

## NOURISH EVERY GRACE

by Dr. Geoff Thomas

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**G**od has filled the life of the Christian with all the glorious young plants of faith, love, assurance, peace and joy. Maybe at the moment of your conversion God gave some of you those things in great measure, and maybe for days and months you went on in the almost self-sustaining euphoria of that marvellous experience. Yet you have come to realise that they're not self-perpetuating and self-sustaining. We have to feed those graces, and exercise our faith on the great truths of the gospel, and exercise hope on the glorious promises of God, with our affections set on heaven. We have to sit under the best ministry we can, and listen intently to it, and apply what we hear. We have to read the Scriptures, and books about the Bible, and talk about the work of God with other Christians. If we don't do things like that then our heaven-given graces will return to the vague weeds of religion and fatalism. They will lose their fruitfulness and fragrance, and so they won't help us nor anyone else. We have to sustain and nourish our faith so that it grows. Faith isn't like having a spiritual visitor's book which records that Jesus Christ once stayed here for the night five years ago. It's an on-going relationship that doesn't just depend on memories from that past. Faith grows and becomes stronger by being fed: "Faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ" Rom. 10:17). Faith is not an exercise in introspection, but an exercise in Christ-centeredness. Trust in him - every day!

You also have to feed your hope. You have to trust the promises of God in his word. Let me give you an example of a simple Christian doing that today. There is a young man called Anthony who is now in the Caring for Life farm in Leeds. The change in his life since he became a Christian has been miraculous, and yet he is dogged by the most dreadful memories. His father had abused him and his sister. He lived in homes and probation hostels, often running away and living on the streets. He also struggles with the effect which Asperger's Syndrome has had on his daily life. He never remembers a time when bad things were not happening to him. Once, when he was in an agitated state, he did things which might have put him in jail for years, but the district judge was compassionate and put him in the custody of Caring for Life. When he first came to church he thought it was boring, but he came back and soon he believed in Jesus Christ. He says, "Then I started to understand more and more. I still do not understand why God let the bad things happen to me, but I do believe that God loves me - the Bible tells me that. I believe that Jesus died on the cross for sinners, and I believe he loves me. I believe that he forgives us when we ask him. I know Jesus now. One

day I am going to see Jesus face to face. I don't find it easy following Jesus, and I find it hard being a Christian, But I know that God loves me and he will never me go. I know he hears and answers my prayers." Anthony has become a man of hope, strengthened and sustained by his church, his circle of Christian friends and prayer. He knows where he is going. He knows God loves him. Work at feeding your hope.

Also you have to feed your love. This is the most indispensable of all the graces without which we are nothing. We read I Corinthians 13 and we put our own name there instead of the word 'love' and we search ourselves and we cry to God, "Make me patient, kind, not envying, not boasting, not proud, but always protecting, always trusting, and hoping and persevering." We put ourselves in places of service where our love for people is tested and has a chance to grow. Most of all we must feed it with the great vision of Jesus Christ himself as the embodiment of the love of God. We live at the foot of Calvary, where Christ became nothing and made himself of no reputation. Work at feeding your love.

We have to work at feeding our humility. Don Carson remembers interviewing two great American stalwarts of the Christian faith, Carl Henry and Kenneth Kantzer, before several hundred students. They had been professors, writers and lecturers who had kept the faith and contended for the gospel for decades. At the end of the interview, which was videotaped, Don Carson said to them that in his view they weren't men who'd succumbed to eccentricity in doctrine, nor to empire-building. They had both retained their integrity for half a century, so what was it that had most helped them in this area of Christian graciousness. Both the men were embarrassed by the question and then one of them said, "How on earth can anyone be arrogant when standing beside the cross?" That is Paul's outlook here. At the cross Christ emptied himself of all the paraphernalia and glory of his own deity. The Lord became a servant; God accepted the anathema of God, and there at Golgotha, supremely, is where our humility is strengthened, and we pour contempt on all our pride. We learn to lose our sensitivity on all the issues concerning our own honour and position. The great God humbled himself, and we learn what humility is. Work at feeding your faith, and feed your hope, and feed your love, and feed your humility. We have to work at feeding our joy, the great fruit of the Spirit, the sheer exhilaration at the knowledge that God is, that he lives and grips me and the world in his love so that at times we want to dance for joy. Often there is such fun in our homes, such laughter when we meet, such delight in coming together on a Sunday, such a happy spirit in our fraternals. Then Satan comes to attack us. "What's all this levity?" he says. "Don't you know how awesome God is, and how serious life is, and how terrible is the fate of the lost." He tries to make us feel guilty for the joys we know in creation, and family, and friends and most of all in the knowledge that our sins are forgiven and God is our Father. That thought must have troubled Isaac Watts because he wrote a hymn in which he said, "Come ye that love the Lord and let your joys be known." He went on to say, "Religion never was designed to make our pleasures less." Of course not, so let's work at strengthening our joy.

