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CHAPTER ONE



FINDING FAVOR WITH MAN MEANS LIVING TO PLEASE GOD

Let not mercy and truth forsake you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart, and so find favor and high esteem in the sight of God and man. Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths.

— PROVERBS 3:3–6

TOO MANY TIMES in a Believer's life, temptation to follow the crowd arises. Situations and circumstances produce opportunities to walk down a contrary path. One such set of circumstances presented itself at my mother's funeral. Having been notified of her death, I flew to Boston and then drove to Springfield, Massachusetts, to join my family for her funeral. I arrived at her home only to discover that one of my siblings had unsuccessfully attempted to have her interred before my arrival.

These efforts had not stopped there: Whatever money could be found was spent on alcohol and drugs; one had even managed to purchase a new car. As I walked into my mother's house, I encountered

a group of people high on drugs and with a beer party in full swing. My mother's body was at the funeral home awaiting burial. Rather than having a quick funeral, the decision had been made to delay her burial indefinitely; no one wanted to spend the money for the funeral. Needless to say, I was furious.

The choice before me was: live to please my family and join my siblings in their revelry, or live to please God and remove myself from that setting. Instantly, everything came into focus. I knew who the Enemy was, and I knew what had to be done. Quickly, leaving my siblings in the living room, I walked upstairs to the room where, at the age of eleven, I had encountered Jesus. There I knelt down and prayed: *Jesus, it was in this room that You appeared to me. You told me You loved me. God, my mother is dead. Now what are You going to do?*

Instantly He brought two scriptures to mind. The first was 2 Timothy 1:7:

For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.

Then He reminded me of the verse that says:

The LORD directs the steps of the godly. He delights in every detail of their lives (Psalm 37:23 NLT).

The Spirit of God whispered, *“Who really killed your mother? Who is causing all the problems?”*

Kneeling in prayer, I realized that I did not have to operate in the spirit of fear, but could rely wholly on God's power, and love, and His provision for a sound mind.

As I arose and descended the stairs to stand in the midst of my family, I said, “You will be saved! God is coming for you.” As I watched them stagger around the room, I felt in a sense what the Father must feel when we choose worldly pursuits over Him. I love my siblings, and it grieves my spirit that they continue to refuse to commit their lives to the living God. I can be confident, however, in Matthew 6:33 that says, “But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.” When we seek God first, He will provide favor with man that doesn’t require compromise in our spiritual values.

How can a Believer please God and position himself/herself for blessings of favor? Pledge to be totally committed to Him. Paul gave us a strategy in Romans 12:1:

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.

Surrender your plans, dreams, expectations, and yearnings to Jesus. The psalmist wrote in chapter 37, verse 5, “Commit your way to the LORD, trust also in Him, and He shall bring it to pass.”

The life that is pleasing to our heavenly Father is one that is continually growing in grace, favor, and the knowledge of Him. This is not an exercise in how to get what you want from God; it is an exercise in intimacy with our Lord—in learning to love more deeply, to grow closer to Him.

The book of Nehemiah teaches a beautiful lesson on how to grow closer to God and reap the wonderful blessings He has reserved

for His children. After seventy years of captivity in Babylon, God touched the heart of Cyrus the Great, who began to allow the Israelites to return to Jerusalem.

Nehemiah, a captive Jew and cupbearer to the king, held an important and trusted position in the royal court. He had been deemed so exceedingly loyal as to be allowed to serve drinks to the king. He could at any given moment be asked to take a sip of the wine to ensure that it was free of poison.

In chapter 1, Nehemiah is approached by a group of his brethren from Judah, bearers of bad news:

And they said to me, “The survivors who are left from the captivity in the province are there in great distress and reproach. The wall of Jerusalem is also broken down, and its gates are burned with fire” (v. 3).

