THOUGHTS OF FEBRUARY, 2016

1. Is the Lord ever wrong, or late, or neglectful regarding things that touch your life? Or is He always in total control, benevolent, purposeful, and all-mighty? The answers we accept to questions of that sort depend upon the condition of our minds, or better, the re-conditioning of them.

Jesus said He would return, but it has been 2,000 years since He left. That’s too long! Our hearts and minds grow weary during our unreasonably long wait. We pieces of clay wane in our faith, cease believing, readjust our belief, or sit confused as our invisible Potter does with us whatever it is that pleases Him, if indeed He is paying any attention to us. So goes the thinking of our flesh.

Who has more power, intelligence and authority, the clay or the Potter? Can man or the devil defeat or delay God and His work, or His timetable? Is God limited? Does He love me, considering the things that have gone on in my life? Why do the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper? Isn’t at least a bit of unrighteousness to achieve success better than a loss with righteousness? If there is no justice, why deny myself some fun? Can’t I just be normal like everyone else? That sort of reasoning goes on and on before hitting a dead end.

Our questions and challenges show how we narrow down our image of the Lord. In so doing, we are going in the opposite direction from the source of our answers. Appearances are deceiving. The natural settings of our lives do not supply us with the answers, especially when we don’t have the right questions. Our answers must come from outside of our fallen, self-centered, limited humanity. Creation is not only temporary but it is brief, even if we have an earthlife of 100 years. We are not now living in all of the story. The rest and the best are yet to come. The squeeze of time that we feel does not squeeze or rush the Lord. He is perfectly on His schedule, and so are we. His timing and most of His processes are hidden from us in this short-term but will be revealed in due time. In the meantime, some more than others have to share in the sufferings of Christ. “How long, Oh Lord?” is a common cry and it does not fall on deaf ears.

Defeats and terrible losses must be endured among our successes and joys, but they do not indicate God’s inability or lack of compassion. Nature reveals Him, His written word reveals Him, the poured-out and available Holy Spirit reveals Him, and His gathered together people reveal Him. Apart from those revelations, He has been allowing Himself to be misunderstood, but only by the under-informed or unbelievers. The seventh day is here. Dawn is breaking. The time for the revelation of Himself is at hand.

2. Lately we have been thinking about the power of humility, littleness, gentleness, and the like. That is a difficult thing for the flesh to grasp, or am I talking only to myself? Jesus showed us the way. Our complaint is that He did not stomp His foot and get things done like we would prefer; neither does He allow us that license. That’s what His first disciples wanted Him to do, and many of us still want Him to do -- shake things up, knock some heads together, and do something! His way is the way of the cross, so often requiring silence, patience, submission, etc.

Plato, classic Greek philosopher of the 400-300 B. C. era, had it right on one side of the coin when he said, “The measure of a man is what he does with power.” The Lord has all the power in heaven and on earth.

3. Nicodemus was a good guy, very moral, a religious leader among God’s people, a man with deep religious conviction, and an example to others. But he was trapped in a bad system that prevented him from comprehending spiritual truth, or perhaps further spiritual truth. When Jesus used a natural term to describe a spiritual truth, Nicodemus did not grasp it. I am surprised and perhaps a bit disappointed that Jesus did not promptly explain the subject to him so he could join in as a disciple. He would have been a prized convert.

And Nicodemus was a part of those whom Jesus called blind leaders of the blind, poisonous snakes, and hypocrites. I can imagine myself saying to Nicodemus, if I had been Jesus, “Not all of you Pharisees are bad, I don’t want to offend you, and I don’t want to be judgmental, but …” But Jesus said, simply, “Nicodemus, you must be born again. Until then you will have to choose between me and your religion.” Perhaps Saul [Paul] was among those Pharisees. If so, he made the same choice and stuck to it longer than [I imagine] Nicodemus did. Until they were born again they were road-kill. All must be born again, even those who agree with Christian history and life-style, but are not born again. Who they are is a hard call at times and I’m glad I’m not called to make it. That’s God’s assignment.

4. “Where is the God of Elijah?!” is a good shout. Lord, help us grow spiritually like Elijah and Elisha did. Another good shout is, “Where are the Elijahs of God?!” Right now that strikes closer to my heart.

