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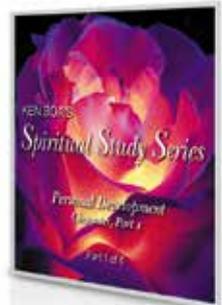
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REFLECTIONS



MINISTRIES



THE PROMISES OF GOD

IT'S A WHOLE NEW WORLD—Colossians 1:13–14

In March, 1992, Salvatore (Sammy the Bull) Gravano, the highest-ranking member of the American Mafia ever to defect, broke his blood oath of silence and testified against his boss, John Gotti. As a result, Gotti went to prison, the Cosa Nostra crime family was decimated, and Gravano moved "from one social planet to another," in the words of the presiding judge. In order to protect himself from retaliation, Gravano entered the federal government's witness protection program.

Actually, Gravano underwent two huge social transformations—first, by switching allegiance from the highly-structured social and economic world of organized crime, and second, by entering the witness protection program. As big a shift as the former move was, it was not as life-changing as the latter. In effect, entering the witness protection program is like dying and being born again. Its purpose is to erase all vestiges of a person's past and create a new identity so as to protect that person and his or her family from retaliation by the convicted. New names, new birth records, new social security records, new tax records, new family histories and genealogies, new home, new vocation—the old world is gone and a whole new world is created in which the witness lives.

The impact of salvation on the believer is no less radical than moving "from one social planet to another." Paul says that believers are rescued from one world and transferred into another when they are saved. The old world—"the dominion of darkness"—is not unlike the dark underworld of the Mafia, where sin and wrongdoing are the way of life. It is a world ruled and energized by Satan (1

John 5:19), where bad is good, dark is light, and lies are the truth. The new world—"the kingdom of the Son"—is a world in which our past has been erased. It is a world where we learn a whole new way of living. In God's kingdom, good is good, light is light, and truth is truth.

The biggest challenge for people in the witness protection program is to remember that their lives depend on their faithfulness to their new identity. The same is true for Christians. In a new world, reverting to an old identity makes us easy targets for the enemy of our souls.

God's Promise to You:

"As my faithful witness, you will always have my protection."

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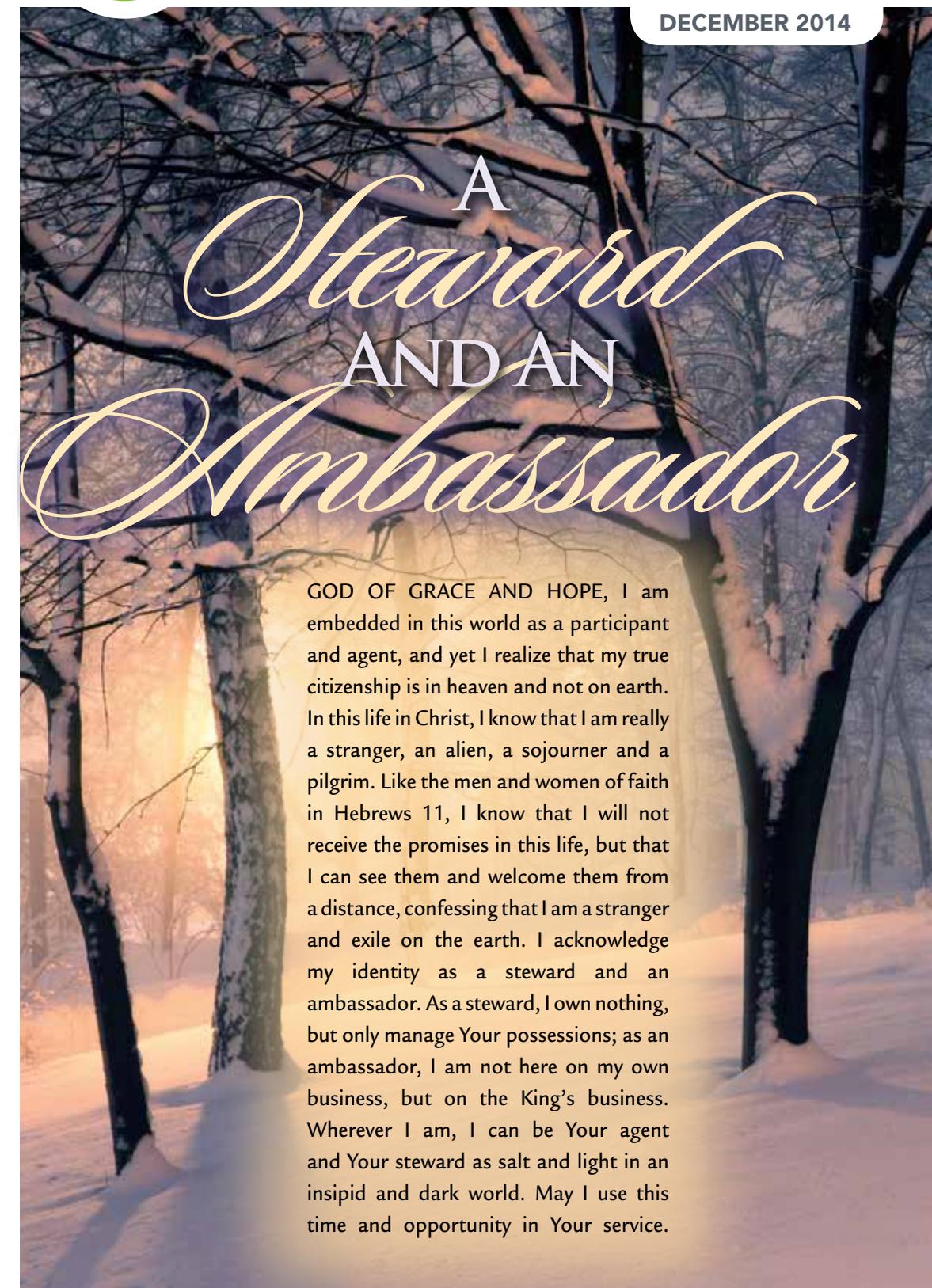
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REFLECTIONS

