

# **The Power in Praise: How the Spiritual Dynamic of Praise Revolutionizes Lives**

by Merlin Carothers (1972)

## **Chapter 1 The Power in Praise**

To praise God is to express our acceptance of something that God is permitting to happen. So to praise God for difficult situations, as sickness or disaster, means literally that we accept its happening, as part of God's plan to reveal His perfect love for us.

We can't really praise God without being thankful for the thing we are praising Him for. And we can't really be thankful unless we believe that an omnipotent, loving Father is working for our good. Praising, then, involves both gratitude and joy that God is keeping His Word to work good through everything if we love Him. (Rms 8:28)

"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." (1 Thess 5:16-1 if8)

Many people are able to praise God for their circumstances, simply because they accept the word of the Bible that they are supposed to praise God in everything. Praising Him, they soon experience the results of an attitude of consistent thanksgiving and joy; and in turn, their faith is strengthened, and they can continue to live this way.

We're not supposed to push our understanding out of the way, grit our teeth, and say, "It doesn't make sense to me, but I'll praise the Lord if it kills me, if that's the only way I can get out of this mess!" That's not praising, that's manipulating. ....We are to praise God *with* our understanding, not in spite of it.

We can never understand why and how God does something, but He wants us to accept with our understanding that He does it. This is the basis of our praise. God wants us to understand that He loves us and that He has a plan for us. And we know that all that happens to us is working for our good if we love God and are fitting into his plans (Rms. 8:28).

Praising God is not a magic formula for success. It is a way of life that is solidly backed up in God's Word. We praise God, not for the expected results, but for the situation just as it is. Praise is based on an acceptance of the present as part of God's loving, perfect will for us. Praise is not based on what we think or hope will happen in the future. We praise God for who He is and where and how we are *right* now.

When we honestly praise God His power flows into the situation, and we will soon notice a change in us or around us. The change may be that we come to experience a real joy and happiness in the midst of what once appeared to be a miserable situation, or the situation may change. But this is a result of praise, and must not be the motivation for praise.

To praise God is to delight in Him. "Be delighted with the Lord. Then he will give you all your heart's desires." (Ps. 37:4). Notice the order of importance here. We don't list our heart's desires and then delight ourselves in the Lord in order to get them. We're first to be delighted, and once we've experienced being really delighted with God, we'll discover that everything else becomes secondary.

God does have a perfect plan for our lives. We may look at the difficult circumstances surrounding us and think we've been standing still in one painful spot. The turning point will come when we begin to praise God for our situation instead of crying for Him to take it all away.

***God has a perfect plan for our lives, but he cannot move us to the next step until we joyfully accept our present situation as part of that plan. What happens next is God's move, not ours.***

"God, I thank you that my life is just as it is. Every problem has been your gift to bring me to the place where I am right now. You wouldn't have permitted any of these things to happen if you hadn't known that it was best for me."

Praising God is something more than a change in our own attitude. The phrases "Praise the Lord!" or "Thank God!" are used so glibly that we tend to lose sight of their real meaning. There is power in our words of praise; there is power in our attitude of thankfulness and joy. When we sincerely accept and thank God for a situation, believing that He has allowed it to come about, there is released into that situation a supernatural, divine force that causes changes beyond what can be explained as an unfolding of natural events.

All sincere prayer opens the door for God's power to move into our lives. But the prayer of praise releases more of God's power to move into our lives than any other form of petition. The Bible gives examples which show this fact again and again. Psalm 22:3 declares "*You are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel.*" No wonder God's power and presence is near when we praise Him. He actually dwells, inhabits, resides, in our praises!

An important step in the act of praising God is to take our eyes off the threatening circumstances and look to God instead. We are not to be blind to the very real threats of evil in our lives. But we are not to be pre-occupied with the appearance of evil around us. See it, admit our helplessness to cope with it in our own strength, and then turn to God. The Lord says in Second Chronicles "Be not afraid or dismayed....for the battle is not yours, but God's." (II Ch.20:15 Amps).

Many of us are constantly defeated by the circumstances around us because we aren't ready to accept that the battle is God's, not ours. Even when we realize our own powerlessness, we are afraid to let go and trust ourselves to God's power.

God's Word makes it clear that the only way out of that dilemma is a step of faith. Believing that God's promises are true, accepting them, and daring to trust in them leads to understanding. The principle in the Bible is clear: Acceptance comes before understanding. The reason for this is simple. Our human understanding is so limited that we can't possibly grasp the magnitude of God's plan and purpose for us. If our understanding had to come before our acceptance, we'd never be able to accept very much.

God told Joshua to march around Jericho six days in a row. On the seventh day they were to blow their trumpets and shout. "And the wall of the enclosure shall fall down in its place, and the people shall go up (over it) every man straight before him."(Josh. 6:5). Joshua trusted God, but what would we have thought if we had been among his followers. Would we have grumbled and balked at his foolhardy orders?

The examples of Joshua and many others in the Bible clearly show that God wins victories by means and principles that look utterly foolish and contradictory to our human wisdom and strategies. We are told to trust Him, praise Him, and watch Him work. This is how Jesus Christ operated during His time of ministry in Israel. He openly admitted that of Himself He could do nothing; His part was to submit to His Father's will in perfect obedience, trust, and faith so that God's power could meet the needs of the people.

There was the time when over 5,000 had followed Him and were hungry. How did Jesus pray? He didn't plead with God to perform a miracle. Instead, He looked up to heaven, and praising God gave thanks, and broke the loaves, and kept on giving them to the disciples to set before the people. (Mk. 6:41-43) .