Nehemiah’s response was immediate; he turned to Jehovah:

So it was, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned for many days; I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven. And I said: “I pray, LORD God of heaven, O great and awesome God, You who keep Your covenant and mercy with those who love You and observe Your commandments, please let Your ear be attentive and Your eyes open, that You may hear the prayer of Your servant which I pray before You now, day and night, for the children of Israel Your servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel which we have sinned against You. Both my father’s house and I have sinned. We

have acted very corruptly against You, and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded Your servant Moses. Remember, I pray, the word that You commanded Your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations; but if you return to Me, and keep My commandments and do them, though some of you were cast out to the farthest part of the heavens, yet I will gather them from there, and bring them to the place which I have chosen as a dwelling for My name.’ Now these are Your servants and Your people, whom You have redeemed by Your great power, and by Your strong hand. O Lord, I pray, please let Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant, and to the prayer of Your servants who desire to fear Your name; and let Your servant prosper this day, I pray, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.”

Author W. F. Adeney wrote:

The brief and sudden prayer reaches heaven as an arrow shot from the bow, but it goes right home, because he who lets it off in his surprise is a good workman, well-practiced. This ready prayer only springs to the lips of a man who lives in a daily habit of praying.¹

Nehemiah prayed for favor with King Artaxerxes, and then proceeded to do his job in the court. He made no plans; he plotted no

drastic measures to gain the king's attention; he simply went about his duties daily suffused with prayer. But as Nehemiah prayed and contemplated the news that had been delivered from Jerusalem, he could not mask his despair over what had befallen his beloved city. (See Nehemiah 1:1–3.)

Now I had never been sad in his [the king's] presence before. Therefore the king said to me, "Why is your face sad, since you are not sick? This is nothing but sorrow of heart." So I became dreadfully afraid, and said to the king, "May the king live forever! Why should my face not be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' tombs, lies waste, and its gates are burned with fire?" Then the king said to me, "What do you request?" So I prayed to the God of heaven. And I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, I ask that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' tombs, that I may rebuild it" (Nehemiah 2:1–5).

Nehemiah was then blessed with great favor by Artaxerxes, who allowed him to return to Jerusalem, not as a casual traveler, but as an emissary of the king. Artaxerxes generously provided safe passage and materials sufficient not only to rebuild the wall surrounding the city and the Temple, but to provide a home for Nehemiah during his stay in Judah.

The cupbearer's response in verse 8 was one of gratitude:

And the king granted them [his requests] to me according to the good hand of my God upon me.

So Nehemiah undertook the two-month journey from Susa to Jerusalem to observe the appalling condition of the walls surrounding the city and the Temple within those broken-down walls. The last part of a quote attributed to Dallas cosmetics businesswoman, the late Mary Kay Ash, defines Nehemiah:

There are three types of people in this world: those who make things happen, those who watch things happen, and those who wonder what happened.²

Nehemiah's prayer and intercession had touched the heart of God, turned His head, and moved His hand. Jehovah had given him favor, and in doing so, blessed the Jews who remained in Jerusalem. Now the cupbearer was ready to go to work and make things happen.

Once in the city, Nehemiah found that the people "had a mind to work" (4:6). The job was not without peril, for at every step the Israelites were challenged by those who had no desire to see righteousness rise in the land. We read in Nehemiah 4:17–20 just how difficult the task was:

Those who built on the wall, and those who carried burdens, loaded themselves so that with one hand they worked at construction, and with the other held a weapon. Every one of the builders had his sword girded at his side as he built. And the one who sounded the trumpet was beside me. Then I said to the nobles, the rulers, and the rest of the people, "The work is great and extensive, and we are separated far from one another on the wall. Wherever you hear the

sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us.”

Nearing the completion of the rebuilding and re-population of Jerusalem, Nehemiah realized there was one void that had not been filled—a spiritual barrenness that could not be satisfied with stone and timber.

The cupbearer-turned-architect began at once to fortify the Israelites with the Word of God. As had Jeremiah, Nehemiah knew the value of repentance and return:

Thus says the LORD: “Stand in the ways and see, and ask for the old paths, where the good way is, and walk in it; then you will find rest for your souls” (Jeremiah 6:16).

