

Falling Down

LIVING WITHOUT TRAINING WHEELS

ALL OF US, EVEN IF WE HAVE NO CONSTITUTIONAL TEMPTATION TO FICKLENESS, MUST FEEL OUR OWN WEAKNESS IF WE ARE REALLY QUICKENED OF GOD. DEAR READER, DO YOU NOT FIND ENOUGH IN ANY ONE SINGLE DAY TO MAKE YOU STUMBLE? YOU THAT DESIRE TO WALK IN PERFECT HOLINESS, AS I TRUST YOU DO; YOU THAT HAVE SET BEFORE YOU A HIGH STANDARD OF WHAT A CHRISTIAN SHOULD BE—DO YOU NOT FIND THAT BEFORE THE BREAKFAST THINGS ARE CLEARED AWAY FROM THE TABLE, YOU HAVE DISPLAYED ENOUGH FOLLY TO MAKE YOU ASHAMED OF YOURSELVES? IF WE WERE TO SHUT OURSELVES UP IN THE LONE CELL OF A HERMIT, TEMPTATION WOULD FOLLOW US; FOR AS LONG AS WE CANNOT ESCAPE FROM OURSELVES WE CANNOT ESCAPE FROM INCITEMENTS TO SIN.

(CHARLES HADDON SPURGEON)

Aspects

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Encouraging
believers to know
God and His ways,
and to enjoy a more
intimate communion
with Him

REMAINING UPRIGHT

I NEVER HAD A BICYCLE WITH TRAINING WHEELS. My parents could never afford to buy me a bike that would be so quickly outgrown, so I never had my own bike until it could be one large enough that it would have looked pretty silly with training wheels attached.

As if it happened just last night, I recall getting that first bike. It was on the occasion of my 12th birthday. The bicycle was a 26-inch model painted a bright, fire engine red. I remember going to bed that night with that brand new red bike parked smack at the foot of my bed, where I could lie there and keep an eye on it, and make sure nothing happened to it before morning. I can still taste the anticipation.

While I never had one of my own, I had plenty of opportunities to observe bikes with training wheels. Simple inventions, these wheels were attached to the frame, one on either side of the rear wheel, and positioned just a few inches above the ground, so that if the rider tipped just a little in either direction, the training wheel on that side would make contact with the pavement.

Bikes with training wheels never fall over; there's always a wheel there to keep the bike and rider upright. The many bumps and scrapes, cuts and bruises of my childhood attest to the fact that bikes *without* training wheels certainly do fall over from time to time.

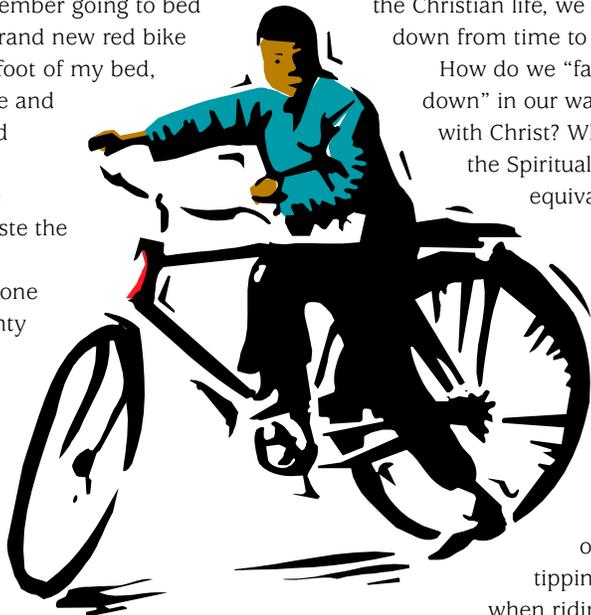
At the point of our salvation—at the moment in which our eternity with Christ is sealed—we are issued the Holy Spirit as a permanent resident. The

gentle Spirit comes in to live with us, to counsel, to guide our steps, and to be our permanent connection to the Father. What we are *not* issued, however, is a set of training wheels.

Some people believe that it is possible to live the Christian life without ever falling down. To those people—people who never fall down—I say: may your tribe increase. It has been my

experience, however, that in the Christian life, we do fall down from time to time.

How do we “fall down” in our walk with Christ? What is the Spiritual equivalent



of tipping over when riding our bike?