When Jesus was confronted with the death of Lazarus, he again prayed a simple prayer of thanksgiving. When the stone was rolled away from the grave where Lazarus had been buried for four days, Jesus lifted His eyes and said, "Father, thank you for hearing me " (Jn. 11:41). Then He commanded Lazarus to come from the grave. The man who had been dead four days walked out!

The Bible says that Jesus came to earth to make it possible for us to praise God. Isaiah the prophet foretold Jesus' coming and said that He would come "to preach the Gospel of good tidings...to bind up and heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the physical and spiritual captives, and the opening of the prison and of the eyes to those who are bound...to grant consolation and joy to those who mourn..." (Is. 61:1-3).

You may recognize your own condition on the list. Are you brokenhearted? Bound by physical limitations, sickness, and spiritual limitations? In physical prison, or imprisoned by your own spiritual blindness? Are you mourning? Unable to rejoice, be thankful, or praise God? Is your spirit heavily burdened and failing? Perhaps it is because you haven't fully accepted and understood the good news Jesus came to bring.

Praise is an active response to what we know God has done and is doing for us – in our lives and in this world through His Son Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

If we doubt in our hearts what God has done and is doing, we cannot wholeheartedly praise Him. Uncertainty about the Good News will always be a barrier to praise. If we want to be able to praise God for everything, we need to be sure our foundation is solid and without cracks of doubt and uncertainty.

## **Chapter 2 Hear the Good News**

Many church-going people do not seem to appreciate God's gift of eternal life. They take their salvation for granted and forget the price Jesus paid for their redemption. Other Christians think that they have to struggle to live a good life to receive God's free gift of salvation. Trying hard to live a good life puts them under such a continual strain that they often wonder if it is really worth it. No wonder they aren't very enthusiastic about sharing the Good News with anyone else. To them it just means going to church on Sunday, staying away from things that might be a lot of fun, and giving their hard-earned cash in the offering plate. If this is your view of salvation, it is no wonder why you spend all your free time seeking entertainment and why you never think of speaking to others about God's wonderful love for us.

But the reality is that God's free gifts of salvation and eternal life are the greatest gifts we can ever receive. worth more than millions of dollars. And He doesn't give them just to those who meet some minimum standards of behavior. They are available to all who will accept them. Christ has already paid the price for every gift God wants to give to us.

Receiving forgiveness of and eternal life as free gifts doesn't fit into the normal pattern of life as we know it. We've been conditioned to believe that we only get what we deserve or are willing to pay for. God's plan of giving us a totally free gift seems so impossible to us that we try to attach something to His offer.

But as St. Paul wrote, it is by God's kindness that we are saved. "Through Jesus Christ, all the kindness of God has been poured out upon us undeserving sinners; and now he is sending us out around the world to tell all people everywhere the great things God has done for them. (Rms. 1:5)

God wants us to share the Good News with everyone. Jesus told His disciples to go out and tell the whole world what He had done for us. So who do you think wants to keep it a secret? Yes, there is an enemy prowling around and his favorite trick is to make us fearful of sharing the wonderful news about God's free gifts. If you cling to the idea of trying to do good to deserve God's favor, you may never learn to love Him. You surely will never get excited about His gifts. But if we are absolutely certain of what God has done for us, if we've accepted His free gifts, then we are going to bubble over with the news.

When Christ enters your life, you'll still keep your physical body. But there's a big change. Paul wrote, "I have been crucified with Christ: and I myself no longer live, but Christ lives in me. And the real life I now have within this body is a result of my trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Gal. 2:20).

"When someone becomes a Christian he becomes a brand new person inside. He is not the same any more." (2 Cor. 5:17). You may look much the same, but you aren't the same. You've become a new spiritual being inside, because Christ dwells there through the Holy Spirit. Your old physical body will one day die, but you won't. You will live forever, with Christ.

Jesus Christ did the doing, but that won't help us if we don't respond by believing. If we get tangled up in the "doing," we will never be free to do the believing. "He died for our sins and rose again to make us right with God, filling us with God's goodness." (Rms 4:25)

St. John wrote "Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. So we know and believe the love God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. In this is love perfected with us, that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear." (1 John 4:18)

God is love. Everything He does is love in action. Our problem is we have such a limited picture of what love is all about. We've all been hurt and disappointed by human love, the kind that rewards us and accepts us when we're good and punishes and rejects us when we're bad. But that is not like God's love at all.

In the New Testament the word "agape" is used to describe God's love for us. It means a reasoning, intentional, deliberate, spiritual devotion. It doesn't originate in feelings or emotions; it is a deliberate act of love, originating in the will. It never changes and can always be relied on, because it doesn't depend on how lovable or deserving the loved one is.

This is how God loves us. He loves us when we reject Him, when we disobey and when we've made a mess of our lives. And He is always ready to accept and forgive us and to fill us with His joy and peace. The free gift of God's love is eternal life in Christ Jesus, and it is as near to us as our mouth and our heart. We simply accept what Jesus has done for us, believe in our heart that He lives, and tell others about it.

The Lord wants to save everyone. However, it is necessary to act on what we know and to accept Jesus Christ as our personal Savior by inviting Him into our lives. When He comes in, by the Holy Spirit, we are spiritually born again.

There are many in our churches who know about Christianity. They know that Jesus is the Son of God who died for their sins; they know He lives again; but they've never surrendered their lives to Him and invited Him to be

Lord and Savior in their hearts. Thousands of people regularly attend worship services and go through all the outward forms of Christianity without ever having experienced Christ in their lives.

The gift of salvation and eternal life is absolutely free; you can do nothing to earn it or deserve it, but you must receive it before it can become yours. God reaches out, lovingly arranging circumstances to show us how much we need Him, to draw us to Himself.