5. For the American Revolution to occur the English colonists had to abandon their safe, traditional relationship with England, including their comfortable, familial, and worked-for rights and identities. [Look out; this Thought can sneak up on traditionalists of any denomination!] Instead, they appealed to God and man on the basis of their relationship to God their Creator. In doing that, they started the world all over again -- it was such a radically different and complete change of thought and life. And it was on an international political scale. They even put it on the Great Seal of the United States, “Novus ordo seclum,” meaning “a new world order of the ages.” Don’t confuse that with the current “New World Order.” George Washington even began dating some of his writings from the year of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

If we want to fully live the kingdom of God, whatever our modern day King Georges and Parliaments want to do, or want us to do, we would cause a revolution. Not a carnal fight of the flesh and guns, and not a shaking of fists and shouting holy insults, and not a breaking of covenant with others and splitting off [religious or secular], but a refusal to go along with their edicts. We would humbly say “No” and fight with spiritual power. We would walk with our Creator who has given us His Son, His word, His Spirit, His family, and His victory. We would count the cost, walk the Way of Life, and pay the toll.

6. MORE on repentance! J. I. Packer [1926-present], British-born Canadian theologian, low church evangelical Anglican, said, “Repentance is more than just sorrow for the past; repentance is a change of mind and heart, a new life of denying self and serving the Savior as king in self’s place.” That leads to Life.

7. Real fruit can be beautiful, but it is almost always imperfect in some way. However, it is tasty and nutritious. Wax fruit can be made perfectly perfect, especially when viewed from afar, but it definitely leaves much to be desired when tasted. This Thought has to do with the fruit of the Spirit.

Everything we experience is worthwhile, most certainly including the painful, difficult, threatening things, because in them we allow our crosses to do their work. Thus, the fruit are prizes, the end results of our decreasing and Christ increasing. The Seed of Jesus in us is ripening. When we read in Galatians 5 of the fruit of the Spirit it is easy to see that the fruit is not how much work we can do for the Lord but how much of Jesus has developed and can be seen in us.

8. I hope that you have had opportunity to notice that, in others of course, when people walk in their flesh their souls get weaker and their hearts get harder. On the other hand, when they walk with the Lord their souls gets stronger and their hearts get softer. Along the way we notice that there is tremendous power in humility, love, patience, goodness, and gentleness. That sort of quality cannot be overcome by evil but overcomes evil.

9. How are you doing with self-control? This Thought, as usual, is more of a testimony than a teaching. Self-control commonly starts with tolerance, non-retaliation, or biting one’s tongue. That is being very spiritual, although at the time it may not seem so. When we soon or eventually gear-up to exercise self-control we come face to face with our naked flesh. There are no disguises there. It’s mano a mano. Either we do it or we don’t. That’s not the full story on self-control but it’s a sometimes neglected part of the story.

10. God has not given the world eternal life. He has not poured eternal life out onto the world. He has only given the world His Son, Jesus. Anyone who wants eternal life must have a friendly relationship with Jesus. That desired eternal life is in Jesus and must be received from Him, only.

Having a relationship with the church is not the same as having a relationship with Jesus. That would be the essence of what is called religion.

11. It is no secret that messages lose something when translated into another language. Our English language Bibles are no exception. Today’s example: In Acts 10:44 it is written, “While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word.” The same word, “word,” is used twice in that sentence. Its first use, the pleural “words,” is the Greek word “rhema,” meaning the revealed, spoken, Holy Spirit inspired word of God that points people to Christ. The second time it is used, “word” is the Greek word “logos,” meaning the living word, either Christ Himself or the Scriptures that testify of Him. So, in my paraphrase, “While Peter was still speaking spiritually inspired words about Christ, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard Peter’s words that meant Christ.”

Like Jesus having come in the fullness of time [the God-prepared time for the world to “receive” Jesus as it should], the word from Peter came to those Gentiles at God’s prepared time for them. The world is filled with people whose times have come. They don’t have an identifying outer mark on them, so we sow the word and the chosen ones are revealed – not necessarily immediately, because some of them must first deny the truth and perhaps persecute us. Then their harvest times come.

