THOUGHTS OF AUGUST, 2016

1. So very many things the Lord does, and offers us the opportunity to do with Him, seem backward or contrary to wisdom. He tells us to give and [then] we shall receive. He tells us to die to ourselves and [then] we will receive Life for ourselves and others. He tells us to humble ourselves and [then] He will raise us up. Recently I was sharing testimony with a gathering of saints, about how to have more time to do the things the Lord has called us to do. Time and other resources are often a problem to those who are givers and producers. We have our own lives and families to be responsible for in quality ways, not to just get by, so when we begin to sense a calling to add an even larger responsibility, we cannot. We just don’t have the time!

My testimony was about having a family of a wife and 5 sons, being head of a household of as many as 21 souls, doing a full-time and busy medical practice in Houston’s inner-city, being the active administrator of a medical clinic [75 full-time employees, 75 part-time employees, 3 full-time medical doctors, 12 part-time medical doctors, full-time pharmacy, full-time optometry, full-time dentistry] where patients were not required to pay for our services, on the teaching staff of both medical schools, one of 5 very involved leading elders in an internationally known church where the Holy Spirit was being poured out, and having a traveling ministry of Bible teaching and testimony. There was even more, but that paints the picture. Nancy’s and my lives were very full. We needed more time for those things to which we were committed. How to get it?

The key to that need was to be even more hospitable, meaning to open our lives to include even more people and responsibilities. It was our Christian nature to be hospitable. We had visitors in and out of our home all the time. The key was in “being head of a household of as many as 21 souls,” as mentioned in the above paragraph. We had been blessed by the Lord taking us into His eternal family and treating us as His family, so it was natural for us to do the same for others who wanted to be part of our family. We, and other families at the church, took them into our homes and integrated with them. Some were very needy, others were very capable and had lots of life to give from the beginning.

Most of the needy also became givers, and very soon at that. All of the givers were really life-givers. Some of them became chief stewards in our home, especially helpful to Nancy when I was gone. Some became assistant administrators and department heads at the clinic. Some contributed their pay checks because I worked full-time for nothing. Some became full-time homemakers alongside Nancy, nannies of our kids, or “uncles” to the teenagers. Some became elders-in-training at the church, then next generation elders.

Do you see the picture? First the Lord gave Himself to us [a sacrificial act on His part], meeting our needs. Then He had us meet other’s needs very sacrificially; then He met our greater needs when we simply had no ability to meet more needs. We gave because we had been given to, then He gave to us because we had given to others. Life was abundant and freely given to us and through us. Careful: Don’t give in order to get, but do give not requiring in return and it shall be given to you.

2. We should understand our times, both the small and worldwide events, in light of Scripture. That means knowing God’s mind in regards to what He is doing. We should not be in the dark, as many are. Specifically, we should know how to respond to encroaching darkness which seems imminent and unavoidable. We will not know everything [Jesus being the example of that] but we can know everything necessary to be “in the spiritual know” and how then to handle things internally individually, Christian groups corporately, and in the natural society that we are all part of and are responsible for.

3. A Thought about our need of believers’ fellowship – not a new Thought to us. Jesus came to form a body, and He has, is, and will continue doing exactly that. The Holy Spirit was sent to perfect that body, meaning to bring persons to faith in Jesus, to bring them together, to anoint them individually as inseparable parts of the body, and to coordinate the body under its local leaders and one Head. He will make the body whole so that it will show the fullness of Jesus Himself – Eph. 4:11-16. For that to happen, He had to lay down His life as the example and enabler of the same for us. He did His part, the Holy Spirit is doing His part, and so here we are.

The scientists had their monkey in a cage and were doing all sorts of things to terrify him. He was coming apart emotionally. Then they added another monkey to the cage and continued the terror, but the monkey calmed down to a reasonable anxiety level. That’s the power of fellowship, which is perfected among the faithful in Christ. As the Lord smushes us closer together, as He will if we allow Him [and as He will also if we do not allow Him, but the results will be different], be ready for pain that comes from within and without, be patient, and accept the pain and one another. He is doing that which He said He would do; He is forming a whole, healthy, and functional body.

