving God because they are content with sitting on the side-lines and being served.

But for how long? Not for long, I tell you, because soon enough they too will fall away from the fold. Growing/maturing as a Christian is vital to your remaining a Christian; and allowing these emotions – rather, exploring these emotions we speak of – is key to getting there. And I believe that although many fall into this group by way of their inaction, most are those of whose feelings have been misdirected. They feel gratitude to God but their real feelings of affection and love, even devotion, are being directed at their pastors or church leadership in general, not God. Ha! This is an epidemic in Nigeria to be precise.

I'm particular about the Church in Nigeria because I am very familiar. The epidemic is caused by the pastors/church leaders themselves who oftentimes deliberately present themselves as the mediator between God and man, all the while side-lining Jesus. They present themselves as the source of knowledge and all wisdom, having all the answers/

solutions, again side-lining Jesus. They remove Him from the centre, and replace Him with themselves; and doing this, they condition the congregation to see them (and not Jesus), to like them (not Jesus), to love them (and not Jesus), to be loyal to them (not to Jesus), to serve them (not Jesus)!

It's sickening really, and very detrimental to the spiritual growth and maturity of the congregation! Each and every one of them. The crop of Believers that come out of those churches are those that can't stand. They can't stand, not because anything's wrong with their feet, but because everything is wrong with their heart and its content. What God likes and what He will prefer are Christians that can stand, i.e., be deeply rooted in love and faith and be able to take a stand for Him, Christians whose spiritual growth is progressive, Christians who have their affections, love and devotions directed at the right Person – the person of Jesus.

For this preference of God to be a reality, it's important for pastors/church leaders to get out of the way, stop drawing attention to themselves, and start directing it at God. To stop being a crutch, help show people the way to God and how to stay with God, grow with God and stand for God! You're not to take on the role of Jesus. Remove the mask you're wearing and tell the congregation the truth. You're not Jesus, you're just a follower – or better put – a disciple called to serve like any other Christian, with your first role being leading others to the real Jesus (John 12:20-22).

Who would have thought that one called to serve in the office of a leader in the house of God would be an obstruction to the congregation having affections for God, loving God and even being devoted to Him? It sounds farfetched, but it is

the reality of one too many people. If you're one of those in this group, I must make it clear to you, liking your pastor is not the same as liking God. Loving your pastor, i.e. being interested in his/her affairs and taking pleasure from being in their company or in the churches where they preside isn't the same as loving God.

In fact, I make bold to say being loyal to your pastor's cause and supporting it is, many times, not the same as being devoted to God and serving Him. Ignorance, as from today, ceases to be a tenable excuse for you; it's now important for you to make a clear distinction between your pastor and God, and begin to channel that admiration, love and devotion first and foremost to God.

GROUP 3: Love but No Works

THIS group is deserving of a mention, for they make up a large percentage of the Christians in the Church today, especially the Church in Nigeria, and sadly so! Going by their claims, they are grateful to God, they like God. They profess a love for God. But upon close observation of their lives, certain things are missing that ought not to, especially in the life of someone who claims to love God. Among the things missing are virtues like devotion/loyalty to God, which is often characterized by works – our enthusiasm and involvement in God's righteous cause as revealed and commanded.

These Christians are self-saboteurs. They sabotage their own growth and maturity, even successfully excluding themselves from what God is doing and what He can and wants to do through them. Their inaction in refusing to put

in the effort in order to deepen their love for God and emerge in the devotion stage and all that it entails is not only obstructive to their growth and maturity as Christians, it is also destructive! Very destructive for these Christians eventually become victims of Satan's deliberate subversion!

A refusal to deepen your love for God makes for a weakened Christian, or don't you know? The deeper your love, the deeper your bond and roots – and I dare add, the more effective your service. Do you think such a person who painstakingly sows into their relationship with God, and their service to God: their growth, maturity and Christian service will easily be subverted in their course and become a prey for the adversary? No, no, no. That won't happen!

Beloved, if you fall into this group, it's time to stop self-sabotaging and stop being lazy. I'll leave you with Jesus' words in John 14:15, *"If ye love me, keep my commandments."* If indeed you love Jesus, prove it! Prove it by your efforts and actions. Talk is cheap. And when you start to serve, be mindful, you mustn't love works over God.

GROUP 4: Declining Love

AND finally, there's the group Jesus mentions directly in the message He sent to the Church of Ephesus. These ones have explored all four stages of emotions, but have become secretly enamoured with the activities associated with devotion. Jesus doesn't say the word "secretly" but I have added it because, let's be real, those who often get taken with these activities always appear to have their fondness for God, love for Him and bond with Him intact; we even believe love is their only motivation for their Christian service. But although the truth is often

hidden from us and even sometimes from those involved, nothing – absolutely nothing – is hidden from God who takes notice of everything.

When Jesus addresses this group, He introduces Himself in a very enigmatic/cryptic yet revelatory way (considering the entire message He is sending). He says He is the one that holds the seven stars in His right hand, and walks in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks and then straightaway mentions their works, which comprises their deeds and virtues, failures and successes; and we can list them out. Jesus Himself bears witness that these Believers are active workers in God's vineyard who labour, even children of God with the expressions of the Fruit of the Spirit; and they also possess a Spiritual gift. He said they are patient and can't seem to tolerate evil and the workers of evil (e.g., the Nicolaitans, a group with heretical teachings). They were not only discerning, but could test and detect false and lying spirits operational in those who claim to be apostles (sent ones) and are not. They were the patiently enduring kind too, patiently labouring in God's vineyard, without even quitting when the going gets tough. That speaks of their perseverance.

But then, after mentioning these good things, Jesus, in verse 4 introduces the word "*Nevertheless*," which means notwithstanding, in spite of that. "*Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love.*" That's like saying, "Beloved, in spite of your good list of achievements, both outwardly and inwardly, there is something I have against you." And if you fall into this category, you have to be concerned if Jesus says He had something against you, something He can't overlook,

something He mentions and something you must pay absolute attention to.

What is that thing Jesus mentions? He says it's about their first love. They had left their first love – causing it to remain now as only a trace of what once was. If you're in this category, and you have left yours too, or on the verge of leaving yours, now must take the warning of Jesus really seriously. These had left their first love, and it is evident because they weren't doing their first works anymore – something God is paying attention to and displeased about! To give it a more vivid imagery, Jesus likens this error to falling from a height!

What's this first love, and first works Jesus speaks about? To make this plain, and in order to affirm what we already know, let's first see the things Jesus previously mentions. Let's put them in categories, for instance:

- **Service:** And here we have – labouring to learn about real apostles, identify impostors, and calling them out, thereby raising awareness, putting them out of business and setting their captives free.
- **Fruit of the Spirit:** Long suffering (patience) and faith (faithfulness).
- **Spiritual Gift:** Discernment of spirits.

Did I get them all? Well, I hope I did. Anyway, the point I'm trying to make is that all of these qualities, as far as God is concerned, are secondary works. What that reveals to us is that Service, Fruit of the Spirit and even Spiritual gifts deposited and manifesting in us are all by-products of our first love and first works. Also note that the combination of first love and first works places the Believer in a lofty position before God, a position that makes us eligible and able to

receive and produce the aforementioned results, and be capable of even more, it seems.

It's important we know that Jesus isn't just speaking of love, as love for oneself or others; it's specifically the love (strong affection) for God that He is referring to, the type this group of Believers, felt at first – when they first believed. Do you remember when you first learnt about God's love, when you first became a Believer, how that love moved you to the point of repentance and of salvation and immense gratitude, and how that gratitude made you start paying God some attention, and affection began to grow in your heart for Him until it completely enamoured you? Do you remember how that affection began to deepen, creating in you more and more interest in the things of God: His word, His way, and His will, and how all of that so moved you to devoting time to personally be with God daily? Remember how you started sharing God's vision and feeling moved to join His righteous cause?

Well, let me state this categorically; it was that first love that you felt, that one, that made you spend your waking moments first talking to God before anyone else, that made you not go a day without reading the Bible, that made you spend different intervals of the day communicating with God, that made you not dare go to bed without first sharing some *gist* with Him about the day and your concerns, even hopes, for the next day! Yes, that first love – that strong intense affection!

I put it to you that it was that first love that led to all those first works that I've stated and that brought about the production of those by-products – Fruit of the Spirit and

Service. That first love and first works positioned you nicely to receive the Holy Spirit, who then produced His Fruit, and deposited spiritual gifts in you which you in turn use in your Christian service. Can you see why Jesus couldn't overlook the decline of that first love and the neglect of those first works?

Jesus wasn't being petty. He wasn't nit-picking. He was showing concern! The element of love that was declining, the (first) works being neglected were essential! For as long as they remain and are prioritized, then the by-products would surely emerge and even multiply. The decline of that kind of love on the other hand, and abandonment of those first works, mean the by-products will eventually lose their life-line; and in the end, even the Believer might end up being lost. I hope you get it.

Jesus likens the slow and steady decline of this first love and neglect of these first works to falling; and He wasn't wrong. Of course, He is always right. The fall might be gradual, but it's a fall nonetheless; and sooner rather than later, what wasn't obvious would become obvious that the person had fallen: first in their heart, and next in their actions, which will eventually include compromise. In the end, when face to face with God, despite the secondary works being on their record, this sort of Believer will be removed from those to spend eternity with God. That's not the expected end God has in mind for any of His children, believe me.

So what then is the remedy?

Jesus says it's simple. "*Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and **REPENT**, and do the first works!*"
OTHERWISE EXPECT SUDDEN JUDGMENT.

I know there's a teaching going round the churches peddled by messengers of Satan, and even misguided Believers, that we are to repent once and never again. What a damnable fallacy! I believe even your own conscience tells you something is wrong with that erroneous teaching. Believe me, if Jesus is talking to the Church, even to leaders in the Church, He still would say today, Repent! We must realize that Jesus means what He says because He only says what He means.

To repent is to feel and express regret for wrong done. But it doesn't end there. It also involves completely turning away from that wrong done (Proverb 28:13), and moving henceforth in the right direction that God is pointing one towards (Ezekiel 33:13-16). Particularly, to repent is to feel and express remorse for the error in your ways, and choosing the right way going forward.

What is this right way? Love God with a strong affection, not a trace amount of it; for this is the ideal standard. Jesus isn't interested in substandard love. He'll reject it. Let the love you feel for Him come before all others in intensity, but also in order. Let that love be the most important thing to you and let it move you to doing all of the right things all of the time; the right things being spending the first hours of your morning with Him, not going a day without communicating with Him, in prayer and in study of His word. Not even going to bed without spending time with Him.

Love for God also includes, not making any major decision without consulting Him, not disregarding His will concerning any matter, obeying Him always and rejoicing endlessly in His love. And when Satan wants to turn your

Christian service into an idol – a demigod of sort – you bluntly refuse, and won't let any other god take God's place.

Someone may ask, is it possible to serve God and not love God? Well, I believe after having read this far in this book, the answer is clear. It is indeed very possible to get ourselves involved in different activities even for the sake of God and not love God. Or, claim to love God still, but that love for Him not being the motivation for our service. That sort of service is not what pleases God. What pleases God more than our service is our love for Him, our fellowship with Him, our bond with Him. Leaving all those out and jumping to serve, or neglecting intimacy with God and being consumed with serving is like putting the cart before the horse; and we all know by now that our God is a God of order. So, let's learn the proper order and stick with it.

The proper order may not be taught and encouraged in many churches; but it must be followed by all God's true children – Believers and followers of Jesus. And this isn't a theory I came up with; in fact, it's not a new idea at all. Jesus Himself makes it clear that this is what He likes, this is in fact His preference – God's preference.

While not condemning or cancelling Christian service, the expression of the Fruit of the Spirit and the manifestation of Spiritual gifts – since all of those have their place and usefulness in the Church and our service in the world – God's preference is that we put at the forefront of everything else our immense and intense love for Him, that we do and continue in the first works that make it just as passionate as it was when we first believed. And this is not a one-time affair, it is to be

like that for all of our walk with God while we are alive and still breathing.

In case you're seeking ways to keep your love for God burning red instead of blue, the answer, I believe, we've already touched briefly, as it's revealed in the words of Jesus to the Church of Ephesus (Revelation 2:5). Remember how things were in the beginning of your relationship with God, the efforts you made. Those are the *works* you did. Just start doing them again and never stop.

Keep Your Love Burning

LET me share some more tips now, as we strive to keep the fire of our love burning.

- ***Practice Gratitude:*** And the way to do this is by intentionally thinking about the things God has done for you, what God is doing for you, and the good plans God has for your future even if they've not been revealed to you yet, and especially if they've been revealed to you. It's hard not to love and stay in love with someone whose good traits and acts you're constantly thinking about.

More Christians would have mastered this by now if we didn't live in such a fast paced world, and if our needs didn't seem so unending. Well, here's what I do, I intentionally slow myself down, and rather than obsess over what I need or what's not going right, I focus on what I have and remind myself God brings good out of bad too. It's not easy, but it's not impossible. I intentionally make gratitude a part of my day, morning, noon and night. This way I make it my culture to appreciate God always.

I wasn't always like that. In fact, I used to be very moody, still am sometimes, but not all the time anymore. Before, one thing going left would ruin my entire day; and if my day is ruined you can imagine how I'd react to God! It continued like that until I decided I needed to make a change. I didn't want to be that gloomy grumpy Christian again, and my relationship with God has benefited greatly from that singular decision. So, yes, practice gratitude by taking delight in your God. It will work wonders for your love for Him; that, among many other things.

- ***Keep an Open Line of Communication:*** How some Christians begin a day, go through a day, and even end a day without communicating with God surprises me. I couldn't survive it! Even when it appears I'm angry at Him, I'll still pour out my feelings to Him; and whether I like to admit it or not, I'm looking out for His response which, by the way, always comes even if it's not what I want to hear or when I want to hear it. It comes and hardly am I allowed to miss it.

What kind of healthy relationship survives without communication, I'll never know. I know God loves to hear from us, not only when we have needs but about every other thing we have going on, even difficult questions we need answers to. I also know that God responds. It's just that we miss it because most times we aren't even expecting a response or we haven't figured out how God speaks to us. From before I knew how God spoke to me, I was writing Him letters. If you've followed me a while, you likely saw that already in my first book, *Letters in My Green Bag*. Now that I know how God speaks to me, I'm even more encouraged to speak to Him.

Here's my advice, start with designating some time, begin each day communicating with God – invest in quality conversation; and make sure not to obsess over the time/length/duration of the conversation. Be consistent, and it will grow from there. He will in fact handle the rest! By this I mean He will let you know when He's responding and what that response is. Don't worry about it.

- ***Stay Constantly Learning about Him:*** The information about God that's in the Scriptures is inexhaustible. I have read the entire Bible at least once, but every time I read portions of it, I'm learning something new about God, something new that leaves me in awe! It's hard not to love someone who has your respect and who constantly leaves you in wonder!

We don't read our Bibles enough, I tell you. We read it sometimes to fulfil a duty, like another thing on our to-do list. And that's not good enough! We can't read the Bible just so we can appear knowledgeable in Church and while in the company of other Christians, and expect such casualness to affirm our love for God! Some of us even read it so we can minister to others. Surely, God is unimpressed! We ought to read the Bible because we are curious about God and interested in learning about Him.

Try reading the Scriptures just because you want to know more about God and nothing else, and wait to see what the Holy Spirit will show you from Scriptures you've read over and over. I assure you, you'll see wonders, and you'd never stop going back to see it. It's hard to fall out of love that way, or for your love to turn cold when you're constantly in awe.

- ***Make Memories with God:*** Before you think I'm reaching, let me explain. I'm talking of you finding a way to collate, so you can recall things that God does for you and with you. We humans forget these things too soon. For instance, you could take pictures of your miracles, you could keep a journal detailing your testimonies. Don't think memories with God is impossible just because you can't see Him or because you can't physically hang out with Him. It's possible because there are so many ways to make it happen if you're interested in doing it. I know personally how I've cried happy tears and how my heart has been filled with joy after I stumbled on a journal from the past that detailed my feelings and God's help in bringing me out of a dark mental space or dark situation. It's love that filled my heart towards God afterwards. You should try it.

- ***Be Clingy:*** Well, this is the last advice I'd give on the subject of maintaining love relationship with God – be clingy! Draw near and depend on God. Stop being so independent from God. Close the gap. Some people, Christians inclusive, hate the idea of needing anyone, even God. They won't say it out loud but everything they do and won't do proves this. They are the ones in control of their lives and are the ones that meet all their needs. They rely on no one, especially God, but themselves, their understanding and strength. It's sad!

I used to be one of those people. Overly independent, I didn't know what the help of God looked like or what true rest given as a gift from God felt like, until I got to the end of my rope and realized, I needed help! And when there wasn't anyone who could give me the help I so desperately needed, I turned to God. Then, slowly, I began to recognize what God's

help was like and what true rest felt like. I now know the difference between labouring – with the endless struggles it produces – and God’s rest. I’ve been there, clingy, and super clingy, ever since! And the truth I’ve since learned is, when you learn to depend on God emotionally, it transcends to other parts of your life. And once God’s help begins to arrive, it’s usually evident, and you can tell the difference between your past life of labours and your new life of rest in God.

When Jesus concludes His message to the Church of Ephesus, He says, “*He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith...*” He then mentions a reward - a gift, a fruit from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God. In plain words He is saying directly to me, to you: overcome the temptation of letting your first love for God decline through neglecting the first works, then you’d see that you’d live forever; an abundant life on earth will be yours, because you’re abiding in Him with love. And then when your life here on earth is over, you can expect to spend eternity with God.

