

AN OVERVIEW OF THE THEOLOGY OF ORAL ROBERTS

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Abstract

Oral Roberts' life and healing ministry were shaped by his theology of God. Roberts viewed God as good, who personally worked in the lives of people in the present, and who had good plans for each believer. The manifestation of these plans depended, however, on the faith of the individual believer. God was affected by events in time, was limited in his ability to act by the cooperation of the believer, and suffered emotional distress even as people do. The overriding element in all of Roberts' message is that "Something good is going to happen to you." Christians should expect miracles, good things, prosperity, healing, and overall blessings because God intends for his children to live that way in their journeys through life. This study will look at the theology of Oral Roberts, primarily featured in several of his most notable theological concepts.

Introduction

*F*or the last century, Oral Roberts has been one of the most influential voices in the Spirit-empowered movement. For over four decades, Oral Roberts preached a gospel message of salvation and

healing through faith in Jesus Christ. However, little has been developed that identifies a foundational understanding of Roberts' basic Christian theology. This article will explore Oral Roberts' understanding of the nature of God, the reality of Christ, and the ministry of the Holy Spirit found in some of his core writings. The investigation will identify the basic theological concepts he expressed throughout his books. The seeds of this study began in the late 1990s when I and a number of other theology faculty members at Oral Roberts University (ORU) met with then-President Richard Roberts to develop a textbook for the "Christian Faith and Ministry" class based on the teachings of Oral Roberts.¹ The text sought to present a systematic theology with supplemental teachings by Oral Roberts primarily found in his commentary on the New Testament published in 1984, something no one had done before.²

Oral Roberts was a gifted thinker, but his writings were mostly written at a popular level. However, Roberts did engage in reflecting on theological topics. Some of the theological concepts, like the Trinity, were quite traditional and were familiar to most American Christians. Other elements of his theology were radically new concepts such as "seed-faith" and his theology of healing. In all his published material, Roberts remained remarkably consistent with his message that "God is a good God" who is interested in doing good things in people's lives.

This study will look at the theology of Oral Roberts, primarily featured in several of his most notable theological concepts. In its most basic form, theology (*theos*, God, and *logos*, ideas) is simply articulating ideas about God. As Richard Kerney has pointed out, theology is simply the exercising of the imagination in order to construct a concept of God.³ This means that when we imagine God, we are creating theological pictures about his nature. This is something Oral Roberts understood keenly. He was not just out to preach a new gospel of salvation and healing. He was interested in correcting faulty images of God he experienced in his day that portrayed God as at a minimum indifferent to the people's suffering, if not the primary cause of suffering.⁴ In order to change this narrative, Roberts developed a number of theological ideas about God that he communicated through memorable phrases, such as, "God is a good God," "Expect a miracle," and "God is able!"⁵ These ideas were central to Oral Roberts' theology and shaped his concept of God.

“God Is a Good God”

Oral Roberts’ theology can best be encapsulated by one phrase: “God is a good God.”⁶ Crowds flocked to Roberts’ tent crusades because they were experiencing brokenness in their minds, spirits, or bodies, and they knew that Roberts proclaimed a God that was good and who wanted to save and heal people. Roberts saw himself as a “spiritual cheerleader” who sought to inspire the thousands who came to hear him preach a gospel that proclaimed God’s goodness to every area of life. He encouraged people to put their faith in a God who loved them and who was not only able, but willing to do miracles on their behalf. During his own experience of sickness, believers around him were telling him that God had put his sickness upon him.⁷ The pain of this experience led him to seek out another picture of God, which he found in 1947 when “God began to bust my theology wide open.”⁸ His picture of God changed when he read 3 John 2, “Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospers” (KJV). Roberts declared,

This showed me that God was a good God and the devil was a bad devil. There is no badness in God and no goodness in the devil. God is totally good and the devil is totally bad. For the first time in my life I had a real foundation for my faith. My thinking was straightened out. I could come to God and believe Him as He really is. No longer would I be tormented by questions about God’s goodness, His love, and His purpose. When I looked upon a suffering man, I would not have to question myself about its being God’s will for him to be sick or to be beaten down by the wicked devil.⁹

From that point on, Roberts rejected the notion that sin, sickness, and calamity were the result of God, not because the Scripture had changed, but because his theology or concept of God changed. If God was truly good, then he could confidently proclaim: “Something good is going to happen to you.” In all aspects of Roberts’ theology, he viewed God as good, who personally worked in the lives of people in the present, and

who had good plans for each believer.