We fall down whenever we behave in a manner unlike Christ: the harsh word said in haste, petty jealousies that come between friends, failing to forgive another, pride that becomes a barrier to righteousness, silent envy that causes us to take what is not ours, a cold heart regarding the plight of another, laziness that permits the ways of the world to win out over the ways of God. And beneath it all, the lingering residue of unholy passions weaned and nurtured before we came to know Christ.

When we pray, our prayer does more for us than for God. And when we fall,

we are the ones who come up bruised and bloody from the experience, not the One who set us atop the bike.

But why do we fall down? We certainly haven't planned to; it's not what we want to have happen. But, like clockwork, just when we have resolved never to fall down again—there go our wheels out from under us.

Is falling down supposed to be a part of the Christian life—or does it represent a measure of defeat in a life that has failed to attain some mystical level of purity? Interestingly, in his most thorough and profound treatise on Christian doctrine, the apostle Paul includes the following personal note.

For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want. But if I am doing the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.

I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good. For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin. Romans 7:18-25

Those of us who fall down from time to time—those who grudgingly understand that absolute holiness will never be attained this side of heaven's gates—can take some comfort from Scripture, which includes stories of those who fell down from time to time.

YOUNG AND FOOLISH

BEFORE I WAS OLD ENOUGH TO HAVE MY OWN BICYCLE, I took advantage of opportunities to ride those belonging to others. One fringe benefit of our family visiting another was that I would be able—depending on the benevolence of the resident kids—to ride their bikes.

Jerry, the son of our friends in Shell Rock, Iowa, had a bike that was a favorite of mine to ride. It was great fun to wheel it around the wide, tree-lined streets of the small town, around and around the block by the adjacent cemetery. There was only one problem: if I sat on the seat, my feet wouldn't reach the pedals. So the only way for me to ride the bike was to do so standing on the pedals, leaning from side to side to avoid the center bar. In fact, the only way I was even able to get on the bike was to launch myself from the edge of their rather large front porch.

The problem with riding a bike in such a fashion is that you have very little control over the vehicle. If you hit a curb wrong, skid on a patch of mud, or otherwise get into trouble, about all you can do is let yourself tip over sideways.

Sometimes you land on your feet; most times, however, you land with your shoulder hitting the sidewalk.

John Mark had a solid, Christian upbringing. His mother, Mary, was an important figure in the early church and, in fact, a group worshipped in her home in Jerusalem. It was to this home that Peter went after the angel of the Lord supernaturally rescued him from prison.

Mark's family was influential, as well as wealthy. Barnabas, the land-owner who became for awhile the apostle Paul's ministry partner, was related. Mark had a good pedigree, and it is not

youthful vigor and enthusiasm helped sustain him through the tougher moments of the journey.

But something happened between Paphos, on Cyprus, and Perga, which was on the mainland in Pamphylia. Suddenly, John Mark left the mission and returned to his home in Jerusalem.

Now Paul and his companions put out to sea from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia; but John left them and returned to Jerusalem.

Acts 13:13

MOST OF US LIVE ONLY WITHIN THE LEVEL OF CONSCIOUSNESS—CONSCIOUSLY SERVING AND CONSCIOUSLY DEVOTED TO GOD. THIS SHOWS IMMATURITY AND THE FACT THAT WE ARE NOT YET LIVING THE REAL CHRISTIAN LIFE. MATURITY IS PRODUCED IN THE LIFE OF A CHILD OF GOD ON THE UNCONSCIOUS LEVEL, UNTIL WE BECOME SO TOTALLY SURRENDERED TO GOD THAT WE ARE NOT EVEN AWARE OF BEING USED BY HIM. WHEN WE ARE CONSCIOUSLY AWARE OF BEING USED AS BROKEN BREAD AND POURED-OUT WINE, WE HAVE YET ANOTHER LEVEL TO REACH—A LEVEL WHERE ALL AWARENESS OF OURSELVES AND OF WHAT GOD IS DOING THROUGH US IS COMPLETELY ELIMINATED. A SAINT IS NEVER CONSCIOUSLY A SAINT—A SAINT IS CONSCIOUSLY DEPENDENT ON GOD. (OSWALD CHAMBERS)

How do we know that Mark did not leave the mission on agreeable terms?

After some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us return and visit the brethren in

every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are." Barnabas wanted to take John, called Mark, along with them also. But Paul kept insisting that they should not take him along who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. And there occurred such a sharp disagreement that they separated from one another, and Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. But Paul chose Silas and left, being committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord. Acts 15:36-40

Whatever John Mark's reason for leaving, Paul was of the opinion that he had let them down, that he had abandoned the work he had set out to perform.