Scriptural Reference: **Revelation 2:1-7.**

2

THE SECOND CALL: *Be Faithful Even unto Death*

WANT TO know one truth? Suffering is part of the Christian experience. But I didn't always know that. Have you always known that? When did you come to that understanding? Or rather, how?

Some of us have come to accept and even understand why suffering is part of the Christian experience. There's a large majority of Believers though who will never believe this, let alone try to understand why this is or even learn how God expects them to respond during difficult moments. Yet, accept it or not, suffering is still part of the Christian life one way or another.

In His sermon on the mount, Jesus makes clear that suffering is part of life. But He doesn't stop there, He goes further to imply that you can either suffer just because it is a part of life, or your suffering can have meaning. You can suffer because you're on the right side of life – the Lord's side! This is suffering just because you love the Lord and serve only Him. It all depends on our choice really; but regardless, suffering will come. It's left to us to decide why we are suffering.

In Jesus' sermon, He describes what suffering might look like for the Believer. In fact, another word that best describes it is persecution (Matthew 5:10-12). Those who are God's true children, while they remain on this side of eternity, are

going to be persecuted in different forms, e.g., physical harassment, injuries, grievances, verbal abuse, slander, imprisonment, and also spiritual attacks in diverse forms, and manifesting in various areas of their lives. And all of that will be because of our religious beliefs/stand!

But Jesus didn't just teach on the topic of suffering, His life exemplified it! He was persecuted! Reading about Jesus' life and ministry gives us a full imagery of what He was talking about. Our Lord and Saviour had to face physical harassment, confrontations, verbal abuse, slander, conspiracies, betrayal, an unjust arrest, unfair trial, physical beatings and eventually death on the cross; all He went through without breaking character or compromise.

Now if suffering was part of His life, why would it be any different for us? Don't we call Him our Master? Are we then greater than Him? If we share in His blessings, shouldn't we share in His suffering? The truth is, whether we like it or not, for as long as we bear His name, we will share in His suffering. His disciples learned this by experience; they too drank from the cup of suffering that He drank. And so will we. We won't be able to choose what we will suffer, in which area we will suffer, nor dictate how long we will suffer, even though we are allowed to pray about our sufferings.

It's easy to write about persecution, I know; but it is never an enjoyable process. Yet, God continues to allow us go through it. Why? Definitely not because He delights in seeing us suffer, but why then? Someone might still ask. In Jesus' teaching, the one on the mount, He tells those who are persecuted for righteousness sake that they are blessed! Amazing, isn't it? I know it's easy for us to assume that He said

that because of what they stood to get from God as consolation after they've been persecuted. But, I don't believe that's all. Before there's a mention of a reward, He tells them they are blessed, just after which He mentions persecution, as if to say they must consider themselves as those to be envied, not pitied!

Would you consider yourself one to be envied when you're going through hard times, facing challenges all-round? Well, Jesus' words reveal that your suffering, persecution are proofs you're in good company – the company of the prophets of old, those who loved God and proclaimed His will. Still, I believe that though Jesus doesn't say more than that, we all who have gone through and continue to go through persecution, and come out of suffering, know of the great work God does with it, even on the inside of us.

From God's perspective, suffering, even repeated suffering, is a tool. He allows it because He uses it as a way of working and strengthening our faith, building our patience or stamina, and even making us effective witnesses for Him. Sure the enemy picks on us for a totally different reason. Satan's temptations, persecution, vexations and annoyances are designed to separate us from God; but we are blessed if we allow God work in us during those times and prove to the enemy our qualities.

Before I go on, let me just write that I believe I know why some of us have come to completely reject the concept of suffering as part of the Christian experience. Again, it is because of the false teachings around. Too many so-called pastors teach their congregation that God cannot allow them suffer. Well, I hope by now you already know that God can,

and will allow you go through hardships, especially if you are to be transformed into Jesus' image. But don't be afraid.

While we can't pray for a problem-free life, we aren't prohibited from talking to God about our problems and seeking His wisdom and grace in handling our troubles and even deliverance from our oppressors as long as we know that when and how He chooses to answer are His prerogative. Now that we've covered the basics, let's delve into how God would like us to respond in suffering. It's all in Jesus' message to the Church in Smyrna.

Pass Mark for Smyrna

AFTER introducing Himself in a different (enigmatic yet revelatory) manner than He did in the first letter, calling Himself the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive, Jesus attests to the works of the Smyrna Believers. Let's take this to mean their Christian service, but also their character, especially in the face of tribulation. Jesus was aware they were facing some challenges, and He was taking note of how they were responding to it. Next, He mentions their poverty, which is a fancy way of describing needs. Yes, they had material and financial needs.

Beloved, poverty can be a form of persecution for the Believer. But then Jesus quickly adds that although the Smyrna Believers were physically impoverished, facing insufficiency, spiritually they were rich! This means they had spiritual blessings – again, contrary to popular teachings in most churches today. Not all blessings are physical and material, just some; definitely not all. And that you're physically in need of one thing or the other doesn't mean that

God doesn't love you, approve of you, favour you or that you aren't blessed.

Okay, so the Believers in this congregation, though loved and served God and had His approval, were facing tribulations, one of which was poverty; but that wasn't all. They were also subject to physical opposition – there were people claiming to be Jews (this could be taken to mean, by reason of their origin; they believed they were more superior and better affiliated with God, and were inclined to oppose the Church, i.e., the Believers). These Jews, though claimed to be one with God, Jesus reveals that they were really under Satan's influence – he was the one moving them to act – and their gathering was unto him even if it was unknown to them.

Next, Jesus says that despite all of these things that the Christians in this congregation were already going through, the devil wasn't going to relent; he had another set of attacks prepared for them. Can you imagine, Jesus sending you information that despite all the hardships you've faced and even currently facing, there's more to come! That's definitely not what we'd like to hear, right? Well, even though they wouldn't have liked the news, Jesus shared the latest information. He even goes on to describe to them the kind of persecution some of them are about to face – arrest which will surely end up in imprisonment/confinement, and will cause them distress (pain that will affect the body and the mind)! They could either see it as suffering, which it really is, or see it through God's lens as persecution for righteousness' sake, or better still, as trial – a test that God was permitting for the devil was trying to see what stuff they were really made of; and they in turn must be ready to give him a show.

Before we go any further, there's something we must absolutely not miss from Jesus' words; it is that a cycle of suffering/persecution, i.e., simultaneous attacks are not strange to the Believer; it's not an odd occurrence, especially in the life of a true child of God (2 Timothy 3:12). So, it's a general experience; once we see persecution and hardship that way, they lose their ability to torment, derail and defeat us. Too many of us, when we find ourselves in seasons of simultaneous attacks immediately think we are cursed or something; meanwhile, that's not always the case.

Others think they've fallen out of favour with God. Well, as you can see, that's not always the case either, there are instances like this very one with the Believers in Smyrna where being on the right side, the Lord's side, is the very reason you're being targeted. And I also hope this situation with the Believers in Smyrna teaches us to stop looking down on Christians who're in this very season in their Christian walk. It won't be a good thing for you if you're the reason another Christian stumbles during their time of hardships. Doing so exposes you to God's judgment.

Note also, in Jesus' message to the Believers in Smyrna, He reveals how He would like them to respond to their suffering/persecution. And, if we take His command/advice, it would do us a world of good. First He commands:

“Do Not Fear”

JESUS tells them they were to fear none of those things which they shall suffer. He was referring to their upcoming suffering/persecution! Why? It's because He knows that fear is a natural, mental and emotional response to suffering. It really is. In

other words, Jesus was commanding them to do something different from their natural inclination, from what the enemy expects. The enemy expects you to be afraid, but I, Jesus says, expect you not to be afraid. Do the opposite of fear and be strong and courageous; and don't panic, either because you're anticipating or have become aware of this coming event – the imprisonment – or because you're concerned about how you will fare. Jesus wasn't just speaking to the Believers back then; He is speaking to every Believer even now. I'm talking about you and me.

Did you know that so many Believers are afraid of suffering, and this fear has led many to attempt to avoid it or even shorten it? And in their bid to avoid or shorten it they've found themselves in deep compromise? And some have even fallen completely from the faith! What loss! But this can't be news to you! I tell you, compromise, even backsliding due to suffering or hardship is common phenomenon among Believers.

Too many times I have come across cases of rags-to-riches pastors, and Believer too who don't hold back when sharing their days of lack, but then jump to how "God" has blessed them with all material blessings; they conveniently leave out the in-betweens because we mustn't know that. For, in the in-betweens lies the compromise story. What they did to avoid suffering or shorten its length, and what they are currently doing to continue to avoid it. It is this in-between that God sometimes reveals to certain people privately, and at other times to the public, when He allows these pastors and Believers to be exposed through their involvement in various scandalous activities. Let's keep in mind that there's nothing that's hidden that will not be revealed.

Like I earlier mentioned, at the root of compromise and sin is fear! Well, at least for most. There are others who are covetous, just plain greedy and impatient. The concept of godliness with contentment, even waiting on God's timing is completely foreign to them. That must not be you and me. The takeaway here is that fear, even covetousness, greed and impatience lead one, many times, to compromise, and compromise is sin. And we know that "*the wages of sin is death.*" Imagine avoiding and shortening earthly suffering only to end up in hell where the suffering can't be avoided nor shortened! Which is worse? Let's choose correctly, please.

Someone might say, but there are Believers who God really took from rags to riches. And yes, I agree. God does bless His children materially, and I used money as an example because it has been, not just as a god, but also a tool in the hands of the enemy to get many to fall away from the faith. There's also the case of unemployment. For others it is a sick child thrown into the mix, with not enough money for medical expenses let alone feeding. What then? Many such scenarios are thrown up as excuses for fear, and compromise.

When we entertain fear/panic, we're going to go into flight mode sooner than later; by this I mean our spirit will be overpowered by fright, and the next thing we know is taking the enemy's suggestion on how to get out of that situation, as they say, to help ourselves. We're listening to and taking advice from the wrong people, re-inviting toxic people back into our lives, taking handouts from people we ought not to, engaging in that immoral act one more time, as if God suddenly has become unable to handle the situations we face.

I'm not saying act like the particular situation isn't real; it's real quite all right. Admit it loud and clear, but so is God. God is real and so is His power and willingness to help you. Instead of taking in the magnified visuals of the situation that the enemy is feeding you so you'll take his horrible suggestions as the way out, you should magnify your God and keep your peace.

Being at peace keeps you in a better frame of mind to speak to God and receive help from Him. Peace in itself is a posture of faith. And surely we know that our faith is able to produce many miracles! Anyway, the next thing Jesus mentions after the command not to fear is that there's an expiration date to their suffering/persecution.

- ***There Is an End:*** Jesus tells the Smyrna Church that their tribulation/suffering/persecution is for just ten days; in other words, that's how long their suffering would last! Now, let's not take this to mean that our afflictions would be for ten days; instead, let's take this to mean that there's an expiration date for the challenges we go through. We might not know them the way it was revealed to the Church in Smyrna, but we can be assured of it nonetheless.

In the Smyrna case, God knew their suffering/persecution, even the upcoming one and the duration/expiration date, and was watching to make sure it won't exceed that limit. This also means we aren't ever alone/abandoned when we are going through sufferings/persecutions. Jesus has already set a time limit to it. Will this knowledge be able to keep you from compromise during the times of suffering? I hope so. Yet, I must add that for many, the suffering doesn't end in this lifetime but in eternity.

Regardless, it ends at some point, right? What's important is, in all cases, there's an end.

But why was Jesus saying all these things? Why does God reveal these kind of information, the awareness to suffering and updates of suffering, even the type of suffering? I don't believe it is to overwhelm us with facts and cause us to fear/panic. I believe it is for at least two reasons. The first is:

- ***To Prepare Us:*** To prepare is to make ready before hand. And preparation is necessary because some of us are simply delusional. We are not in touch with reality. We think that being Christian means our life is a walk in the park, a bed of roses. These pieces of information from God creates awareness for us, that in this world we are as sheep in the midst of wolves! Please let that imagery sink in. It also brings to the forefront of our minds that those of us who are simply delusional will most likely not have a good grip on our feelings/emotions as much as we like to think we do, and we'll need the awareness in order to prepare ourselves beforehand; else, our bravado might just end on our lips when we are faced with challenges.

Do you know any dream-like Christian? Or are you one yourself? Well, I used to be one. I always had my head up in a cloud, and indeed thought I was brave until I discovered through a series of events that life is not a dream – it is warfare! Ephesians 6:12 couldn't have that more clear. I immediately realized the earlier I woke up the better!

Thereafter, no one taught me to wake up; the situations I faced forced me to wake up, and begin to really see myself as unprepared! My mum used to say to me for a long time, "Modupe, you're the most naive person I know." She wasn't

wrong. Believe me when I write this, that being delusional, being ignorant, being unprepared is too costly; it makes you an easy prey. And being a prey isn't God's vision for you. In fact, it kind of excludes you from God's big plan for the Church and the world.

In contrast, being aware/awake, being knowledgeable or being prepared positions you to be a victor, to be able to stand and take a stand, to be useful and effective. Now that's God's plan for your life. I hope you get it. Does my mum still call me naive? I haven't heard her describe me this way a while; but if she does I won't take offence. I'd go to God and ask Him to teach me the things I need to know.

So, do you think you have a good grip on reality? Do you think you can stand to be blessed by means of persecution? If you don't, it's nothing to be ashamed of. It just means you have some learning and preparing to do. And even if you think you do have a good grip on reality, there's still so much learning and preparing to do; and Jesus is always a willing Teacher. Through His Holy Spirit He will show you the things you need to know and even help you remember them should you forget. But, that's not all. He also helps us in our weakness, and even prayers. Now, here's the second reason God wants us aware of suffering as necessary experience of our Christian life.

- ***Settle Things in Our Hearts:*** Settle what? To settle something in your heart is to make up your mind about something. So God makes us aware of suffering, even goes the extra mile to reveal to us most times when persecution is ahead for us, whilst not leaving out details of it. Well, in such a case what we settle in our hearts is what we are not going to

do when a said persecution begins to happen. The time God informs us about the said event and when it does actually take place affords us time to not only prepare ourselves but also to settle many things in our hearts – the things we will not do.

When Jesus uses this term in Luke 21:10-19, He is speaking to His disciples, first foretelling wars and natural disasters, even saying before those things will be, their persecutions which God intended to permit and use, as an opportunity for them to bear witness. Next He commands them to settle it in their hearts, not to prepare a verbal defence for themselves, because He already has help prepared for them. He promised to give them a mouth and wisdom to speak. They could go ahead and trust God for that, even expect it.

So, that's one thing we too must settle in our hearts, that we won't take on the role of saviour/hero – taking matters into our own hands in order that we might save ourselves; for God will send us help, the right help. We can go ahead and trust God for it, even expect it. He doesn't plan to abandon us during our times of suffering/persecution. He'll never leave us helpless or comfortless.

Let's revert to the upcoming persecution of the Church in Smyrna, with the newly released information, what they ought to settle in their hearts; and we too by extension, especially in light of all these teachings on suffering/persecution should be that suffering/persecution are what they are, and we have to face them for righteousness' sake, for Jesus' name. They aren't going away – and are imminent! Those Believers in Smyrna, as well as we, are not to try by reason of compromise to avoid or shorten the coming

persecutions and sufferings. We are commanded, and are expected to simply go through when faced with them – all the while expecting God’s presence in the midst of our suffering. We’re to make the most of our experiences, and expect to come out on top.

So, Jesus commands and expects them not to fear the persecution ahead; yet, He told them about it, even in details, in order to prepare them (mentally and emotionally). He did so also to give them ample time to settle some things in their hearts. But there was one more command He gave them, one more command He is giving you and me too: He expects us all to be faithful unto death.

“Be Thou Faithful”

TO be faithful is to be loyal. Jesus was demanding their loyalty. Jesus is demanding our loyalty too, even during suffering/persecution. Does it surprise you that God has expectations of you, even this kind? If children are allowed to have expectations of their parents, then parents equally should be allowed to have expectations of their children, right?

We’re allowed to ask God for things. God too is allowed to make demands of us. And one of His demands is our loyalty. He demands our loyalty even in the face of looming persecution and when persecution takes place. He demands our loyalty even in the face of persecution that can/will lead to death. Does this scare you? It’s okay to admit it – it’s scary!

Persecution because of our beliefs is one thing, dying for our beliefs is another ball game altogether, right? If there was a way to go to heaven without dying, we’ll take it. I know the rapture is a way; but some of us will still have to die first. And

some of us will die because of our beliefs. Are we ready for this? People who aren't Christians die for their beliefs too, so it's not particularly strange to hear that even this is required of us Christians. But even though more and more non-believers are ready to die for their cause, not many Christians are prepared to die for Christ's sake. But I'm getting way ahead of myself. I should have started with not many Christians are going to remain loyal in the face of persecution; dying for the cause hasn't even crossed their minds. They aren't prepared nor will go through with it.

As I write this, I ask myself too, Am I ready to stay loyal in the face of persecution? Or will I turn away as soon as things get hard and threats are made to my life? I'll give God my answer and trust Him to help me stay true when the time comes. You see, Jesus isn't just asking for loyalty to the faith, and to God's righteous cause because He could, what He is really asking is that we be prepared to follow His example, and do so till the very end, for He did it first.