For Roberts, God's goodness was inexorably connected to his love, which was the essence of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He commented,

When I think about God, I think about love. God is love. That is why He gave Jesus Christ, His only begotten Son, to die for our sins. He loves you and me. In fact, God loves us first. He loves everybody before they love Him. And He even loves those who do not love Him. Therefore when we have God who is love, we love others. And if we say we are of God but do not love others, we really are liars. Love is the surest sign that God is in our lives.¹⁰

Only through his theology of God could he make room for the possibility for Christians to believe for miracles, good things, prosperity, healing, and overall blessings.

The “Dimensions” of the Trinity

Roberts' concept of God as Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, followed traditional ideas of three Persons in one God, without defining the idea. Most western Christians envision God as one being, Jesus another, and the Holy Spirit as some incorporeal, mystical, spiritual substance. The western scientific mind tends to view numbers separately and often has great difficulty thinking that one could equal three. However, Roberts does not try to resolve this dilemma. He does, however, describe the Trinity in terms of “dimensions.” In his commentary on Matthew 3:16–17, he describes the relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit thus:

God had said to the Hebrews, “Oh, Israel, the Lord thy God is One.” Our Jewish friends say today, “How then is God three?” God is One, but He manifests Himself in the dimensions of His fatherhood, of His spirit, and of His Son, in ways that people can understand who He is.¹¹

“Dimension” could be used to mean “extent” or “scope,” referring to locations, realms, or aspects of existence in relation to other ones. But, Roberts does not intend to describe the measurements of God nor his scope of influence. Rather, he uses this term to try to differentiate the Trinity without losing the element of unity of Being.

Concerning the concept of the Trinity, Roberts did focus his understanding of God on one particular person, whether Father or Son or Holy Spirit. Adhering to the broader Protestant Trinitarian tradition, Roberts differentiated persons or “dimensions” of God in terms of the relationship to the individual: the Father as Creator, Jesus as the Savior who died on the Cross for our sins, and the Holy Spirit as the one who inspires and convicts people of sins. In his commentary on the baptism of Jesus in Matthew 3:16–17, he says,

Here we see the incarnation of God coming by His Spirit. First, God the Son, the everlasting God who created the world, then the Holy Spirit who is everlasting God, who conceived the human body of the Son and who had co-existed with the Father from the beginning. We must understand that Mary bore His humanity but not the Christ part of Jesus. The Christ part was conceived by the Holy Spirit and co-existed with Father from the beginning. In the mystery of the Incarnation, God is becoming flesh and flesh is becoming God. He is total God and total man—God, who is eternal, omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent, and man that He might reflect what God is like. Jesus says in John 14 that “If you see Me, you have seen the Father.”¹²

Roberts believed that God’s true nature was revealed in Jesus, who demonstrated what God was like so people could understand him better. This allowed people to identify better with God through the humanity of Jesus as a real person, living in a real place, doing things that most people do. Roberts was pushing back against the view that God was primarily transcendent, instead offering a more intimate portrayal of a God who wants to have a daily relationship. Roberts witnessed the physical, financial, and spiritual brokenness of people

in his ministry and sought to bring them deliverance by getting them “connected” with God in a noticeable reality. Only through a “real” relationship with God can people live an “abundant life,” only if people remained connected to their Savior.

Roberts’ concept of Christology was also very balanced. Although Jesus was fully God, he was very human. One way this was demonstrated was in Jesus’ miracles, which were supernatural. Roberts believed in a universe that was not closed, but one in which God works within the system he created. Historically understood, miracles have been thought of as the work of God superseding normal natural physical functions. However, Jesus’ miracles of healing do not involve the conveyance of non-natural material. For example, a broken arm is healed instantly by Jesus, not by inserting a titanium replacement, rather by healing the person’s natural flesh and bone. What was “miraculous” was the speed at which the arm healed, or in the case of disease, like the woman with the issue of blood, the power of God quickly made the woman’s body overcome the elements that had malfunctioned and made it return to normal function.