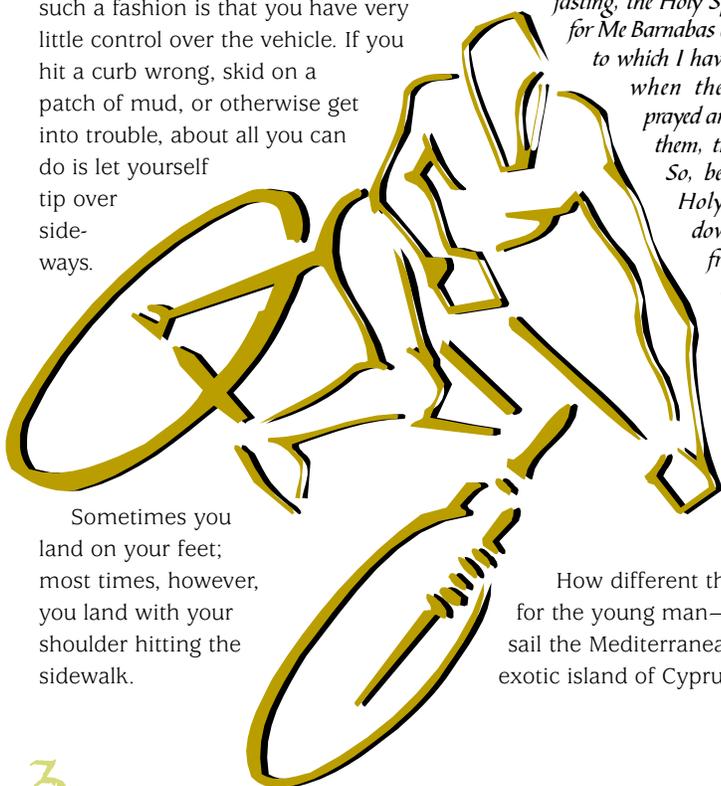
Why do we fall down?

In a perfect world we would be born with every bit of wisdom and knowledge we would need for any circumstance. But, as we all know, this world is not perfect. We gain experience and wisdom only over time, as we mature. The person who has been riding a bike every day for forty years will stay upright more consistently than the one who is just beginning. The venerable Christian, who

hard to imagine his youthful enthusiasm when it was proposed that he accompany Paul and his cousin Barnabas on their first missionary journey.

While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away. So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus. When they reached Salamis, they began to proclaim the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews; and they also had John as their helper. Acts 13:2-5

How different this must have been for the young man—how exciting to sail the Mediterranean, landing at the exotic island of Cyprus. Surely his



has been walking consistently with the Lord for decades, will fall down less often than the one who just met Him yesterday.

Then again, we can gain experience by falling down. The scars of failure can often be the best teachers. If we are paying

attention when we blow it, chances are better that we may not blow it again. It's a risky business, however, learning only from the mistakes we make. The better plan is to learn, from the beginning, from the One who has all the right answers.

*How can a young man keep his way pure?
By keeping it according to Your word.*

Psalm 119:9

AN INFORMED DEVOTION

IT SEEMS THAT IN ALL OF SCRIPTURE, no one fell down more often than the apostle Peter. But to his credit, he kept getting back up and trying again. Even in the face of withering retorts from Jesus (and certain humiliation before the other disciples because of His rebukes) Peter never gave up. He hung in there to the end.

Of course we need not single out poor Peter. Even the most cursory study of the disciples of Jesus reveals a veritable catalog of the frailties of the flesh. Peter stands out, however, in his sheer ability to say or do the wrong thing at precisely the wrong time.

The question then presents itself: Why did he keep trying? Why didn't Peter just give up and return to his nets? The answer, I suppose, has something to

do with his love for Jesus, and for his desire to please Him—to do better the next time.

This is no small thing, for it reaches to the heart of what motivates any of us to get back up when we have fallen down. There is, indeed, something in each of us that connects us to Christ: the Holy Spirit. Beyond that, however, there is a love for our Savior that develops over time, much like the earthly love we might have for another human being.

Just as we come as babes to Christ, and only gradually mature in spiritual wisdom and knowledge as we walk with Him, our devotion to Jesus gradually matures and deepens the more we come to know Him. Our initial love for Christ is a young and fragile thing, based primarily on an appreciation for what

He did for us at the cross. But as we travel through life with Him, coming to recognize and appreciate His tender touch through the rough times; His comforting, forgiving arm about our shoulders when we have failed; sharing His joy over our triumphs—the longer we live with Jesus, the deeper and more profound becomes our love for Him.