Jesus faced persecution. He endured suffering, despising the shame that came with it. He understood suffering was part of God's will for His life, even suffering till the point of death; and He was submitted to it. He willingly submitted to it and chose to stand by God's will till the very end. There was no denouncing of His relationship with God or retracting His identity and His teachings. He stood by what He believed and all He said – complete loyalty to God, unwavering, no compromise at all! This is what He wants us to emulate – His loyalty.

This is what His disciples emulated as well, with the exception of Judas Iscariot, of course, and temporarily Peter.

But in the end, the disciples, now including Peter, not leaving out Paul, were loyal, loyal in the face of persecution and death, loyal to the very end; most if not all of them were not only persecuted for their faith but died for their beliefs! You know what all these men had in common? Yes, I know they were loyal, but what you must absolutely not lose sight of is that not only were they loyal, they were used by God. The exploits they did are still valued by the Church till date!

What does that tell us? It tells us that Believers who are loyal to God are used by God. Whether they are aware of it or not, God uses them, whether it's in this lifetime or after their demise. Loyal people, loyal Christians, are a great asset to the Church and useful vessels in God's plans for the Church. You and I must be part of that number. I hope you agree. If you agree that means you're willing to be like Jesus. It means you won't wait till a big thing happens, e.g. a major persecution before you display your loyalty; but that from little things and everyday occurrences, you will begin to prove to God and the world whose side you're really on. Because, many times, it is in small things that we know the contents of one's heart – if one will be loyal or not when a major situation/persecution happens.

Will you lie because the truth will lead to punishment? Will you steal because not stealing means hunger for one more night? Will you be ashamed to say you're a Christian because you don't want to keep being left out, remain unemployed, single, homeless and broke? Would you share the gospel among your peers even though you know they will shame you for it? If they turn on you will you denounce the faith or continually take a stand? Are you willing to even go

against your parents' beliefs, even lose their financial support in order to do something God absolutely has commanded that you must do with your life? You know, even the little things are used by the enemy to prove whether we are indeed loyal or not. Also, the little things prove to God whether we are indeed loyal to Him or not.

Anyway, I can't in good faith round off on this call to faithfulness/loyalty without touching on the subject of blind loyalty. You see, while many Christians aren't prepared to be loyal to God in the face of persecution and even death, many are however prepared to be loyal to their pastors even when it costs them something, or even their own lives.

Beloved, this is an anomaly! You must take that veil off your eyes at once, and begin to see again. You've spent too long in the dark; come out of that prison you've been locked in. The danger of staying there is spiritual death. It could be physical death too.

When Jesus addressed the Believers in Smyrna, He promised a reward – a crown of life to those who were loyal to Him – to the Christian faith, in the face of persecution and even till the point of death, not to those who were loyal first and foremost and only to their pastors/church leaders! This blind loyalty thing is another epidemic in some churches in Nigeria that must be addressed and stopped altogether. Yes, you can honour your pastors, but your worship must be reserved for God, your loyalty, even your blind loyalty despite persecution, and till the point of death must be reserved for God and Him only!

There is no good reward for worshiping your pastor, for being blindly loyal to your pastor despite persecution and

even till death whether he/she seems to be doing good or not. You are called to be faithful/loyal to God. So, please, let's retrace our steps and align with God's will. Failure to retrace our steps, like I earlier stated, will lead to death, not just the first ones as in spiritual death and physical death, but a second one that Jesus speaks of.

You see, while those who are martyred for Christ's sake are resurrected and allowed to spend eternity with Him, those who love their lives, refuse to endure persecution, and even refuse to remain faithful/loyal to the point of death, including those who blindly follow and remain loyal to their pastors will die, not just a first death (spiritually and physically) on earth, but a second death too; and those in the second death are to be separated from God eternally.

Scriptural Reference: Revelation 2:8-11.

3

THE THIRD CALL: *Be Separate from The World*

HOW MANY times have you heard Christians say, “We’re not of this world!” And how many times have you echoed these very words, “I’m not of this world!” Did you know (recognize, understand) what you are declaring? Well, let’s unpack that.

The Call for Separation

IN John 17:16, Jesus while praying to God the Father for His disciples said these exact words: “*They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.*” Now, it’s important you do not miss the obvious here, that Jesus is declaring that He and His disciples have something in common, their collective are out of this world! Lol! I don’t mean they are from mars or some out-of-earthly place, but that although they were born into this world as babes, and even though they grew up in this world with its various customs, they had become separate, distinctly different by not adapting to the world’s custom.

So when as a Believer you declare that you are not of this world, it means you’re affiliated with Christ, you belong in His circle, though you were born in this world, grew up here, and you’re nothing like the people who live here. You’re separate from them, different from them – thinking nothing like them neither adopting their lifestyle. And it’s not hidden; it’s pretty obvious when people observe you, spend time with

you and make the comparison between you and the peoples of the world. But talk is cheap, isn't it? Have you been making that declaration just because it's what everyone is saying, or have you been living its truth?

You see, Scripture has many ways of describing the world where we live, and one of my favourite description, even if it was originally used in a different context, is this: the world where we live is where Satan's seat is. That's a vivid imagery, wouldn't you agree? Imagine Satan looking for the mid-point of the earth and placing a special chair there for himself and sitting there. What does that tell you?

I'll tell you what that means to me; it means that this world is where Satan exercises his authority, that his influence is prevalent here, and that in this world it is his way that's generally or widely accepted, practiced, or favoured. And what is Satan's way like? Simple: everything that isn't God's way. For example, the works of the flesh, e.g. adultery, fornication, uncleanness (morally and spiritually impure), lasciviousness (sexual lust), idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance (i.e. not being in harmony), emulations (i.e. envious rivalry), wrath, strife, seditions (i.e. resistance to lawful authority), heresies (i.e. false teachings), envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings (e.g., wild partying), desiring vain glory, provoking one another etc.

But that's not all; there are more. For instance, loving oneself (a little too much), being covetous, boastful, proud, blasphemous, disobedient, unthankful, unholy, perverse (e.g., practicing bestiality, homosexuality, incest); then truce-breaking, false accusations, incontinence (i.e., excess, lack of moderation), fierceness as opposed to gentleness, despising

good, being a traitor, being heady, high mindedness, loving pleasure – seeking thrills (e.g., drug use), gluttony etc.

Take a second – slow look – at that long list that doesn't even convey all of Satan's ways. Do you see anything in there you're still clinging to and practicing while claiming to be Christian? If you do, please keep reading.

The first step we take to be separate and to be different is to denounce and renounce the world, and accept Christ as our Saviour, and Lord, right? Then we become part of God's family and start a new life, right? And to begin to live this new life, something is required of us, that we are committed to completely unlearning the ways of the world, which are Satan's, and begin to learn and relearn God's ways; but not just learn them, we also begin to practice them – Jesus models all of this perfectly for us during His public ministry. You can read all about it in Scripture.

The question now is this, If all of these things I have mentioned aren't news, why then do we have a rise and continual rise in Christians who aren't completely detached from the ways of the world? Why are there more and more Christians with questionable conduct?

Even though I run the risk of sounding like a broken record, I will still make reference to the Church in Nigeria. The first reason for the decrease in the number of Christians with Christian virtues and conduct is that there are not enough teachings on the subject in churches, and not enough emphasis is placed on living out these teachings. I won't even go into what teachings are repeated over and over on Sundays, Wednesdays and even during special programmes and the ones emphasis are laid. But if I mention it being generally

about gains, I'm sure no one will dispute it. It's always about how we can maximize our relationship with God in order to receive our desires, and hardly ever about how we can maximize our relationship with God in order to become completely converted and transformed – from the inside-out!

Do we wonder why most Christians are the way they are? Why won't they be that way when the people God raised to instruct them in His will are completely carried away with teaching what the congregation would like to hear, and what will make them keep coming back. God forbid they offend the congregation by teaching what God wants them to really learn. And for those pastors, how will they teach what God desires when it is not of priority, even in their lives. I don't expect a pastor who lacks Christian conduct to begin to teach it; and even if he/she teaches it, I don't expect the congregation to take such a pastor seriously. It's a mess, one that will continue to exist, making us a stench, a pretentious, unserious and a not very useful bunch before God if we don't do something about it, starting now.

Another reason for the decline in the number of Christians with Christian virtues and conduct is plain laziness – unwillingness to put in the work, whether it's to read up on Christian conduct as it is readily available in Scriptures, even via Jesus' example, or it's to put into practice what they've learned. I want to shout it from the roof top that being a Christian doesn't mean you get to fold your hands and do nothing, but get transformed nonetheless.

God is a miracle worker, not a magician; and many times He involves us in one way or the other in the miracles He works for us, especially when it comes to our transformation.

Our full cooperation with the Holy Spirit is required, and we express it in being willing to learn God's ways and putting what we've learned into practice. It requires commitment and intentionality. There's no short cut! For as long as we do nothing, we get nothing, at least as much as it concerns being a Christian with Christian virtues and conduct.

Here's another reason; this one too is the fault of pastors and leaders in the Church, some false, some misguided. These are the people who teach the Lord's congregation a distorted interpretation of God's grace. From my own experience, I have read and heard so many teachings on grace that if followed will make me act exactly like the peoples of the world. There would be no distinction between me and them at all. It's as if Apostle Paul didn't state categorically that we can't continue in sin that grace may abound, that if we claim to be truly dead to sin how then can we continue to live in it? (Romans 6:14-15)

Let me state clearly, practicing Satan's ways habitually and hiding under the umbrella of Christianity, while shouting Grace! Grace! Grace! doesn't make any sense; and it's unacceptable in God's sight and among God's true children; and it won't exempt you from God's discipline, you know.

Beloved, again I repeat Apostle Paul's words (paraphrased): Even if there are no laws in the world or even in Scriptures concerning certain things, even if some pastors and church leaders encourage you to do certain things, pay attention to what you're about to read next; not all of these things are advisable. And why? It's because they will lead you away from any form of improvement in all things godly and good. And the result will be that you'd end up with a stunted

spiritual growth, left with no real visible and permanent transformation (1 Corinthians 10:23).

Let me remind you again why it is absolutely necessary for us who claim to be Christians to have things in common with Christ – like our separation from the world, our virtues and our conduct. Aside from the obvious reason which is that it signifies our affiliation with Christ, another reason is that it makes us fit for the Master's use.

Did you know that there's an alarming increase in the number of Christians who are involved in scandals? I mean that are really involved in scandals, not because someone was feeling mean and got them tangled up in a web of lies, but that these Christians were actively involved in the things they're accused of? If you're not aware, then, perhaps, you live under a rock; because every other day more and more Christians get added to the number, and you know what that means, that even though they ought to be witnesses unto the Lord, and the Lord has even given them special abilities and special messages for the Church and the world at large, they become less and less credible witnesses.

People wonder why they should pay them any mind when these ones didn't pay any attention to their own lives, their own flesh, their own impulses, emotions and desires. Imagine that! And no one can fault them for thinking and acting this way towards these Christians and their messages, or can you? This is a wake-up call for us to pay attention to our lives and not disqualify ourselves by reason of our action and inaction!

Still on the topic of being separate from the world, let's take a deep dive into Jesus' message to the Church in Pergamos.

Never Condone Worldly Ways

WHEN addressing the Church in Pergamos and its leadership, Jesus introduces Himself distinctively as one with the sharp sword with two edges – as always, an enigmatic yet revelatory revelation of Himself, considering the message He delivers.

You see, according to Jesus' observations, the Pergamos Church had some good works on their record despite its location, being particularly under Satan's heavy influence, and the people in that area practicing Satan's ways in different forms and degrees. It was an area with high demonic presence and activity, an enabling environment for all manner of evils. The commendation of this Church is a good sign, right – being able to do good works in spite of opposing satanic presence and activities.

In fact, this congregation kept on being Christian in identity and practice, even in witnessing, despite the martyrdom of Antipas who was one of them, and despite continued threats of martyrdom on the rest of them. Yet, Jesus had a few things against them, which, depending on the spiritual state of who is reading, could be something He has against you too, or will soon have against you; in which case, you will do well to pay attention to His words as well.

He said in the Church in Pergamos, and among the Believers there, were those that were adherents of a strange doctrine He calls doctrine of Balaam; and by practicing this strange doctrine those involved were not only defiling themselves, but posing a stumbling block for others in the congregation. What that means is that they themselves were defiled by reason of their belief and practice, and were

influencing others negatively as well to follow their example, leading to their defilement as well. Some of the things they were involved in were specifically eating foods sacrificed to idols (idolatry) and committing fornication.

Jesus also mentions that in the Church in Pergamos and among the Believers there were adherents of another false doctrine – the doctrine of the Nicolaitans. This is best understood as false teachings associated with worldly conduct – a doctrine Jesus particularly hates. Doesn't all you've read describe the Church today, especially the Church in Nigeria, especially the youth? Does this describe you?

Belonging to a local assembly, claiming to be Christian but entertaining false doctrines, defiled by your continual adherence and practice of the worldly ways they encourage, and defiling other Believers directly when you offer them your advice/suggestions rooted in false wisdom, and indirectly when you don't say a word but they follow your example regardless.

You do know that you can defile others even if you don't actively encourage them to copy your ways? Ever heard of the saying, "We are the Bibles people read"? Someone's always watching; sometimes it's someone that's impressionable, and if you're not doing the right thing all of the time you run the risk of indirectly telling and teaching them that what you're doing is the right way to go. They practice what you do and end up being defiled. And you earn yourself the title of stumbling block, a title you will be sharing with Satan himself.

Jesus' message to the Church in Pergamos affirms that the infiltration of false doctrine in the Church is a reason for the

steady decline of Christians with godly virtues and conduct; but that's not all. It also challenges us to consider the impact and dangers of false/mixed teachings which encourage the practice of Satan's ways. There's also the dangers of wrong association. Let's look into these topics briefly.

1. Looming Danger of Satan's Ways

THIS heading alone should make it clear to us that there is something ahead for those who continue to claim to be Christians without being separate from the world and abstaining from its teachings and practices. And this thing ahead is not positive in any way, shape or form. Your defilement will end in sudden judgment if you don't self-check and desist!

Anyone who professes to be a Christian and yet remains a part of the world – by this I mean being conformed to the world and adapting to its customs, including indulging the flesh – is neck deep in self-deceit. Do you know that self-deceit is a tool that Satan has continually used to defeat Christians; making them fit for God's punishment and unfit for God's use, both older and sadly younger generation Christians?

Self-deceit in this context means despite carnal indulgence, even continual indulgence in sin, the faltering yet professing Christian is fully persuaded he/she is not a sinner, and in right standing with God! Because of this, there's no repentance, no realignment. Well, if you fall in this category, let me make it plain to you; even if you profess to be Christian, or claim to love and serve God; even if you've suffered for righteousness sake and for Christ's name in the

past or in the present, even if we always find you among Believers, friend, you're a sinner. You're defiled. You need saving. You need to be cleansed. And if you don't take the next step towards realignment, which is repentance, you'll not only remain defiled, you'll be judged sooner rather than later by Jesus Himself.

Nothing bothers me more than a Christian in denial of their true spiritual state!

How does one help them?

Well, we can begin by praying for them and hope they receive their sight back; because, if they can't see themselves for what they truly are, which is that they are sinners, they won't see their need for a change and a Saviour. Do you know any of such Christians, or are you one of them? Have you become so spiritually blind and numb, and nobody can tell you anything? Do you only listen to the lies of the devil? No, Satan does not have to show up in front of you directly; he wears a disguise, and comes as different people in your life who continue to praise you, bestow you with titles, ask you to pray for them/with them, even teach them God's word. They encourage you, even when you know you're far gone in indulging your flesh – in various ways and in different degrees.

I repeat, self-deceit is serious opposition to repentance. You can be sure the enemy of your soul is the one opposing you so fiercely. A man/woman must see themselves for what they truly are; this is a prerequisite for repentance, genuine conversion and realignment. Do you really see yourself? I don't mean the façade you wear before others, keeping up appearances. I mean, do you really see yourself through the eye of God?

Again, I repeat, if you refuse to see yourself in your true spiritual state, not only will you continue to defile yourself, but according to Jesus' warning to the Church in Pergamos, you're bound to receive sudden judgment from Him. Having God fighting you is definitely not something anyone would enjoy experiencing.

To avoid this looming danger, the way out is to repent. We've already gone through the definition of that word; but to elaborate further, especially in this context, to repent means not only confessing your sins before God and asking for His forgiveness but even more, to actively and deliberately separate yourself from the world and its ways. Then you begin to learn the ways of God and practice Christian conduct. This isn't always an enjoyable thing; but every true child of God knows that following Jesus is costly. Have you begun following? Then it has cost you something, right? Nothing at all? That's a first, and a doubtful first.

One price we all pay is separating ourselves from all things, even people and ambitions that will deter us from this new life in Christ and our usefulness to Him. Until you separate from worldliness – unholy worldly practices – there is bound to be struggle between the Spirit of God in you, and the flesh, which particularly enjoys the ways of the world. But our spirit will remain victorious if pleasing God is our motivation for taming the flesh.

2. The Danger of Wrong Association

EVER read about Balaam? My other book, *Curses, Causes and Clauses* could help you understand this odd soothsayer who some erroneously call a prophet of God. Of course, he was a

false prophet hired by Balak, king of Moab, to curse Israel, God's people. The story of his repugnant covetousness, told across three chapters in Numbers (22-24), ends in failure as God didn't permit him to curse Israel. But Balaam didn't stop there.