The humanness of Christ also meant that he was not only aware of human weakness and suffering, but he made it his mission to meet the physical and spiritual needs of believers, thus revealing the nature of God.

Do you want to know what God is like? Of course. Everyone wants to know what God is like. But that has been the problem . . . That is why Jesus came. He came not only to save us through His death on Calvary, but He came to let us see Him through the Bible, to see His deeds, the places He went, the things He said, the miracles He wrought, the life He lived, the death He died, the resurrection He had, His ascension, descent of the Holy Spirit, His living with us in His unlimited presence. Then we see the Father. You see, because Jesus is good, we see that God is good. Until we read Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, the book of Acts—particularly those five books—we are not going to see Jesus, and in not seeing Jesus, we will not know what the Father is like.¹³

Despite his anthropocentric view of Jesus, Roberts did not fall into the trap of seeing Jesus as a “good buddy” or simply a special human. Roberts sees Jesus in more relational terms, as the guide to a different understanding of God and spiritual things. God wants the heart of a person, not just a ritual or duty, though those are important aspects of religious life. The realm of the spiritual seems so transcendent to so many Christians that our Christian life takes on the appearance of legalism or rationalistic obedience to traditional practices. Roberts stressed the connection of Christians to the spiritual world through their relationship with Jesus. That was more important than denominational or sectarian identification.

The Holy Spirit

Roberts often spoke of the Holy Spirit, but mostly in terms of his role in the empowerment of the believer. Roberts understood that people are themselves weak and helpless in the face of life’s difficulties. Because of this, the Holy Spirit exercises his power to meet these needs and help people overcome the issues life produces. Roberts encouraged people to see beyond the physical world, to participate in the powerful spiritual realm of existence.

It is there, just beyond our natural eyesight that our faith connects with the unseen world which surrounds us, and in that supernatural realm we can use our faith to tap into the miracles that brought Jesus Christ into this earth as our Lord and Savior. It’s in the unseen realm where the Holy Spirit operates as the unlimited presence of Jesus and where the Lord Himself is now seated at the Father’s right hand. And in this invisible world, from which we’re separated only by the veil of our humanness, believers have access every moment to the miraculous—to the miracle life which our salvation from sin has bought for us! How can we penetrate the invisible and reach that supernatural realm of God? It’s by the power of His spirit.¹⁴

Roberts’ belief that there is a greater life in this physical realm means he was more of an existentialist than a Stoic. His theological

worldview recognizes the brokenness of human suffering and the need of help from divine sources. This notion is not so different from the concept held by other world religions, but in Roberts' view Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, actively makes himself available to create a personal relationship with each Christian, to guide, direct, touch, speak to, and manifest himself to all Christians. The Holy Spirit makes all this real and experiential. The entryway into this relationship is faith.

Practically everyone recognizes the fact of God's healing power. Mental acceptance is not enough. We must have personal, active faith in God for our own healing. If God has ever healed one person, He will heal two; if He heals two, He will heal four; if four, then eight; and if eight, He will heal all who will believe. Else you would make Him have healing compassion for one and not another. Should that be true, He would not be God, but a man No, you will not be able to say it is God's will to heal one but it is not His will to heal another. He is either a God of love—perfect love—or He is not God at all.¹⁶

However, Roberts admitted that he did not see everyone he prayed for receive healing. God has his own timetable, showing his belief in God's ultimate sovereignty.¹⁷

Roberts knew that God made choices and created humans with the ability to choose between moral options, as well as choices of certain things in life such as food, clothing, shelter, friends, and so on. But God is still the Sustainer of the universe and there are some things that just have to happen, whether anyone likes it or not. God's choices do not always appear congenial with our ways of handling problems, such as directing punishments for disobedience, like the result of Dathan's pride or the Israelites who were put to death by Phineas. But there is the aspect of reverential fear due to God as Creator and Lord and Master. He certainly applies discipline in the ways that relate most appropriate for the people and historical age of the situation. Biblical examples of necessary events include Jonah's call to Nineveh, Paul's meeting with Jesus on the road to Damascus, Joseph's residence in prison so he could meet Pharaoh, and Moses' assignment to return to Egypt. So we

conclude that sometimes we make choices and sometimes God has an irrefutable plan. Roberts believed that people failed to exercise faith, which is a choice, to believe in God and his word. So he felt called to encourage people to trust God and expect him to work in their lives.

