

James, the brother of Christ, seems to say it best:

Life is never played out in a straight line. If one stands at Point A and sets out meticulous plans for reaching Point B, there will invariably be several unexpected stopping points along the way—and sometimes even the original goal may never be reached.

Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. James 4:14

Here in the Midwest it's called the weather. Within a week's time we may have snow on the ground. Then it will warm up sufficiently for Linda and I to haul out the hoses and wash the Jeep. A day later, we may have freezing drizzle that coats every tree and bush and driving surface with a layer of ice—ice that is beautiful, but deadly. And through it all, the forecasters will be mostly incorrect about what the following day will bring.

In the story books, and our rose-tinted memories, the approaching season called winter is a frosted wonderland of beautiful snow. But the truth is that the season contains just about every variety of weather known to man: from shirtsleeve days to bitter, subzero cold; from brilliant sunshine to a seemingly endless procession of slate-gray days; from fresh blankets of white snow to monotonous landscapes of browns and grays.

Life is not constancy traveled on a paved highway, but a series of surprises traveled on a muddy dirt road. The quality of our

relationship to God is demonstrated every day by how we respond to the twists and turns that come our way. Life may be messy for everyone, but those who have placed their trust in the Lord get the mud washed off quicker.

One day may find us slogging through deep slush, up to our neck in potholes and pitfalls. The next day may find us slipping and sliding across sheets of icy predicaments, never sure whether our next step might send us flat onto our back. And the next day? Who knows.

God knows. Woe to the one who slips and slides his way from one day to the next without the Lord. Woe to him who wrangles and cajoles a plastic destiny out of the ether, only to end up hopelessly discouraged when things don't go as planned.

There is One who never promises an easy road, but is always there to pick us up when we slip and fall. There is One who offers firm footing when the bottom drops out of our expectations. There is One who knows how to wipe off the mud without wiping away our hope.

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning. James 1:17 nkjv



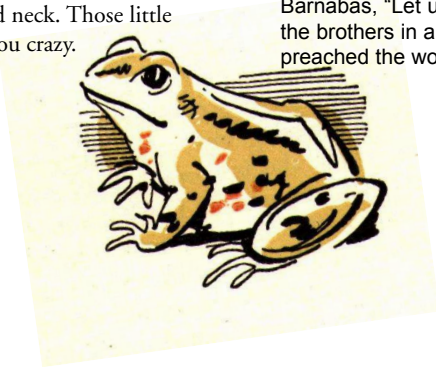
MAKING LEMONADE

One person's curse may be another's blessing.

While it is true that just about every autumn and spring around here is windy, this autumn has been particularly so. It would do little good to make our annual pre-winter sojourn around the property to rake up leaves for processing into mulch. The wind would carry them into the next county before we could load them into the cart.

Perched atop a valley, the wind gets a good cut at us straight out of the northwest, the direction from which most of our weather comes. City-dwelling visitors customarily remark at how much more windy it is out here, compared to what it is within their town.

My good wife and I have differing opinions on the wind. The harsh, persistent wind bothers Linda's ears, and its relentless onslaught shortens her temper and makes her just a little crazy. In contrast, while I may have to struggle to keep the hat atop my head when the wind blows, I welcome it as a friend—primarily because it keeps the gnats away from my face and neck. Those little guys will *really* make you crazy.



Perspective is all. To this writer frogs and toads are rubbery nuisances that leap out and startle, but Linda delights in them for their consumption of bad bugs in the garden. Finding one in the drive, or out in the yard, she will lovingly transfer it to a new home in one of the gardens. Last night as I was about to pull an imposing weed, Linda stopped me by explaining that it should remain in place because it attracted beneficial bugs to the garden.

Go figure.

Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I appeal to you on the basis of love. I then, as Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus—I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me. Philemon 1:8-11

To Philemon, Onesimus was nothing more than a runaway slave, but to the apostle Paul he was a friend and brother in Christ. Same person, two perspectives.

Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and

see how they are doing." Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus. Acts 15:36-39

To Paul, John Mark was a disappointment, someone who had let them down by bailing out when things got tough. But Barnabas saw the potential in the young disciple, and chose to encourage him.