In Numbers 25:1-9, and 31:16, the Scripture reveals that Balaam had discovered how he could "curse" Israel indirectly, by leading them to sin. He taught Israel's enemies a strategy to introduce idolatry and fornication into the camp of the Israelites, including leading them to eat food sacrificed to idols. The Israelite men unwittingly embraced the wrong association with the Moabitish and Midianitish strangers (women) that infiltrated their camp, accepted their deceitful invitations and fell prey to their devious scheme. The result was a plague that claimed twenty-four thousand lives!

Well, I went through the process of recounting those events so we can see the dangers of associating with the people of the world, even those who claim to be Believers but are practicing the ways of the world. The men of Israel began to indulge in sin because they associated with the women of Moab/Midian. They accepted invitations to their festivals/worship of idols (however disguised with tuneful songs and rhythmic dancing). The Israelites who were people of God, in time became idolaters, even fornicators! It didn't end well.

The account in Revelation shows that all, not just some of the Believers in the Church of Pergamos, were at similar risk too, because, in their company were people who were practicing the strange doctrine of Balaam (that and the false doctrine of the Nicolaitans), should they all as some were already get entangled or associated with them, those

corrupters were bound to be a snare to them. They were not only going to defile them, but were going to make them as fit for God's judgment as the corrupters already were. It was now up to the yet undefiled Believers what they were going to do in order to avoid being defiled, or be fated for sudden judgment. That's just as it is now up to us, Christians in general, especially Church youth in Nigeria. If we are God's true children, we must decide what we are going to do in order to avoid defilement and escape impending judgment.

Here's my advice, especially when among Believers. Stop idolizing people. I mean, make no one, no Christian, no pastor/leader in the Church, regardless of their status, knowledge, talents or accomplishments, your role model. Admire people, respect people, honour people, but not in excess. Don't make them your role model because if you do, you put yourself at risk – as you're likely to trust them, even blindly, and then obey/ imitate them, even in their sins!

As a Christian, your only role model is Jesus. He is the author and finisher of our faith, our perfect example. By worshipping Him, trusting Him blindly, following in His footsteps, obeying Him continually, you can never go wrong. You can't miss your way following Jesus. You certainly can't be defiled nor fated for judgment as a true follower of Jesus. Many of these people you're looking up to are terribly flawed, with most lounging in sin. They aren't imitating Christ. Following them is like the blind leading the blind. You will both end up in a ditch – which is hell really.

Another piece of advice is this: when among Believers, stop being so quick to connect with people. I will never understand why so many Believers do this. Don't we know

that just because someone says they are Christians doesn't mean they are? Without testing their spirit, we just go ahead and believe them hook, line and sinker; then unsuspectingly join ourselves with them. Why do we do this? Aren't we aware of the rise of false Prophets and the spread of false doctrine? Don't we know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?

These corrupters, once they are close to us, are very likely to influence us, especially if they are successful in one thing or another – we naively begin to see them as worthy of emulation, people we ought to pay attention and receive advice from. And when they influence us negatively, we too in turn begin to influence others negatively. That's how the defilement spreads.

Let's break out of this cycle by not being quick to connect and form bonds so we won't be led into sin, endorse sinners and unknowingly become tool for leading others to sin. Take your time to pray, test spirits and confirm teachings like the Bereans (Acts 17:11)!

Another piece of advice on the matter is this: take heed unto yourself, especially when among revealed sinners in the congregation. What I mean by this is, pay attention to your life – Pay serious attention to your spiritual life. I know one too many Christians enamoured in the lives of others. I know one too many Christians like this because I used to be one of them. I blame this behaviour of mine on my empathetic nature, I want to help my “neighbour,” and somehow, I'm sucked in into their lives, crying more than the bereaved while neglecting my own affairs.

You see, the danger with that is the more attention you pay them, these professing Christians you're trying to save

who are many times comfortable in their sin, the more susceptible you are to losing your own way. Beloved, it is those who stand well that should attempt to help pull someone else up from the mud/pit. Pay serious attention to your spiritual wellbeing.

Am I saying there's something wrong with associating with those who are struggling or have fallen? No, that's not what I'm saying, what I'm saying is, it's dangerous. Two truths can exist. Tread carefully. Don't get too carried away playing saviour that you end up needing to be saved again.

And my final advice on the matter is this: when we identify these corrupters in the Church and amongst us, whether by close observance or divine revelation, if we are to stay undefiled and help others too, we dare not keep silent, except led by the Holy Spirit to do so. We must show concern not just for our wellbeing, but also for the sake of other unsuspecting Believers, and take a stand. We must prayerfully and courageously speak up/out against them! We're to expose them and their strange and false doctrines and practices – let awareness spread and help preserve the purity of the Church. We can't assume a lazy position on the matter at all!

In conclusion, just as in the previous letters, Jesus promises a reward to those of us who overcome, i.e. those Believers who, while in the world, are able to separate themselves from the world, its customs and practices. He speaks of giving them to eat of a hidden manna, He says He would also gift them a white stone, even a new name which will be written on this white stone that no one else will know about except those who receive it. What does that mean? In my opinion, I believe Jesus is promising them access to

mysteries and special blessings in the Kingdom. I guess if we want to know more about this, we can as well work towards being fit for this sort of reward. We know what we have to do, don't we?

*Scriptural Reference: **Revelation 2:12-17.***

THE FOURTH CALL: *Reject False Teachers and Teachings*

HERE IS a question for you: Is it possible for a Christian to be misled? Different categories of Christians respond to this question differently. My straightforward answer is yes! But, you need to check your personal experience: Have you ever been misled, say in Church and among professing Christians? Be honest in your answer.

Let me take it a step further by describing the kinds of Christians who get easily misled.

1. *Those Who Don't Believe Christians Can Be Misled:*
Are there Christians who don't believe they can be misled? The answer is yes. Not only that this group of Believers exists, their high statistics never cease to amaze me. Their claim is just as ridiculous as saying that all humans are good, or all humans are saints, or even that the devil or evil doesn't exist in this world. Christians that fall in this group are the very naive ones, and always make for easy preys. Are you one of these? I really hope not. Let me state categorically that it is naivety that makes one easy prey to deceivers. Ask the first woman.

Eve was the first human to be beguiled, deceived, seduced, misled; and believe me when I say, her naivety contributed to her fall. Did Eve believe that there was evil in the world? No. Did Eve believe she was a target of someone very sinister? No.

Did Eve believe that she could fall from grace just by having a conversation with some animal that looked harmless but seemed knowledgeable? No. Did Eve believe listening and taking the suggestion of one that seemed to have her best interest at heart would be the beginning of her pains? No.

If Eve was less naïve, could she have had a fighting chance against one so intent on her fall, even her death? Yes, because she'd be better prepared; more alert, less welcoming. Well, maybe we can somehow excuse her naivety, for though there was already a manifestation and the operations of evil at the time – with the devil and other fallen angels cast from heaven already for their evil plot against the throne of God – she possibly wasn't aware. But what's the excuse for the Christian of today? If you're in this category, what's your excuse?

I'll tell you why you're so at ease and dare to live in such a fantasy. It's not the lack of awareness; it's something else. Perhaps, it's because you think you're Christian, so you're special. You read the Bible, so you know a lot. You pray and fast at least three times a week so you're covered. You give generously so you're shielded, and you serve so you're exempt.

Well, what if I told you that what you're so convinced can't happen to you is already happening? Yes, you're already being misled – by the whispering of the enemy. He is there encouraging you to place your confidence in all these things and to let down your guard. His whispering are tactful lies. Let me make something very clear; the very fact that you're Christian, even young and gifted, means you're a target. Sure, it's good to study your Bible, pray and even fast; it's also a good thing to give and serve, but believe me, none of these things stop you from being a target and remaining a target.

All your life as long as you're on the Lord's side – loving Him, serving Him, denouncing and renouncing the world and its ways – you're on the hit list of the devil, and if you aren't aware of this and stay alert, except for the mercies of God, you'd not only be misled, you'd stay misled.

2. *Those Who Are Not Discerning:* The second group of Christians that get misled are those walking blindly, not discerning. The rate of Christians without discernment is alarming; perhaps, you're part of the growing number in this group, not because of the absence of the Holy Spirit in the Church or because He has stopped working in our lives; rather, it's because of our response to Him. You see, when Jesus mentions the Holy Spirit in the gospel of John, He described Him in many ways, He even reveals His functions to us. The Holy Spirit was sent to be our ever abiding Comforter. He is described as the indwelling and ever-present Spirit of Truth, Teacher and Reminder (John 14:16-17, 26).

Please, let's take a minute to dwell on these two titles and functions: Spirit of Truth and Teacher. What this means is that aside His help, we could yet be led into error; and He being the Spirit of Truth means He is our guide into all things true. Now, the second title is Teacher; what this means is that the Holy Spirit is more knowledgeable than us, and we're expected to be His students. So, if He is the Guide, then we are literally lost without Him; and if He is the Teacher, then we are ignorant pupils and student required to learn from Him.

Both titles and functions reveal not only our dependency on the Holy Spirit, but also what our response to Him should

be like – reverential and prompt obedience. To revere is to respect and to obey is to comply. All of these should be common knowledge, but it's not; because, if it is, then the rate of Christians who are misled, even easily misled, by false prophets and false doctrines wouldn't be on the rise.

Christians have the Holy Spirit but don't regard Him enough to follow Him implicitly. Christians have the Holy Spirit but don't unreservedly obey His leading. And I'll tell you how; for instance, we disregard His voice when He's giving the hint that someone is a false teacher. Instead of just taking Him at His word, we choose to see the good in what God has called bad. Another instance is this: He clearly instructs you to separate yourself from a self-acclaimed minister of God and their teachings, but you insist that if they are "gifted", successful and prosperous then God is with them; and since the Holy Spirit hasn't given you a comprehensive reason why you must leave – except a few dreams here and there – you choose to go and see for yourself. So you disobey the inner voice of the Spirit.

Are these scenarios familiar? They ought to be because these are the ways gullible Believers tend to respond to the Holy Spirit. It's not like Help isn't available, it's that we won't pay Him any mind or take His advice/command seriously. I write this categorically because I used to be like that – undiscerning, unresponsive and inadvertently putting myself at risk. Thank God for His mercies, though. I'm different now; not only have I found grace to quickly recognize and respond to the Holy Spirit, I'm saved from the gullibility that almost ruined me in the past.

3. *Those Who Don't Take Anything Seriously:* One final group I must not fail to mention, believe it or not, are Christians who if they have good health, sound mind, food to eat, clothes on their backs, shoes on their feet, a good job, a house to live in, car to drive, money to spend, Church to attend, department to serve in etc, they can't be bothered about anything else – not about spiritual matters or about false teachers and their teachings. I know this because I have come across them. They are many in their number, even among the youth.

Could you be one of them? Unfortunately for those in this group, just because you don't take the spiritual realm too seriously, or just because you don't care about being misled doesn't mean you're any less a target of negative spiritual forces or less susceptible to being misled. It simply means you make for an easy prey. And when you're eventually misled and inflicted with spiritual wounds that transcend into the physical and your material possessions, you will have to take life, even spiritual warfare, and all spiritual matters seriously, if not even a little too seriously.

I believe it is this group that the Church in Thyatira falls into. This Church received a message from Jesus who introduced Himself as the Son of God with His eyes like a flame of fire, and feet like fine brass – again, this enigmatic yet revelatory introduction relates to the message if you pay real attention. As for the Believers in Thyatira, Jesus says He knew their works, their charity, service, faith and patience. In fact, they abounded in good works, even more works compared to the ones they've been doing in the past.

Yet, Jesus had a few things against them. At the top of His list was that they (most likely the pastor in charge / church leadership) allowed, especially by reason of indifference, a woman whom He identified as Jezebel who claimed to be a prophetess (one chosen and sent by God to proclaim His will and foretell future events) to teach, and continue to do so without her being exposed, removed from the Church and her teachings rejected. He denounced their indifference and inaction which enabled this woman to successfully seduce (mislead) a good number in the congregation – among whom were some of those involved in serving in the Church in different capacities. Those who practiced what she taught and practiced herself, were fornicating and eating things sacrificed to idols.

Let's dwell on that for a while and see the danger associated with not believing you can be misled, with not being responsive to the Holy Spirit's voice, with not taking spiritual things, especially the presence of false prophets/doctrines too seriously. Such docility leads to satanic invasion, or better put, infiltration, not only into our lives but into our midst as a collective; and it never brings good results. Spiritually, we get robbed. Many die, and all end up fit for eternal damnation, if steps aren't taken towards realignment with God.

The Thief in the House

IN John 10:10a, Jesus first mentions a thief – this is someone who does his work stealthily or secretly. Next, Jesus goes on to list the thief's mission: to steal, to kill, and to destroy. The Lord is right and He is referring to Satan; and one of the ways

Satan gets his mission accomplished is by raising up false prophets/teachers to peddle false doctrines, so he can mislead the children of God.

These false teachers can be either male or female, young or old, black, white or brown. They vary, and are at large. They are in the Church, even in the Church in Nigeria just as they were in the Church at Thyatira. Some are easy to discern, but some are not. Yet all can be discerned, and the Church can be purged of them to a large extent if we believe they exist and that we are their targets, if we are discerning and responsive to the Holy Spirit, and if we take identifying and rejecting them seriously.

Some of these false prophets/teachers belong to the group of misguided Believers – some of whom were once truly called and endowed by God but somewhere along the line, the enemy got them to compromise and they became misguided, and in turn began to mislead others. There are others too who are simply out for gain. They were never children of God let alone called by God or gifted by Him; they just wear a disguise – claim to be people of God, sent and endowed by God. In the real truth, they are commissioned by Satan to do his evil work.

Regardless of which group these false preachers belong, whether as backslidden Believers or the non-believers simply out for gain, they are dangerous. They are in the world and in the physical Church congregation too. One response we absolutely cannot afford to keep giving to them is indifference and tolerance, for indifference and tolerance sooner than later will lead to compromise; uniting with them and supporting

them. Compromise is sin, and sin makes one fit for God's judgment and unfit for God's use.

To tolerate is to accept, to allow, to support. This response to false prophets/teachers is absolutely wrong; yet, this was the response of the Church in Thyatira. Some Christians even today, perhaps including you, still respond in the same manner. And why? Here's what I know, at least writing from personal experience. These false prophets/teachers are well disguised and operate with stealth. They often have the appearance of godliness, and claim to be gifted. They usually are knowledgeable and their doctrine always have a hint of truth, coating their lies so it's easy for them to go undetected for a long period of time, and for you to respond favourably to them.

That being said, I don't believe the cunning ways of the false prophet and teacher that infiltrated them was tenable excuse for the Church in Thyatira. I say this not because this certain woman Jesus speaks of – Jezebel – wasn't disguised as being holy or didn't claim to be gifted or knowledgeable, or even that she didn't coat her teachings with some hint of truth; the lies in her teachings had to be glaring. Her teachings clearly went against what God's word taught as acceptable Christian conduct. For instance, her teaching encouraged fornication, idolatry – even eating things sacrificed to idols. Do you see why I say they weren't excusable? It is for this same reason we will not be excusable too!

So many Christians claim to be unable to identify false prophets/teachers. I agree that it can be challenging at times to identify them, but not impossible if you pay attention and enlist the help of the Holy Spirit. There are indeed numerous

cases where they were easily spotted, as in this instance of the so-called ‘inspired’ prophetess Jesus mentions in Thyatira.

Warning for the Wise

LET me state it clearly: anyone, no matter how godly they appear, no matter how gifted they seem to be, no matter how knowledgeable they sound, regardless of their reputation of being “deep” in the things of God, the minute you hear them contradict God’s word, i.e. encourage actions that God clearly has instructed His children not to indulge in, you must not continue to listen to them or even dare to practice what they preach and practice themselves. You must, as a matter of urgency, separate yourself from them and their teachings, and denounce and renounce them!

Although Jesus only states fornication and eating food sacrificed to idols as the major things this woman led some Christians – even those who served – in the Church in Thyatira to do, if this woman is really like Jezebel the wife of King Ahab in the Old Testament, then you should know that the list of things false prophets/teachers like this woman in the Church in Thyatira will encourage you to do are more than the few mentioned.

You can expect them to teach and encourage you to oppose all things godly and good, to be ambitious – selfishly ambitious, to abuse your power/office, to be domineering, manipulative, covetous, greedy and to get what you want by all means – even if it involves conspiring against another innocent Believer, slander against another innocent Believer, bearing false witness and even committing murder. They’d encourage you to even try to evade the consequences of your

actions by being pretentious or seductive. They'd introduce you to gods like power and wealth, even self, and tell you it's okay to serve them even as you serve God. They'll tell you to seek to be influential, and when you do become influential, to wield it like a sword against others.

I must add, if they don't tell you outright that it's okay to do these things, they'll practice it before you; and if you're impressionable, you'd imitate them and find yourself as fit for God's judgment as they are. Jesus didn't want the Christians in Thyatira to keep tolerating false prophets/teachers and practice what they taught. Even today, He still calls us to reject false prophets/teachers once they are identified, and completely reject their teachings as well.

Back then in Queen Jezebel's time, the prophet Elijah who was God's servant wasn't under her influence, though she was quite influential; and I believe today, that is how God wants us to respond to them. Though they are influential, we must not come under their influence. And we must not be ashamed to let it be known that we have no affiliation with them, nor will listen to their teachings or practice what they preach, nor would we imitate them in any manner. But I know the Christians who like to chase after pastors of mega churches. Pastors who claim to be gifted and follow trends will have a hard time obeying Jesus' words.

This time also, I want to shout it from the roof tops that just because someone claims to be a servant of God and is a part of a big Church, or has a big Church (or even a small Church) doesn't mean they are genuine. Just because they appear knowledgeable doesn't mean their wisdom is from God and not false. Just because they have a large following or are

the rave of the moment doesn't mean they're sent by God or endorsed by Him! Please, know this and you'll know peace.