Another part of His plan is to select those from here and there whom He can use to change situations. Those chosen are those who will stand alone, in breeches among His people, so He can start rebuilding His kingdom as it was when He alone was the **I AM IT**. It’s not kid’s work to stand there and reach out to the estranged brother on your right, and to the estranged brother on your left, and be God’s glue between the two. It is the kind of work laid out for the simple minded, meaning the child minded. One such person can be used for changing any situation – Ezekiel 22:30. Gaps in the wall are dark places, the light posts are down, the broken stones are everywhere, the destroyer is lurking about. Who will stand there and unite the separated? It’s a place of believers’ fellowship with Jesus.

4. The early church [first couple of centuries A. D.] had lots of good things developing within it. Paul and other leaders had trouble with Christian Jews who were teaching that Christian Gentiles had to hold to certain Jewish religious practices in order to be saved. They caused pain to the gospel and to Paul. But there were other Jewish Christian leaders who worked with the Gentile Christians helping them to live through faith and to live righteous lives. Paul did that a lot, as did Peter, James, and others in what we know as the Epistles.

There was a very well-known writing in those first few centuries, before the canonization of the Bible in 325 A.D., known as the Didache [did-a-kay], written by Jewish Christian leaders to help Gentile Christians live the Christian life. [Communication, travel, and church order being as it was in those years, the canonization was not settled among the churches until about 400 A.D. in the West and 500 A.D. in the East.] You notice that such catechisms were abundant in both the Old Testament and New Testament scriptures, so that when the Didache came along it was helpful and accepted. Even in the olden days, Moses interpreted/applied God’s word to the Israelites in the wilderness. He passed that job on to Israel’s leaders, and the priests and rabbis did the same. Jesus did the same, taught His disciples to do it, and told us to do it. The faithful are to apply God’s word to others, translating it into native tongues, and teaching its life-application to all ages and tribes. That’s what the Didache did for the early Gentile Christians. It talked of the ways of life and the ways of death, baptism, fasting, communion, Christian ministry, and the second coming.

Let me share with you its teaching about prophets. The office of the New Testament prophets was especially liable to abuse. Because the prophets had abandoned everything to serve the Lord and His church in their traveling ministry, they were held in the highest honor. They were welcomed by the church, their word was never disregarded, and their in-house freedom of ministry not limited. Their sacrifice and ministry brought forth generosity from the local congregations, enabling them to live comfortably if they so desired. That led to what even then appeared to have been at least an occasional frailty – ministry for hire.

So, in due time, the Didache taught that the prophet should remain in that congregation only one day, and, if necessary, another day; but if he remained three days he was a false prophet. He must never ask for anything but food. If he asked for money, he was a false prophet. Remember that the people were to be generous but that he was not to ask for anything but food. If he asked for a banquet for himself, he was a false prophet. If he wanted to settle there, he could, but he had to go to work in a trade. He could not be idle. He could not “traffick in Christ.”

5. When you are following no one, you can go wherever and whenever you want to go. When you are following someone you must go wherever that person is going and on that person’s schedule. That’s not a brainy thought, but it was good enough for Jesus. He was visiting Nazareth after having started His ministry, having performed significant miracles, gathered a band of disciples, and achieved some notoriety. His [half-] brothers began pressing Him to go up to Jerusalem and display His miraculous powers where He would have greater exposure and could expect more and quicker results. They told Him that He would be on a world-type stage where He could present Himself as the Messiah. They thought He should go public with the things He showed and said of Himself. That is a common world view, is it not? In John 7:6 He told His [half-] brothers that people like them could come and go whenever they wanted, but He was on His Father’s schedule [my paraphrase]. Not long after that He did go, apparently having received that spiritual nudge from above/within.

6. Do you need mercy? If your answer is “No,” you really need mercy! But, you have better insight than that. We received mercy when we were first given God’s Spirit of real and eternal Life and have continued receiving it ever since. How do we know we have continued receiving mercy? One way is for us to observe the measure of mercy we give to others. It flows from the throne of grace to us and through us. Mercy’s abundance is a mark of our being of God. Our mates need mercy, spoken and dished out in abundance. So do our children of all ages. Also our friends and enemies and strangers. Mercy flows from us out of cars onto the street, out of diners to waiters and waitresses, and at check-out counters. Mercy is noticed, appreciated, and usually passed onward.