But first someone must speak inspired words that point to Jesus. The Holy Spirit will pour out His life of power on those who hear that inspired word. That power enables us to be living martyrs, to speak, write, and live the inspired word. It is an unsettled non-question of whether or how much the hearers are responsible for hearing, or whether the hearers can only hear if the Lord opens their ears to the truth. It is settled that the inspired word will change the chosen ones.

12. More on that area of our soul called “imagination.” Question: How would you get along without an imagination? Answer: To start, I could not answer that question without an imagination.

We use our imagination to deal with truth and lies, reality and unreality, and with history past, present and future. From our imagination [joined with our memory, etc.] comes creativity, once our imagination is adequately coordinated and directed. As with all else of our souls and efforts, our imaginations are designed to be placed under our personal (self-)control so as to be obedient to Christ -- 2 Cor. 10:5.

From our imagination come inventions, great books, pornography, praises to God, vengeful acts, prophetic utterances, curses, sermons on the mounts, knowledge of and of the depth of our sins, and hope. All are accepted, refined, or rejected according to our desire for obedience to the Lord. When we are aligned with the Lord [even if only in the realm of the natural], science, architecture, religion, and society flow in logical order. Outside of that alignment, all is chaos, dead end detours, and worthless pain. Inspect the use of your imagination, and submit it to the Lord for His use.

13. Can believers turn the Bible into an idol? That depends upon how we define several words in that question, doesn’t it. A love for God’s written word is a mark of believers. The Lord exalts His word above all else of Himself and He wants His people to assume the same position, as did Jesus. The Spirit within believers urges us and assists us to follow Jesus in honoring the written word. After all, the Scriptures speak of Jesus – Luke 24:27. We depend upon His revealing Himself to us in those ink-marks on paper.

 I don’t think I have met anyone who had turned the Bible into an idol, although lots of them [us] have devoured those words of life and applied ourselves to living them. I know what it is to “do what is right in my own eyes,” and know that the Bible is the Holy Spirit’s principle source of direction in things of all types – 2 Tim. 3:16-17. There is no difference between knowing Jesus and knowing His word, or loving Jesus and loving His word. If we don’t believe what Moses and Paul wrote, how will we believe what the Lord says in the other ways He has of communicating with us?

14. Have you found yourself trying to make things easier for the Lord because the situation looked too difficult? I know you would never deliberately and clearly think that way, but with some self-examination you might join me in recognizing that tendency. We know “nothing is too difficult for the Lord,” but we can learn good theology faster than we implement it.

Look what Elijah did! He was about to call fire down from heaven, and he put water on the wood! Elijah was only a servant of the living God. We are sons of that same God, and our Older Brother has told us we are greater than Elijah so are to do greater things than even He[Jesus] did. We should get our theology straight and begin to approach the Lord for increasing our faith.

Be careful, now, how you receive or don’t receive this paragraph: We, the beautiful bride of Christ, whom He loved and loves so much that He did for us what He did, have a different picture of Him and of ourselves than we should have, and much of that difference is based on what we have done with His printed word. When we honor Him we will honor His word, ignore none of it, not weaken it, and not miss its applications. His house will continue being the place of great social efforts, but will also spiritually impact society with the revelation of Jesus Himself, not only with the revelation of a people of good works.

The Lord is not broken; He is not weak; He is able to do according to the power that works within us. The world will turn aside to see burning bushes. They will again ask, “What shall we do?” Don’t tell them to sign a card and attend a class next week.

15. If you want to understand how the devil turned out so bad, look at how Andrew Carnegie [1835-1919], Scottish-American industrialist and philanthropist put it: “Immense power is acquired by assuring yourself in your secret reveries that you were born to control affairs.” As an atheist, Presbyterian, and co-founder of Universal Peace, Carnegie had some good insights and did lots of charitable works.

16. The nature of love is that it can be invisible until it is broken down and expressed by some of its parts, such as peace under persecution, enduring patience, unappreciated hard work, unnecessary sacrifice, humility during prosperity, consideration of others who may not deserve it, etc. The Holy Spirit will bring love’s expression onto the stage of your life at the exact moment He has prepared the audience for it.