Longsuffering of Jesus

MOVING on, Jesus talks about how He has been patient with this woman He calls Jezebel. He would have judged this woman, this false prophet/teacher in the Church in Thyatira sooner, but He gave her time to repent of her fornication, a privilege she snubbed. He says *“and she repented not.”*

What does this tell us? It tells us that God isn't ignorant of what's happening in the Church back then, neither is He ignorant of what's happening in the world today, nor in the Church in Nigeria. He knows all things and isn't slack – even for false prophets/teachers. His desire is not for them to remain unsaved and perish, but that all men (and women) be saved (2 Peter 3:9). So He gives ample time for repentance; but failure to take those moments of grace means unavoidable judgment.

The judgment appears to be in stages – with the aim of giving room for repentance still. The first stage, Jesus says, involves the false prophet/teacher being cast into a bed. Now, if Jesus is the one casting her into a bed, this means she is not willingly reclining on a bed. The image that comes to mind is someone who is forced to retire to bed, and is confined to that position because of failing health. But she's not the only one who is judged, those who join her in her immorality (spiritual and physical adultery) will find themselves in a season of distress and suffering as well. And if despite all these they recalcitrantly refuse to repent still, then the next stage which is the fatal stage will happen – this stage involves death. Her

followers will die; and their death will be a sign to all the other churches of the judgment of God on those who continue to tolerate false prophets/teachers and practice what they teach, reminding them that Jesus is One who searches the reins and hearts. Jesus says He Himself will carry out these judgments, giving unto every one of us according to our works.

What does this tell us? It tells us that we have been warned! False prophets/teachers are warned. As for you who claim to be a Christian but follow false prophets/teachers, you've been warned! You're at risk of judgment, and you might end up being fit for judgment – even physical death, depending on what you choose to do after all you've read. Please, choose to do the right thing, and continue to do the right thing only – repent (detach, disengage, withdraw from false prophets/teachers and their teachings) and come to the Lord's side. Stay on the Lord's side.

Someone might ask, does this mean all false prophets/teachers will fall ill and die by sickness? The answer is maybe. I'm not God. It's His prerogative. He gets to decide on how to judge all and sundry. One thing I however am sure of is that all false prophets/teachers will be judged; and it won't be pretty – they and their followers will surely perish except they repent.

If you're a false prophet/teacher reading this, you can't claim to be ignorant. You must know that the timer has been set, and the clock is ticking. *Tick tock, tick tock, the repentance you have to do, do quick!* And, if you're a follower of these false prophets/teachers, you won't be able to continue pretending to all and sundry that you aren't their follower if this is something you've been doing. Remember that it's Jesus you're

going to be answering to. He knows all things – He searches the mind and heart and will give you what you deserve according to your works.

Reward for Standing Believers

THE situation of the Church in Thyatira was dire, but not all the Christians there were under Jezebel's influence. There were some who were not under her influence, who were not following her teachings and to those Jesus had a few words. These words that He speaks are a command that we must obey as well. He speaks to each and every one of us who are not entertaining false prophets/teachers and following their teachings or imitating their actions; it is also for all those who, this moment, are coming out from under their influence. What is this command? Jesus says, He will not lay on them any other burden other than this command "*But that which ye have already hold fast till I come.*" After this, He promises a reward. But before we go into the reward, let's look a little closely into what we must do to qualify for the reward.

"Hold Fast"

JESUS' command is that we hold fast. What does it mean to hold fast? It means to keep something tightly secured. Better put, especially in this context, it means to continue to believe in or adhere to what we already have – what we already know to be truth. But, what if the Christian reading this doesn't have anything to hold fast to? Yes, there are Christians that only know what they hear on social media and in Church on Sundays and Wednesdays. If you fall into this category, you don't have enough measure of the truth; and you're at risk of

mixed teachings. I advise you, go back to the Scripture and begin to invest time in learning the truth, and be certain of it that the Holy Spirit will help you if you ask for His help. He is, after all, the Spirit of Truth and Teacher. And when He teaches you, you can be sure it's the truth, not the mixed and contaminated teachings of liars and false prophets/teachers. You'd even have some *eureka* moments, because, soon you'd be able to remove the stones from the rice you've been feeding on for so long.

It is these truths that you discover, and revealed to you about God that represent the Christian faith, godly principles and conducts that you must hold fast to. That being said, Jesus' command also reveals something else to us: what we must absolutely be wary of. See, if Jesus says "*that which ye have already hold fast till I come,*" it means be very careful about adding to what you already know. Ever heard of itching ears? No, I'm not talking about the allergic reaction you get caused by pollen. I'm talking about a syndrome many Christians have. And believe me when I say they have it.

You see, one way the false prophet/teacher in Thyatira was able to get to some Christians in the Church, even those in active service, and have them under her influence, was because she claimed to be deep! Somebody say Rhema! Please, pay attention; because, this tactic is still being employed by these charlatans today. This woman, she claimed to be privy to some depths of the spirit – that she knew and understood some mysteries, and that God allowed her access to these things of the spirit, and because of this access, she stood as an authority, was regarded as one, and was thereby able to command the people's attention, especially those with itching ears –

supposed Christians who swallowed up all she taught, hook, line and sinker. But unknown to them, they were all exploring the depths of Satan.

Mind you, those with itching ears are some Christians who genuinely have a desire to know more, to learn more; they have a thirst for knowledge like Eve, but are undiscerning, and find themselves to be the targets and easy prey of false prophets/teachers and their teachings. But there's also another set of Christians with itching ears; these ones always want to hear something new! And trust me, there's nothing you're looking for, even the invention of something new that the devil doesn't have to offer. He'll give it to you. He'll come up with a new lie, but use a false prophet/teacher to deliver it.

Again, there's a third group whom Apostle Paul speaks of in 2 Timothy 4:3-4. These ones are Christians who are tired of sound doctrine; they want to hear something exciting, something pleasing, something that will keep encouraging them in their sins. They reject the truth, hate being reproved, corrected, instructed in righteousness; and this group too Satan willingly caters to; he is a caterer, and will cook, then raise up for those in this group false prophets/teachers that will serve you his lies and feed you with it.

But, is it wrong to seek to add to what you already have or know? No, if you are truly desiring to be furnished with the truth, if your hunger and thirst is for the truth, desiring more is not wrong. But it is a slippery slope, a dangerous zone where you must tread with caution – at least judging by the situation of the Church in Nigeria. It's true that there are false prophets/teachers out there; but there are also godly teachers. I advise

that you ask God to lead you to the right Church where a true pastor presides. This, to a large extent, should be a safe zone to learn.

I also have one more advice, and it is for those in this same aforementioned group. It is not popular opinion. Anyways, I advise you to choose to insist that the Holy Spirit teach you personally. And believe me when I say a genuine need to know is never turned down. You'd be satisfied and overflowing with the right information. In fact, I dare you to do this; show up daily with your Bible and notepad, and invite the Holy Spirit to feed you because you're hungry for more. You'll end up being fed till you overflow!

For those that belong to the earlier mentioned two categories of Christians with itching ears, those who are always seeking to hear something new and those who want to hear something exciting, pleasing, that will encourage their sinful and decadent lifestyle, please, be warned! You're asking for trouble, and the real troublemaker won't hesitate to find you. In fact, you will get the trouble you're looking for and even worse. It'll render you unfit for God's Kingdom and His use if you don't adjust your appetite and find a new love, regard and satisfaction in the true word of God.

That being said, as always Jesus says, if we are able to overcome (identify, expose, reject) false prophets/teachers by choosing to hold fast to God's word and practicing only this for as long as we live, or even until the time of His return, then we fall into a category of Believers Jesus will allow a measure of spiritual dominion/authority over nations! How will this be expressed? It involves a strong and impact-filled rule/service – similar (but not equal in status) to what Jesus possesses – and

is able to accomplish. Jesus also talks of giving those of us in this group the morning star! These rewards in their entirety speak of exploits! God is giving us abilities to do exploits and will give us support too – an offer too good to refuse.

*Scriptural Reference: **Revelation 2:18-29.***

5

THE FIFTH CALL: *Keep Guard Against Sin*

SIN – A mere three-letter word, easily dismissible, yet a formidable opponent. It demands to be acknowledged with its impressive record of destroyed lives under its belt in generations, nations and in systems. Sin is not a respecter of persons – male and female, old and young, non-believer and Believer alike, all are targeted by sin, confronted by sin; and many are defeated by sin, even Believers are brought down by it. Sin is a weapon of Satan our adversary, used by him from the onset of the human race to accomplish his threefold mission: to steal, to kill, and to destroy (John 10:10a); and till date, sin is still in use by him against mankind.

Sin's mode of operation is simple, straightforward, even uncomplicated. It always works through our desires, e.g. wishes, urges, appetites (longings, cravings, lusts), requests, ambitions etc. Presenting its enticements, sin offers false hopes for the present and the future, pleasure, fulfilment and satisfaction, and defeats all who agree to make a deal with it - to receive from it, whether willingly or reluctantly.

Nothing about sin is hid; not it's nature of being classified as a weapon of the enemy, nor it's mode of operation of working through our desires; not even the bitter aftertaste of ruin it leaves for those who indulge in it. Yet sin continues to thrive, growing in accomplishments in generations, nations,

systems, and sadly even among Believers, especially in the lives of the youths of today. How so? You ask. The reasons are endless, yet I will try to list some.

How Sin Thrives

- ***A Wrong Perspective:*** Too many Christians see sin through the wrong lens, and so trivialize it. To trivialize something is to consider it of little importance. And sadly, one of the things people – especially Christians – trivialize is sin. It has been so belittled and undermined that we’ve begun to treat it as something that warrants little or no attention. Yet, regardless of how small/inconsequential we regard sin, it hasn’t stopped being a weapon fashioned against us, and hasn’t lost its ability to defeat all and sundry that court it.

Let me make it very clear, if there’s anything worth trivializing in this world, sin isn’t one of them. In fact, it’s not on the list. It never was and will never be. And why do many Christians trivialize sin? It’s first and foremost because of the false teachings on the grace of God. But I won’t dwell too much on that topic, since I’ve mentioned that already in at least one of the other calls how, despite what we’ve been taught by misguided and misinformed preachers, the grace of God – I must reiterate – is not a license to sin.

We have misguided and misinformed preachers and their twisted teachings on grace to blame for our wrong perspective of sin. They are the reason we trivialize sin. But we exonerate ourselves, as we have ourselves to blame too for our failure to rate God and our relationship with Him highly. Let me ask you two questions, is God your greatest treasure? Is having a relationship with Him your greatest accomplishment? I’ll

assume your answers to both questions is yes. If that be the case, then you must keep reading.

It's true. From the onset, sin has been known to separate man from God and ruin our relationship with Him, and that's what it still does. Sin separates us from God little by little until we have no relationship with Him anymore. The separation though gradual will eventually be complete in this life and then transcend into eternity. So if what can cause us the loss of our greatest treasure is sin, and if what can cause us the loss of our greatest accomplishment is sin, why then do we dare to think sin can be trivialized? Or haven't we ever seen things this way? If you haven't, then you've got to start seeing things in the right perspective. You've got to see sin as what it truly is, your opponent, a devious weapon, a thief, a killer, a destroyer, so you can guard against it appropriately.

- ***Carelessness:*** Another reason sin thrives is carelessness rooted in pride. It's true that there are Christians who don't have the right perspective of sin; but there are those who know sin, it's nature, its operations and aftereffects, but still are floored by it. These Christians, I imagine them, are like doctors who smoke and drink, bankers who gamble – you get the picture; and their downfall begins with pride. They consider their identity, wealth of knowledge, their status, even their accomplishments, then they make the mistake of placing their confidence in these things and begin to see themselves as untouchable, and self-destructively treat sin with indifference, leading to their downfall.

Let me make it clear; a Christian, despite their love for God, their zeal and service to God, their knowledge of God and the things of God, their position in the Church, even

their past faithfulness, consecration and accomplishments, can be floored by sin if they make the mistake of placing their confidence in these things and begin to see themselves as untouchable. No one is exempt from the call to keep guard against sin! And one of the ways we do that is to look inwards, observing and controlling our desires! We also look outwards, watching against all appearances of evil so we can respond appropriately.

- ***Misplaced Priorities:*** A third reason sin thrives even among Believers today is misplaced priorities. Everyone, Christians inclusive, has a list of things they consider important to them; these things are priorities. For many of us Christians, our priorities are misplaced. Our highest priorities and greatest necessities have become what they ought not to be. We have put the things on earth before the things above, the physical before the spiritual, and have continued to do so. And, as long as this is the norm for us, our lives will be enabling environments for sin.

So that it doesn't seem like I'm speaking in riddles, I'd make it clear. For many of us, our thoughts first and foremost are consumed with our physical needs. And, so long we put those physical needs before our spiritual needs, spiritual discipline and commitment, we will be defeated by sin. Then there are those among us that crave human acceptance and validation over God's. Again, for as long as this is the order we go by, then we will sin.

There are also the group of Christians who have at the forefront of their minds, fame, money, power, influence, status, property etc. For as long as you constantly think along these lines, sin will be close by; and if you don't keep guard, it

will master you! It has through these means defeated many; you wouldn't be an exception except you exercise caution.

- ***Wrong Company:*** A fourth reason sin thrives is wrong company. Believe it or not, the company we keep has the power to influence us, whether negatively or positively. It can either encourage us in our Christian walk, or lead us to sin and turn our hearts away from God completely. Don't believe me? Ask Eve who had a conversation with a serpent. Ask Lot who dwelt in Sodom. Ask Dinah who got raped by Shechem in Shechem when she went out to hang out with the girls of the land. Ask the man of God from Judah who accepted the invitation of an old (and corrupt) prophet. Ask Solomon who married pagan women. Ask Peter who denied Christ thrice when he lingered in the company of non-believers. The list is endless. I invite you to read my other book, *The Workings of the Tempter*. It offers deep insight into the wily ways of the tempter, and the horrific fall of his victims. Even better, the Holy Scriptures is your best resort on how to escape the evil effects of wrong company.

Wrong company differs; it can be an intelligent person, familiar face, a familiar place, amongst your colleagues and business partners, among people of your age group and gender; it can be a person who claims to love you, a stranger who claims to be a fellow Christian who unknowing to you is compromised. It can be a wrong marital choice, or the most obvious one, intimate association with non-believers. Whichever one it is, a wrong company is and will continue to be a way for sin to creep in on us and defeat us if care isn't taken. We must continually stay mindful of who we are

spending time with, the way they think, their habits and especially their lifestyle choices.

- **Secrecy:** The last reason I'd give for why sin thrives is secrecy. Anything, especially sin done in secrecy means it's been hidden or concealed. Sin thrives in secrecy because it promises us that our action will have no consequence. And, as long as we are able to convince ourselves no one will know what we are up to, and that no one knows what we've been up to, then we sin, not once but habitually; yet, despite how convinced we are about our sins being hidden, covered, and concealed from all and sundry, God knows. God always knows! He is the silent witness to everything we do. So, even though we fool ourselves from time to time and succeed in fooling others all of the time, we can never fool God. In fact, I believe it is to this group most of the Christians of the Church in Sardis belong.

When Jesus addresses this Church, He introduces Himself as the one that has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars – another enigmatic yet revelatory introduction. Next, He informs them that He knows their works! And before we wonder about their works, He clarifies and says, they have a name (a reputation) that they live, but in reality they are dead (spiritually). He later mentions that their works (deeds) aren't perfect – not corresponding to the ideal standard for a Believer. Please, take a moment to dwell on Jesus' words. The Christians in this Church, specifically the ones Jesus was addressing, were seen or judged to be genuine Christians even respected by people because they considered them to be alive.

Let's take the word 'alive' to mean genuinely converted. People thought of them as still Christians (Christ-like in

virtue), most likely because they once were; but now spiritually they were dead! This reveals they weren't living up to the title 'Christian' anymore, though unknown to others. They weren't righteous, upright; they had been dabbling in sin secretly, leaving their white garments defiled. They were on a steady decline and nearing destruction (they were at risk of their names being blotted out from the Book of Life) if they continued to do nothing about their true spiritual state.

This is one of those times I wish I could be there to see the looks on the faces of the congregation in Sardis when the message from Jesus is read out by the Church leadership. The sinners among them suddenly being confronted by their hidden/secret sins, their true spiritual state and the risk that it posed. Do you think they'll consider this a spiritual awakening and realize the need for realignment? How does this make you feel, knowing that nothing you've ever done or ever will do is hid from God? Do you consider this an awakening of sort and a call to realignment? Does this gear you up to even walk more consciously before God? I hope it's all true. I really do, for if we aren't awake, in agreement and in alignment with God, how can He use us for His glory, in the Church and in the world?

The Havoc of Sin

NOW that we've covered how sin continues to thrive, it is important that we look closely into the kind of havoc sin causes even though we've touched on it briefly here and there so far. In Jesus' message to the Church in Sardis, He sheds some light into the havoc sin causes in the life of the Believer. Here's my list:

- ***Sin Defiles:*** Jesus mentions that there were a few Christians in the Church in Sardis that had not defiled their garments; meaning the majority had, revealing sin as the cause of their spiritual death. Beloved, the one thing that defiles the garments of a true child of God is sin. Yet for something to be defiled it means it was once pure. And that is the state of every true Child of God: our original state in Christ was sanctified, made pure by the blood of Jesus that was shed for our redemption and cleansing. Now imagine yourself in a clean garment because that's how we are clothed spiritually when we become converted. But whenever we sin, what happens is, there's the appearance of smudges – stains – and the garment becomes defiled.