The brothers there had heard that we were coming, and they traveled as far as the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns to meet us. At the sight of these men Paul thanked God and was encouraged. When we got to Rome, Paul was allowed to live by himself, with a soldier to guard him. Acts 28:15-16

His friends and comrades bemoaned his imprisonment in Rome, chained to a soldier under house arrest. But the apostle Paul saw the jailing as an opportunity to spread the gospel to the gentiles of Rome—even into the emperor's palace. What would have been to many intolerable company, was to Paul a captive audience for the Good News.

It's up to us, really. Perspective is all.

CATCHING IT EARLY

Sometimes we are to make lemonade from the sour turns of life. We are to find the good, learn the lessons, improve our perspective. But at other

times we are to quickly and decisively remove from our life anything that will bring with it only pain, suffering, and disease.

Catch for us the foxes,
the little foxes
that ruin the vineyards,
our vineyards that are in bloom.
Song of Solomon 2:15

Early in every new year, once the winter snow has melted away, with days warm and mostly clear Linda and I begin in earnest our spring cleanup of the property. While my

good wife prepares her gardens for the new year's round of plantings, I turn to the many trees bent over and broken by winter storms.

Hitching up my trailers in tandem behind the tractor—one for wood and refuse, one to hold my saws and supplies—I set out from the barn with great purpose and fortitude, ready to do battle with all the fallen limbs strewn over the land. The true dimensions of that battle sometimes become painfully clear, however, when I spend most of the day within only fifty feet of the barn door.

There's a wild rose that grows in these parts. Newcomers (as we were a number of years back) remark at the fragile beauty of its spring blooms: white, with a delicate, almost imperceptible fragrance. They count themselves fortunate to have such beauty

occurring naturally, and accept as tolerable inconvenience the thorns that accompany the pretty flowers.

But eventually the wild rose wears out its welcome, as it spreads and moves quickly from an object of fragile beauty to a noxious weed. The temporary flowers become poor payment for the long, whip-like strands from which they bloom, thorn covered tentacles that seek out shirts and soft flesh, whipping about in the breeze in search of unprotected eyes.

One year I spent most of the first day of spring cleanup doing battle with two large areas of these thorn-covered beasts and their near cousin—a singularly hateful vine that spreads and twines its way up into the branches of trees, sucking life and health from its host as it fends off property owners

with a skin of needle-like spines.

I was now paying the price for permitting these noxious weeds to continue to thrive. Instead of easily lopping them off at an early stage, I now fought my way through their thick growth, collecting scratches and being gouged by their defense systems. What would have earlier required only thirty minutes of whacking with the scythe, now required four hours of dangerous excavation with chain saw and poles.

*Search me, O God, and know my heart today;
Try me, O Savior, know my thoughts, I pray.
See if there be some wicked way in me;
Cleanse me from every sin, and set me free.*

J. Edwin Orr

Unadulterated joy, born of God's Spirit, should be unbounded, given wing freely and extravagantly, deaf to convention or popular opinion.

Out of all the myriad voices that awaken us each morning, it is the voice of the smallest that predominates. Out of all the many birds that rise and give voice before a summer dawn, it is the tiny wren—barely larger than a hummingbird—whose voice is the loudest and most distinctive.

We invite the tiny creatures every spring by setting out houses in the trees that surround our home. Very soon the male will arrive to reconnoiter, flitting about the branches to select precisely the house that suits his fancy. Once he's made up his mind, he will proceed to entice a suitable female to his home.

The male wren sets to collecting twigs and carrying them, one by one, through the small hole into the house. His purpose is single-minded, and identical to that of the male of any species: to impress the female of the species.

During and after his construction project, he will periodically perch on a branch near the house, lift his tiny head skyward, and give

forth with his clear, multi-faceted song. With a volume and clarity that bears no relation to his tiny size, the male wren will give strong voice to his need for a mate. And soon one, indeed, will arrive. If she likes his nest—and likes him—she will favor the male with her company.