17. Does a righteous and just God change His ways when, instead of blessing us, He blesses someone who did us dirt? How could He pay me for a day’s work, and pay another the same amount for only one hour’s work? My flesh says that He is unjust, that I got cheated, and that the other person got more than he deserved. Clearly, that is dead-end thinking. The Lord was simply going about doing what He always does – showing grace and mercy to everyone, not dealing with us according to our sins, not punishing us according to our iniquities – Ps. 103:10. What do we want -- justice?

I’m thankful that He does not immediately go about delivering justice, although the time for delivering justice will come. In the meantime He will continue being unfair, having already balanced the scales of justice on the back of Jesus Christ, in whom we are blessed to share injustice.

18. Yes, it is important to have beliefs. Some beliefs are to be held firmly, some less firmly due to wise doubtfulness about them. The question to be considered is whether our beliefs are based on our own desires and self-established “knowledge,” or are they based on immutable facts established by an external higher source that we acknowledge as such.

Our case in point is our variable Christian doctrines. It is a difficult thing for a faithful believer who has firm doctrines to be able to read the Bible, not to confirm what he believes, but to know what He believes. We must be adjustable to Him, not His word adjustable to us.

This is a simple and earnest Thought. It really is difficult for a dedicated, faithful, and at least reasonably biblically minded believer to read the Bible without personal prejudice, staying open to what Scripture says, and yet be able to adjust his own beliefs. It is frightening to be open even in the smallest way to a change in vital beliefs. It is also frightening to be not open to change of vital beliefs. Vital beliefs are vital, so we hold them firmly; so firmly that any modification can be impossible.

19. Our works and our behaviors are important, but where do you get your identity? Are you you, or are you what you do? One of the traps of criminals is that at some time in their lives they begin to identify themselves with what they do, their failures, and thus their failures define them. The same goes for all of us. The preacher’s trap is that he will define himself by what he does, not by who he is – God’s son. He knows he is God’s son but his identity becomes “preacher.” I was granted grace to walk out of my identity as a doctor, into becoming “God’s son who does doctoring.” Our identity dictates to us our commitments and performance. Christian, do you identify yourself by your behavior, or by your sonship in the Lord?

The same goes for “whom you believe in” vs. “what you believe.” Both are important, but your anchor is in whom you believe. Without the anchor, what we believe is susceptible to the tides and winds. Besides that, the excitement and joy of Life is in whom we believe.

20. Paul intended to and probably did finish his earthlife with joy – Acts 20:24. No reason to rust out at the end. Life only gets better the further we go. The bumps along the Way only strengthen us. Life is good. I hope that those few and brief sentences reflect your life also, because all of life’s accomplishments mean little or nothing if we don’t finish well. Running well is important, but finishing well is the project. Finishing well is not just the cherry on top of a delicious sundae; it may be that which qualifies us for the crown, despite a life of stumbling and going in circles.

I have confidence that each of you is running your race, and that you have fallen many times. But you are still running. You are still in the race, although I was notified this week that one of us has finished her race. Staying in the race puts us in the position of being able to finish in the winner’s bracket. We entered the Narrow Gate [by invitation and grace], did not [often] sit down or dally by the wayside, stayed on course [most of the time], were blessed with frequent showers to remove dirt we accumulated when we stumbled, but kept our wandering eyes on the finish line. It has not been a perfectly run race, but we are still in it. We are alive to present truth about ourselves and about the world as the King is processing us, and have fresh, clear vision that sends us into every day with expectancy and into every evening with a joyful “wow, what a day this has been.”

King Solomon fell flat on his face as he neared the finish line. His life happened for our sakes, and was recorded for our benefit – 1 Cor. 10:11. It had been filled with God’s blessings, to which he added many more as he desired them, but he allowed them to control and change him. He became spiritually lazy. As he neared the finish line, instead of leaping for joy he fell. Jesus is our continual joy and is worth our best finish, is He not? Relax, listen, and take His mother’s advice – John 2:5.

21. It is often said that God honors that which we do, but that can be more accurately stated, “God honors not what we do, but honors His word as we abide in it.

22. We cannot have the peace that the Lord offers us if we do not know that He is in total control of everything all the time everywhere. As long as I think that God and the devil are battling and that God may lose this time, how can I be peaceful? If my sin causes devastation, but I repent from my heart and make restitution, yet how can I be at peace over that mess?