Every time we sin and continue to sin without genuinely repenting and turning away from that sin, that garment keeps getting stained over and over and over and over again until we become contemptible before God. In summary, what it means for sin to defile us is that it corrupts our purity, makes us unclean, and demotes us from a position of perfection in the sight of God to profanity. It degrades us, making us unworthy and unfit for use.

- ***Sin Weakens:*** For something/someone to be weakened, it hints that it was once strong. One of the marks of a true child of God is (inner) strength, aka power, via the work of the Spirit of God in us, so we may be able to do God's good pleasure, e.g. resist and overcome sin. But from the moment we begin to entertain ungodly desires and contemplate unholy suggestions till we eventually make a deal with sin, we begin to weaken our God-given ability to resist sin.

Imagine a very high and strong wall of defence surrounding a house; then imagine a small crack, and lastly imagine sin showing up with a sledge hammer hitting against the wall over and over at different times/intervals. The crack represents our first deal with sin, and for as many times as we continue to deal with sin wilfully, it gains our unspoken permission to return and hit the walls of our defence, destroying it bit by bit until the wall can't keep anything out! This is a vivid imagery of how sin weakens us. Just a little sin today can become a habitual one tomorrow, especially when it is aided by secrecy, remains unconfessed and not renounced.

The majority of the Christians in Sardis were dealing repeatedly in sin. In time, instead of a fortified wall of defence against sin, they had no wall left standing; and instead of being alive, they became spiritually dead in sin. A child of God is expected to go from strength to strength in their inner man; but introduce sin, and that progress and stride diminish – whether in our ability to resist and overpower sin, or in our effectiveness as witnesses for the gospel. Not a very pretty picture, is it?

Now imagine if that Believer continues to sin, refusing to repent! The picture gets worse, doesn't it? This is why we mustn't court sin. Those who embrace it once, then from time to time, end up being repeat offenders/habitual sinners. The result? I'm sure you already know the answer.

- ***Sin Makes Us Fit for Judgment:*** I'm not sure much needs to be said under this heading, because, as Believers, we must know this by now. Yet, I will take the pains of reiterating it. Sin makes us fit for God's judgment. When Jesus addressed the Church in Sardis, He warns them of the danger of

remaining in that spiritual state they were in and not taking to His counsel. He tells them He will come on them as a thief, they wouldn't know the hour He will come upon them. This means suddenly! They wouldn't know when He will show up in order to judge them. While many take that to depict the Rapture, and are perhaps not wrong in their interpretation, I'd like us to consider even the present time. God's judgment will not forever be postponed until the Rapture when unrepentant sinners will be left on earth, every day people are judged for their sins here on earth and before the Lord's second coming.

Guess how each day usually starts; like every other day, right? Sinners don't get to know the very day their judgment will begin, do they? Neither do they know when it will be complete on earth to continue in eternity. So, yes, sin makes people fit for judgment on this earth and in eternity and it will be sudden.

Still speaking to the Church in Sardis, Jesus not only mentions sudden judgment, He also mentions how the defiled and spiritually dead will forfeit certain privileges, like the privilege of walking with Him. They'd be considered unworthy by Him. A white raiment given to others who remain undefiled will be denied the defiled. But that's not all, the scariest of all the judgments, in my opinion, is that they risk their names being blotted out from the Book of Life, since Jesus will not identify them as His before God the Father and His angels! What then is Jesus' command, not just to the Christians at Sardis, but to Believers all over, the youth, especially?

“Be Watchful!”

SINCE Jesus is commanding the Christians at Sardis to be watchful, it's no less His command to us too. We already know how the Believers in Sardis found themselves in the spiritual state they were in. They weren't on guard against sin! Beloved, we have to be watchful at all times, and for the rest of our lives, since we know this world is full of temptations to sin. There are various ways we can be watchful, one being to keep ourselves under close observation – be very self-aware!

Know yourself well; because, your adversary, the Devil knows you well. He is very interested in you, and spends a lot of his time invested in knowing more about you. He knows what your desires and weaknesses are, and will weaponize your desires and take advantage of your weaknesses if you allow him. You must stay aware of the state of your heart always, that, and make sure to turn over your weaknesses to God in prayer, that He may exchange it for strength.

Another way to be watchful is to be attentive and vigilant in and out of season. Take for instance the age we are in; is there still anyone who doesn't know we are in the last days? Evil is prevalent, and it's becoming very hard to find true and uncompromising Christians anywhere! Compromise has become the norm because the attractions out there are eye-catching and the influences at work have become very strong and powerful. This is not the time to be carefree and careless at all! This is a time to keep this present age under serious observation, as ignorance will be costly. Know what is out there and then pick a side – the Lord's side, the right side. Take a stand for Him and begin to withstand all the wiles of the enemy.

Yet, there's still another way to be watchful; that is, keep your guard against repetitive sin! One thing about the enemy is that he repeats his strategies that work, and these repeated patterns work because we aren't paying attention. A wise person once said, when you stumble upon a rock, you don't just dust yourself up and keep going, you pause and take a long hard look at that rock you tripped over, and make sure, going forward, to avoid any semblance of that rock, so you don't get tripped again. What I'm saying is, you're positioned well to outwit your adversary if you learn from your past mistakes/sins. Take some time to really take note of the situation, especially how you fell, then make sure to avoid any such compromising situations ever, including any such errors. Because, if you don't, you have a high chance of repeating that same sin.

Finally, we can be watchful by being prayerful. I saved the best for last. Prayer is one of the best ways to stay watchful because you're inviting the God who is Light to step into the dark/blind spots of your life and journey. He knows all things, including the plans, plots, schemes and weapons of the enemy, and is the real one ally you need to not only know what's ahead but to also prepare for it and win!

Someone may ask, so what do we pray about? We pray about everything and anything, including our struggles, especially about our weaknesses. You see, when a patient is before a doctor, they do themselves a disservice when they hide their symptoms or refuse to tell the truth. So, when you're before God, come clean, be vulnerable, don't cover anything. Why bother anyway, since He knows all things! So,

open up, and let Him see your sincerity so He can give you all the help you need.

“Strengthen the Things Which Remain”

GOING by Jesus’ words, the sinful Christians at Sardis were to strengthen the things which remain that were ready to die. Some things that ought not to, were on a low level. Well, do you think Jesus is addressing the sinners only to do this task? The words He speaks afterwards help us see that this is a command to all and sundry, especially when we consider that any of us could find ourselves in the same state these professing Christians were in.

What does Jesus say? He tells them how to strengthen the things which remain; they were to remember therefore how (or rather what) they had received and heard, and then hold fast to it – this was supposed to encourage their repentance. And I put it to you that Jesus’ command would also help us guard against sin if we obey it. What was He talking about?

To remember is to bring to mind or think of something again. This reveals that those among them who sinned, and many of us who sin, often fail to keep in mind for attention or consideration the words of God that we earlier received and were taught! Sadly, we learn so we can forget, and the word doesn’t work for us. Do you know any forgetful hearer of God’s word? Or are you one yourself?

If you are a forgetful hearer, you won’t be the doer of the word you ought to be. We can assume for many of the Christians in Sardis, their love for God and loyalty to Him were two things that were dwindling fast; and, apparently, their consecration was already a thing of the past. Yet all of

these three things can be elevated, even revived, by God's word.

You see, the word of God is very potent and useful for many things; as a sword, it's particularly a weapon against sin! But we limit its efficacy by our inaction. Many of us hear the word of God, listen to it or read it because we believe it's what we are expected to do as Christians. But we ought to commit ourselves to understanding it truly, and enjoy the benefits of practicing it. Those who don't invest time to really learn from God's word and would not give much thought to what they've learnt, will not be given any measure of insight, let alone get the privilege of using the knowledge and insight from it as weapon against sin – their opponent.

What did Jesus say again in one of His teachings, I'm referring to the parable of the sower and the soils? He says in Mark 4:24-25, "*Take heed what ye hear: with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you: and unto you that hear shall more be given. For he that hath, to him shall be given: and he that hath not, from him shall be taken even that which he hath.*" So, we ought to treat God's word with the seriousness it requires. Let's not just read but study it. Let's invest time and thought into it, bearing in mind all we've received from it, then begin to apply them every single day of our lives, in small and in big choices! The word works! But we must do our part for it to work for us as it ought to. Let's begin today.

"Repent Now!"

IF you've been toying with sin, Jesus' command is that you repent. And, like previously mentioned, one of the ways to get to the place of repentance and really maximize God's grace is

to have the right heart posture – make sure you bring to mind what you know sin to be, sincerely visualize your true heart's state this moment, then pour out your heart to God in prayer, seeking His forgiveness, and even more, be determined not to dabble in sin again by the help of His Holy Spirit.

I know that many will read all this and still not repent; and this is because they fear to lose face before people – their reputation is very important to them. They know some repentance require restitution, i.e., confessing to a spouse (if married), or to a pastor/congregation (if you're a worker or a pastor in Church), or restoring something to its rightful owner, even restoring something to its rightful condition, or agreeing to face legal actions; i.e., being sued or even being jailed for a past heinous crime. But I tell you, your reputation, how people see you is not half as important as how God sees you. Rather than fear what people will say, what people will do, fear what God will say, what God can and will do to you, and let that healthy fear of God drive you to a place of genuine repentance.

As usual, Jesus ends His message to the Church in Sardis by mentioning the rewards for those who have not defiled their garments and have overcome – by keeping guard against sin and upholding the ideal standard! He says (while on earth) they will walk with Him robed in white because they are worthy, and in eternity they will be clothed in white raiment, signifying righteousness, their names will never be removed from the Book of Life – securing their eternal reward and He will acknowledge them before God the Father and His angels. You and I should be the overcomers He speaks of, right?

Scriptural Reference: **Revelation 3:1-6.**

6

THE SIXTH CALL: *Be Patient Despite Persecution*

IF YOU had the opportunity, what are the things you would remove from the Christian walk in general? Be honest. Well, as for me, I'd like to remove at least these two things: the need for us all to possess the virtue called patience and the experience that we all must go through called persecution; because most Christians, if not all, myself inclusive, do not enjoy either of these things. So, myself, along with the majority of us, would remove these two seeming 'negative' requirements and experiences because we believe life might be more enjoyable and happier without them.

And, not surprisingly, God thinks differently. What we would rather do without is what He says is an absolute must. And this is because our priorities are different from God's. While enjoyment and happiness are priority to us, besides our salvation, our growth and maturity are two of God's priorities for us; and these two aforementioned things we'd rather have removed from our Christian walk are tools God uses to aid our growth and encourage our maturity.

A new Believer reading this might struggle to make sense of this. I know. Even one who has been a Believer for a while now may struggle with accepting the idea too. Yet, it is important that we all, new Believer and old Believer alike, embrace it as God's way. Our ways are not God's ways; in fact,

God's ways are higher than our ways (Isaiah 55:8-9), we must know this and accept it so we can know peace.

While learning and exercising patience and going through persecution can be two different experiences, the average Christian, new or old Believer, will at some point in life, and in their Christian walk, find themselves going through both at the same time. You'll find yourself in a very unpleasant situation. And make no mistake about it, it will be because you're Christian that you're in a said situation, and while in that unpleasant situation, you will be required by God to respond with patience. Yes, you and I, including every Christian all over the world, we are called to be patient despite persecution.

What does patient despite persecution mean exactly? It means:

- ***Bearing the Pains or Trials Calmly without Complaint:*** I imagine someone reading this and thinking: this is impossible. Well, it is challenging but not impossible. I have come to realize that nothing God asks us to do or expects of us is impossible. Not because we're always able to do it, but because He always helps us do it; and sometimes one of the ways He does so is by showing us a way to get it done. In this instance, what He asks of us, is to be calm and not complain. To complain is to express our dissatisfaction. While we can be tempted to believe we are being asked to be pretentious, the truth is that what God's really asking is that we go against our natural impulses and exercise restraint over our feelings or emotions; and instead of complaining, we silently, calmly tolerate the inconvenience. Are we not allowed to express our dissatisfaction? To this I'd say, rather than bemoaning the

situation, something more productive to do is pray about the situation, don't you agree?

Now, to the question on all our minds: Why does God not want us to complain? It's simple really. Complaining leads to agitation; and when we are agitated (increasingly troubled in mind, disturbed and upset), we are more likely to become impatient and take matters into our own hands rather than allow room for divine intervention. The result? We could escalate and worsen the situation, or worse still, end up falling into sin.

One of the ways to achieve this state of calmness/peace despite an unpleasant situation is to choose what you focus on. Jesus for instance during His time of suffering focused on the big picture. He thought of the joy He knew would be His when all of the suffering was over (Hebrews 12:2) – the good results that His suffering would produce so He continued to endure. And I know that our salvation was part of that joy that He knew would be His. I'm very sure He was thinking about you and me too, and was filled with compassion for us. He thought of how we absolutely needed His help and wasn't going to refuse us a chance at changing our lives forever for the better. He knew eventually He would get a chance to rejoice over us. And He indeed did!

He thought about me, and now when in an unpleasant situation, I think about Him, how I absolutely do not want to disappoint Him by bringing dishonour/shame to His name, which I now bear by my words or actions. You should try focusing on Jesus too! And making Him proud.

- ***Refraining from Exercising Your Right When Provoked:*** I see someone's eye balls budging out already! Please relax! This too, though challenging, is not impossible. Again, God won't ask us to do what He is not prepared to help us achieve! The concept of not exercising our rights is definitely not a human idea. I know because the average human being – myself inclusive – wants to exercise their rights all of the time. Problem is, if we do that all of the time, we rob ourselves of an opportunity to be transformed into the image of Christ Jesus our Lord; and being transformed into His image should be our aim as Believers.

Believe it or not, God will many times lead you – as a Believer – to or expect you to forgo your rights and let some things just fly, or let some people off the hook even when you're being wronged. And it won't always be easy; but it will never be impossible if you ask the Holy Spirit's help.

One thing you must absolutely know and understand is that the devil, our adversary, lives to lead us to sin; and one of the ways he does this is by evoking in us certain negative emotions via the things he makes people do to us. He purposefully stirs up someone to wrong us in one way or another with hopes that their actions will incite us to anger and provoke a fight. And when a fight ensues, so will many other evil works, then, just like that, he achieves his goal! And even if a fight doesn't occur, sin in another form might. Do you see it? God doesn't want us to be contentious, vengeful or volatile people, easily aroused and erupting into violence/falling into sin at any and every instance, unable to overlook anything or forgive anything – not striving for peace. How can God even conveniently use such a person for His glory?

Cantankerous attributes are not what God looks for in a vessel.

You want to know something? When we are the type to always insist on our rights and fight for our rights, we leave no room for God to fight for us. And speaking from personal experience, there's nothing sweeter than God fighting for you! Yet, I will be honest and say, many times God won't fight for you in a way or manner or even when you expect Him to. In fact, absolutely nothing might happen to the person that wronged you or to improve the situation. The only thing that might happen is that you come out of that situation a better version of yourself, and that's if you actually follow God's instructions or the Holy Spirit's leading to let go of your rights.

How do we achieve this? We just trust God and obey when He leads us. He gives grace for us when we humble ourselves to obey, you know? So, there's no formula other than that. You just do it. You won't feel happy about it all of the time, you'd even feel cheated and all the other emotions; but you'll get over it, at least I always do eventually after I've prayed to God to help me get over it. So, if you're struggling with getting over a matter, pray about it.

- ***Not Being Hasty to Make a Decision:*** Whenever I think about making haste, I imagine a hare. This animal is very fast. When we are hasty, we act too quickly, too fast without really thinking things through; and when we do so we make mistakes, errors that sometimes are irredeemable. By this I mean we make errors that have long lasting consequences that we can't excuse or escape.

One thing we must realize is that when we are in an unpleasant situation or under provocation or strain, the enemy, our adversary is always present even though he is hid from our eyes. And he isn't there to cheer us on to victory; he is there because it's an opportune time for him to carry out his mission against our lives. He is hoping to steal, to kill and to destroy, and that we willingly cooperate with him doing all his three missions to us. It's wild huh! Wild but true; and unfortunately, many Christians, youths especially, find themselves being willing partners of the enemy, all because they were too eager to act. You will find yourself in their shoes if you don't learn on time that you have to be patient and not be too eager to act, especially when facing persecution.

Yes, it's true that our natural instinct is to act when we are in an unpleasant situation; but it's also true that the enemy urges us on too. Combine both and the result is a catastrophe. So, not only have you dishonoured your parent by answering back while they were nit-picking, you've been thrown out of the house and you now have to fend for yourself all by yourself on the streets whilst not being prepared. Not only have you disregarded God's timing by resigning prematurely due to office politics, you've begun your own enterprise, but you're now facing untold hardships, and no one is willing to lend you a helping hand.

You attempted to look for another job but nothing seems to be forthcoming; you're now in a season of famine. Not only have you refused to stop comparing yourself with others, you've steadily compared yourself with your friends so much that you picked up a spouse from a dating site. Now you're married, but every day you're uncovering horrible secrets

about your spouse. Not only have you struck the person who stepped on your toes, but you're facing a murder charge now because the person dropped dead due to underlying medical issues you knew nothing about. Not only did you sue the person who double crossed you, but the case has dragged on and on and has sucked up your finances, with the case still a long way from ending; now you wished you had let God fight for you.