7. In Jesus’ day here on earth in His flesh He was careful to keep Jewish laws and traditions, but then at other times He ignored them for the purpose of doing good and teaching. There was a certain day, a Sabbath day, described by both Matthew [8:16-17] and Mark [1:21-34]. Why did they both point out that it was late in the day – sunset, evening? The Law of the Sabbath required that no work be done on the Sabbath, which also applied to any healing work by the doctors or Jesus. On Sabbaths, care could be given to prevent the patient getting worse, but no work that amounted to healing could be done. In line with that, the most weight that could be carried on the Sabbath was equivalent to the weight of two figs – dried ones. So, in those verses, those sick persons whom He would heal could not be carried to the Great Physician on the Sabbath. The day ended at sundown, not at darkness, but as soon as two stars could be seen in the heavens. That’s why that healing service started “late in the day.” A new day began at sundown, meaning the Sabbath was over. They had to wait until the evening [“eve” meaning the beginning of another day, as with “Eve” in Genesis 3:20]. Jesus was shown to have spent the day healing people who could come to Him, but those who were sicker and had to be carried had to wait, to fulfill the Law. How great it is to be delivered from that Law, but not from the Law of Christ that requires us to “carry” our brother at all times.

8. Another definition of “overcomer.” An overcomer is one who knows the truth, lives the truth, and constantly challenges the lie – 1 John 1:6.

9. The evening news, Christian writers, and the Bible continue to inform us of coming troubles. No need to fear, but a due amount of preparedness is called for. Preparedness, as with righteousness, starts within and works itself outwardly. Each of us, thus corporately, should be ready now so that when sudden or slow, severe or mild troubles come we will be ready. When prepared, we may not be totally informed but we, individually and corporately, will be quickly adjustable to our new circumstances. Being ready individually means being Christ-centered and neighbor-related. A neighbor is anyone whom the Lord, through any of many variable means, puts into our lives, whether next door or around the world. Let’s roughen-up our crosses and toughen-up our skin.

10. When the Greeks thought of character they thought of etchings on metal or engravings on stone. They understood that character came about by making 1,000 choices, then another 1,000, then another 1,000, etc. Eventually a person developed character. They knew that force or enticement could not produce character.

The Lord knows that, too. The Greeks picked up on it because all of nature and its processes reveal the Creator’s character and reveal Him. He knows and shows the importance [necessity!] of freedom. Have you noticed your freedom? He has offered the world and given to believers all that is necessary for righteousness and holiness, but has not forced it upon us. Thus He invented revelation, conviction, repentance, forgiveness, cleansing, and restoration. It’s a chain reaction. One leads to the other. Sometimes there is a disconnect along the way but the way is an open highway straight ahead – John 1:23.

11. Ah, those wilderness opportunities! How wonderfully painful! The Lord sets us free [even gives us extra vacation time], tells us we are going on a three-day picnic [Ex. 3:18; 5:3], and we end up in yet another wilderness. Then He reminds us that we are not yet perfect, that He is the Potter, and that we are His workmanship – Eph. 2:10. We are to keep our hands off our and others souls.

Moses and the Israelites never did return to Egypt from their church picnic. Their God had something even better for them. To receive it, they would have to walk 10 days, that being from Egypt to the Land of His promised blessings, then fight against overwhelming odds, with His obvious presence and His full assurance of their victories. Instead of heading for the Promised Land they looked at something else -- their obvious inability to possess the Land on their own, not at the ability and faithfulness of their God who only weeks before had done a series of tremendous, even greater miracles, on their behalf. They chose their inability over His ability, thus spending 40 years wandering in a desert, going nowhere, the unbelieving generations drying up [dying off] until the next generation believed God for Himself.

 12. Remember that belief is more important than behavior. When someone’s behavior fails, guard and nourish their faith. Correct them as needed, while considering that you may be the one needing their correction tomorrow – Jam. 5:19-20. Despite their filthy spiritual clothing, listen to them first and well. Then begin to speak and act. That’s in Proverbs 18:13 and James 1:19.