***Faith is about the facts of salvation and not our feelings.***

If our relationship with God was dependent on our feelings, it really wouldn't be our choice, would it? We can't choose how we're going to feel. But we can choose to trust, to believe, and to have faith. Faith and feelings are not the same. In the letter to the Hebrews we read: "Now faith is the assurance, the confirmation, the title-deed of the things we hope for, being the proof of things we do not see and the conviction of their reality – faith perceiving as real fact what is not revealed to the senses." (Hebrews 11:1)

Faith does not originate in our emotions, our feelings, or our senses. Faith is a matter of ***will***. To be saved by faith, means that we accept Jesus Christ as our Savior by an act of our will, not by our emotions or feelings. We are born again by faith, saved by faith, and that means we take God's promise that it has happened once we've accepted Christ into our hearts. We may not *feel* saved or *feel* born again but that doesn't change the fact that we ***are***.

It is dangerous to try to measure our faith by feelings. We have been confusing feeling with fact for so long that we think we ***are*** what we feel. But our feelings are changeable and can be affected by the weather, by our diet, by our sleep, or the mood of our boss. Our feelings are a poor test of reality. When we apply them as a test of our relationship with God, we get into trouble.

Jesus said, "Pray in faith, believing you have received." We can't pray the prayer of faith if we insist on measuring the results by our feelings. In fact, God's truth in the Bible often says we should do the exact opposite of what we feel.

"Love your enemies," Jesus said. Doesn't He know how we ***feel*** about our enemies? Sure He does. But He's telling us that we don't have to let our feelings boss us around anymore. We are free to choose to love even our enemies! We are also free to accept God's Word as fact, regardless of what our emotions, our senses, our intellect or our feelings try to tell us. Our new life in Jesus Christ is a life of ***faith***. That means a life of freedom from the tyranny of our emotions, intellect and senses.

God isn't looking at our feelings, but at the decision we make. We may be feeling terrible, but as long as we accept Christ by faith, God considers the transaction done. Whatever you may feel or not feel immediately following your commitment makes no difference. God accepted your surrender of will, and you were born again by His Holy Spirit.

Praise God when you do have the wonderful experience of His presence, but don't let your faith depend on how you feel. A Christian who makes emotional experiences the test of his salvation will always be torn by doubts.

How do we fight our feelings? Paul wrote, "the only condition (for salvation) is that you fully believe the Truth, standing in it steadfast and firm, strong in the Lord, convinced of the Good News that Jesus died for you, and never shifting from trusting Him to save you. This is the wonderful news that came to each of you and is now spreading all over the world." (Colossians 1:23)

Once we surrender ourselves to Jesus, He says about us, “I give them eternal life and they shall never perish. No one shall snatch them away from me.” (John 10:28)

When doubts and feelings come to attack our faith God tells us to stand firmly on His Word. God’s promise is that we will experience more and more of His joy in peace in our lives as we go along. Rejoice when that happens, but rejoice also when you feel dry and empty. Your salvation is still a wonderful fact. Throw the switch of your will power in God’s direction and say, “I will to believe, God. I stand on your Word.”

Do it and discover that your old dependency on feelings will gradually fade away. You will be free to believe! “You will know the truth and the truth will set you free.” (John 8:32)

### **Chapter 3 Power Unlimited**

“God... has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in heaven because we belong to Christ.” (Ephesians 1:3)

Because we belong to Christ, we are children of God. We have entered His kingdom, and all the power, privileges, and responsibilities belonging to the children of God are ours. Not because we are worthy, but because we belong to Christ!

The result of placing our complete faith in what Christ does for us is glorious. “Now we can come fearlessly right into God’s presence, assured of His glad welcome when we come with Christ and trust in Him.” (Ephesians 3:12)

The Father wants us to trust that through Christ we have the *right* to approach Him and ask for whatever we need. God wants to bless us with good things; He wants us to be happy. God does provide for our needs, and He does it abundantly and free. All we have to do is ask.

The very first free gift God wants His new children to ask for is the baptism in the Holy Spirit. The baptism in the Holy Spirit is provided as a “first feeding” for newborn believers.

The Holy Spirit comes to dwell in the new believer the moment He accept Jesus Christ as his Savior. He is born of the Spirit. But Jesus also told His disciples that they would have to wait until they were *baptized* with the Holy Spirit so they could be His **witnesses** and spread the Good News with power and authority.” (Acts 1:5-8.)

The disciples waited in Jerusalem, just as Jesus had told them, and on the day of Pentecost there came the sound “like a roaring of a mighty windstorm in the skies above them and it filled the house where they were meeting. Then, what look like flames or tongues of fire appeared and settled on their heads. And everyone present was filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in languages they didn’t know, for the Holy Spirit gave them this ability.” (Acts 2:2-4)

This was the beginning of the Church when the timid disciples were transformed into fearless witnesses to Jesus Christ. They immediately began preaching the Gospel with power and authority, and the same miracles that had followed Christ, followed them.

The baptism with the Holy Spirit has been promised to everyone who believes in Jesus Christ. Jesus said, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. For the Scriptures declare that rivers of living water shall flow from the inmost being of anyone who believes in me. He was speaking of the Holy Spirit who would be given to everyone believing in Him.” (John 7:37-39)

The baptism in the Holy Spirit is a free gift. Jesus, who provided our salvation, also provided the Holy Spirit.

“I will ask the Father and He will give you another Comforter, and He will never leave you. He is the Holy Spirit.”(John 14:16-17)

Jesus is the One who sends the Holy Spirit; He baptizes us in the Holy Spirit. So what exactly *is* baptism in the Holy Spirit? Jesus sometimes referred to the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of Truth. “When the Spirit of truth comes He shall guide you into all truth...” (John 16:13) The Holy Spirit of Truth lives in all believers and guides them, but to be baptized in the Spirit of Truth means a great deal more.