The list goes on and on, but I believe you understand the message I'm trying to pass across. You were only trying to do what seemed right in the moment, but you've made it so much worse and you're stuck with the consequences of your action, some you can't even excuse or escape. You know who is pleased at the sight of all that? Your enemy. The Devil! We stand to lose a lot whenever we make any decision in haste, especially when we are going through persecution – it always ends in regret.

So what do we do when we feel the urge to act, when the pressure is on? We simply turn the pressure off and purposefully slow down. When we do this we avoid suicidal choices. And when we do eventually take a leap, it would be a leap of faith as led by God, not a fatal one. Do I have any tips for turning the pressure off? Yes, it's called prayer. Taking a minute to pray even if it's under your breath can help you turn the pressure off and keep you sane enough to not act in the wrong manner.

It seems too simple, but sometimes things are that simple and we're the ones that over-complicate things. So yes, take a minute to pray, but also know to obey the Holy Spirit's leading even though it would most likely be contrary to what

your natural instincts (and the enemy) is encouraging you to do.

- ***Being Steadfast Despite Opposition, Difficulty, or Adversity:*** I saved the best for last. When God asks us to be patient despite, or during, persecution, He is saying be steadfast. God's expectation is that we do not let the negative situation change us, that we remain firm in our Christian beliefs, and consistent in adherence to God's law and will. And you know why He commands and expects this reaction from us? One out of many reasons is that it proves that we are dependable, reliable, that He can commit things, even more things into our hands, also that we are worthy of His comfort!

A Beautiful Church

THE Christians in the Church in Philadelphia give us a beautiful example of this. As He did with all the other churches, Jesus sent them a message too, but unlike the other churches whose messages from Christ we've dissected with the exception of the Church in Smyrna, the tone of the message this time is completely different.

After introducing Himself as one who is holy, true and has the key of David (i.e., messianic authority), One who could open and no man could shut, and shut, with no man able to open, Jesus addresses them. He says to them that He knows their works (as regarding) the open door (for effective ministry) that He had set before them that many had attempted to shut but no man could shut. He goes on to say that despite having a little strength, they had kept His word and had not denied His name.

Next He allows us a peek into what their situation is like; this Church was facing opposition, persecution, even from certain Jews that belonged to a synagogue in the same location. Jesus reveals that they weren't real Jews serving God, but were of the congregation of Satan – by this He gives them and us a hint on who was really behind this opposition, the persecution, even if he was using these misled Jews.

Then Jesus makes them a promise, a promise of divine intervention and support. He would make the opposition, those Jews who were under Satan's influence, believing his lie and supporting his cause to cease from resisting them, harassing or afflicting them. They would instead begin to show them a much merited respect by reason of what He would do; and this would prove to them, even all that the Christians of this Church were loved by Him. But the message doesn't stop there. Jesus also makes a second mention of their works: they kept the word of His patience.

Jesus had earlier said, the Philadelphia brethren kept His word and had not denied His name. Later He adds that they kept even the word of His patience, i.e., the command to emulate His patience. This reveals and affirms what we already know, that the persecution they faced, like all persecution, was designed by the enemy to cause them to disobey God's word, even the one that commands that we emulate Christ's patience despite persecution! Satan's end goal was to make sure they rejected Christ altogether on account of their persecution!

But these Christians were steadfast, they were firmly rooted in Christ; they didn't let the negative situations surrounding them change them from good to bad. They didn't

disobey God's command, even the one about emulating Christ's patience, nor turn away from the faith, or stopped being Christians. They remained firm in their beliefs, and consistent in adherence to God's law and will. How did they achieve this? Jesus had clearly said they had little strength, proving they weren't the largest Church ever nor even the strongest Christians physically, spiritually, mentally and emotionally. So what then? I strongly believe they were motivated by love. They remained firm and consistent because they loved God. Their love was like fuel, it kept them going. And I base my conclusion on Jesus' promise to also prove His love for them publicly, especially before the opposition by reason of what He promised to do.

Love Always Wins

LOVE for God motivated the Christians in Philadelphia to withstand opposition and remain steadfast despite persecution. I believe it's safe to say we also can achieve same result if we let our love for God motivate us to act in similar manner.

Beyond this glaring truth, one thing that I can gladly reiterate before we proceed is why Satan insists on persecuting us, and does so using different avenues? Apparently, it's so we will fail to keep God's word, even His command about being patient, and ultimately so we can quit being Christians. Many Christians don't like to imagine a worst case scenario when they are faced with trials, provocations, difficulty, opposition and adversity; or, is it that they do imagine it but have the wrong imagery in their mind when they do? Beloved, the worst case scenario is you backsliding! And for every challenge

you face, know there's a possibility you could backslide. Let's keep that in mind so we can conduct ourselves wisely.

That being said, let's revisit Jesus' promise to the Christians in Philadelphia. He promised to prove His love for them publicly by reason of what He would do with and before the opposition. This promise holds true for not just them back then, but for us steadfast Believers in the present too. How does it feel to know that all your works of Christian service, especially patiently enduring despite persecution, are being noticed by God and that you can expect divine intervention and support from Him? It has to make you feel good, right? I personally find it comforting. Very comforting.

Moving on, Jesus informs the Church in Philadelphia of the hour of temptation which shall come upon all the world – a time when the peoples of the world, all who dwell on the earth – would be tried. But He doesn't just keep them abreast of the inevitable, He promises to keep them from it! Besides the earlier promise of intervention and support, this one is of exemption from forthcoming trials and tribulations. I believe Jesus here is talking about the Great Tribulation period, and promising the Believers of this Church that they would be raptured before it begins. This would have been a huge relief for them. Jesus was making a promise to the Christians in Philadelphia; but we too must take comfort from Jesus' promise/words because they apply to us as well. He is offering a promise, comfort to us steadfast Believers as well. Whatever we are going through now will be nothing compared to what is to come eventually during the Great Tribulation period. Thankfully, we won't have to be a part of it. We would be raptured with other Believers all over the world.

Next, let's take a close look at Jesus' command to the Church in Philadelphia, because that command goes for each and every one of us too, I mean those of us who have decided to be patient despite persecution. Jesus says, *Behold, I come quickly:*

“Hold That Fast....”

HERE'S the complete command: “...*hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown.*” This means in view of His return, or better put, till the end of their lives, they were to hold fast; i.e., tightly guard what they had, lest they lose their reward. But what were they to hold fast to? Jesus says, that which they had. What did they have? These group of Christians had a number of things going for them. Jesus clearly states, they had strength even though it was little, and weren't supposed to lose that.

Like I mentioned earlier, their strength despite its degree was effective and was motivated by their love for God; what Jesus was then saying was no matter what, they weren't to let that love wane (decrease in size, extent or degree) or die out; if it did, they'd lose their strength and eventually their crown and eternal rewards too. How then can they keep their love for God tightly secure? We've touched on this topic before in the first call. It's important that we invest in things that inspire our affection for God. One tip I can share here is to maintain an attitude and atmosphere of worship daily, even while being persecuted. I'm talking about gospel music. Sing songs of praise and worship. Play and listen to them, dance to them, hum them.

This works for me, and I'm sure it will work for you. It keeps you honouring God, showing reverence to Him, and reminds you of what He has done, what He is doing, and what He will yet do. It stirs in you love, hope, faith. Its benefits are endless, and I have personal testimonies to prove this. And in case you're thinking you don't have a good voice, or you're not a great dancer, remember God knows exactly what you can or can't do well. So, go ahead and make a joyful noise, and dance unto the Lord! I'm sure He won't mind so far you're being sincere.

The second thing these Christians had going for them is their obedience expressed as patience! Patience is a Fruit of the Spirit; so it's safe to say these people were submitted to the Holy Spirit. The command then means they were to keep submitting to the Holy Spirit so He can continue producing patience in them. The present opposition was going to end, but that didn't mean there won't still be persecution in other forms and at other times in their lives. They could rely on God's help, but it was their responsibility to keep being patient despite and throughout the persecutions they would face during their lifetime.

Are there still Christians who don't know what it means to be submitted to God's Holy Spirit? To submit means you're cooperating, always giving your consent, i.e., say yes to the Holy Spirit's leading and go ahead to do what He says. No antagonizing, no rebellion, no foot-dragging. Just prompt obedience. Again, easier said than done, but not impossible.

Beloved, Jesus never said being His follower would be a walk in the park. He made it very clear it would be costly, but also that it would require courage. Or, didn't you know that

loving God, obeying the Holy Spirit in matters of loyalty, consecration, service, purity and even in patience, require courage? It does! It absolutely does, especially when you consider that He will never let you remain in your comfort zone; you'd always have to stretch and step out of it – always!

The third thing these Christians had going for them was God's approval. And it was because they were doing all they knew and could do to please God, and He was pleased. Jesus' command then meant they were to make sure to stay within those bounds, and not be swayed nor stray. By this I mean they were to continue to please God by reason of what they chose to do and what they chose not to do! Deviating to the left or right will cost them. What then does this mean for us? Really, the same thing it meant for them. The command is the same, Beloved, you and I are tasked with making pleasing God our lifestyle regardless of the situation we find ourselves. It has to be second nature to us so much so that considering any other way will be completely foreign to us, and treading it, impossible.

These three things we've touched were tasked to do by the saints of old, just as we are tasked too; and just as failure to do them meant losing their crown, so we could lose ours too. What does that mean? I'm convinced it's literal, that there's indeed a crown Jesus had kept for each one of them, and us, in heaven, a reward for being steadfast till His returns or the end of our lives!

And, in His usual fashion, Jesus rounds off His message to the Church in Philadelphia by mentioning (more) rewards to those that overcome. To the Believers, then and now, who are obedient, patient despite persecution, and who will not reject

Christ, the Lord says, He will make each of us a pillar in the temple of God, and each of us shall go no more out! Let's understand this to mean, Jesus is going to make us permanent, supporting, integral or upstanding members and part of God's Church – a position of service! But that's not all, He also says He will inscribe on each of us the name of God, the name of the city of God, which is *new Jerusalem*, and also His new name. This I believe is a triple-layered seal and symbol or mark of God's ownership of us and our office!

Scriptural Reference: Revelation 3:7-13.

THE SEVENTH CALL: *Be Mindful of Your Relationship with Money*

DIFFERENT PEOPLE, Christians inclusive, have different kinds of relationship with money. Some have a good relationship with money, others have a bad relationship with money; and there are those who by reason of their inaction can be said to have no relationship with money. To which group do you belong? Before you answer, let's look briefly into these three categories.

1. *Good Relationship with Money:* The people that have a good relationship with money see it through the right lens. They understand that it is universally accepted as a medium of exchange. This means it has purchasing power, and can be used as means of payment for goods and services. They also realize or are aware that they have a need for it, so they obtain it via legal means, such as working a regular job, starting a business and/or investing in order to earn it.

But that's not all, they also have the right expectations of money. What this means is that they recognize that even though money is able to get them certain things, e.g. the bare necessities, even luxury, it still has its limitations; for instance, while money can get you a good place to live, it can't

guarantee your safety; while money can get you good food to eat and water to drink, it can't guarantee good health; while money can get you the best medical care, it can't guarantee healing, long life etc. I'm sure you get the picture. So, these people in this category understand the limitations of money, and because of this, acquiring it is not topmost priority for them. Yes, it's a priority, but not topmost, and so relentlessly chasing after it in order to acquire and amass it is not a thought that consumes their minds nor an action they invest their time in doing. Their highest priority remains God, who has no limitations, and the cause of His Kingdom on earth and in heaven (Matthew 6:33).

One more thing that sets apart the people that fall in this group is what they do with money – how they handle it. I'm talking about those who have just enough, and even those who are blessed with lots of it. they use money not only to meet their personal needs and that of their immediate families alone, but also to meet the needs of others: widows, the fatherless, orphans, displaced families, the impoverished in the community, the Church etc. They are full of good works.

2. *Bad Relationship with Money:* The people in this category also know the definition of money and even its powers. Unfortunately, it is this knowledge, and perhaps the way they process the information, that lays the foundation for their bad relationship with money. Take for instance how they obtain money. These people are willing to do anything, even explore illegal and sinful ways, in order to obtain money, turning themselves into criminals fit for legal punishment, and also God's.

Aside knowing what money can do, these people refuse to accept or believe that money has its limitations; and so acquiring and amassing it become their topmost priority instead of seeking God and the fulfilment of the righteous cause of His Kingdom. What they are doing is replacing God with Money. And as a result of their belief in money, they end up with a heightened expectation of it, and what ensues is always disappointment for them, at least in the end. I say “at least in the end” because, you’ll always find these people enjoying the pleasures/luxuries that money can afford today. You won’t be wrong if you refer to them as hedonists. They are pleasure seekers; they go by the doctrine that pleasure/happiness is the sole or chief good in life, and money is the key to unlocking all of that and more. And so they are devoted to the pursuit of money.

Yet, because they refuse to acknowledge the limitations of money doesn’t mean they don’t encounter it every now and then; but by then, for most of them, it wouldn’t even matter. For contentment and moderation, which have been foreign to them, will continue to remain so and you’d even see them continually seeking for ways to get more and more money; acquiring more of it and amassing it remains topmost priority for them, and they’ll do so at all cost.

Here is the twist, in spite of how much money they acquire and amass, few of them do use their money to help meet the needs of others. It may come as a surprise, but a small percentage of them do; it is possible to have a bad relationship with money and still be good to others. So, yes, you may from time to time see a percentage of those who love money shift their focus from themselves and their families,

and help out others in need, even in the community and the Church; just don't count on it being a regular thing or to come with no strings attached.

3. *No Relationship with Money:* The people in this category know the definition of money and know it's abilities too; yet they refuse to let it motivate them to act, at least in the right way. Sadly, you will find Believers in this category too like you will in the categories previously mentioned. But, even if they refuse to acknowledge money like they ought to, their needs won't let them forget money – it remains their constant reminder. They are often forced to admit they have need of money, still that doesn't propel them to seek legal means, say obtaining a job in order to earn money, start a business/enterprise with monies received as gift/support or even invest; they don't even consider illegal means either – which is a good thing, though. And the Believers among them come up with clever ways to blame their lazy positions on God.

One word that will define the character of the people in this group is laziness. They are lazy, slothful. They are disinclined to activity, and hate exertion. You'd always find them idle and unproductive; yet, they want to have a roof over their heads, food to eat, water to drink and even clothes and shoes to wear! Some are even bold enough to desire the finer things in life, luxury items and the likes! And most even succeed in making it all happen. How? Simply by exploiting the generosity of others – they are always bothering others with their needs and requests, even employing tools of

manipulation, lies and deceit. But the majority of them languish.

Most of the people in this group end up being depressed and dispirited; their lives are plagued with limitations and filled with regrets in the end, as they never really accomplish anything or much, let alone be capable of doing good, at least the good that requires money for others, even in their community and the Church. They are always receivers, hardly ever givers.

Now that we've looked into the three categories, I'll ask again, which group do you fall into? The one with a good relationship with money, the one with a bad relationship with money, or the one with people who have no relationship with money? Please answer honestly. And if your answer is at least two of the above, or even if it is all of the above so far in your lifetime, I won't be surprised. Why? Because, most humans, Christians inclusive, don't start out with having a good relationship with money. Some start with no relationship with money, others with a bad relationship with money, but all are expected to strive towards having a good and balanced relationship with money and maintaining it.

Many of us are hard at work on it, some of us aren't. And I must add that many factors are responsible for our wrong relationships with money, the topmost on my list being the society we live in. You'd agree with me that a person that was born and raised in a very materialistic society/family has a huge chance of having a bad relationship with money. In fact, except they are being very intentional about having a good and balanced relationship with money, they will as a matter of fact have a bad relationship with money. That sort of

environment is a set up for failure really. The situation is not any better for a person who grew up in a family full of sloths/freeloaders. You get the picture?

The next factor responsible for our wrong/bad relationship with money as Christians is the presence and doctrine of prosperity preachers! Their emergence and our tolerance of them in the body of Christ has made them successful in raising a generation of money-obsessed Christians, both old and young! Their preaching appeal to our flesh, so we relish it as we swallow it hook, line and sinker; then like remote-controlled robots, at their command/suggestion, we go out and begin a frenzied search for money! It's horrible! Those trapped in this cycle completely forget everything Christ has taught us, especially about money! Christians who remain in such churches sentence themselves to a lifetime of bad relationship with money. The list goes on and on to even include self as regards greed and a general lack of contentment. Let me stop there for now.

Question now is why is it so important for us Christians to have a good and balanced relationship with money? Aside all the reasons we've touched on briefly so far, the chief reason is because of our spiritual lives and wellbeing. And the best way to explain this is by taking a deep dive into the message Jesus sent the Christians in the Church in Laodicea. Let's get right into it.

A Lukewarm Bunch!

WHEN Jesus introduces Himself to the Laodicean church, He says He is the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God. As usual, His introduction

– enigmatic as it is – is still revelatory, especially when considered along the lines of the message He sends. In the opening, He tells them that He knows their works, and narrows in on their energy for God, the things of God, even for spiritual things, which He considered tepid/lukewarm. To make it plain, their interest and response to God and all things godly was below par – below the accepted standard for a child of God, a follower of Christ.

And this had become their norm, but it was unacceptable to Jesus who would rather they'd pick a side, either be hot (eager, zealous) or completely cold (falling so far off the mark that we consider them sinners anew). What they didn't know was that they were at risk of being separated from Jesus permanently on account of their lukewarmness, if they didn't take the necessary steps to realignment.