13. The Jews created their own religious system. When they returned to the Promised Land after 70 years of slavery they never again worshipped idols [of the simple and obvious type they had worshipped before]. Their new idols were self and possessions. Their previous idols had been carved or molded; their new idols of self and possessions were melded into a self-designed religious system that barely had room for Jehovah except as they needed Him. Yes, they used His name and some of His practices, but their hearts were hard and belonged to themselves. Into that system came their Messiah. Their rejection of Him was assured. In no way could He fit their mold. They were deaf to His words and blind to His obvious presence. Their system was great looking on the outside, but was full of dead men’s bones in the inside.

To varying degrees, our religious systems [denominations] are the same. The Lord can get into them only to the extent that He comes in our denominational dress. Otherwise we don’t recognize Him. We may tolerate Him for a spell, as they did Him for three years, but then He is rejected. He can sit down and be quiet or be put out some other way. Our religious systems are dead and death-dealing. The way of Christ is alive and life-giving.

14. Quickly following that Thought: Things or people that we think are lost are either put where they were destined, or into safe-keeping until they are returned. Keep that in mind as we go through this month’s THOUGHTS, and as we go through life.

15. Back to the church and our culture. Our culture is drifting downstream, as it must when on its own. It never drifts upstream. The church is a beacon, which is one aspect of being light, but when the beacon dims or goes out the world has no chance of getting on course. Our many Holy Spirit outpourings, some of which were in our lifetime, were meant to first help the church find itself and then to give light to our culture, but have usually been rejected by the church at the great expense of our cultures.

16. The church knows that without faith it is impossible to please God – Heb. 11:6. That is usually understood in a narrow, obviously religious sense. The successful workplace minister understands that without risk it is impossible to please [be successful before] God and man. Risk is his friend, not his enemy. God has not given him a spirit of fear, so he takes risks – 2 Tim. 1:7. If he does not step forward with that which the Lord has given him, his workplace ministry will dry up. He knows that he cannot allow fear of losing what he has to prevent his taking risks. On the other hand, it is undue comfort and safety that can become his enemies – Matt. 25:14-30. His faith tells him “I can do it.” It does him no good to “get excited” about his ministry; if his ministry does not excite him, things must change. He has learned that his uphill hopes and plans need uphill habits and effort. He adds value to others’ lives daily, not manipulating them in the process. He is a full-time mentor of his employees, and minister of the gospel.

17. Humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less. That definition convicts me more deeply, but is more healthy.

18. At times little subtleties can stand out after being overlooked for years. The last few words of Matthew 9:8 have been there all the time -- .. “God, who had given such authority to men.” The new thing that struck me was that the crowd got the revelation that God had given tremendous authority to humanity [to men], not just to that man, Jesus of Nazareth. They saw God’s gift in a much broader sense than just to the man who was standing there exercising it. Yes, at other times the observers saw it only in the person of Jesus or of His disciples but this revelation is special. It is only a short step from seeing that God’s gift is therefore available to me.

In that same passage, notice that Jesus started with the encouragement of “.. your sins are forgiven.” Then He healed the man in whom [and in his friends] He had already seen real faith. It is reported that the Jews believed that healing could not come until a person was forgiven of his sins, because disease was associated with sin. Jesus’ half-brother, James, wrote in 5:16 of his epistle that we should confess our sins to one another. Thus, being cleansed of our unrighteousness we can pray for one another and expect to be healed [my paraphrase].

Back to Matthew 9. When the paralyzed man received the pronunciation of the forgiveness of his sins, and got up and walked, the crowd should have known that indeed the man’s sins had been forgiven – by Jesus of Nazareth, who therefore must be their Messiah, and in some as yet unknown way, God. The fullness of that recognition was thus far not given to them but was on the way.

19. Do you know your calling? In this case, not the “what” but the “who.” Jesus was called to the Jews, so He stuck to His calling. That was a corporate calling but He also had individual people callings. The Jews were sick, He was their Physician; individual Jews were sick, He was their Physician. He welcomed whosoever would hear Him and His message, even accepting a few Gentiles as He saw that His Father had granted them faith, the key to His ministry.

In Matthew 9, beginning at verse 9, Jesus offered Life to a gross sinner, a social and religious outcast, a cheating tax collector, the author Matthew himself. No doubt that when Matthew wrote this part of his gospel he threw himself into it and relived it. When Jesus was challenged by the religious leaders for having anything to do with such people [Matthew was not the only outcast at the dinner], He pointed out that He had been sent to those who were the self-known unhealthy, impoverished, and otherwise needy – not to the self-supposed healthy, wealthy, and already fulfilled. He came for the hungry, not to those who were full [of themselves and religion]. He came to those who needed a savior, meaning those who knew they were sinners.