We can have peace only when we think and live “out of this world” or “outside of ourselves.” If we are here to do only our Father’s will, know that He communicates with us and we hear Him, that we are not our but His workmanship, that He is the Master Architect of ALL things, and that He can handle all of my and Hitler’s foibles, we can sink deeper into His peace. Jesus is Lord, always. He is not surprised, outwitted, or defeated in anything. The devil is still trying to find a hole in that truth, as in the case of Job, but he still has not found it. There is no hole.

23. The night of Jesus’ arrest was a bad night for all of the disciples, not only for Judas. Jesus directed them to stay awake and pray, but they went to sleep. He awakened them and repeated His instructions, but it was too late for them to fully obey – the evening’s events were upon them. They abandoned Him, they denied Him, and they did not believe what He had taught them about those very events. Until He had proven His resurrection, they had said, “Well, that’s over. Let’s get back to life as ‘normal.’” But what did Jesus say to correct them? He said, “Let’s have something to eat, then let’s get up and go. We have a life to live together.” That’s a good word.

24. “Don’t be afraid of the dark” said my parents. But the darkness could have hidden some bad things, I thought. That’s the nature of darkness; it can hide an abundance of bad things that cannot be seen and may be harmful. Really, fear was what darkness is best at, and fear is harmful. Isaiah [60:1-2] knew that darkness would cover the earth, but that people of the light would walk in light in the midst of the darkness. The light would be so bright that God’s glory [God’s goodness and power present with us] would be evident upon us. O. K.; that’s settled. That’s good enough for me. He knows how much darkness is necessary, and we know He has the light we need. “Fear not” means “keep your peace.”

25. “Desire is the starting point of all achievement,” stated Napoleon Hill [1883-1970], American writer, teacher of financial success, advisor to presidents, communicator with spirits. But that last comment about his communicating with spirits does not mean he was always wrong. Desire began my relationship with Nancy, with whom I have now been married for 64 years, and desire began my relationship with the Lord, with whom I have walked for 52 years. Much can be said for desire, especially when mixed with righteousness.

26. Atheists have a tremendous amount of faith, springing [as with Christians] from a great imagination. There is no faith without an imagination, so the Lord God created us with one, like His perfect one. But the atheist’s imagination is misguided. They believe that something can be gotten from nothing. They believe that once there was nothing and since now we have something, our something is proof that something can come from nothing. That is indeed a circular non-argument. As has been said, “First there was nothing and then it exploded.” Is your imagination that good?

27. Our words have the power to destroy and the power to heal – Prov. 12:6. The power of our words is another part of God’s nature/image that He gave us. We have that unique and powerful giftedness. Also consider Proverbs 12:13-14; 18:21, and Matthew 12:36-37. Consider the words of Adolph Hitler and those of Winston Churchill. One aroused the people to destroy through war, the other to make peace through war.

28. Love, admiration, and appreciation go out to those who fill the role of “pastor” in the congregations of all denominations. Some “pastors” are apostles, some are prophets, some are evangelists, some are actually pastors, and some are teachers. Their religious traditions have squeezed them into their denominational roles, whether they are true pastors or not. If they are not true pastors, they try but their ministry lacks power, insight and wholeness.

In brief, one’s giftedness in any of those five ways is shown in the results of their presence among the flock. In reverse order: The result of the presence of a true teacher is a congregation that is solid in the truth and application of Scripture, of the presence of a true pastor is a united and peaceful congregation, of the presence of a true evangelist is a steady and high level of living faith and ease of acceptance of the truth, of the presence of a true prophet is open ears to timely and soul-shaking words from God’s throne, and the presence of a true apostle results in the founding and re-founding of the flock on the solid rock of Jesus no matter the cost.

If the flock has only an evangelist as its “pastor,” the flock will be noted for acquiring new members, but they will burn out and leave in due time, perhaps having clicks and repeated divisions. If the flock has only a true pastor as its pastor, it will go to sleep spiritually, lack zeal and outreach, and become inwardly focused. If the flock has only a teacher as its “pastor,” it will become dry, self-righteous, and pharisaical. If the flock has only a true prophet as its“pastor,” it will fall into heresy with new, uncontrolled, and misdirected revelations. If the flock has and continues long with only an apostle as its “pastor,” it will tend toward isolation or independence. Meaning: The Head of the church will bring in, or raise up, all five of those ministries in order to feed His flock as He Himself did in Galilee.