Another concept that was essential to his theology of God was the concept of “the anointing” of the Holy Spirit.¹⁹ Roberts used the concept of the anointing as a way to connect with his audience and to inspire confidence in God’s ability to meet their needs through the ministry and power of the Holy Spirit. But for Roberts, the anointing is not a mystical power, rather the presence of the Person of God himself.

The revelation came to me that the anointing is a time when God separates you from yourself and fills you with His glory so that when you speak it’s like God speaking and when you act it’s like God acting . . . you are keenly aware that another Self—the Spirit of God Himself—has taken over and is, at that time, in full charge of you and you are acting under His divine unction or guidance and power from above.²⁰

It was important for Roberts to counter the notion that there is an autonomous spiritual power that is called “the anointing.” Instead, he emphasized that the anointing is a gift of the Holy Spirit. He rightfully recognized that eight times in the book of Acts, the Holy Spirit himself is called “the gift” and the so-called “gifts of the Spirit” discussed in 1 Corinthians 12 are actually “graces” that are the manifestations of the Holy Spirit, as he deems appropriate (1 Cor 12:11). He consistently reminded people that Jesus does the miracle, not Oral Roberts. In a sense, we do not receive tools; we are the tools of God that he uses.²¹

“Turn Your Faith Loose”

Roberts believed that many Christians were living in despair because they assumed God did not have time to hear their prayers personally or care for their sufferings. This is where the concept of faith intersects with his concept of God. He says, “Many Christian people have been led to believe that God is not a good God—that He does not reward

faith. So why do you think God wants us to have faith? Because, He wants us to know His existence, His realness, His goodness, and His desire to reward.”²² Faith was the essential key to the connection between God and people. Roberts believed that God was willing and ready to release his goodness if one can simply “turn your faith loose.”²³ Faith is, therefore, a series of interchanges: we recognize our need, we interact with God through prayer made in faith, then God acts to supply the solution to our needs and problems. But the key was always faith.

Faith is right believing. Fear is wrong believing. Faith believes that God is the Sources of our total supply . . . that God is for us . . . that God wants us to be in total health—body, mind, spirit, relationships, finances—in other words your whole life . . . that God’s highest desire is to see our needs met, our questions answered, and our problems solved.²⁴

It is important to recognize that although God is a good God who desires to do miracles, the burden and responsibility for releasing those miracles falls directly on the believer.²⁵ Jesus is the receptacle full of healing power, but Christians must “release their faith,” like the woman with the issue of blood, to receive the power. “The knob on the door is on our side. We’ve got to open the door; then God will reveal His treasures to us.”²⁶

This was the key to living the “abundant life” that God, in his nature, had for believers. To access this life, the act of faith becomes the way to reach “higher” up than our current existence.

Oh, to get a miracle! To be rewarded for your faith by God!
To feel your faith leaping up to the sky, soaring up to God in
heaven! There’s nothing like it in the world! You’re transacting
spiritual business with the Almighty, unlocking His divine
intervention in your life. And as your spirit reaches up to a God
Whom you cannot see, the Lord Himself is reaching out His
hand to you with the prize, the reward, the deliverance, the
miracle you need. All the glory of heaven is waiting for you AT
THE OTHER END OF YOUR FAITH!²⁷

Roberts' rhetoric of the "higher" life describes the positive, but "lowest" and "down" communicates negative, defeated concepts.²⁸ Therefore, the life of faith was a higher reality in God, one described as experiencing the "abundant life" that can "change his way of life so he could use his faith to successfully meet the enemies of life."²⁹ On the other hand, if miracles depended on the believer's initiative, would it not be that someone did not receive deliverance or healing because faith had not been exercised? In one sense, this is true of Roberts, who believed his job was to focus his efforts on getting people to believe first so that God would then be able to do good things for them.