The Greek word we translate as “baptize” in actually means to “immerse” or “saturate” and the same word also means “waterlogged.” So to ask Jesus to baptize us in the Holy Spirit means that we surrender ourselves to be saturated – waterlogged with His Holy Spirit.

The baptism in the Holy Spirit is a cleansing, purging, stripping experience. It brings total exposure to the searchlight of God’s truth to every little corner of our lives. The baptism in the Spirit purifies us and empties us of our self-reliance, our pride, our shady areas of deception, and the excuses we have been holding onto – all the things that block the inflow of God’s power and presence in our lives.

Jesus teaches us that we should pray to receive the Holy Spirit. “What father among you, if his son asked for fish, will instead of fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!” (Luke 11:11-13)

And when we ask Jesus to baptize us in the Holy Spirit and *know* He does it.

The baptism in the Holy Spirit, like every one of God’s gifts, must be received by *faith*. That means you may not *feel* anything when it happens. Faith is an act of our will, not a response to feelings.

Some people have dramatic experiences when they are first baptized in the Holy Spirit, just as some people have emotional encounters with Jesus Christ when they first receive Him as their Savior. But we don’t get saved by feeling, and we don’t get baptized in the Holy Spirit by feeling either. Whatever outward sensations you may or may not feel when you are baptized in the Holy Spirit, the sensations are *not* the baptism. The baptism of the Holy Spirit is an *inner* transformation.

As a result of this inner transformation, we are told in Scripture, there will be plenty of evidence to follow. We experience increased power and authority in witnessing for Christ; the operation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit through us, an increase in the fruits of the Spirit – love, joy, peace. All these things we will experience provided that we are trusting in the Lord’s promises.

We must *decide* to accept God’s word on faith and deliberately turn away from paying attention to our feelings. If we don’t, we will never be able to exercise our faith. Tell God that you *will* take His Word for it. You *will* believe Jesus baptizes you when you ask Him to. Stand firm in your trust and *believe* it has happened.

When you ask Jesus to baptize you in the Holy Spirit, whether you are alone or someone prays for you with the laying on of hands – Jesus will baptize you. Many people receive the baptism in the Holy Spirit while alone in prayer. However, our faith is often strengthened when we have other people praying for us.

Read everything in the Bible Jesus had to say about the Holy Spirit; read the book of Acts and the letters of St. Paul to the young churches concerning the Holy Spirit, the gifts of the Spirit and the fruit of the Spirit. All of this applies to you now.

Expect these things to happen in your own life. Tell God you're willing to be used as a channel of His love to others and be ready to step out in faith when God provides the opportunities. Praise God in all your circumstances, whether they seem good or bad to you; trust that God is using them to unfold his wonderful plan for your life.

#### **Chapter 4 Count it All Joy!**

“My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.” (James 1:2-4)

God has a very special plan for your life. It began long ago when He first created you. He formed you lovingly, carefully exactly to the specification, every detail just as He wanted... Nothing about you or your life has been accidental. In love He reached out and drew you to Himself through circumstances He had arranged just for that purpose. You were given a new birth, new life through His Holy Spirit when you accepted Jesus Christ, as your Savior, and were baptized, saturated with the Holy Spirit. And now God's plan is to make you full and complete!

God wants us to *become* something more than we are now. God wants us to become more loving, more kind, more patient, have more faith, peace, gentleness, kindness, humility, and self-discipline, so that we can be His witnesses wherever we are.

When we hear this, most of us think that means we have to embark on a rigorous program of self-improvement, trying to make ourselves more loving, kind, patient, humble, gentle, and disciplined. And the harder we try, the more frustrated we become. But the truth is God has to do the changing. He wants us to commit ourselves to Him and trust that He will transform us.

How does God bring about the change in us? How does He break the old patterns of thought and action we have lived with for years? These are characteristics we've called “personality-traits” or “personal likes and dislikes,” or “preferences,” or “strong opinions.” On closer examination, under the scrutiny of God's Holy Spirit of truth, we see that they are part of the self-centered, defensive, selfish behavior that for years has separated us from the love of God and love of others.

What methods does God use to change us? “At present you are harassed by all kinds of trials and temptations. This is no accident – it happens to prove your faith, which is infinitely more valuable than gold... (which) must be purified by fire. This proving of your faith is planned to result in praise and honor and glory and the day when Jesus Christ reveals Himself.” (I Peter 1:6-7)

When we persevere through trials with faith, hope and love, our patience, endurance and steadfastness grow. When God showed His prophet Jeremiah that he would have to go into captivity with his people, God also said “For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord. Plans for good and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.” (Jeremiah 29:11) The years of suffering in exile were part of God's plan for Jeremiah and the Jews. It was a good plan – God's plan – designed to give them a future and hope. God's plan for you and for me is also good plan.

Why can't our faith grow in pleasant, easy circumstances? It can and as we come to trust and rely more and more on God's promises, it does. But the strengthening of our faith comes through circumstances that challenge our determination to believe, trust, and rely on God's word, in spite of what our senses tell us.



For too long we have trusted our senses, our emotions in our intellect to dictate our beliefs. We must break that habit in order to exercise faith. Remember, **faith means a deliberate determination to believe something we can't see or feel the evidence of.**

So, if God tells us He is working everything out for our good, and we see everything going wrong, our faith grows when we stand on God's Word and thank Him for everything that happens.