As a young physician, when He came to me that was easy for me to grasp. As a young physician and well-established sinner, that was very easy for me to grasp. So I grasped it, quickly and completely. At the same time Jesus grasped me quickly and completely. The struggle was over; Life was on. I had survived the scourge, the epidemic, the plague of sin; having been redeemed by the only Redeemer. Now it was for me to go as He had gone, to the people to whom He assigned me, and more particularly to the individuals therein. I had little to offer those who were “well,” but had Life to give to those who were “sick.”

A good picture of the condition of our time is given us in the Revelation 3:14-22.

20. What is your approach to ignorance – not to yours but to others’? I suppose it depends on how important the others are, or how important the ignorance is. Uneducated youth is a pot of troublesome stew, in which ignorance and confusion swirl like potatoes and beef. Whether in politics, economics, marriage or almost anything else [except in the military, where they learn from good teachers], they so easily display their sophomoric wisdom. My, my; how fortunate I was to have skipped that sort of pseudo-intelligence. [I must say here that that last statement is not at all true. I have to print this correction because so many of my readers with whom I grew up are no longer around to recognize the humor in that contra-truth.]

How has mankind managed to survive youth? For me, survival was due to my loving and patient parents. They were patient and gentle with me in my ignorance without consenting to it. I would say that it was kept as a family affair among our close-knit farming family. But now we are so public with social media and other forms of instant communication that there is little time for gentle, patient correction, if there is offered any correction at all. My thinking on this topic was prodded by the many youths who recently flocked to support an old geezer in politics whose answer to all things seemed to be to take from those who have and give to those who don’t have. You know my advice: Get a job.

21. So, the mayor of Albuquerque, New Mexico started a program to help the homeless. He has project vans pick them up and gives them day jobs with lunch and above-minimum wage pay. They do clean-up and pretty-up work. Everyone seems to be winners.

22. How great is grace? Will it enable us to heal the lame through surgery [without them appreciating our Christian benevolence]? Will it enable us to transform the reprobate through psychological rehabilitation [without them receiving Christ as Lord and Savior]? Will it enable us to reform murderers and thieves back to good citizenship [without their spiritual conversion]? Will it enable us to change our culture through political means? How great is God’s grace?

Will we extend His grace to those who spit in our face and otherwise severely persecute our brothers? Does God’s grace first require their internal transformation? Will God’s grace require us to withhold ourselves from our neighbor and our enemy? Will God’s grace transform without bringing salvation to those to whom we are sent across the entire scope of society? Is anything or anyone too lost or corrupt to be offered God’s grace? Or does God, or do we, first or eventually need to be paid some form of goodness? If so, is that God’s grace? It sounds very human to me.

Example: Israel medically treats thousands of Moslems, adults and children annually in Israel. The patients come from those surrounding countries that are continually at war with Israel. They come, Israel treats them. Is that God’s grace? If so, for what purpose? Right; God’s rain falls upon the just and the unjust. How great is God’s grace!!

23. Here is a little [unneeded, I’m sure] clarification of the difference between knowledge and wisdom: Knowledge is knowing a tomato is a fruit; wisdom is not putting it in a fruit salad.

24. Jonathan Edwards is noted for preaching, such as for his most famous sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” Less known is that he was a champion of economic justice. He did not divide between economic justice and the proclamation of the gospel but considered both as central parts of the pastor’s job. That got him fired, not for “messing around with worldly things” but for insisting that all church members must be regenerate as shown by their generosity and justice in working with the poor. Personal piety was to be shown in the workplace.

25. How is you vision, your point of view, your “relative position on objects or phenomena?” When Jesus looked out on the masses He saw them as a harvest ready to be harvested and saved. When the natural-eyed ones looked they saw them as chaff, headed for destruction. Jesus’ vision called for Him to die for them; the others vision caused them to drive on by those in the gutter. The problem for those of the masses was that there were no reapers to reap them. Prayer for the masses was not enough. Prayer without works is not enough. There are the few who cannot do other than pray, lifting up the arms of those who labor, but the majority of us are called to get into the gutter and be the gospel to the masses.