The wren is a feisty, charismatic bird who is fearless before any opposition. We have seen them run off blue jays and woodpeckers who have strayed too close to the house—all birds many times their size. We ourselves have also been recipients of their verbal chastisement, when we have been the ones encroaching on their territory.

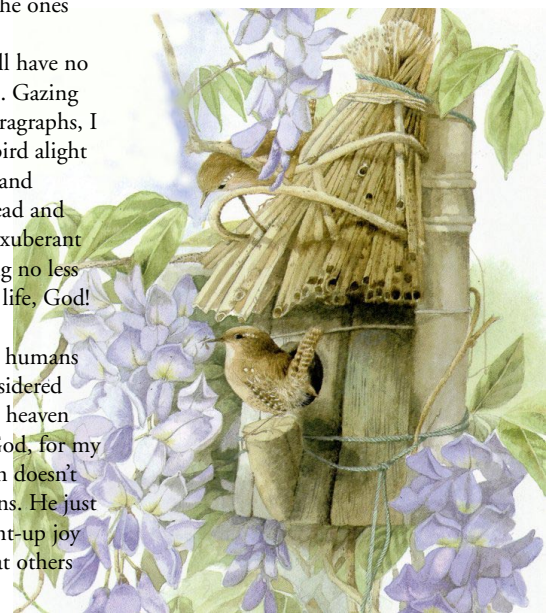
But very often the tiny wren will have no apparent reason for his vocalization. Gazing out the library window between paragraphs, I will quite often see the small gray bird alight on the step railing, looking so tiny and fragile. But then he will raise his head and sing out with a most glorious and exuberant sound—as if proclaiming something no less profound than “Thank you for my life, God! I praise you!”

We, as intelligent, sophisticated humans don't do this often enough. It's considered unseemly to raise one's gaze toward heaven and simply cry out, “Thank you, God, for my life! I praise you!” But the tiny wren doesn't care about such civilized conventions. He just needs to periodically release the pent-up joy that fills his breast—no matter what others may think.

SINGING OUT HIS PRAISE

Praise the LORD!

How good it is to sing praises to our God,
how pleasant and fitting to praise him!
Sing to the LORD with thanksgiving;
make music to our God on the harp.
He covers the sky with clouds;
he supplies the earth with rain
and makes grass grow on the hills.
He provides food for the cattle
and for the young ravens when they call.
Psalm 147:1,7-9



Sometimes I can't tell which of the two is more inconsistent: the weather or my Spiritual life.

The first half of an earlier spring was too dry. By the time winter had drawn to a close, the heavy snows were only a memory, so there were no huge drifts left to melt down and run off into the rivers, lakes and ponds. While it was far from drought conditions, we were kept busy hauling water out to the new plantings. Every week we would look toward the heavens and plead for rain, but none came. In the meantime, the pond—which has a slow leak—slowly leaked its way toward being just another dry hole in the ground.

Then God changed His mind (He can do that, you know). The long sweeping jet streams high aloft shifted and suddenly we had more rain than we knew what to do with. Then we had the opposite problem: Now our carefully tilled and shaped garden was being washed from its bed and down the slope. Now days and nights were filled with thunder crashes and lightning strikes taking pot shots

at the trees surrounding the house. Small rivers were created in moments, washing driveway gravel down the side of hills; the thin tops of mole runs collapsed under the watery onslaught, leaving tiny canyons throughout the gardens and lawn that quickly widened from the rushing water.

The ground became a squishy bog that could take no more of the water, and sent the excess, along with buckets of black mud, coursing toward the pond. That body of water, which earlier that spring had been on its way to becoming a dry hole, now overflowed its banks, creating a new river around the end of the dike, flowing into the woods below.

And now we were gazing toward the heavens, pleading, "Turn it off! Turn it off!"

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like

CONSISTENCY

a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does. James 1:2-8

I suppose the word we're looking for here is consistency. Oh, why can't we be more consistent in our walk with the Lord. The first answer to that age-old question (just ask Adam and Eve) is easy: We are not consistent in our faith because we are *human*—more to the point, members of depraved humanity. Redeemed, sanctified, saved by the blood, yes—but still flesh, with all of humanity's inherent weakness.