God alone can remake us, remold us from within. Our part is to follow Paul's advice to the Romans; to submit ourselves fully to Him, believe that He has taken over, and then accept joyfully – with thanksgiving and praise – all the circumstances God uses to bring about this transformation in our lives.

Faith and patience are essential characteristics of a Christian life and witness; yet there is another quality we must have or else we have missed the point of the Good News. "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." (John 15:11-12)

Love means more to us than anything else in the world. We were created to love God and to love one another. When we don't love, fearful things happen in us. We become hurt, resentful, afraid of each other, hateful and guilt ridden. Our wounded emotions, our fears and frustrations, our destructive ways all come about from lack of love. Educators, psychologists and all kinds of experts have told us what a difference love makes in the development of human beings.

St. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 that genuine Christian love is love love that accepts and believes in others. It is patient and kind, never selfish or envious, never proud or seeking its own way, not touchy or irritable. It doesn't hold grudges, and doesn't quit when we must suffer. It is a love that is loyal, that believes the best and expects the best. Christian love is never glad when others, including our enemies, suffer. Christian love is always happy when truth wins out. Such a love endures without weakening in all circumstances.

This is the kind of love God has for us and the kind of love He commands that we have for each other. This is the kind of love that heals the wounds of old hurts, cast out fears, melts away resentments and old grudges. This is the kind of love that makes us whole and able to love in return without fear of being rejected or hurt. This is the love that in the Greek version of the New Testament is called "agape." This love is a deliberate act, reasoning, intentional and spiritual devotion. This is the love that is a fruit of the Holy Spirit and it draws others to its source – God's love for us in Christ Jesus.

The gifts and manifestations of the Holy Spirit are given to us specifically to show God's love and concern for our every need. God heals because He loves us; He performs miracles because He loves us. His power reaching out through us is love – the supernatural, divine, intensely personal love for each individual in His creation. His message to the world is one of love and we are to be his messengers, the channels for His love. In order to accomplish this, His plan is to make us loving too.

Since this love is a fruit of the Spirit and the Holy Spirit dwells in us, we can expect this deliberate, "agape" love to be present in our lives. As baptized and Spirit-filled believers, we have been given the ability to love in this Christ-like way. So, when Jesus tells us that we must love others, He is not telling us to do the impossible. Jesus is commanding us to **choose to use** the power of love that the Spirit has given to us. Remember, this agape love is a deliberate, intentional love. We are told to love others even if we don't "feel" like loving them.

When we step out in faith and choose to act on God's word our act of faith overcomes our self-centeredness and releases God's supernatural power of love in our lives. This power begins to transform us, making us more loving and this power also flows out to the person we have deliberately *willed* to love.

We all encounter people that for a variety of reasons are difficult for us to love. In these situations we cannot make ourselves more loving toward them by trying to change our attitudes toward them. God has to do the changing. Our part is to confess our own lack of love and then submit in faith to God's transforming power.

The harder we try to change ourselves, relying simply on our own power, the more frustrated we become and the more guilty we feel about our own shortcomings. In fact, God brings certain people into our lives just to show us how incapable we are of loving others in our own strength. He doesn't do it to make us feel bad; He does it to give us an opportunity to experience His transforming love in our lives and in the lives of the people He has called us to love.

Therefore, part of praising God in everything includes thanking Him for the people in our lives who are difficult to love. We should praise God for our difficult family members, neighbors and coworkers. Because God loves us and wants to make our joy full, He will make it possible for us to love the difficult people in our lives. The Lord loves them to and wants to use us as a channel of His love for them.

Some of the most wonderful and most challenging opportunities to love come within our families. Does your husband or wife have certain qualities that rub you the wrong way? Are your parents difficult to live with? Are your children rebellious? "Love one another," Jesus said. Accept one another; thank God for one another.

It isn't easy to thank God for an alcoholic husband, an indifferent wife or rebellious child. It isn't easy to love someone who says he doesn't want our love. It also isn't easy to admit our self-righteousness, our self-pity and the role we play as long-suffering martyr. We need to thank God for bringing these people into our lives show us our lack of love. We should thank God for them, just as they are. And we should confess our inability to love them as they are with their irritating habits. We should ask God to give us the desire to love them without complaints. Then we should submit ourselves to Him so that He can transform our hearts so that we *can* love them. When we do this, we can confidently expect God will work a miracle in us.

To love, deliberately and intentionally as Jesus Christ loves us, always requires an act of our will. Whether or not we *feel* any love does not change the fact that we *do* love. God will show us practical and specific ways to communicate that love to the person He is placed in our life and soon we will experience a deeper love than any we have ever felt before. Our love will be stable and consistent because it flows from a source beyond our own limited capabilities. It is God's love filling us to overflowing and spilling over to others through us. This is what it means to be rooted in God's love; and in that fertile soil, our own ability to love will grow and grow. This is how the Holy Spirit bears fruit in our lives!

### **Ripping Out the Walls**

A difficult relationship or a trying set of circumstances may be God's loving way of providing us with an opportunity to grow, to exercise our spiritual muscle. Or it may be His loving way of exposing a particular weakness or sin in us. Whatever the reason, we have grounds to rejoice. Any weakness, however well hidden, is like a crack in the foundation of the building. Self-reliance and self-assurance are always serious cracks in our foundation. If God brings us into circumstances that reveal an area in our lives where we've been vainly relying on ourselves we should thank Him. Because when our true helplessness is revealed we are compelled to open our hearts to His power to heal us.

Circumstances that rip out the walls of our own self-sufficiency are God's blessings in disguise. We can truly thank God for them and praise Him for every blow that removes more of the illusion that we have the ability to

handle our own situation. The more we praise Him, the easier the transition will be. Our joy will increase and the pain will hardly be noticeable. We will also discover that the more trying the circumstances, the more we will realize that our real strength and power is Christ dwelling and growing in us.