It is possible that Roberts' hermeneutic, as with all of us, was based primarily on his experience with God and his own ministry. He reasoned, if God heals one person, why would he not heal everyone, if one would only persevere? Roberts viewed theology from an American cultural perspective. God must be fair, and the believer must do something in connection with the situation, then rewards come from our trust in him.³⁰ Roberts' personal experience of healing illustrates his theology. God healed his stuttering and his case of tuberculosis, which proved to him that God loved him. Additionally, Roberts ran away from his home, rejected the teaching of his parents, turned his back on Jesus and Christian religion but was restored to normal health and righteous living as evidence of God's personal love for him. Since God does not play favorites, what he did for Roberts, he would do for everyone.³¹ The answer to every problem, the secret of interacting with the supernatural power of God, was the exercise of individual faith.³²

The challenge of Roberts' view, of course, is that each person is an individual with different circumstances and different relationships with God. In the same way that medicine will not affect everyone the same way, what is successful for one may not be successful for all. Having a low view of God's sovereignty often creates many theological problems because it tries to fit everything possible into a category, organized and controlled. Roberts' worldview included a cooperation with God. However, he was not quick to blame a lack of faith for people not getting healed. Instead, he pointed to the need for

perseverance, praying until the answer comes, as the major factor that indicated faith on the part of the believer. As an illustration, Roberts cited a case of the restoration of health for a young child named Benjamin, whose parents prayed for a long time for his healing:

He [God] wants us to stick with our praying until the answer comes! What if Wayne and Leslie had given up on day five? What if they had thrown up their hands in anguish and frustration and stopped praying for little Benjamin's healing? Or what if they had hung in there until the eighth day . . . or the eleventh day . . . or the twelfth day, but then had given up? Where would he be now? Oh, if he had died, he'd be with Jesus, but would that be what God had planned for his life? We've got to go the long distance no matter how long it takes!³⁴

In this case, Roberts seems to make even the healing contingent upon the prayers of his parents. However, the key to faith is simply to continue to believe, not the quality or condition of their faith.

Roberts wrestled with questions about the interplay between God and humanity and the limits of God's goodness to reach humanity. Roberts maintained a position that there is a synchronous partnership between God's will and the believer's faith in the healing process and he balanced God's design and interaction with humanity. For Roberts, since a human being is created "a free moral agent," God's action is affected, whether limited or released, by human action.³⁵ God exercises his sovereignty in guiding human historical events, but for individuals, some first steps from the believer are necessary. He notes that God is highly affected by human decisions, even being emotionally devastated when humans succumbed to evil influence. He comments,

Can you imagine the shattering impact that seeing these things (all the evil acts of fallen humanity, described in Genesis 6) must have had upon a good God whose dream was to have a family like Him to multiply and replenish the earth and to live in the class of God Himself? The scene was so devastating that

the council of the Godhead was immediately convened: and it repenteth the Lord that he had made man on the earth and it grieved him at his heart.³⁶

That said, even though he maintains this lower and anthropologically-centered view of God, he insists that “God is still God.”³⁷ He is still greater than the universe and has known the future of the world from the beginning and has planned the redemption and restoration of humanity in Christ from before the creation of the universe. Although confident in God’s goodness, Roberts often held these realities in tension: “I just believe that God is, that He is a good God, that He loves me, and that He has the power to deliver me. We must come by faith. If you could reason it out, you wouldn’t need to have faith. You have faith for that which you can’t understand.”³⁸

God Is Your Source

Another important concept of God, intimately connected to Roberts’ view of God, was the belief that “God is your source.” As an element of the expressed love of God for his people, Roberts viewed God as a Good Shepherd who provides for our every need. God, by his nature, is a giver. After all, God loved so much that he “gave” his son Jesus to provide for us. In the same way, believers can give unto God out of faith in his goodness and, in return, God will supply their needs, financially and otherwise. This view of God led Roberts to develop the idea of “seed-faith,” which became a major theme in many of his writings and messages. He explains, “You sow it, God will grow it, and you will reap it, providing you believe it and set your faith on God who calls Himself the Lord of the harvest When He (God) speaks, and I obey, miracles happen.”³⁹

The basic idea of seed-faith originated through the combination of Roberts’ hermeneutic of reading the Bible as a personal message to himself and his upbringing as a child of the Great Depression in America. Just as a farmer plants wheat in order to get wheat, God planted the seed of his Son so that people would believe in him and

have everlasting life and not die. Out of this belief, Roberts developed the principle of seed-faith, which emphasized demonstrating faith by giving a seed. This involved three basic steps. First, seed-faith is making God the source of your life, the source of your total supply. Second, seed-faith is giving God your best, giving first, giving out of your need. And third, it is giving for the desired result, expecting a miracle harvest, expecting to receive it.⁴⁰