This relationship is the basis for our desire to get back up and try again when we have fallen flat on our face. It is our confidence in Jesus that encourages us when down; it is our love for Him that becomes our motivation to try again, and do better the next time.

*But You, O Lord, are a shield about me,
My glory, and the One who lifts my head.*

Psalm 3:3

*Arise, my soul, arise! shake off thy guilty fears;
The bleeding Sacrifice in my behalf appears.
Before the throne my surety stands;
My name is written on His hands,
My name is written on His hands.*

*He ever lives above, for me to intercede;
His all-redeeming love, His precious blood to plead;
His blood atoned for all our race,
And sprinkles now the throne of grace,
And sprinkles now the throne of grace.*

*Five bleeding wounds He bears, received on Calvary;
They pour effectual prayers, they strongly plead for me;
"Forgive him, O forgive," they cry,
"Nor let that ransomed sinner die!
Nor let that ransomed sinner die!"*

*The Father hears Him pray, His dear anointed One;
He cannot turn away the presence of His Son:
His Spirit answers to the blood,
And tells me that I am born of God,
And tells me that I am born of God.*

*My God is reconciled, His pardoning voice I hear;
He owns me for His child, I can no longer fear:
With confidence I now draw nigh,
And "Father, Abba, Father!" cry,
And "Father, Abba, Father" cry.*

(Charles Wesley)

THRILLS AND SPILLS

THE SAME SINS WHICH PUT OUR LORD TO DEATH WILL PUT US TO DEATH IF THEY CAN. O CHILD OF GOD, YOU NEVER SIN WITHOUT INJURING YOURSELF. THE SMALLEST SIN THAT EVER CREEPS INTO YOUR HEART IS A ROBBER SEEKING TO KILL AND TO DESTROY. YOU NEVER PROFITED BY SIN, AND NEVER CAN. NO, IT IS POISON, DEADLY POISON TO YOUR SPIRIT. YOU KNOW THAT IT INJURES YOUR FAITH, DESTROYS YOUR ENJOYMENT, WITHERS UP YOUR PEACE, WEAKENS YOU IN PRAYER, AND PREVENTS YOUR EXAMPLE BEING BENEFICIAL TO OTHERS. (SPURGEON)

BECAUSE I WAS A FAIRLY TYPICAL, RED-BLOODED AMERICAN BOY, the brand new bike I received on my 12th birthday did not long remain in its pristine state. Young boys where I come from like to *customize* things, so it wasn't long before my shiny bicycle had been modified beyond all recognition.

The angles of the seat and handlebars were changed for a more racy profile, and many-colored plastic streamers were attached to the holes in the grips. An odd assortment of do-dads was added to the wheel spokes for noise and flash. Lights and buzzers, whistles and horns were added and subtracted on a regular basis for both safety and social status. The red factory finish was eventually improved upon with random blotches of spray paint: metallic green, silver and gold.

Then the fenders were modified—even removed. Factory handlebars were exchanged for those of a slightly more radical design. The shape of the seat became more of an artistic statement, rather than just a perch for my bottom.

Also typical, with modifications to the appearance of my bike came modifications to my riding habits. On the first day with my new bike, I remained conservative, riding in genteel circuits round about the block. But soon I was jumping the curb, launching myself off graded slopes and banks, careening dangerously close to vehicles both stationary and moving. In no time, instead of obeying my father to use the kickstand when dismounting, I had adopted the habit of leaping from my trusty steed while still moving, thereby letting it slam and scrape into the ground with a most satisfying crash.

Curiously, as my reckless riding habits increased, so did the cuts and scrapes and bruises upon my person.

When I rode sensibly, I remained astride the seat in an upright position; when I rode with reckless abandon, I paid a price for my antics—usually with physical pain.

Now when evening came David arose from his bed and walked around on the roof of the king's house, and from the roof he saw a woman bathing; and the woman was very beautiful in appearance. So David sent and inquired about the woman. And one said, "Is this not Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?" David sent messengers and took her, and when she came to him, he lay with her; and when she had purified herself from her uncleanness, she returned to her house. 2 Samuel 11:2-4

The curse of free will is that we are free to do really stupid things. Sometimes we fall down purely by accident. But more often we fall

down because we have purposely put ourselves into a position where



down is likely.