Jesus continues His loving rebuke and chastening of this Church by revealing the contents of their hearts as well as what they were eager, zealous for! Can you guess what it is? Riches, material increase etc. They had desired and chased after ephemeral (short-lived) pleasures and things; investing most if not all of their time and energy in acquiring them, amassing them, and had succeeded too! The Christians in the Laodicean Church had become rich and multiplied what they had as possession.

The next thing that followed is that their material success clouded their reasoning; they fell into the error of believing that material wealth equals good spiritual wellbeing, while the actual truth as revealed by Jesus was that they had successfully achieved all their material wealth at the expense of their spiritual wellbeing! Before we go any further, let's take a

minute to really consider the dangers having a bad relationship with money poses to our spiritual lives and wellbeing.

Money Demands and Diverts Our Attention and Efforts

ONE thing Jesus' words make clear to us is that money demands our attention, and once it has it, it takes up most if not all of our time and energy. And if we by any chance make the mistake of giving it our full, complete and undivided attention, we will devote all of our time and energy to it as well, and will be doing so at the risk of our spiritual life and wellbeing, which ought to be matters of paramount importance. Please, let's take this seriously, especially if you're a youth reading this.

Nothing, absolutely nothing, is worth losing Jesus over! And one of the things that will contend with your relationship with Jesus is money, call it riches, increase or possessions! And it always disguises. It will come as a personal need, even as a noble cause, an opportunity or duty too; but the goal is always to separate you from Jesus, and many times it wins. The love and attention of too many people of the previous generation of Believers were carried away by money. It's worse in our day. I know at least a number of people whom money is actively separating from Jesus, and others whom money did eventually separate from Jesus. I always weep over them. I can't help it, the tears flow freely; but I know their examples are before me, are before us all, so we can learn from them, because we're all at risk too.

And what do we learn from them? Not to give too much thought to money (Proverbs 23:5). I'm not saying you won't

have needs, I'm not saying you won't need money to meet them, and I'm not saying you shouldn't work towards having money to meet your needs if you aren't in full-time ministry. What I'm saying is, don't become worried and bothered when you don't have money in abundance, don't become overly anxious when you're confronted with your needs, and don't chase money! To chase after something, especially money, is not only to desire it but to be earnest and frenzied in seeking after it! It will leave your life in disorder!

Someone might ask, what then should we do when we don't have much money despite how hard we work and our basic needs are ever before us? Jesus gives us the perfect counsel in Matthew 6:31-32. He says we shouldn't be anxious about our needs, that we ought to put our trust in God who is our heavenly Father and is aware of our needs and capable of meeting them. He then adds in verse 33 that we should prioritize our spiritual life and wellbeing first, and God will take care of our needs. In verse 34, He says we should live one day at a time. Thinking about tomorrow's needs even before tomorrow comes can and will do more harm than good.

Money Can Deceive Us

THIS description of money I'm about to share is easily one of my favourite descriptions of money, and might be one you absolutely need to add to the list you already have. Money is a veil, as revealed by Jesus, because it can be used by the enemy to conceal the truth from us. Take for instance the Christians in the Church in Laodicea whom money – chasing it and acquiring it – successfully led down the path of spiritual decline, and with its increase, Satan convinced them that all

was well with them. And they believed it too, because Jesus said they thought in their heart that because they were rich, because they had increased with goods that they had need of nothing!

These conceited Christians were completely oblivious of their true spiritual state. Do you know any Christian that still believes that the presence of plenty money/wealth and possessions, especially in the life of a Believer, equals good spiritual standing? They think that money – increase in it – is a yardstick for spiritual success! I hope you aren't one of those, because you will be wrong, very wrong. And if you are, then you've been deceived.

Please pay close attention to what Jesus says, that despite these Christians in Laodicea striving not to lack anything physically and materially, and believing they lacked nothing, whether physically or spiritually – because of their financial achievements and the fact that they still referred to themselves as Christians and belonged to a local assembly – they in fact lacked many things; and what they lacked were the things they couldn't afford to lack – spiritual things. I don't know in what order they suffered the spiritual decline – their spiritual losses. But Jesus reveals that they had become wretched and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked!

I don't know about you, but the imagery is scary for me, an anomaly for a true child of God who is expected to be in an enviable state spiritually, loaded with spiritual riches, filled with joy even to overflowing, not lacking in any spiritual blessings, and should be able to see, i.e. discern clearly, and who is supposed to be clothed with the robe of righteousness. But Jesus isn't just describing the state of the Christians in this

Church, but you and I know His words, even the description of their true spiritual state depicts that of some of the Christians in the Church today. Sadly, many Church youths are trapped in this too! Worse still, it reveals what the state of the future generation will be if care isn't taken now.

Many Believers are spiritually wretched, miserable, poor, blind and naked! Is it safe to say money has the capacity to rob a Believer clean? I believe it is. And that's one more danger that a bad relationship with money poses to the Believer.

Money Can Rob the Believer

MONEY can and will rob the Believer if he/she isn't mindful of the kind of relationship they have with it. In the case of carelessness, the Believer will be reduced to a pitiable state. Did you wonder how the Christians in Laodicea were reduced to the pitiable state they were? Yes, we know money is the main culprit, but did you wonder how it got them to part with their spiritual riches, joy, blessings, their spiritual eyes and white raiment? I don't know about you, but I wonder about it and have come to the conclusion that there was a trade-off, only they didn't know when it happened.

You see, money is a tool in the hands of the enemy, Satan our adversary. Isn't it clear why money is often referred to as a god? It still is a major tool, a weapon in Satan's hands, one that he wields against everyone, including and especially, a true child of God. Money is something Satan uses to initiate and successfully carry out trade-offs with those he seeks to devour.

Let me refresh your mind on how Satan does this. He does so using our desires, ambitions, or disguising as a need, an opportunity or duty; he then demands and diverts our

attention, and before we come to realize it, he's got open access into our lives and has robbed us clean.

By the time the trade-off is complete in the spirit realm, you're in a deplorable state, even if physically you're well off. People commend and even envy you. Of all the valuable things a Believer is robbed off when they have a bad relationship with money, the worst is that they are separated from Jesus. The imagery is that, with your desires and by your actions, you shut Jesus out of your heart.

Why this extreme image? It's because you can't have room in your heart for two Masters. Like Jesus rightly said in one of His teachings in Matthew 6:24, mammon/money acts as a master; so, it's either Jesus or Money. There's room for just one in your heart. Jesus won't share that heart space with money. You'll have to make a choice, and the one you make room for is the one you love, the one you'll serve. I guess the challenge now is to choose whom will be Master over our lives. Let's choose correctly, please.

Going further, Jesus counsels the Christians in the Church in Laodicea. He tells them – and as many of us who have a bad relationship with money – to take heed to His counsel, and to repent. But what is His counsel? He tells them to come to Him in order to buy what they lacked, things such as gold tried in the fire that they may be rich, white raiment that they may be clothed, and that the shame of their nakedness do not appear. and eye salve that they may see. We'll look into these things individually, but before then let's realize once again that Jesus, not money, has all the answers to our lives' problems, even complex spiritual ones; and not only is He willing to share these answers with us, He is able to

provide all we lack spiritually. But, that's not all I want us to realize.

It's also important that those of us who fall into the category of the Christians in Laodicea know that receiving what we need from Jesus will, as a matter of fact, cost us something; after all, He did say "*buy of me,*" indicating that some payment or rather sacrifice will be required on our part. We'll have to part with something or some things in order to receive from Him what we need. We'll learn more about what is required of us as we look into what Jesus counsels us to buy of (from) Him. Let's get right to it.

- ***Gold Tried in the Fire:*** At first glance, it looks as though Jesus is talking about literal gold and literal fire; but He isn't. What Jesus' words imply is that there is the presence of impurities (love of money, vain/selfish ambition, greed/avarice etc) in the heart and life of these Christians, and that He is capable of refining them – ridding them of these impurities through a baptism of fire. And by the time He is done, they will appear as gold – in their spiritual appearance – but more so in their worth and value again.

And what will be required of them? Their cooperation – doing what is required of them – a willingness to go through the refining process regardless of how it happens, when it happens and for how long it goes on without interrupting the process. Now, this refining process, like I earlier mentioned, will be via a baptism of fire, meaning it won't be enjoyable. It would most likely be characterized by a series of unpleasant situations, sufferings to be specific; but it would prove beneficial in the end seeing that the Holy Spirit would be hard at work in us during those times.

- **White Raiment:** When Jesus says there's a need for white raiment (the robe of righteousness), it usually implies that the old one is soiled/defiled via sin. But in this case, not only is the old garment soiled/defiled, it's not even available anymore, leaving the Christian naked – disrobed! This is telling of how far-gone these Christians were. Sure, they were materialistic. It makes us wonder the kind of lows they had sunk – the compromises they made in order to become rich and to increase in goods. It must have been really bad, and consistently so for them to have turned out stark naked – disrobed spiritually!

At this point if we refer to them as sinners, seeing they had fallen into compromise, we wouldn't be wrong. In fact, that was what was required of them in order to acquire a white raiment. Rather than consider themselves Christians or half-hearted Christians, they needed to be willing to admit that they were sinners, sinners in need of saving, in need of the Saviour Jesus, so that He can clothe them in His righteousness again. Now, let's take note that only Jesus can give one a white raiment, a clean slate even. Our mere insistence that we are Christians can't do it. Our regular Church attendance can't do it, neither can our past Christian service. We must go to Jesus with all humility! It's amazing what a broken and contrite heart can achieve when presented before God.

- **Eye Salve:** Eye salve is an ointment for the eyes. The Christians in Laodicea by reason of their bad relationship with money and the multitudes of their trade-off with the adversary had lost their spiritual sight. Satan had carted off with their eyes. But they weren't yet a hopeless case. Jesus was willing and able to restore their spiritual sight. To lose one's

sight in this context is to become spiritually blind – unable to discern or judge correctly, needing the right guidance.

What Jesus offers is not only eye salve for the eyes but will anoint their eyes as well. They won't be the ones to do it by themselves. What this means is that Jesus can and will restore their sight; afterwards, not only will they be able to discern or judge correctly, He will also continually guide them – they will enjoy divine guidance going forward. And going by the different ways Jesus healed the blind in the Scriptures, especially during His public ministry, we won't be wrong to assume that Jesus is likely to use various methods (even life situations) to open our eyes and restore our sight.

What then is required of those who seek the restoration of their sight? They need to draw near to Jesus. Not once did I read of Jesus healing the blind from afar even though He could. They were all in close proximity to Him, so He could either lay hands on them (even twice in an instance), apply something to their eyes or so He could instruct them on what they must do. In every case, they were in close proximity, were committed to the process, and received their healing.

The same is required of us for our eyes to be open, for us to regain our sight and remain seeing. You must be willing to redirect your attention, invest time and energy in being with Jesus, communing with Him, even daily, through prayer and study of the word as a way of staying committed to Him, thereby growing your faith and practicing obedience. This way, you not only receive your sight, you never go a day without divine direction again.

And if they and us who fall into the same category as the Christians in Laodicea do indeed make up our minds to offer

the sacrifices required for our restoration, all that Jesus listed we would have, and even more. In fact, our renewed commitment, if we follow through, would prove that we have come-around, renewed, and are genuinely repentant. We'd have proven that Jesus is no longer shut out of our hearts and lives but has been re-invited in, that we had heard His knock and voice, and have opened the door of our hearts and lives to Him once again. And He then had come into our hearts and lives and now commune with us and we commune with Him. We already know that this is a sure way to continual spiritual growth and maturity, even fervency which is the ideal standard for a child of God!

As is Jesus' fashion, He ends the message to the Church in Laodicea by encouraging them, and us by extension, to overcome the temptations to neglect our spiritual growth, maturity and wellbeing on account of money throughout our lifetime on earth. We're to remain eager, zealous in our interest and response to God and godly things above all else. This is what will make us eligible for a good reward from Him. And this reward He speaks of is the overcomer being permitted as a right, a privilege or favour, to sit with Him in His throne, just as He overcame and is set down with God the Father in His throne.

What do you understand this to mean? The reward Jesus speaks of for the overcomer is similar to the reward He received for overcoming the world – similar but not equal. The overcomer will be elevated in rank spiritually, but also endowed with rare power/authority. We would be permitted to join Jesus in the work of ruling – the exercise of authority! Amazing! There's no way I'm letting Satan rob me of this

opportunity! Or are you willing to let him rob you? If you aren't willing, then really pay attention to all you've read here, and all that Jesus has said in His word.

Scriptural Reference: **Revelation 3:14-22.**

FINAL WORDS:

A New Beginning with a New You!

CONGRATULATIONS! YOU made it to the concluding part of this book. I admire your dedication to learning the truths captured in this book, the essence of which is as God intends in His word for the season. As you likely have observed, I have directed much of the message specifically to the Christian youth in Nigeria. But you're not exempted wherever else you are.

I sincerely hope you're thoroughly furnished now, armed with vital truths, and no longer ignorant of why many 'mighty' in the Christian faith fell. I hope too you can see clearly what's holding you back, or what stands to hold you back from becoming who God wants you to become. I hope too you have learnt how to avoid all the pitfalls, so you can do all the exploits God has planned that you'll do.

Those who fell by the wayside did so because they prioritized Christian service over investing in their personal relationship with God, refused to develop Christ-like attitude such as loyalty to God, especially during hard times, remained in the world by adopting its mentality and practices, embraced false teachers and their teachings, courted sin either passively or actively, were impatient when being persecuted, and last but not least, they had a bad relationship with money!

There you have it. If others had fallen, the question now is how will you fare? Identifying these stumbling blocks is one thing, learning about them, including how to avoid them is

another thing. But will you overcome? Will you put the word to work? Will you be a doer?

Take an active part in your destiny today because God is indeed ushering in a new beginning, but the new beginning starts with you! He wants to make you new first!

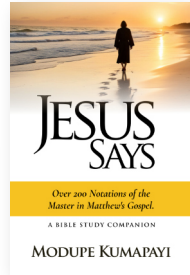
BOOKS BY THE AUTHOR



Letters In My Green Bag
A collection of ineffable, life-transforming ways to experience God.



God's Love Letter To You
A devotional guide.



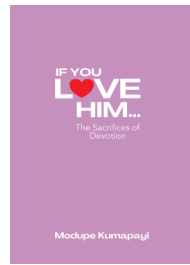
Jesus Says
Over 200 notations of the Master in Matthew's gospel; a Bible study companion.



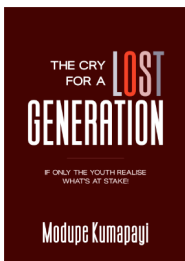
A Book For Dreamers
How dreamers transmute into achievers.



Take The Limits Off
A challenge to parents and guardians to release their wards to do what God wants and has ordained for each child.



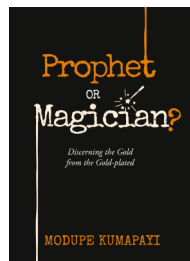
If You Love Him...
A book that answers the question, 'What is God's love?' And it presents the challenge, if you love God, then what?



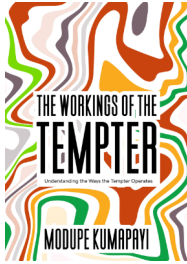
The Cry for a Lost Generation
A book that offers immediate help for anyone seeking God now and seeking to do His will regardless of their past.



Dinah's Defilement Is Your Defilement
A dramatic retelling of Dinah's story. A book that offers you a claim: You can separate yourself unto God and live free of Satan's defilement.

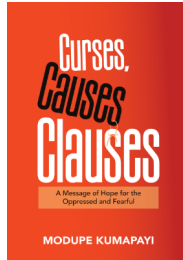


Prophet or Magician?
Prophet or Magician? Is a unique book, a mirror of sort, and reflects who God's true prophets are, and who impostors, charlatans, liars, false preachers are.



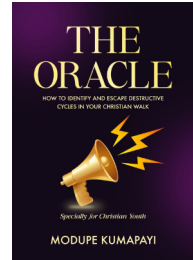
The Workings of the Tempter

The Workings of the Tempter is an unusual book; it retells Bible episodes of temptations and chronicles incidences of many who had fallen for the tempter's cunning ways of trapping those he lures into sin.



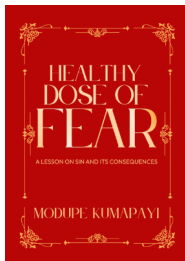
Curses, Causes and Clauses

Curses, Causes and Clauses is written to answer questions about curses, show you the way out of curses, and also teach you how to remain free from curses.



The Oracle

The Oracle reveals hidden truths about the Christian life. Opens the way to understanding why some Christians fell in the early church and how you can stand today and gain heaven at last.



Healthy Dose of Fear

Healthy Dose of Fear equips you to be a victorious, sin-overcoming, holy, upright, and heaven-assured child of God.

THE BOOK

The Oracle indeed! How best to describe a book that spells out the deep implications of the seven letters Jesus sent to the seven churches of Asia in the Book of Revelation! Some erroneously think of the first century state of the Christian Church as ancient; but *The Oracle* brings the reality of those seven churches to the modern time. Jesus wrote those letters to you, to me, to us today too. By implication:

- *The Oracle* is directed at you personally.
- It reveals hidden truths about the Christian life.
- Opens the way to understanding why some Christians fell in the early church, and how you can stand today and gain heaven at last.

THE AUTHOR

MODUPE KUMAPAYI believes strongly that God has impressed upon her heart to share through her writings the knowledge she has gained in her walk with God and the insight she has been given in her study of God's Word. Her deepest desire is to arm people with the truth; and her greatest fulfilment comes from watching people thrive spiritually.