Reflections on God's revealed truth

DECEMBER 2014



A Steward AND AN Ambassador

GOD OF GRACE AND HOPE, I am embedded in this world as a participant and agent, and yet I realize that my true citizenship is in heaven and not on earth. In this life in Christ, I know that I am really a stranger, an alien, a sojourner and a pilgrim. Like the men and women of faith in Hebrews 11, I know that I will not receive the promises in this life, but that I can see them and welcome them from a distance, confessing that I am a stranger and exile on the earth. I acknowledge my identity as a steward and an ambassador. As a steward, I own nothing, but only manage Your possessions; as an ambassador, I am not here on my own business, but on the King's business. Wherever I am, I can be Your agent and Your steward as salt and light in an insipid and dark world. May I use this time and opportunity in Your service.

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 Biblical teaching for the heart and mind



THE TEMPORAL AND THE ETERNAL (PART 27)

The Gestation of Sin

When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. Don't be deceived, my dear brothers. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.

— JAMES 1:13-17

In his book, *Not the Way it's Supposed to Be*, Cornelius Plantinga discusses the nature of sin itself. Plantinga defines sin as a "culpable disturbance of shalom." What a perceptive insight. Sin disturbs the harmony of who we truly are. "Shalom" is about more than just peace. It's about unity and our rhythm with God. When people are in shalom with one another and with God, there is a convergence of authenticity. Anything that disrupts that is "sin." This fits well with what James says. The Shalom comes from above. In fact, we cannot create this kind of peace; instead, we are called to preserve it ("preserve the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace"). The evil from below is the thing that disturbs it.

Even Christians experience the temptation to live by a bottom-up system. We live in the world, and none of us are perfectly immune to its influences. The danger signs we just looked at all first appear in the mind and make their way to the heart. They'll not likely be noticeable in you until they've been there long enough to start producing their results in your life with others.

Notice the process here. This is the gestation of sin. First of all, it is conceived in your mind; then it grows, and then it finally gives birth. And when it gives birth, it gives birth to action. So the sin is the concretized mind, the outcome of the thoughts that we allowed, though we knew they were opposed to God. In other words, lust,

evil desire, whatever is in your mind will eventually (if given freedom to grow) birth sin. What has lived for a time in the mind becomes real in the actions. And when sin is accomplished, when it's lived out its course, it brings forth death. In effect, this is the birth of death, and it all starts in the mind.

This is a problem, as a growing number of Christian Americans are allowing their thoughts to be guided more by culture than by their own faith systems. In a 2003 study, researcher George Barna found that almost half of the American population held a non-biblical moral view on at least half of the core behaviors he surveyed; this while roughly 80 percent of Americans claim to be Christians. How is this possible, that Bible-believing Christians hold non-biblical perspectives on key moral issues?

Inside Out

Your mind holds the key, and Romans 12:12 reminds us that we are transformed by its renewing. Ironically, though, almost every sermon I hear says, "This is what you ought to do..." We hear that we ought to live out the faith of Old Testament heroes or we should do the things that Jesus told us to; our churches ought to be organized a certain way, and we ought to adhere to certain practices personally and corporately. But we don't hear very much about how we ought to think, how we manage our own will, about what we allow our minds to focus on, *the life that is lived inside our heads*.

The thought life is critical. As a man thinks, so he is (Proverbs 23:7). If we begin with behavior, we won't necessarily change our thoughts, but rather will just hang new habits on an old nature. If we can get our thought life right, though, good actions are likely to emerge from the divine foundation those good thoughts provide, and the new nature can emerge. The system we're most familiar with works from the outside in, but the other system (the one Jesus advocated in his teaching ministry) works from the inside out. It demands

that we start change by considering first what we believe and think and dwell on. This is critical, especially since we rarely hear sermons about how to manage what is floating around in our brains. Without learning and practicing this discipline, we tolerate a great many thoughts that are not worthy of the person we've been called to be.