Being a good preacher or administrator helps any “pastor,” although those two gifts are not necessary pastoral. The flock needs a true pastor, and more. The effect of a true pastor is a unified family of God’s people who know they belong in that pastor’s flock. But even if the titular head is a true pastor, the Head of the church planned and offers more of Himself than the role of true pastor(s) can supply. The wholeness of ministry to a congregation requires a group ministry, called the five-fold ministry of Jesus’ word, of which pastor is one-fifth of the essentials.

The ministry of God’s word is meant to be lived and presented by all five of those equal gifts, until the church becomes complete, united, and coordinated as was Jesus. The Holy Spirit has called those of His choice into those roles and stands ready to anoint them by faith. If there is unbelief in regards to those offices, or unbelief in one’s calling to an office, they, as with other gifts that are received in faith, obviously will not progress or exist. That is a shame. Such unbelief results in the opposite [in variable degrees] of that which obedience to the word and faith in the Spirit would have created.

We are unique members of Christ’s body. Each individual member has his own unique purpose, function, and role. No one is called to a more broad function than the Lord has divided/gifted us. We are not sent out on our own, and we are not all things to all people. I knew that quite well as a practicing physician or I would have been a bad family doctor trying to be all things medical and surgical to my patients. This is a weak point in the church. The Head determines what should be done, who should do it, and He anoints those who will respond to Him. When we analyze the situation with unbiased minds, God’s intent can be seen. It’s in the Book and He works powerfully accordingly.

29. “The distance between insanity and genius is measured only by success.” – Bruce Feirstein [1956-present], American screenwriter. Some of us fools for God can be encouraged by that little quote. Others may be threatened by it.

30. Isaiah 60:10 offers us a peek into the Lord’s patience and faithfulness. Israel is currently in that position, and it will greatly increase in due time, after a stressful interlude.

31. Little words or phrases can carry a large message. In Mark 4:24-25 the Lord gave some foundational instructions on giving [money, time, attention, etc.], saying that by our standard of generosity toward others He will be generous to us. Notice that he prefaced that not with the comment that we should take care how we decide to be generous, but that we should take care of what we listen to when making such decisions. Our ex-father, the devil, taught us, and we remember well his lesson, to put ourselves first, then others, and lots of similar “wisdom.” But the Lord said to His disciples that they/we will receive for ourselves according to the measure we give to others – give sacrificially and receive abundantly; give stingily and receive sparsely, and that He would whisper customized instructions in our ears.

Testimony: When I left my medical practice and moved to Houston, for one year I received a monthly check for my accounts receivable in my former clinic. After eleven months of sizable but diminishing size checks, I had only about $1,000. left because I had seen others’ needs and met those needs. I was to soon receive the last check, but for only a few hundred dollars. My accountant told me that I should have held onto some of that money because my income tax bill was going to be sizable. Then I recognized that another brother needed $1,000. that day, so there went my last money. That evening I received a call from my accountant. He said: “Bob, I don’t understand it. I’ve gone over your taxes three times, and the government owes you money.”

Take up our crosses, listen to the Lord, and do as He says. It is vital that we know His ways, but essential that we also listen to His voice. When we are alive to ourselves, we cannot hear Him because there are all those other voices – the world, the flesh, and the devil. Mark was told by those who heard Jesus that He said to His disciples, “Be careful which voice you listen to.”

32. And be careful of what titles can do to you, especially religious ones. They can swell our heads, and can cause us to rest on them once we have them. They try to give us our identities, which is shameful. Our identities are “Sons of God.” Those other voices want us to step down to a lower identity, like doctor, pastor, or mayor. When our Father wanted to introduce Jesus to the world, He said, “This is my beloved Son.” None other of His titles could have been nor are now more appropriate.

33. Here’s something else for us dads, professionals, those with titles, and anyone with authority: “Being powerful is like being a lady. If you have to tell people you are, you aren’t.” – Jesse Carr [died1985], American labor union leader.

34. Keep your peace.