Work at feeding your assurance, or your assurance will go. You must guard it, and sustain it, most of all by a growing understanding of the glorious truths of the grace of God. Why are you a Christian today? Our text tells us that it's because of God's 'good purpose', in other words, because the Lord had chosen to work saving faith and repentance in us. He has loved you with an everlasting love - a love that never began. He loved you in the beginning. He knew all about you. He had seen the file, but still his good purpose was to forgive your sins, and give you life in Christ, and take you to heaven. Please don't slip into any form of legalistic thinking. Don't imagine that God loves you because you have been serving him for twenty years and done many kind things. Don't find any refuge in Mr Morality's house. It is built on the sand. Build on this - "chosen in Christ Jesus before the foundation of the world." If you begin to lose sight of great central gospel teaching that salvation is all of grace then your assurance will go. If you begin to think that your salvation depends on anything in yourself your confidence that you are a Christian will go.

A letter was forwarded to me this week from a friend who is a student at the Free Church College in Edinburgh, from another student named Ruairidh. He was diagnosed with cancer in early 2001 and then this was reconfirmed a year ago. It was a devastating discovery for a young man, and when one of his doctors dared to ask him the question "Well, where is your God now?" he was disturbed. But because he had worked in his heart the truths of biblical assurance he could reply. He says, "The answer I gave was the only answer I knew then. It remains the only answer I know now. I come from the Black Isle, where the northern view is dominated by Ben Wyvis. Easter Ross, being where it is, has a lot of rain and often Ben Wyvis would be shrouded in cloud or mist, blocking it from view. If someone came along to me and said that Ben Wyvis was no longer there because it couldn't be seen I would laugh and say, 'Don't be ridiculous. Of course it's still there - it's just the clouds that are blocking it from view.' So it is for me with God - I know He's still there as He always has been and promised to be. It's just some temporary clouds that are blocking Him from my view." That confidence is the benefit of strengthening your assurance.

The cancer has continued to spread, and his spleen has now been removed. Last December Ruairidh started weekly chemo but the cancer has now spread throughout all the organs of his body. On August 30 they decided to cease treatment because it was damaging his heart and lungs and wasn't a success. Chemo had been a great struggle for him. Each time he's had to go through it he says he feels as if he were walking to his execution. His hair loss was also surprisingly disturbing, especially the reaction of people to it.

However, Ruairidh has been working out the assurance of his salvation with fear and trembling. You can see this in an answer he gave to someone who asked him recently what he wanted them to pray for. Listen to his priorities. This is what he said,

*So many things!*

1. *that I and everyone else would be able to accept God's will whatever it is.*
2. *that if it is his will, I'd be healed.*
3. *if it isn't that I would be a good witness and as someone said recently 'your job now is to die well'. I am not afraid of death (lots of other emotions about it though!) but the process, which is going to be pretty awful, petrifies me. I don't want to let God or anyone else down.*
4. *that my non-Christian relations would come to know Jesus as their Lord and Saviour soon.*
5. *that Audra and I (along with Mum, Dad, Gran, the MacRae's, and other friends) would have great times*
6. *that I would be kept in my walk with God.*

So there we see Ruairidh is working out the assurance of his own salvation.

We are all called as those who have been saved by God's grace to do the same by mortifying our sins and feeding our graces at the word of God, the ordinances of the New Testament - Sunday worship, the privileges of believing fellowship, and the sharing of the great verities of the Christian gospel with one another. We work out our salvation by applying ourselves to those graces.