Each challenge, each trial or opportunity for growth makes us better equipped to be channels for His love and power. God wants us to understand that when we entrust our lives to Him, we can be sure that any mistreatment or suffering we experience He will work for our benefit.

The love Jesus speaks of is a deliberate love, one that requires the setting of our will to love, a love exercised in faith. Jesus describe the nature of this love when He said, "Love one another as I have loved you." John 15:12 Anything in us that prevents us from obeying His command must be pruned away. "I am the true vine, and that Father is the vine-dresser. Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, He takes away at every branch that does bear fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit." John 15 1-2

We are hindering His work in us when we complain about the painful pruning circumstances. These things don't come to us by accident or fate. They come because our loving Father is our loving gardener. We can rejoice and thank Him because He knows what is best for us.

## **Chapter 5 When Sparrows Fall**

"Not one sparrow can fall to the ground without your Father knowing it. In the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't worry! You are more valuable to him than many sparrows." Matthew 10:29-31

Jesus told His disciples that our Father in heaven keeps an eye on every sparrow and counts every hair on our heads. Yet, the fact remains that sparrows do fall. Tragedies do come to us. Innocent little children die under the wheels of cars driven by drunks. Someone we love is struck by cancer and dies in spite of our fervent prayers. Could God have prevented the sparrow's fall? The tragedy? The child's death? The spread of cancer?

Most of us believe that God has the power to prevent such things *if* He wants to. We are then left to wrestle in our minds with the problem of *why* God permits what seems to us to be a triumph of evil over good. Sometimes we draw the conclusion that God is calloused and uncaring. Or we think the victims of evil suffer because of their own or someone else's sin. Both conclusions are in stark contrast with the Gospel that God is love and we don't have to earn His loving care.

Because we know God is all powerful, we know that He either directly wills or allows everything that happens. And because we know that God is good all the time, we know that He is working all things for good. This is why it is possible to praise God for *all* things and in *every* circumstance.

Praising God for evil circumstances *does* not mean that we approve of evil. In fact, God sent His Son to die on the cross to break the power of evil in the lives of all who believe in Him. And we who believe have been given the power to overcome the world. (1 John 5:1-4) If we set ourselves to firmly believe this, and to praise God for every circumstance of apparent evil around us, *every* difficult situation, *every* tragedy will be changed by the hand of God.

When we fully entrust an evil situation to God, thanking and praising Him for it, the power of God will be released. Just as in the crucifixion of Jesus, God's power will overcome the evil inherent in the situation, transforming it to fit with the perfect plan of God. We may not understand God's plan, but when we praise Him for it, we release His power to work in the situation for our good.

So when we come face-to-face with evil we need to recognize that in ourselves we have no power to overcome evil. The overcoming power is always God. The essence of God's message to us is that we must learn to focus our attention on Him, the source of overcoming power, and not direct our attention toward the evil confronting us. Anytime our action is prompted by the evil circumstances surrounding us rather than by our faith in God's power and perfect control of the situation, we are allowing evil to control us, rather than overcoming evil with the power of God.

If we let fear and doubts and a preoccupation with the presence of evil take over our minds, we block the power of God from entering the situation. We must learn to see evil in the right perspective – subject to the mighty power of God – and then let that power work out everything for our good according to God's perfect plan.

Our defense against the power of Satan is the power of God. When we stand firm in our faith that God is in perfect and loving control, God's mighty power is released. And we express our faith by praising and thanking Him for the situation. We are told to be careful and watch for the enemy's attack, but our attention must be focused on God, not on Satan. We are to stand firm in faith, obedient to the prompting of the Holy Spirit, who will guide our outward actions in the situation. Inwardly, our part is *always* to keep our eyes on God and to praise and thank Him for His goodness and mercy in all things. (James 4:7)

We also need to be patient. God is never late. His timing is perfect, but we sometimes complain – because it is *our* time schedule that is wrong.

When we refuse to see God's hand in every situation around us, we are like the pot arguing with its maker. The Lord tells us, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts. For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there but water the earth, make it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but shall accomplish that which I intend the prospering thing for which I sent it." Isaiah 55:8-11

Our skepticism and disappointment in God's plan is rooted in a distrust of God. We are not convinced that He has our best interest in mind. We question why God allows an innocent child to die after being hit by a drunk driver so that the driver comes to recognize his need for God. Does God care more for the soul of the drunken driver than He does for the child or the grieving parents? We all ask countless questions like that, turning them over and over in our minds, and while we are torn by the questions, we have no peace and the situation remains unchanged.

The only way out of our dilemma is to accept God's Word on faith. To trust Him, in spite of what we think, feel or see. His Word is that He loves us and that the death of an innocent child *does* fit into His loving plan for each of the lives affected. God's love for us can be accepted only by faith, just as we accept every other promise in the Bible. We must decide to believe in His love, because He says it is so, regardless of whether we *feel* loved or not.

God loves us with a love more kind, more patient, more long-suffering and concerned with our happiness and well-being than any human love can be. God loves us and has a perfect plan for our lives. He sent His Son to die for us, to provide us with a new life full of abundant joy and peace, in a world filled with suffering. We can't possibly comprehend with our limited human understanding, the magnificent scope of God's plan for us and for this world.

God's plan is a perfect plan. It is the only plan that has ever worked on this earth where mankind's rebellion and evil has prevailed. Look at the bloody mess we have made in trying to order our own lives throughout history.

God's plan is not what we would work out. As He told Isaiah, His thoughts are so much higher than ours, His perspective is so much clearer.