Then the Lord sent Nathan to David. And he came to him and said, "There were two men in one city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had a great many flocks and herds. But the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb, which he bought and nourished; and it grew up together with him and his children. It would eat of his bread and drink of his cup and lie in his bosom, and was like a daughter to him. Now a traveler came to the rich man, and he was unwilling to take from his own flock or his own herd, to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him; rather he took the poor man's ewe lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him." Then David's anger burned greatly against the man, and he said to Nathan, "As the Lord lives, surely the man who has done this deserves to die. He must make restitution for the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing and had no compassion." Nathan then said to David, "You are the man!" 2 Samuel 12:1-7a

Our selfish desires can blind us to the fact that we have even fallen down in the first place—especially when we have grown accustomed to the spills.

"Why have you despised the word of the Lord by doing evil in His sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the sons of Ammon. Now therefore, the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised Me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife." Thus says the Lord, "Behold, I will raise up evil against you from your own household; I will even take your wives before your eyes and give them to your companion, and he will lie with your wives in broad daylight. Indeed you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all

Israel, and under the sun.' " Then David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord." And Nathan said to David, "The Lord also has taken away your sin; you shall not die. However, because by this deed you have given occasion to the enemies of the Lord to

blaspheme, the child also that is born to you shall surely die." 2 Samuel 12:9-14

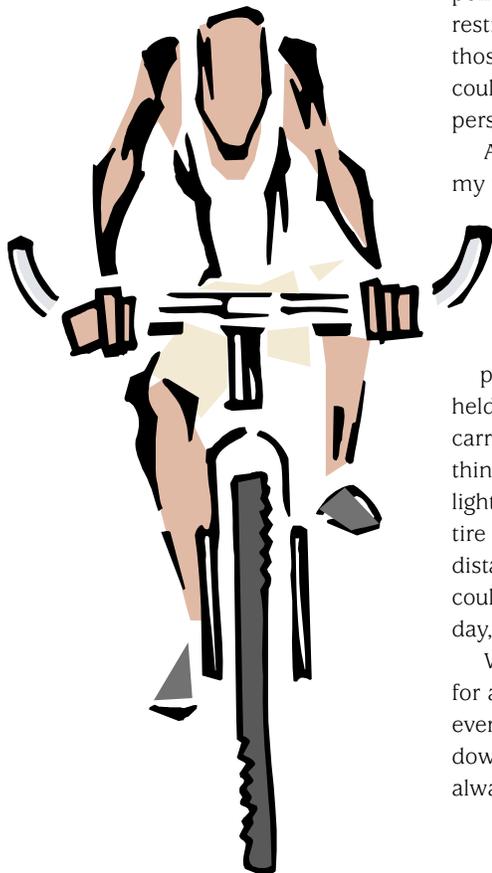
Living under grace—under the blood of Christ—means that we will not die

because of our foolish decisions to sin, but living under God's *justice* means that we will forever bear the scars of our sin. God's forgiving grace does not nullify the lingering effects of our wrong decisions.

LIVING WITH GOD

DURING THE LATTER HALF OF MY FOUR-YEAR SOJOURN IN THE U.S. NAVY, while stationed in San Diego, California, it became the fashion in our small group to acquire and ride a bike to and from work every day. I suppose the motives behind this inconvenient fad were both economy and general health but, all in all, I found the practice to be something akin to daily root canal.

I took no pleasure in arriving at work and arriving back home drenched in sweat and gasping for breath. "It'll get easier the more you ride," my more slender companions informed me. Well, it didn't. It *never* got easier.



FOR HOWEVER IMPORTANT CHASTITY (OR COURAGE, OR TRUTHFULNESS, OR ANY OTHER VIRTUE) MAY BE, THIS PROCESS [TRYING AGAIN AFTER FAILURE] TRAINS US IN HABITS OF THE SOUL WHICH ARE MORE IMPORTANT STILL. IT CURES OUR ILLUSIONS ABOUT OURSELVES AND TEACHES US TO DEPEND ON GOD. WE LEARN, ON THE ONE HAND, THAT WE CANNOT TRUST OURSELVES EVEN IN OUR BEST MOMENTS, AND, ON THE OTHER, THAT WE NEED NOT DESPAIR EVEN IN OUR WORST, FOR OUR FAILURES ARE FORGIVEN. THE ONLY FATAL THING IS TO SIT DOWN CONTENT WITH ANYTHING LESS THAN PERFECTION. (C.S. LEWIS)

When my wife and I moved from National City, a suburb on roughly the same elevation as the Navy base, to an apartment in San Diego proper, in a neighborhood so far uphill from the base that its ascent would cause a Sherpa's nose to bleed, I called it quits. From that point on my mode of transport was restricted to self-propelled vehicles—those with four wheels and a roof—one could ride without losing five pounds in perspiration.