Our comprehension of this system was meant to produce a confidence, faith if you will, that because God loves us, He wants all our physical, mental, and spiritual needs met and He is the source of meeting those needs. Again, it is up to the individual person's exercise of faith that determines the extent of the supply. We essentially disappoint God's desires if we do not focus our relationship with God on His abilities to provide for us and cooperate with the spiritual principles involved. How does one connect with the spiritual power to activate this system? God's word to His people is that we must MAKE GOD OUR SOURCE God's people are not to live in poverty, physically, spiritually, or financially. God is in your now and you are in God's now. God has already provided everything we need for our lives and He is serious about our having our needs met. God wants us, as His children, to live every day of our lives "by faith."⁴¹

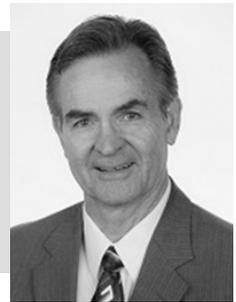
By imagining God as the source for abundant life, the intersection of the goodness of God with the faith of the individual created the potential that believers could "expect a miracle," even on a daily basis.⁴²

Conclusion

Oral Roberts' theology is intimately connected with his view of God. Roberts viewed God as good, who personally worked in the lives of people in the present, and who had good plans for each believer. He believed that all scriptures, such as 3 John 2, were direct quotations from God intended to reveal God's nature and his desire that every believer be in health and prosper. This conviction that "Something

Good Is Going to Happen to You” led him to proclaim that believers could expect miracles, good things, prosperity, healing, and overall blessings because God intends for his children to live that way in their journeys through life. It also meant that all the bad and difficult things come from the devil, from unbelief, or a failure to understand God’s true nature. At times, Roberts held a minimal view of God’s sovereignty in that he works to some extent in history, although he never expanded that notion in any detail. But it was his concept of faith that also shaped his view of God. Requirements, such as faith and obedience, limited God’s ability to work in the believer’s life. God was affected by events in time, was limited in his ability to act by the cooperation of the believer, and suffered emotional distress even as people do. Such a perspective necessarily places a large responsibility for the fulfillment of God’s purposes on the individual believer. In the end, Roberts’ theology was a theology of God, that believed God was good and was here to heal, restore, and bless his people, even as Roberts himself had been blessed. All one needs to do is to believe in this image of God and “expect a miracle.”

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Notes

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- 20 Roberts, *Expect a Miracle*, 108.
- 21 R. Samuel Thorpe, *The Voice of the Spirit, Volume Two: Biblical Theology for the 21st Century* (Acton, MA: XanEdu Press, 2013), 54–55.
- 22 Roberts, *The New Testament Comes Alive: Volume 3*, 29.
- 23 Roberts, *God Is a Good God*, 42–47.
- 24 Oral Roberts, *Fear Not! That's the Biggest Secret to Getting Your Miracle* (Tulsa, OK: Oral Roberts Evangelistic Association, 1989), 10.
- 25 Oral Roberts, *How Your Faith Works When God Says No!* (Tulsa, OK: Oral Roberts Evangelistic Association, 1992), 7, comments “God really believes in you! The real question is, do you believe in Him even when He says no to you? Are you aware that you have faith and that you can use your will to release your faith to God for every miracle you need and that your faith still works even when God says no?”
- 26 Roberts, *Expect a Miracle*, 43.
- 27 Roberts, *How Your Faith Works When God Says No!*, 8.
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- 29 Roberts, *Best-Loved Tent Sermons*, 47.
- 30 Oral Roberts, *Cashing in Your Receipt with God* (Tulsa, OK: Oral Roberts Evangelistic Association, 2006), 69, comments “I have bad memories of the first 12 years of my ministry. This was before I understood from God’s Word that I was under hire from the Lord. Then I learned we are worthy of our hire, and God is fair and just. He (God) wants to meet all our needs—not just part of them—according to a measurement based on giving and receiving, sowing and reaping, of making our faith a seed that we sow, and looking to Him as our Source.”
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