But in a way, that answer is little more than a cop out. It's too easy to say, "Well, I'm just human, after all." Settling for inconsistency means settling for sin in our lives, and every time we settle for the smallest sin, larger ones will not be far behind.

Droughts will come and rains will come, and they will almost always be inconvenient in their timing and duration. They will also, invariably, leave damage in their wake. We can do little about the weather, but how much damage is being done to our lives by our inconsistent faith?

PULLING SMALL WEEDS

"How is it you don't understand that I was not talking to you about bread? But be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees." Then they understood that he was not telling them to guard against the yeast used in bread, but against the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Matthew 16:11-12

Our household is one accustomed to thrift. While I would not describe us as actually stingy, Linda and I have always been careful with our money and get as much as possible for every dollar.

It's not uncommon for us to do without something, waiting for it to go on sale, then buying out the store's supply at the lower price.

So when it comes time for my good wife to lay in a supply of potting soil, she typically passes by the more expensive 'soilless' mixes, and bags of ultra-sterilized soil, to get the cheap bag of potting soil on sale at K-Mart.

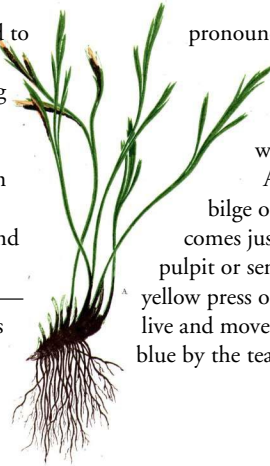
One year she must have *really* saved some money, because there were quite a few surprises sprouting in her seedling flats. The rows of new geraniums, delphiniums,

heliotrope, tomatoes, peppers, and celery were that year invaded by sprouts of grass and other weeds. Since the flats had never been outside, but had remained in the house under florescent lights, it's a safe bet the weeds were not carried in by the wind, but were instead sprouted from the cheap potting soil.

So along with the normal care of the seedlings, that season also included the pulling of tiny grass starts as they showed themselves among the plants. What was relatively easy to remove early-on, in its germinating state, would have been much

more of a challenge if left, and transferred to the garden come spring. Weeding in the comfort of the house saved much bending over later in the heat of the summer sun.

We live in a world in which there is an extravagant amount of cheap information flying about. From the television, radio and newspaper, to magazines and journals, to newsletters, e-mail, the Internet and Web—this variegated procession of word-carriers continuously fills the air with ideas and



pronouncements declared essential (and, of course, unimpeachable) to our lives and well-being.

And today, sadly, the bilge of heresy and blasphemy comes just as readily from the pulpit or seminary, as from the yellow press or liberal university. We live and move through oxygen tinged blue by the teachings of the foolish,

and by necessity we must be constantly on guard against the weeds that threaten the integrity of what we know to be truth. While the fertile soil of the gospel is itself impermeable to the weeds of this world, we must remain vigilant in what we permit to take root in the soil of our lives.

Easily remove the sprout now, or struggle with the mature, deeply-rooted plant later. The choice is ours.

It was obvious that my dad was an electrician.

Isn't it true that whatever one's profession, it is practiced the poorest in our own home? The finish carpenter who uses meticulous craftsmanship on the job site will often do embarrassingly crude work in his own dwelling. The plumber who can punctually plumb an entire three-story house will need to be nagged unmercifully by his wife to repair the toilet in his own.

In Marshalltown some time back to do some work around mom's house, I was in the basement vacuuming up a few year's worth of cobwebs. In the process, I was brought face to face, again, with reminders of my dad's profession. As a child I had tagged along with my dad (now deceased) to various jobs when he would wire houses, and I knew him to do exemplary work when working for others.

In the basement of the house in which he had lived for many decades, however, was

evidence that in his own home the electrical work was something less than a fine art. Unboxed outlets and switches dangled from the overhead joist space; bare wires sprouted from hastily taped splices; heavy Romex draped down, unstapled, to catch the unwitting passerby under the chin; and the junction box from which they all emanated looked as if an enraged gorilla had released the full force of his wrath upon its tangled innards.