On the first day of the seventh month following completion of the work, Nehemiah called the people together before the Water Gate. Ezra, the scribe, brought the Book of the Law of Moses, climbed atop a scaffold, and began to read the Word. Now all the people gathered together as one man in the open square that was in front of the Water Gate; and they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded Israel. As they listened to Ezra read from the scroll, “all the people wept, when they heard the words of the Law” (See Nehemiah 8:9)

In his study on the book of Nehemiah, Donald K. Campbell wrote:

It is noteworthy also that “the ears of all the people were attentive unto the book of the Law” (v. 3b). The

people had arisen very early and listened patiently hour after hour to the reading of the Scripture. Many of them had not heard the Word of God for many years; some had probably not heard it at all. It was a spiritual feast for their hungry souls as they sat in rapt attention. No wonder a work of God would soon be accomplished in their midst. A New Testament parallel is found in the dramatic scene where Cornelius and his household said to Peter, “Now therefore are we all here present before God, to hear all things that are commanded thee of God” (Acts 10:33.) And a significant work of grace followed.³

I am reminded of a passage in Isaiah 55:11:

So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper *in the thing* for which I sent it.

The Word was read and it did indeed bring repentance, restoration, and revival. The people bowed their faces to the ground and worshipped Jehovah in submission to His authority. When you and I determine to surrender our will to His, our Lord responds with love, mercy, and favor—with God and man.

On June 17, 1843, the great orator Daniel Webster delivered a speech at the celebration of the completion of the Bunker Hill Monument in Boston. In his speech, he addressed the importance of the Word of God:

The English colonists in America, generally speaking, were men who were seeking new homes in a new world. They brought with them their families and all that was most dear to them They brought with them a full portion of all the riches of the past, in science, in art, in morals, religion, and literature. The Bible came with them. And it is not to be doubted, that to the free and universal reading of the Bible, in that age, men were much indebted for right views of civil liberty. The Bible is a book of faith, and a book of doctrine, and a book of morals, and a book of religion, of especial revelation from God; but it is also a book which teaches man his own individual responsibility, his own dignity, and his equality with his fellow-man.⁴

How can we please our heavenly Father as we walk daily with Him? We can live in obedience to Him and to His Word. We can be doers of the Word as the apostle Paul wrote in James 1:22: “But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.” We must put into practice those things we read in the Word.

We must be motivated to follow Christ, to measure everything we do or say by the yardstick of the Bible. During the 1990s a popular question sprang up among Evangelicals: What would Jesus do? Bracelets, caps, T-shirts, and jewelry sported the initials “WWJD.” It was to be a reminder of the moral constraint to conduct oneself in a manner that would be pleasing to God. It was a call to permit love for Jesus to control our actions, transform our lives, and therefore please God in all that we do and say. It was to be the living out of Romans 12:2:

And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what *is* that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

This is a relationship with Jehovah that will be transforming, invigorating, and uplifting. It will be pleasing to God and will produce favor—with God and man.

— DISCUSSION —
MATERIAL

1. How can a Believer please God and position himself/herself for blessings of favor?
2. How can we please our heavenly Father as we walk daily with Him?
3. When Nehemiah heard of the plight of his people in Jerusalem and the state of the city, what did he do?
4. Consider why prayer should be our first action and not our last resort.
5. Why is it important that we measure our every action by the yardstick of the Word of God?

— SCRIPTURES ON —
LIVING TO PLEASE GOD

And whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight.

1 JOHN 3:22

For they that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh; but they that are after the Spirit the things of the Spirit.

ROMANS 8:5

The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.

2 PETER 3:9

But to do good and to communicate forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.

HEBREWS 13:16

Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind.

PHILIPPIANS 2:2

And to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love his neighbour as himself, is more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.

MARK 12:33

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God. For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith.

ROMANS 12:1-3

For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.

HOSEA 6:6