But when we insist on figuring out and approving His plan before we dare to trust ourselves to Him, we make our understanding – or lack of it – into a wall between us and God. Acceptance of His will and plan must come before understanding. We must set aside our own desire for knowledge and comprehension of what God is doing and throw the weight of our will into the decision to trust His Word.

We often think that God takes whatever happens to us and makes the best of it, sort of a secondhand blessing. But God isn't on the defensive. He isn't limited to making the best out of a bad situation. God has the initiative! We need to remind ourselves of this fact.

Our viewpoint makes all the difference. As St. Paul tells us, we *can* have the viewpoint of Jesus Christ. "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus." Philippians 2:5 "Be constantly renewed in the spirit of your mind." Ephesians 4:23 Paul wasn't suggesting an impossibility. The keywords in his passages are "let" and "be renewed." When we read, study and meditate on God's Word, as we spend time in His presence, our minds are changed to have the same attitude, the same perspective that Christ. We can become humble servants of the Lord.

Whatever circumstances come into our lives, we are to praise and thank God for them, because they are His way of working out His perfect plan for us. The circumstances are His way of purifying us, and giving us a willing heart.

**Praise releases the power of God into our lives and circumstances, because praise is faith in action.**

When we trust God fully, He is free to work in our hearts and He always brings victory. It may be a victory that changes circumstances or a victory in the circumstances. Death may be turned away or made to lose its sting.

Praise is acceptance of what God has brought into our lives. We practice this attitude of praise by an act of our will, by a decision to praise God regardless of how we feel.

"When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust without fear. What can flesh do to me?" Psalm 56:3-4.

## **Chapter 6 Goodbye Grumbings**

Are you in the habit of thanking God only for what you want? Are you in the habit of grumbling when things don't go the way you like? We may think "What is wrong with a little complaining?" What difference does it make?" It can make *all* the difference in the world. *Everything* depends on how we respond to the little things in life.

Grumbling comes so easily to all of us that we often don't realize what we are doing. But grumbling is the very opposite of thanksgiving; a complaint is the opposite of trust. The dictionary defines a complaint as an accusation. When we complain and grumble we are actually accusing God of mismanaging the details of our lives. While the decision to praise releases the power of God into our lives, the attitude of grumbling and complaining blocks that power.

Petty complaining kept the Israelites out of the Promised Land. Our complaints and murmurings against God in the little things can keep us from entering into the perfect plan He has for our lives. "Beware then of your own

hearts, dear brothers, lest you find that they too, are evil and unbelieving and are leading you away from the living God.” Hebrews 3:12

The cause of the Israelites murmuring was unbelief and unbelief is at the root of every one of our little complaints. God wants to give us peace. It is that state of perfect trust in Him and we can all enter into that peace now. But in order to do so we must give up our sin of unbelief, our grumbling, murmurings and complaints. Unbelief, like all sin, is an act of rebellion against God.

The most effective way to deal with our sins is to be specific about them. We confess them, repent and ask God’s forgiveness. Then we make a clear-cut decision not to fall into that sin again. We then ask God to give us the grace to withstand temptation.

Once we make an agreement with God not to grumble and promise instead to thank Him for every little thing that used to make us complain, we can expect Him to go to work. We cannot change ourselves from unbelieving grumblers to thankful, cheerful believers. God has to do the changing. For our part, we must decide to stop complaining and start thanking and praising God. But it is God’s power that works the transformation. Our job is to keep our eyes on Jesus and thank God for what He is able to do.

In practice we will find that God will bring into our lives the very kinds of circumstances that used to trigger our grumbling. When we see them coming, we can thank and praise God, because He is using those very incidents to bring about the change in us. Before they made us stumble; now they show us God’s strength. They will serve to increase our faith. Accepting every thing that happens with an attitude of thanksgiving will release the power of God in and through us and we will soon experience a feeling of joy as well. But don’t look for the feeling as a sign. Our praise and Thanksgiving must be based on faith in God’s word not on our feelings.

Do you have a favorite grumble about your own life? Do you say to yourself that if you could have a chance to live it over again, you would be in a different profession, a different neighborhood, different marriage? Can you accept and declare to yourself that God has you exactly where He wants you? That He hasn’t overlooked a thing? It is certainly true that we can make bad decisions. But the promise of God is that He makes all things, including our own wrong choices, work for our good when we trust Him.

It is possible that you are in a situation that God plans to move you out of. Still, it’s essential that right now you accept your present situation with joy and thank God for it. As we thank God for every difficulty, submitting to His will at every turn, He is able to move us into the spot where He wants us. You can be sure that if God wanted you to be somewhere else at this very moment, He would have you there. Your task is to thank him for where you are right now.

Resentment and fear, grumbling and complaining hinder the unfolding of God’s plan for us. He has a perfect plan and we must realize that His timing doesn’t always coincide with ours. God’s timetable is precise to the minute. How great it is to know that we are on his schedule. Release the timekeeping of your life to Him and He will get you where He wants you, when He wants you there. We have got to do our part, but that does not include worrying about the timekeeping. We do our best, get up on time in the morning, prepare in time for appointments, then thank Him for whatever happens – even if we get delayed unexpectedly, or are interrupted by a talkative neighbor or demanding child.

God has a double purpose in teaching us to trust and praise Him in everything. First, it releases His power into our situation. Wearing a glum face may not seem like a sin, until we consider the fact that it expresses the very opposite of faith in God and is actually an attitude of unbelief. As we learn to push the praise button instead of the panic button, our lives and our attitudes are changed.

The results of our reactions are cumulative. With each positive step of faith, it becomes easier to believe. In the same way, each time we allow unbelief to block God's presence from entering into the difficult situation, the negative results heap up. It becomes increasingly difficult to muster our will to exercise any faith at all. The more we grumble, the more we become entangled in the web of defeat. Many little grumbles can add up to overwhelming mountains of depression.