If dad had wired someone else's house in the same way, he would most certainly have been run out of town on a highly-electrified rail.

Not surprisingly, God's word takes a position remarkably opposite from the ways of this world.

A deacon must be the husband of but one wife and must manage his children and his household well. Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus. 1 Timothy 3:12-13

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. Ephesians 5:25

Likewise, teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good. Then they can train the younger women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God. Titus 2:3-5

In the Spiritual realm, sloppy work at home brings disaster, and dishonor upon the Kingdom. Our best work should be reserved for our own home, for it is the earthly model of God's love for His people. It is the place where—before even the church—love for Christ and a devotion to God is to be demonstrated and learned.

It is where Jesus, once again, becomes flesh.

*O give us homes with Godly father and mothers,
Who always place their hope and trust in Him;
Whose tender patience turmoil never bothers,
Whose calm and courage trouble cannot dim;
A home where each finds joy in serving others,
And love still shines, tho days be dark and grim.*

*O Lord, our God, our homes are Thine forever!
We trust to Thee their problems, toil, and care;
Their bonds of love no enemy can sever
If Thou art always Lord and Master there:
Be Thou the center of our least endeavor—
Be Thou our Guest, our hearts and homes to share.*

Barbara B. Hart

QUALITY OF GRACE

he other day the ferns reminded me of Satan. More precisely, they reminded me of our natural bent toward him and his ways.

Last year we placed mature, transplanted ferns in the flower beds on the north side of the house, expecting them to thrive in the shade of the house and overhanging trees. In the profuse rains of spring, some of them did emerge to send forth their delicate lace-work fronds.

Day after day we grew accustomed to the rains and the luxury of not having to water the growing things. Not only were the rains arriving steadily, but we knew that the soil in the shaded, protected beds would stay moist for a long time after.

As spring bled into summer and the rains stopped coming, we began watering the more exposed gardens, but continued the habit of thinking the flower beds on the north side of the house would remain moist. The other day, when I finally went out to water them,

the ferns were leaned over, parched, gasping for water. The protected beds had indeed dried out terribly, showing the result of weeks without rain.

Grace can be a two-edged sword. The glorious, comforting grace of Jesus Christ brings a reassuring peace into our lives, and the confidence of an eternity lived with Him. Christianity is based on the foundation of that free grace—salvation offered through nothing more than the sacrifice of the Son.

But it's easy for the confidence of grace to turn into complacency—the static complacency Dietrich Bonhoeffer referred to as 'cheap grace':

Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves... Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.

There is more to God's grace than salvation, for the extravagant waters of the conversion experience will not be sustained from above. Oh, to be sure, the salvation itself does not fade. But just as the ferns began to wither and die from lack of regular water, our quality of life under God's grace

withers without regular nurturing.

Our natural bent is not toward God, but *away* from Him. Satan exploits our complacency, fooling us into thinking that sanctification is simply a one-time act, rather than a continuing process. He lies to us, letting us follow our natural path of deception, thinking that obtaining the key to heaven is enough. It's not. God expects more from us.

Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock.

Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose. *Philippians 2:12-13*



nce again the brown of fallen oak leaves is rapidly covering over the green of the grass. Once again the dusty musk of dried foliage permeates the crisp autumn air.

IMPORTANCE

Months ago, when the first rays of spring were bathing the trees in life-giving warmth, the skeletal branches of the oak trees formed buds, then the buds burst forth into broad, brilliantly green leaves. Each new leaf seemed to appear with a flourish, as if saying, "Here I am to brighten things up after the drab grays of winter. Look at me!"

There is a saucy arrogance to the leaf as it clothes its host with the luxurious drapery of spring and summer. Generously it draws nourishment for the tree while it shades the ground, the house, and the people who live beneath it. And the leaf enjoys its moment in the sun, its time of prominence.