Living in this backward system as we do (and as we are rarely admonished not to do), we act and then rationalize our actions. We hear sermons filled with what Dallas Willard calls "the Gospels of Sin Management," and we practice it. We maintain our "personal sin profiles" in such a way as not to cause embarrassment to ourselves or others. We keep our sin "low-profile" as best we can and only share "safe" confessions and prayer requests with others. Who's to know what you're really thinking, anyhow? Right?

But your thought life will eventually be birthed into action. One way or another, it's inevitable, because the things you think about and allow your mind to dwell on are your "meditations," so to speak. Whether your sin is worry or lust or hatred or envy, what you spend large chunks of time thinking on will eventually change and shape your character. (Psychologists refer to this as the Law of Exposure. What you are most often exposed to is what you will remember.)

Our character will eventually expose some of what we've been thinking. It will demonstrate for a watching world whether we are thinking predominantly about sin, or if we are, rather, making every effort to keep God's Word in the forefront of our minds.

Talking to Yourself

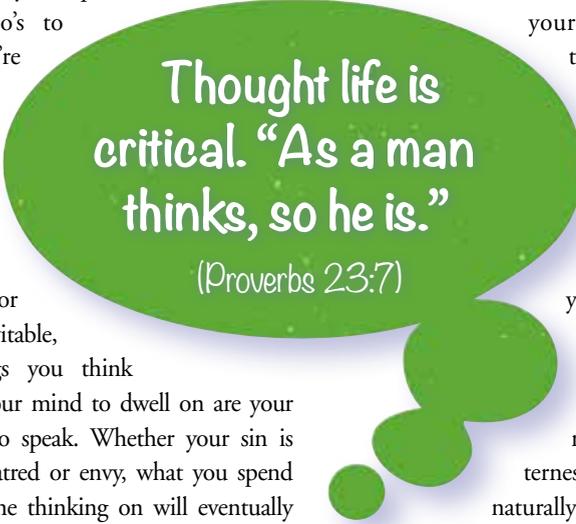
The first step is to recognise the fact that your moods change. The next is to make sure that, if you have once accepted Christianity, then some of its main doctrines shall be deliberately held before your mind for some time every day. — C. S. LEWIS

In his book, *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis argues that once we've decided to believe in something (based on the evidence for it) we must be reminded of that evidence regularly. No belief, Lewis says, will "automatically remain alive in the mind" without being fed. This is true, and this is why disciplines like Scripture reading, prayer, and meditation are so important.

But thought life is underplayed in our current American Christian culture. We have so understressed the practice of some spiritual disciplines that our wills have grown flabby and weak. We fail to train our minds toward holiness. Instead we just allow them to roam where they will without really making any choice about it.

But there is good news. There is a choice to make. You can choose to **listen** to yourself (follow the thoughts where they may lead you), or you can choose to **speak** to yourself (decide where your thoughts are going to go). Listen to yourself, and you'll hear the whining and complaining of your flesh, still full of the old nature's hatred and bitterness. Your flesh will naturally lead you off into all the wrong things. That's *listening* to yourself. You *will* meditate on something, whether it is something you've chosen or something you've just stumbled on. Your mind will always be ruminating on something.

The good news is in the other option: *speaking* to yourself and choosing what you will think about. While right actions don't always lead to right thoughts, practice *can* create habits, especially when we practice on our attitudes. Attitudes are manifested in actions; but actions, over the course of time, can work toward changing attitudes as well. It can be possible to think yourself into a new way of doing, *and* it's possible to do your way into a new way of thinking. Speaking to yourself gives you an opportunity to make a conscious choice.



OPPORTUNITIES IN DISGUISE

In the days when an ice cream sundae cost much less, a ten-year-old boy entered a hotel coffee shop and sat at a table. A waitress put a glass of water in front of him. "How much for an ice cream sundae?"

"Fifty cents," replied the waitress.

The little boy pulled his hand out of his pocket and studied a number of coins in it. "How much is a dish of plain ice cream?" he inquired.

Some people were now waiting for a table and the waitress was a bit impatient. "Thirty-five cents," she said brusquely.

The little boy again counted the coins. "I'll have the plain ice cream," he said.

The waitress brought the ice cream, put the bill on the table, and walked away. The boy finished the ice cream, paid the cashier, and departed. When the waitress came back, she picked up the empty plate and then swallowed hard at what she saw. There, placed neatly beside the empty dish, were two nickels and five pennies—her tip.

Every day we will encounter little annoyances that are opportunities in disguise. As Thomas Dubay put it in *The Evidential Power of Beauty*, "if people who annoy me are also God's beloved, they must be mine as well: we are to love as he loves us (Jn 13:34)."

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A teaching letter of