As a result, curiously enough, while my waistline continued its outward expansion, my slender companions just got more slender. My co-workers not only ended up in superior physical shape, they became expert bike riders. Their pedals had stirrups and straps that held their feet for greater power; they carried all the accoutrements—such things as water bottles, air pumps, lights; they could repair and change a tire on the fly; they could travel long distances without stopping; and they could ride for weeks and months, every day, and never fall down.

Whether we believe that it is possible for a child of God to live his life without ever falling down, or that some falling down will be inevitable, our goal should always be to remain upright. And the

amount of time we stay upright is directly dependent on how much time is spent walking with the Lord.

There came a day when a psychologist tried to relieve me of a migraine headache by using a form of image therapy (my phrase)—a method falling somewhere between hypnosis and biofeedback. While I reclined on his couch, relaxed with my eyes closed, he began drawing word pictures intended to have some positive effect on the pain raging between my ears.

He began with images of heat, at one point telling me to imagine a white hot beam of light piercing through the top of my head. That didn't work at all, so finally he switched to images of cold. The word picture that finally brought some relief was one in which I was walking through a snow-draped forest in the cold dead of winter.

Because I prefer being cool—even cold—to being hot, the cooler images were the ones that I better identified with. They were the ones that eventually brought relief from the migraine.

The mental pictures you employ to describe the relationship you have with God are not nearly so important as the fact that you *have that relationship*. You

may imagine God the Father as a white-bearded grandfather, floating off the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel; you may imagine Him as blinding light, radiant energy; or you may not be able to describe Him at all, only as unspeakable holiness. You may imagine Jesus walking alongside you, holding your hand; you may think of him leading or pulling you in a certain direction; or you may see Him in the distance, beckoning you toward Him. Maybe He even sits across a table from you, carrying on a conversation.

The important thing is that you have the relationship. If you never want to fall down, the only way to do it is to walk constantly with the One who will hold you up.

The Christian has a privilege too often neglected—that of living, actually *living*, day in and day out, with the all-powerful God of the universe. We too often place God onto a mystical what-not shelf, arrange Him prettily with our other collectibles, and only dust Him off once a week when we feel compelled to pray to Him.

But the God of the Bible is more organic than that. He concerns Himself with the day-to-day minutia of the lives of those who call upon His name. His children matter to Him, and if He weren't interested in having a relationship with them, He wouldn't have bothered sending His Son.

*Behold, the Lord God will come with might,
With His arm ruling for Him.
Behold, His reward is with Him
And His recompense before Him.
Like a shepherd He will tend His flock,
In His arm He will gather the lambs
And carry them in His bosom;
He will gently lead the nursing ewes.*

Isaiah 40:10-11

It may grieve the Lord when we fall down, but I imagine it grieves Him more when we try to stay up on our own. While we must never forget the majesty of God, nor should we forget that He is the one in charge, we do Him a disservice when we leave Him sitting, untouched, atop the shelf.

*Loved with everlasting love,
Led by grace that love to know;
Spirit, breathing from above,
Thou hast taught me it is so!
Oh, this full and perfect peace!
Oh, this transport all divine!
In a love which cannot cease,
I am His, and He is mine.*

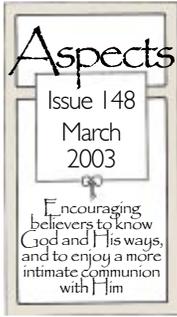
*Heav'n above is softer blue,
Earth around is sweeter green!
Something lives in every hue
Christless eyes have never seen:
Birds with gladder songs o'er-flow,
Flow'rs with deeper beauties shine,
Since I know, as now I know,
I am His, and He is mine.*



*Things that once were wild alarms
Cannot now disturb my rest;
Closed in everlasting arms,
Pillowed on the loving breast.
Oh, to lie forever here,
Doubt, and care, and self resign,
While He whispers in my ear,
I am His, and He is mine.*

*His forever, only His;
Who the Lord and me shall part?
Ah, with what a rest of bliss
Christ can fill the loving heart!
Heav'n and earth may fade and flee,
First-born light in gloom decline;
But while God and I shall be,
I am His, and He is mine.*

(George Wade Robinson)



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