Whether you are surrounded by what seem to you like mountains of accumulated misery, or just irritating little molehills, the turning point is the same. Confess your complaining and murmuring as a sin and promise God that you will be thankful from now on. When you make the decision and determine to stand on it in faith, God will furnish the strength you need to do it. Once you have made your commitment, the opportunities to thank God may come in little or big packages, but they will come.

The second purpose of praising God is that others are drawn to Him when we do. If we grumble and complain as bitterly as our non-Christian friends over the many little upsetting incidents of our days, they conclude that our faith does no more for us than having no faith does for them. Unless they can see, in the nitty-gritty of our daily lives that Christ makes a difference, how can we expect them to believe us when we say they need Jesus? It isn't what we say, but what we are and what we do that draws others to Christ's life in us.

When the joy of Christ is released in our lives, others are drawn to Him. As you learn to thank God for every little thing, God will use your praise to draw unhappy, weary people to Him. And He can turn their burden of worries and anxieties into pure joy and peace.

"In everything you do, stay away from complaining and arguing, so that no one can speak a word of blame against you.... Whatever happens, be glad in the Lord. I never get tired of telling you this and it is good for you to hear it again and again." Philippians 2:14-16; 3:1

It is our lack of complaining as well as our happiness in Christ that enables us to shine like beacons, holding out the Word of Life in a dark world. So let us quit our grumbling and praise the Lord for every dark and crooked thing we see around us. Do it, and watch God's light penetrate that darkness.

## **Chapter 7 The Joy of the Lord**

"The joy of the Lord is your strength." Nehemiah 8:10

"... Ask and you will receive, that your joy may be full." John 16:24

Jesus desired so strongly that His disciples understand that He had come, not only to purchase our salvation through His sacrifice on the cross, but also to provide us with the sustaining power of His joy.

Every Christian should know that His salvation is a free gift. Every Christian should also know that baptism in the Holy Spirit is also a free gift and when we receive it Jesus provides us with His joy.

Since "the joy of the Lord is our strength," it is not something that comes last in a long line of attainments, sort of like the whipped topping on the cake. It is something we need from the start, something to sustain us and strengthen us in our task of carrying the Good News around the world. Our outward circumstances will always be filled with trials and suffering. But through them all our constant joy is the presence of Jesus Christ within us through the power of the Holy Spirit .

Unfortunately, even though joy has already been given to us by Jesus, many Christians live such joyless lives. Jesus prayed that His joy would be perfected in us. What He means is that we can't make ourselves joyful anymore than we can save ourselves, give ourselves peace or make ourselves more loving. What we *can* do is choose to accept what Jesus has done for us and allow Him to perfect His joy in us.

In practice this means that we deliberately set out to choose joy, regardless of how we feel, trusting that God then goes to work, transforming our sorrows into pure joy, just as He has promised. Love, joy and peace are all fruit of the Holy Spirit. Jesus told His disciples how they were to cultivate this fruit.

“I have loved you even as the Father has loved Me. Live in my love. When you obey Me you are living in My love, just as I obey My Father and live in His love. I have told you this so that you will be filled with My joy.”  
John 15:9-11

The source of our joy is not to be found in happy circumstances but in knowing the love of Jesus and obeying His teachings.

Joy is certainly something we are meant to feel. It is to be a happy, overflowing, pleasant experience. But joy does not depend on feeling. We are not to rejoice because we feel joyful, rather we can expect to feel joyful as a result of our rejoicing.

Many Christians think that joy is something we experience when we are satisfied and things are going well around us. But real joy does not spring from our emotions. Instead, it is triggered by our will and is part of the life of praise. As Psalm 33 says, “all the joys of the godly well up in praise to the Lord, for it is right to praise Him.”

Joy, thanksgiving and praise belong together and our commitment to praise God for everything is not complete until we have committed ourselves to rejoice in everything. What begins as an act of obedience to God's Word, will eventually bring about in us a state of being where we sense, think and experience a real, overflowing praise, thanksgiving and joy beyond anything we have ever known. When we fully submit to God's will, so that all obstacles in us can be flushed away, we are transformed and renewed into perfect vessels for Him. Then we will also find that the joy of the Lord *is* complete in us.

Jesus came into this world to remove the sin barrier between God and us, so that once more the Creator could be united with his creation. Shortly before His death on the cross, Jesus prayed for our oneness with Him and the Father. “I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in the through their word, that they may all be one; even as you, Father are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent.” John 17: 20-21

Jesus prayed and we know for certain that His prayer was answered. We can be assured that Christ dwells in us. We are one in Him with the Father. When we begin to grasp the full significance of these accomplished facts, everything else in our lives begins to take on the right perspective. The difficult circumstances that once loomed out of proportion and captured most of our attention, can now be seen fitting perfectly into the plan that God is working in our lives. We still don't see the plan, but we *do* see Jesus Christ as Lord and Master, and we know that God has a good plan for us.

Jesus Christ has purchased joy for us as well as salvation. To live a life of uninterrupted joy in God, looking at every circumstance as coming from Him and thanking Him for it – this is Christian perfection and we are all called to experience it.



This is why St. Paul teaches us: “Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit...” 1Thessalonians 5:16-19

Receive the love, the peace and the joy that Jesus is offering you. Believe that Jesus is with you and that our Heavenly Father is working in every circumstance of your life to meet your need. The very thing you find painful is in fact His loving provision to draw you to Himself – so that your joy may be full!

Look up and praise Him! The Lord loves you and He dwells in the praises of His people!