But then the year drags on, and the vitality of summer passes inexorably into the

faded glory of autumn. The brilliant green of the leaf quickly fades, replaced, just for a moment, with a beautiful gold or red, which, in a blink of the eye, fades again to a dull brown. The leaf shrivels into a curled shaving, then drifts and tumbles silently to the ground.

But the leaf's useful life is not over. It will be gathered up with its brethren, shredded and stored in a large pile to silently wait out the bitter cold approaching. Then, as the next spring nudges aside the icy blanket of winter, the leaf will be resurrected to continue to serve. It will be spread over the ground to protect the newly planted soil, or mixed in deeply to add roughage, or will be added to the compost pile to become brand new soil

for the garden.

From brilliant glory to faded burial, the leaf continues its life of service. And so shall we. Whether God ordains for us a life of prominence, or a more simple life of pedestrian labor, we are here at His pleasure. Clothed in fine garments, or clothed in rags, we belong to the Lord.

If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not boast over those branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you. You will say then, "Branches

were broken off so that I could be grafted in." Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either. Romans 11:17-21

After crossing the Grimsel, on the way down toward Handeck, the traveler traverses a road cut in red marble so smoothly polished that, even when it is divested of its usual thin coating of snow it is dangerous in the extreme. Even though steps are hewn and rough marks made across the granite, he would be foolhardy who should try to ride along the slippery way, which is called Helle Parte (Hell Place) for reasons which glisten on the surface. 'Dismount,' a sign orders, and none are slow to obey it. There are many such Hell Places on the road to the celestial city—smooth places of pleasure, ease, flattery, self-content, and the like. It will be the wisest course, if any pilgrim has been fond of riding the high horse, for him to dismount at once and walk humbly with his God. That enchanted ground of which Bunyan tells us that the air naturally tended to make one drowsy, is just the spot to which we refer. Men whose path lies through that deceitful country need to be watchful. Charles Haddon Spurgeon

We are now well on our way to the more barren part of autumn that leads, inevitably, to the locked-up cold of winter. We have just passed through the splendid pageantry of autumn's opening show: the dazzling colors of leaves fading from their summer green. But now those leaves have either moved into the flat brown color of their final days, or have dropped away all together, to collect and molder into the soil. In either case, the trees on our land are now taking on their typical barren look of winter.

There are few things more ugly and apparently lifeless than a stand of oak trees in winter. Devoid of leaves, they perch like hulking black stick figures—fugitives from Dorothy's haunted forest, gaunt and unapproachable. Without leaves to give them form, their limbs protrude at comical, nonsensical angles, as if put together by committee. They appear almost grotesque, and thoroughly dead.

But let it rain for a day or two, regardless the season, and a mystical transformation takes place on the surface of the trees. Where once was seemingly lifeless, black bark, there suddenly appears a cloak of bright green: Life, seemingly from lifelessness. With a period of rain the almost invisible lichen dormant on the heavy bark springs back to life, giving the tall trees a brilliant new covering.

When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." John 8:12

It's easy to forget that within our bodies we carry the life of Christ. It's easy to forget, in this world of darkness and cynicism, that we carry in our persons the brilliance and

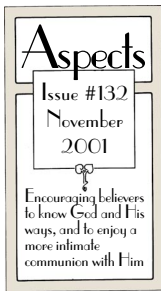
hope of heaven. On the surface we may look like any other person: mere flesh and bones, happiness tinged with sorrow, frustrations, anger, and darkness.

But deep inside and permeating every cell is the rich, sustaining life from above. We are indeed citizens of another city, but as pilgrims in this unholy land we can, over time, take on the dull patina of its more permanent dwellers.

It's not necessary for us to keep reacquiring the light and life that Christ has given us; the first time was sufficient. But without steady feeding, the light can fade, and we can begin looking like everyone else: ugly and dead. Drench ourselves with some heavenly rain, however, and we spring back into native brilliance—overflowing with life and light from above.

*Showers of blessing,
Showers of blessing we need:
Mercy-drops 'round us are falling,
But for the showers we plead.*

Daniel W. Whittle



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Knowing... is a series of brief devotionals for understanding the God of heaven through the lives of those who called upon His name.

Edition: HTML